



TO THE MANOR BORNE

Roger Wheeler is swept off his feet by Gravetye Manor

Sussex has more smart country hotels than is decent and now Butlins in Bognor is getting in on the boutique hotel act (more of that later).

Gravetye Manor is only about 45 miles from Bognor but a world away in every other respect. It's been a hotel since 1958, making it one of England's first country house hotels. Located between East Grinstead and Crawley, it was the second country house hotel in the UK. Its gardens, just 1,000 acres, are world famous and the 400-year-old house is everything you



would expect. It was originally an Elizabethan stone-built family mansion hidden in a valley very near **West Hoathly**.

Five years ago **Andrew Russell** and his business partner, chef **Mark Raffan**, who had both worked there for many years, bought it and today they have made it one of the friendliest places we've ever been to. Of course the house is old, traditional and oak-panelled, but the staff are very far from vintage. They are all quite young and very professional – as well as eye-catching. Within a few minutes you are made to feel like one of the family. Nothing is too much trouble for them and it's all done with a very warm smile. We didn't get

to meet Andrew the co-proprietor; he was away in Ireland at the time. Knowing that we were in very friendly territory, we relaxed and enjoyed the moment.

Forget about your waistline immediately. As soon as you arrive they give you tea with scones, jam and clotted cream, cakes and cookies. All homemade, all just delicious.

The bedrooms are all named after trees. We had Pine, and it was all just too much: huge room, giant bed, big armchairs, everything you could want and great views over the gardens. A bowl of fresh fruit and half a bottle of champagne were waiting for us. There was even an umbrella, just in case. We didn't take the broly when we went for a walk in the gardens and it poured with rain, of course. But getting wet was all part of the experience.

The dinner was everything you would expect – great food and lots of it. Mark, the chef, trained with the Roux Brothers, and the large kitchen garden provides the veg so it's all very local. When we went to bed they had even left a printout of the next four days' weather forecast for us. Whatever next!



It's not cheap, of course, but it is very good value when you take all the facilities into account and for a very special treat it would be very hard to beat. And don't forget – always ask for the best deal, there will usually be a special offer.

Naturally they do weddings and civil partnerships. Nothing, it would seem, is too much trouble. All decent hotels will treat guests well – they charge enough, after all – but money doesn't always buy friendly service of this quality. They really do seem to like their guests, even the challenging ones.

Gravetye Manor is a pretty special place. I really wanted to find something to criticise, somewhere, anywhere, but I couldn't, so that's my complaint: it's virtually perfect.

www.gravetyemanor.co.uk/

