



REGENCY SPLENDOUR

THERE ARE HUNDREDS OF LUXURY COUNTRY-HOUSE HOTELS IN THE UK. WHILE MANY OF THEM ARE ALL CHINTZ AND TIE-BACKS WITH HUNDREDS OF PILLOWS THAT NO ONE ACTUALLY WANTS, THERE ARE STILL PLENTY OF THEM THAT CAN DO THEMSELVES AND THE BRITISH HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY PROUD. ROGER WHEELER WAS LUCKY ENOUGH TO FIND ONE SUCH GEM – THE MOUNT SOMERSET, NEAR TAUNTON

The **Von Essen Group** is a relative newcomer to the hotel scene. It has been buying up country-house hotels for about six years and now has 28 properties. We were invited to visit one of them, **The Mount Somerset**, a very grand Regency house built between 1805 and 1815 for a gentleman farmer just four miles from **Taunton** and two miles from the M5 on the **Blackdown Hills**. It has only 11 rooms and therefore a potential maximum of only 22 guests and is certainly not 'family friendly' – bonus point there. It is situated in one of the loveliest corners of England and, of course, the views are all beautiful.

Our welcome was very warm and professional; we were expected, as we were the only guests on a very quiet Monday in January. There is a huge sitting room full of settees and armchairs, real log fires and hundreds of glossy magazines. Tea and homemade cakes made the welcome all the warmer, as did the searing heat from the log fire about two feet from my legs.



The rooms are all named after local villages. Ours was **Ashill** (pictured left), and we were told it was the 'most masculine' of the 11. Well, if chintz is masculine then perhaps, but nonetheless it was huge and very nice indeed, with armchairs, a faux-antique writing desk, a vast four-poster bed (without a canopy but who needs one?) and a television – only five channels but

that's enough for most people. We were wowed by the bathroom, which was bigger than the average flat, with an enormous Jacuzzi bath – big enough for two and, yes, we did try it out – plus a power shower and the now-standard two washbasins and massive mirror. Molton Brown supplied the freebies, and the big white dressing gowns were fab. All the rooms are different but all very stylish and tasteful; the bridal suite is called the Barrington and really is something, while the Langport Suite is, for my money, the best of the lot.

At dinner we were the only guests, so we 'fine dined' alone. The head chef, **Stephen Walker**, was off so the unnamed sous chef prepared our food and it was fine, if very Gordon Ramsay-style 'tower' food. Big



square plates with a pile of food in one corner and some squiggles of 'jus', or maybe it was a 'reduction', everywhere else. In my opinion this was out of character with a fine old English country house. We have some great food in this country but chefs seem hellbent on producing something 'different'. Later I discovered that the group's executive chef, **James Parkinson**, was trained by Mr Ramsay so inevitably this is the style of catering you will get in all 28 hotels.

The little hors d'oeuvres – or were they amuse-bouche or canapés – served in the bar were great. Mike's main course of Gressingham duck breast was delicious. My 'tornesdos' (that's how they spelt it) of sirloin steak was beautifully cooked but tasteless – a pity. We skipped pudding and tried the English cheeses, which were all very good. The wine list was reasonable and they even offered tap water rather than the ridiculously overpriced bottled stuff.

We retired to the wonderful big bed and passed out. Breakfast in the Conservatory was everything you would expect, though no porridge. A nice touch was the Wellington boots available for walks in the muddy grounds. All in all, I would strongly recommend The Mount Somerset.

The bottom line: during **March** the room rate is **£250 per night** for two people with dinner, bed and breakfast (ie, £125 each). The cost of dinner is £42 and breakfast £12.50. In London or Brighton the dinner alone would cost around £60 to £70 a head; breakfast in a similar hotel is £15-plus, which gives a cost of about £40 each for the amazing room. Whatever you do never pay the 'rack' rate – the deals are very good value though. So for an anniversary (yes, it was ours), or just a break, this very gay-friendly hotel is ideal.

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