

Swanning around

An atmospheric coaching inn in picturesque Helmsley proved the backdrop for girlie fun for Janet Reeder



Rooms are full of atmosphere



Afternoon tea - too lovely to resist!



The restaurant garden is perfect for alfresco drinks



The fab bar

Photography by Adrian Ray Photography 2007

There are those of us who fantasise about the perfect coaching inn for a weekend - perhaps bumping into George Clooney in the bar as a bonus. We can dream can't we?

Certainly the drunken bloke who practically sat on my friend Shelagh and then told her that I was "scary" was as far as was possible for a male specimen to be from gorgeous George!

Fortunately he wasn't staying at the Black Swan. He was pestering customers in the pub down the road where we'd stopped for a small glass of something and for Shelagh to reminisce about her visits there as a teenager. Clearly nothing had changed. To be fair, the rest of the clientele were perfectly polite and indeed there were some posh landowning types mixed in there. Just our luck!

We swiftly retreated to the boutique luxury of the Black Swan which not only enjoys a reputation for smart accommodation and great food but is an integral part of the area's history.

The hotel is actually three houses. There's a black and white building on the left, a Georgian house in the middle and on the right an Elizabethan building - however the inn is supposed to be as much as five centuries old.

Breaking uneven floors, gnarled beams and the sort of atmosphere Hollywood would give an Oscar to, add up to a place that is really something very special. Had George Clooney been around, I'd

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definitely be giving it top marks for romance too.

Our room overlooked Helmsley's pretty market square and I was slightly worried we may be woken by the sounds of people bustling about in the town but we couldn't hear a thing. It was a lovely room but not huge - well they were heating rooms by

open fireplaces in the 18th centuries so of course too much space would have been impractical. These are just the sorts of rooms you can curl up in and chill. Take a book over to the window seat and people watch.

However, we didn't have time for all that. We were there to sample the Black Swan's excellent cooking.

We looked over the tasting menus in the bar with a glass of champagne before being led into a light dining area, softly lit with eau de nil walls and views over a pretty garden.

The tasting menu consisted of six courses and costs £55 (£50 for the vegetarian version) - but remember we are in North Yorkshire and the portions are a bit more substantial than the fiddly-diddly bits and pieces you may be offered in somewhere food fashionable.

A kind of Asian influenced dish of tuna, pickled Shimeji, soy jelly and Bok Choi kicked things off and was followed by a rabbit so delicious that Shelagh's declaration that she didn't eat bunny turned out to be a complete fib. The pressing of local rabbit with pistachio, sour dough, honey cress and cherry dressing was a delight.

Scallops, divine braised shoulder and cutlet of Waterford Farm Lamb, chervil root, broad beans and mustard was the perfect spring main course. A banana mousse with salted caramel dessert didn't disappoint either.

After dinner we were lured into the bar by the sounds of someone doing a reasonably good Bob Marley impersonation. Live music in the bar, people drinking, dogs in the back room. the place rocked. it was a night that reminded me of one in Ireland. it was a place where it would have been rude not to join in and let the good times roll. I'll be doing it all over again sometime - maybe with my significant other. After a few drinks he can look a little Clooney-ish.

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