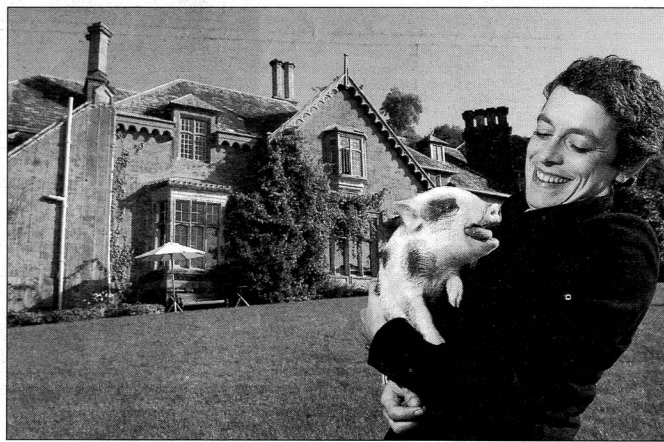


# At last, a country house where fun isn't frowned on

Lynn Barber has always found posh rural hotels depressing. But the glamorous new Endsleigh in Devon forces her to think again



Endsleigh's proprietor Alex Polizzi and her pot-bellied pig, Georgina.

Photograph by Chris Saville/apexnewspx.com

Oh no, not an English country house hotel! Some of the worst weekends of my life have been spent in English country house hotels – to me, they reek of failed hopes, exposed delusions, and induce a sort of existential gloom never encountered at home in London.

The gloom begins the minute I walk in and crack my head on the first of many low beams, and then survey the horse brasses, the 'interesting' collections of thatching implements, the coaching prints, the cathedral prints, the Oxford college prints, the framed notice on pseudo-parchment in the hall telling you the history of the house, the tragic 'library' with its battered Punches and three Len Deightons, the dead flower arrangements, the sour old dragon in charge of the dining room who takes such delight in telling you (after a four-

hour drive) that dinner finished at 8.30. And then, upstairs, the musty four-poster bed, the eye-grazing chintz, the dusty lavender sachets, the Corby trouser press, the terrible bathroom with its dribbling shower.

But most of all, I hate the sad, embittered proprietors in their Boden clothes who tell you that they used to work in advertising but gave it all up to 'follow their dream'. I always want to say: 'You mean you have no hotel training at all?' But instead, I listen patiently while they say they want everyone to feel relaxed 'as if at a house party' while also explaining the basic rules, starting with no smok-

ing anywhere, no drunkenness, no loud laughter, preferably no talking, door locked at 10 – which is not like any house party I have ever attended, or would want to.

So you can imagine I was none too thrilled when the travel editor told me she wanted me to visit a new English country house hotel, Endsleigh, near Tavistock in Devon. This one is different, she assured me. But having suffered for years from people telling me 'I know you hate the theatre but this play is different', I assumed it would be the same – ie reminding me of all the reasons I hated it in the first place, plus a few new ones.

However, Endsleigh is different.

Of course it does have certain insuperable disadvantages (such as a) being in the country and b) in England, which inevitably means c) that the staff are a bit amateurish and d) that the food is over-fussy in the way that country people think means sophisticated – but at least it feels possible to have fun. You get the first intimation of this when you arrive to be greeted by the owner's pig, Georgina – a miniature pot-bellied Vietnamese – and notice a bellboy discreetly kicking her away before she can eat your luggage. And then the owner herself, Alex Polizzi, 34, erupts into the hall, fizzing with energy, hailing all the staff 'darling!' while

peppering them with orders – dynamic, glamorous, Italian, bossy, and as different as possible from sad Boden couple.

The daughter of Olga Polizzi, granddaughter of Lord Forte and niece of Sir Rocco Forte, Alex remembers as a child sitting at family dinners listening to the grown-ups talk about their hotels, and thinking it sounded the most exciting business in the world. She read English at Oxford because, as she says, 'You get paid to spend three years reading!' but then headed straight for a hotel career. She trained at the Mandarin Oriental in Hong Kong, worked for Marco Pierre White at the Criterion, and then did stints at Rocco Forte hotels in Cardiff, Rome, St Petersburg, as well as helping at her mother's hotel, Tresanton in Cornwall. Along the way, she also started her own wholesale bakery, supplying bread to shops such as Selfridges, Harvey Nicks and Fortnum – she did it, she says casually, because she fell in love with a baker and for a year she and the boyfriend were baking every night and delivering at dawn – the baker fell by the wayside, but the bakery survives. So she has plenty of experience in the hotel/catering business but Endsleigh is her first great opportunity to run a whole hotel herself. 'I am incredibly proud,' she says, 'of being my mother's daughter and my grandfather's granddaughter, but I'd like not only to be known for that.'

She looked at houses for six months before settling on Endsleigh, seduced by its eccentric charm. It is a Grade I listed fishing lodge built by the 6th Duke of Bed-

ford in 1812 (the Bedfords owned a third of Devon so they had plenty of land to choose from) and designed by Jeffrey Wyattville in the newly fashionable Picturesque cottage orne style. Being Picturesque means it has a rambling asymmetrical floor plan with all sorts of odd wings and corners, as if it started life as a Hansel and Gretel cottage and then just grew. It has odd 'rustic' details such as pillars made of tree trunks and pavements made of river pebbles and sheep's knucklebones. There is also a children's wing with its own garden, oddly equipped with a larger than life-size nude statue, and a canal for the children to drown in.

