

GISSING HALL



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# THE ONLY GUESTS IN GISSING...

**THERE ARE HUNDREDS OF OLD COUNTRY HOUSES IN THE UK AND MOST OF THEM ARE IN SERIOUS NEED OF RESCUING FROM TERMINAL DECAY. SOME HAVE BEEN SAVED BY ENTERPRISING PEOPLE WHO HAVE THE ABILITY TO SEE THE POUND SIGNS PAST THE DRY ROT, AND TURN THEM INTO HOTELS. ROGER WHEELER VISITED ONE.**

A midwinter weekend break seemed a good idea, so we cruised the net to see what there was in the country-house-hotel line. Most appear to be very grand and charge very grand prices. Not wanting to drive too far, we decided East Anglia was a good plan and, among others, **Gissing Hall Hotel**, five miles northeast of **Diss**, ticked most of the boxes, so we booked three nights in early February. The price seemed reasonable at **£95** per night per room including breakfast and dinner: great value. As we didn't have sat nav, Gissing took a bit of finding, but when we arrived everything looked exactly as it should – a very grand red brick house dating from 1700, with great gardens. Our welcome was very warm and we were given the key to Room 2, on the ground floor.

Our initial reaction was wow – a huge four-poster bed, easy chairs, flat-screen TV and a bathroom that was basically a wet room and would have accommodated the local rugby team. We dropped our bags and set out to explore the house. Very creaky floors, loads of tapestries and old paintings, a lovely residents' lounge, hall and grand staircase. We found the bar and the restaurant, which were a bit disappointing, as they appeared to be a new addition; in fact, they turned out to have been added to the main house in 1999. Never mind, we thought, we'll take a stroll down to the village, founded along with the church in the tenth century. Very nice and exactly what you would expect. So far so good.

On our return we poked around a bit more and realised that we appeared to be the only guests. Well, it was a Thursday in February. After a long hot shower, sitting on all the armchairs and playing with the television, we were hungry. In the bar, a very friendly young lady was happy to serve us drinks and give us the menu and by now we

realised that we really were alone. The dining room doubles as an art gallery, as the owner's wife, Ann Roy, is an artist and her work was on show. Art galleries are not famous for their warmth or atmosphere and this was the case here; in fact, it was all rather chilly. Dinner was just about OK but not memorable. We did not feel the need to linger, and we got the feeling that the chef might well have prepared the food and gone home and it seemed that the waitress, the young lady from the bar, wanted to follow him.

And so to bed, in what was without any doubt the most comfortable bed we have ever slept in. Mike announced that he was moving in and never leaving. Being in the very heart of the country, it was totally silent and we slept very well.

Next morning we saw the house in all its glory. The sun was shining through the mist that was hanging about one metre above the ground; the house seemed to be floating. It was stunning.

The next day the hotel had a wedding reception, which meant that we felt we were in the way; our dinner, served as before in the chilly restaurant, was once again OK but no more.

Gissing is a good base to tour Norfolk; Diss is a very interesting market town, Norwich is about 20 miles away and worth a visit, as is Southwold, which in itself was worth the entire trip.

For an out-of-season country-house-hotel weekend break, Gissing Hall is very good value. There's a pretty medieval village, Saxon church and all the trimmings. The only pub, The Crown, is certainly worth a look, but for a couple from the soft underbelly of gay Brighton, going in was a bit of a culture shock. This really is the heart of the countryside.

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GISSING CHURCH



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NORFOLK BROADS



SOUTHWOLD