

The View review

Indulgence is on the menu this month for
Rosemary Staal



Norton Park Hotel and Scene Restaurant • Sutton Scotney • Winchester • Hants • SO21 3NB
 01962 763000 • www.qhotels.co.uk

It may be the period of sublime semi-consciousness while I am having a massage or perhaps it is the moment I find I have the pool all to myself for my pre-breakfast swim that makes me feel I've been reborn as a spoilt princess.

As princessy experiences go, these two take some beating. A massage which invokes that exquisitely pleasurable suspension of the senses and a solo swim in an azure-blue pool with the morning sun flooding through the glass roof – yes, give me excess of it, please, and I'll wear the tiara if I have to.

Sadly, it is but a brief taste of that other world, the one that can be found on Cloud Nine, for D and I are at the Norton Park Hotel for only one night. But we make the most of our all-too-brief visit and enjoy seeing how this former training centre has been transformed into a 4-star deluxe hotel and conference centre.

It has taken 18 months and £11 million to effect the change, but it has been worth the upheaval, the mud and the inconvenience as Norton Park now boasts the sort of facilities and comfort that have guests flocking from far and wide to its 185 bedrooms. They may come for business reasons – there are 16 meeting rooms as well as a complete conference suite for up to 340 delegates – or events or banquets, or just for a relaxing break.

Corporate customers love it so much, Monica Hampson, events and conference planner, tells us, that they are booking well into next spring. Even during the reconstruction, which included adding 90 new bedrooms, relocating the reception and creating glass walkways to link all the buildings, some companies insisted on coming to Norton Park despite having to hold their meetings in (admittedly luxurious) Portakabins.

Not least among the attractions of this multi-purpose venue is Norton Park's spectacular setting. Across the lawns from the beautiful 16th century manor house, as though designed by a landscaper high on romance, there is a two-acre lake deeply fringed with trees. At one edge, in a shady corner beneath ancient boughs, a little boathouse stands as a reminder of when days were filled with serious leisure.

There are other echoes of bygone days, too, in the walled garden, the Victorian brick glasshouses and the soon-to-be-restored Regency-style conservatory. While work is just ending on the landscaping of the 54 acres of parkland that surround the hotel complex, a refurbishment of the 13 bedrooms and five meeting rooms in the manor house is scheduled to be completed next month and the conservatory is on the to-do list as well.

Many guests make use of the excellent facilities in Reflections, the hotel's health, fitness and spa suite which houses the beauty treatment rooms and a gym as well as the swimming pool that was for half-an-hour my very own.

After we've unpacked in our room, D settles down to read the papers and I nip off to Reflections, where Sophie, the beauty therapist, offers me a choice of massage oils for my back. I opt for the combination that promises 'detox and slimming' – a tall order in just one massage, but I am ever hopeful. It is, of course, absolutely blissful.

Lucky for me that I have a newly slimmed down, detoxed back because it is just about to have its limits tested with a meal in Norton Park's Scene restaurant.



D and I take a lovely summer-evening stroll beside the lake and then we are shown to our table on the first-floor balcony of the restaurant. The sun is going down but we relish this rare chance of al fresco dining in what is still a pleasantly balmy temperature – for England, in a summer such as this. After a warm welcome from Mike Philpot, the restaurant and bar manager, David Muir, his assistant and Dagmara, our waitress, we are set fair for what we hope will be a memorable evening.

A look at the menu tells us we could just be lucky, but as we know from past experiences, menus can beguile and even lead astray, so let's choose carefully and see. Thankfully, it is a modest menu so I don't drift into my annoying 'brain meltdown' mode: there are five starters, five mains, five sides and three desserts, plus cheeses if there are three or more ordering.

I choose swiftly and easily: I'd like gravadlax followed by pan-roasted sea bass fillet with buttered leeks and saffron risotto. D goes for Cajun spiced chicken with a niçoise salad and then seared pork tenderloin with caramelised apple, roast fennel and Colcannon potatoes. We each also choose a side dish of French beans with shallots.



The main conference room



Scene restaurant

Dagmara brings our food with a smile and a flourish. She tells us that her father is German, which accounts for her name, but she is actually Polish. In fact, by the time you read this, Dagmara, her knowledge and use of our language perfected after 10 months as a chambermaid and waiting at table, will be back in Poland working as a lawyer.

We discuss how humbling this sort of tale makes us feel as we broach our starters. My gravadlax is so delicious, with its accompaniment of capers and dill sauce, that I can't think why I don't have it more often – maybe even every day. Then I remember that I am only a princess in my imagination.

My handsome prince is much enjoying his Cajun chicken and our conversation switches to memories of a sunny break in Nice as he tucks in to the salad niçoise.

Happy days are also evoked for D when his pork tenderloin arrives. Roast fennel reminds him of Italy and the meat itself, so tender and so tasty, puts him in mind of other great landmark meals. "This is right up there with some of the best," he assures me.

My main course – three modest chunks of toothsome, tender and perfectly cooked fish with crispy skin – is quite wonderful and I savour, too, the leeks and risotto and the fresh, al dente, French beans.

Thanks to the well-chosen oils for my massage, I feel able to indulge in a pudding: lemon tart with orange sauce. It is sublime – a tangy blend of sharp, smooth, bitter and sweet, but not too sweet. And thanks to D's predilection for a crème brûlée in any guise, he opts for a delicious honeycomb one with a tooth-challenging chunk of cinder toffee.

By the time we finish our meal we are the only ones on the balcony. Inside, the restaurant is so busy that it is easy to understand why non-hotel guests are advised to book a table. After our dining

experience it is also easy to understand why they would want to eat here.

We are grateful to have the chance to thank the head chef, Simon Lakey, who, I am not surprised to learn, is passionate about cooking and especially about seafood. No wonder my sea bass was so terrific.

Simon, who started 20 years ago at the age of 15 peeling potatoes at the Montagu Arms, Beaulieu, trained at Southampton College and has worked, he says, 'all over the place'. He was head-hunted for Norton Park only this summer, coming from the rosetted Dock Gate 4 in Southampton.

With executive chef Charles Nooland, who is Dutch, and a growing band of happy chefs in the kitchen, Simon has his sights confidently set on two rosettes for Scene. 'It's achievable, we can do it,' he says. In the meantime, he harbours an ambition to set up a cookery school at Norton Park and run courses.

Contented and replete, D and I turn in for the night and enjoy a peaceful, comfortable sleep. The lark fails to wake me but I do rise in time for a swim before we head off again to Scene for our breakfast. Hooray, there's fresh fruit and yogurt for me and something that looks suspiciously full and English for D. His cup quite runneth over.

Then it's time to sign out, say goodbye and get back into the car to return to the other world, the one where no-one recognises me as a princess and D doesn't get to eat fried sausage, egg, tomato, mushroom and bacon for breakfast. **V**

Our three-course meal for two, excluding drinks: £65

A two-night break for two people, with full English breakfast on both mornings and dinner on the first night: £189, to include use of the leisure facilities.



Head chef Simon Lakey