The building is so higgledy-piggledy that it looks like a jumble of outbuildings as you approach down the drive. It is only when you walk round to the front that you see its size, and the reason why it is built where it is – its stunning view. It looks down on the beautiful River Tamar, which divides Cornwall from Devon, and beyond that you can see only wooded hills and the tops of Dartmoor, not another house in sight. The park and gardens (also Grade I listed) are perhaps even more distinguished than the house, designed by Humphrey Repton, with a huge lawn rolling down to the river, a rose walk along the side, and great trees behind, including many 'champion' trees – the tallest of their species. Behind the house

there is a gothic garden, with a fernery and a bat cave and a dell of giant gunnera, the whole thing dotted with quaint little Picturesque buildings – an ice house, a shell house, a dairy with all its original tiling.

So Endsleigh is interesting per se but then it gets better – the interior is designed by Olga Polizzi and it is fabulous. Not an inch of chintz anywhere; no 'curtain treatments' or pelmets (she favours shutters), no colour-co-ordinated upholstery (she prefers neutral colours), no hunting prints and, of course, no horse brasses – but some seriously good art, especially sculpture heads and busts, ranging from classical to contemporary. The bathrooms are to die for – huge freestanding baths, power showers with dinner plate roses, fabulous white Frette towels and bathrobes. She has left the original house fittings intact – fireplaces and door furniture, shutters and window latches, some original hand-painted wallpaper in the bedrooms, and panelling painted with heraldic shields in the dining-room, but lightened its English gloom with modern Italian touches – white blinds, pale upholstery, and banks of white orchids. There are blazing log fires everywhere and at night the house twinkles with more than 100 candles.

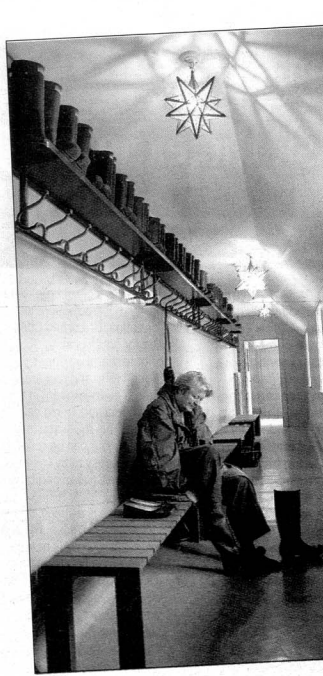
The Polizzis bought Endsleigh in September 2004 and opened last August but it was all a bit of a panic, especially when they found

**The first intimation of how much fun you will have is when you arrive to be greeted by the owner's pig**

more dry rot than they had bargained for. Alex says the whole project has cost £5 million so far 'and counting'. There are also ongoing 'bat issues' which mean she is not allowed to convert the stables until the bats that live in the roof have been rehoused to their total comfort and satisfaction. (Unfortunately, they can only indicate their



The 'distinguished' Rose Walk.



Left to right: Lynn Barber in the hotel's boot room; taking afternoon tea; 'fishing' with ghillie Bill Case on the Tamar. Photographs by Chris Saville/apexnewspx.com



satisfaction by producing babies so it all takes a long time.) She needs the stables because at present the hotel has only 15 rooms – the stables, sans bats, will provide another nine. And it is hard finding staff in the country; she has to train them all herself, and she got in trouble for poaching a chef from Gidleigh Park. But Alex Polizzi clearly has undaunted determination and limitless energy, so I imagine she will conquer all.

She is obviously a perfectionist but also unusually tolerant of eccentricity, which is what gives the hotel its charm. I mean, it is a bit odd to be sitting reading in the library when a pig hurtles through the room, or when the log boy suddenly decides to give you a lecture about how Tony Blair has ruined the countryside and made farmers' lives a misery. Another boy, who offered to show me the salmon larders, said they were locked but he knew how to break in, and proceeded to remove a barred window with practised skill. Then there was the ghillie, Bill Case, who took me to the river to teach me fly-casting (the Tamar is famous for its salmon) and said wistfully that the last time he took a journalist, she was a lovely young lady in a lowcut dress. Alex had thoughtfully equipped us with this expedition with a bottle of champagne so, having given up on the fish, we spent a merry afternoon quaffing.

There are loads of places – Tavistock, Dartmoor, Buckland Abbey,

endless National Trust houses and gardens – to visit round Endsleigh, but actually one could very easily spend a week simply walking round the grounds and reading. The house has dozens of comfortable little nooks for reading and, because Alex is such a keen reader herself, the library is stunningly well-equipped, not with the usual hotel cast-offs but everything from the new Zadie Smith to a complete PG Wodehouse. (Why, though, did my bedside table feature Linda Lovelace's autobiography and Primo Levi's *If This is a Man*? It seemed rather a stark choice.) And although Alex never uttered the dreaded words, 'I want it to feel like a house party', that is exactly what it felt like.

Endsleigh is a hotel designed for grown-ups who can be trusted to help themselves to drinks at the honour bar, to cream tea in the library, to Hunter wellies from the racks in the corridor. In return, all that is required is that you should relax – and exercise a little tolerance when Georgina insists on joining in your game of croquet.

## Factfile

Rooms at the Hotel Endsleigh (01822 870000; [www.hotelendsleigh.com](http://www.hotelendsleigh.com)) cost from £210 a night for a small double, or from £350 for a suite. Weekend bookings must be for a minimum of two nights.