

Pictures: David Powell

Rooms with a view

If you're looking for time out, beautiful scenery and a short drive to get to your destination, **EMMA LUTHER** found the perfect country house hotel in Herefordshire



The cosy restaurant and welcoming hotel, above

SOMETIMES you just want to get away from it all. Take a break, get some fresh air, but not travel too far to get it.

If the idea of sitting in traffic and waiting at the airport sounds too stressful, hopping over the county border could be just the ticket.

I was feeling frazzled, life had been more than a little hectic and the thought of time out couldn't have been more appealing.

So the chance to pop over to Herefordshire and check out the Pilgrim Country House Hotel arrived at the perfect time.

I grabbed my partner, hit the winding country lanes and within an hour – yes it's that close – we were pulling up on the huge gravel drive and ready to unwind.

The hotel offers a cheerful welcome. It's run by a thoroughly nice chap called Steve Boyle. In the 80s he played rugby for Gloucester and the British Lions and still has the appearance of a larger-than-life forward.

He showed us around the cosy bar, all shades of exposed brickwork, red carpet and polished brass, then proudly waved his arms towards the magnificent view from the conservatory. And what a sight it is – lush green slopes, huge trees and gently rolling hills in the distance. It draws you to want to explore the great outdoors, so we asked about nearby walks.

Steve's an expert on the best routes and was happy to print off a map and prepare a picnic for us to take out the next day.

As he showed us to our room he chatted about the background of the 20-bed hotel. Most of his staff have been with him seven or eight years and I'd guess one of the reasons they've stuck with him and

the hotel is because he's such a lovely bloke. Wandering around, the atmosphere was relaxed, friendly and well organised. It felt homely, cosy and toasty. Steve bought the place 10 years ago after running and then selling two smaller hotels in Cheltenham and is understandably proud of it.

Looking out from our bedroom windows, I was mesmerised by the landscape. It's perched in a beautiful spot.

But before racing outdoors I needed a rest and the comfy bed was calling me. Our room was nicely decorated with golden yellow walls and nature-inspired artwork. There were freshly-baked shortbread biscuits waiting for us in a little ceramic pot and a great choice of teas and coffees to keep us going.

On the note of food, we were really looking forward to a good meal after checking out the hotel's website. This is a place that prides itself on using as much local produce as it can, and with plenty of fabulous surrounding farms we certainly weren't disappointed.

There were specials chalked up on a blackboard and a wide choice from the bar and restaurant menus.

Steve had been out fishing and caught the specials board's Forest of Dean trout the day before so I felt I must give it a try.

My partner was intrigued by the Eastern influence to the menu from chef Deepak Kumar and opted for Indian-style marinated salmon in a Bombay rosti potato crust with cucumber ribbons and curried barbecue dressing.

Simply put we were both wowed by the food. It was top notch. The flavours and tenderness of the meat were incredible. My pan-fried trout was the nicest fish dish I've ever had – the rosemary, butter and garlic infused to create a taste sensation.

TRAVEL NOTES

Location: The Pilgrim Country House Hotel, Much Birch, Hereford, HR2 8HJ

Rates: Double rooms bed and breakfast from £100. Dinner, bed and breakfast from £150

Contact: 01981 540742

Website: www.pilgrimhotel.co.uk

Walking holiday offer: Two nights bed and breakfast, welcome drink and bar, meal on the first evening, a picnic lunch and three-course dinner on your second day. Snack and a drink for your second walk on third day. £129 per person sharing double/twin, £149 single occupancy



The impressive countryside view from the hotel

Matt's salmon got a big thumbs up.

We relaxed in the comfortable bar, which was full of chatty couples and felt our shoulders completely unwind. It's definitely the sort of place where you can leave your cares behind.

The next morning we were raring to go and explore and after a hearty cooked breakfast, which got extra brownie points from me for not being even a tiny bit greasy, we were ready to give Steve's 8km walk a go.

We made our way through green fields, orchards, past a romantic abandoned sunken church, up hills and through farmland saying hello to horses, sheep and goats along the way.

Having a ready-made picnic to enjoy at a scenic spot was a real treat – even away from the hotel we felt well looked after.

As we returned we'd worked up our appetites and were happy to sample even more of the hotel's delights.

Sitting in the restaurant had a slightly more formal feel to it but the vibe was definitely friendly.

The genuine staff have obviously been

picked with care – their smiles and helpful suggestions were charming.

I tried the glazed Arabic spiced duck breast which was fantastic. And Matt's sirloin steak was excellent. We loved the flourless chocolate tuille cake dessert – a properly indulgent treat.

Pulling away down the gravel drive as we left the next day was with something of a heavy heart. I'd felt cocooned in a little piece of paradise.

If you're looking for time out, this is a brilliant place to grab it – with the added bonus that it's on the doorstep. It ticks a lot of boxes and I'd highly recommend it.