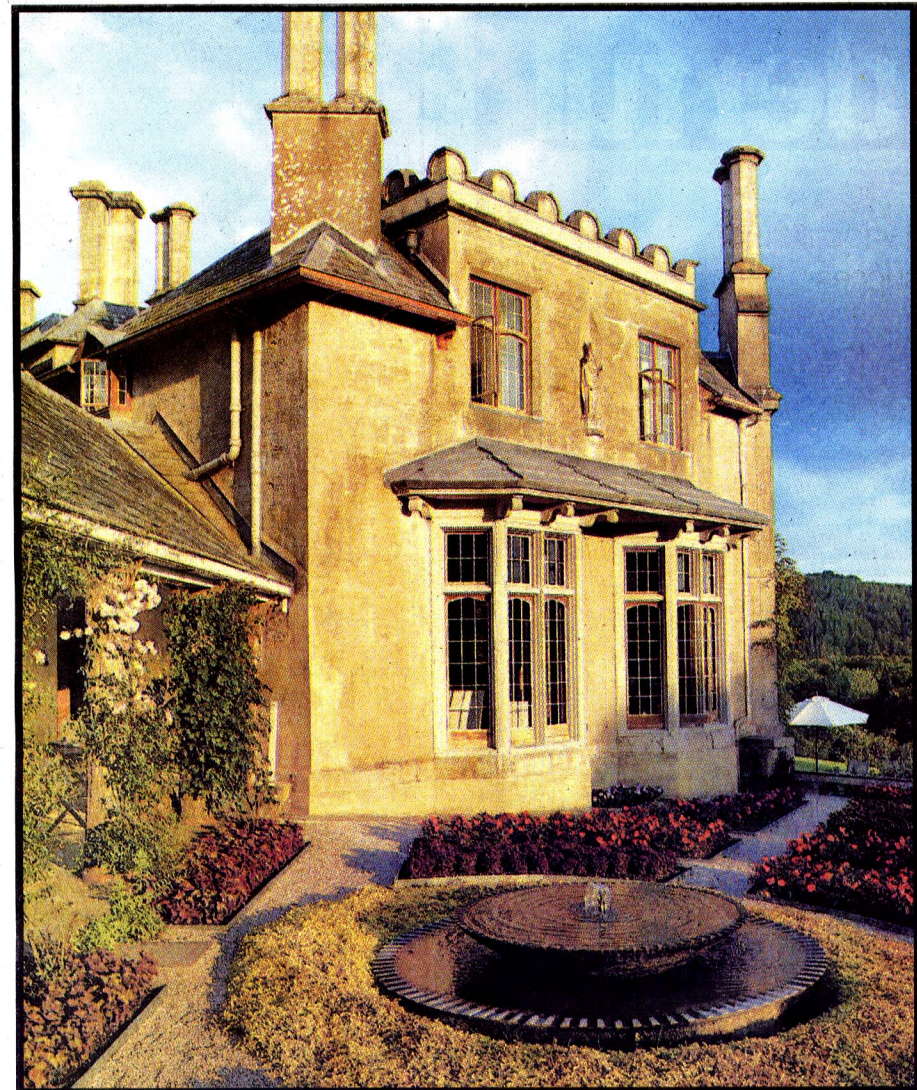


Olga Polizzi has launched her new hotel with little fanfare but, as **Fiona Duncan** discovers, it's definitely something to shout about

BEACHFEATURE.COM

Cream of Devon



REGENCY TREAT Hotel Endsleigh, on the edge of Dartmoor, was once the bolthole of the sixth Duke of Bedford

I approached with trepidation. In a world of hyped-up hotels, Endsleigh is the most talked about of the year, heavily booked for months to come long before it opened just over two weeks ago. I had managed to secure one night during the hotel's second week of trading and now I was immersed in the deep, twisting lanes of Devon, closing on my quarry at the edge of Dartmoor.

What's unusual about Endsleigh is that the hotel's owners have done nothing to generate the buzz, slipping it into existence without fanfare: no pre-publicity, no launch party, no photo shoots in glossy magazines; just a modest brochure and website and a clear understanding that it's quality that makes a hotel successful, not ephemeral publicity.

And how do they know? Because this diminutive Devon bolthole is the offspring of the brilliant Hotel Tresanton in Cornwall. Like Endsleigh, Tresanton refrained from trumpeting its arrival when it opened seven years ago, but word of its charms soon spread and the owner, Olga Polizzi, sister of Sir Rocco Forte, had a major hit on her hands. Tresanton is both effortlessly elegant and – crucially – unpretentious. Unlike many of its try-hard, oh-so-hip rivals, it manages to impart to everyone, young and old, starchy and staid. And it is admirers of Tresanton who have been so busy booking up Endsleigh.

But will it live up to the standards set by its parent, I wondered, as I turned onto Endsleigh's almost mile-long private drive and began the

descent into what feels like a secret valley. They certainly have a head start with the location, one of the loveliest I've seen in 20 years of writing about hotels. The sixth Duke of Bedford did the groundwork: this was the spot on which, in 1812, he built a retreat for himself and his wife Georgiana. Here they would come, just once a year, along with children, servants, silver and animals.

The 16-bedroom fishing and shooting lodge was designed by Jeffrey Wyattville as a cottage orné (Grade I-listed, it's one of the UK's most important surviving Regency country houses) while the gardens were created by Humphrey Repton. His attention to detail was legendary: he had

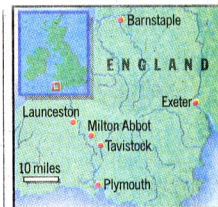
a chimney built in the woods opposite the house, so that the occupants could see smoke curling prettily above the trees. And now I was gazing on the same view, minus the smoke, from one of two languorous terraces, drink in hand. It was hard to hold a conversation: my eyes kept drifting back to Repton's Yew Walk, to the River Tamar as it inched its way along the valley floor, and to the richly coloured woods beyond.

Before Olga bought Endsleigh, it was a hotel of sorts, belonging to a fishing syndicate. Some of its former guests have told Olga's daughter, Alex Polizzi, who is running the hotel, that it still looks much the same. "My mother was rather upset but I think it's a compliment."

So do I. Orné it may be, but Endsleigh is also a sturdy base for outdoor pursuits, with wooden floors, thick oak doors and fireplaces in bathrooms as well as bedrooms, and though Olga has redecorated – in her cool, inimitable style – the spirit of the place remains intact.

There are the old pull-down maps of Devon in the hall, the family crests in the dining room, the beautiful hand-painted walls in Room 8, the floor made of sheep's knuckles on the veranda...

Bedrooms are lovely – stylish and unfussy, with original baths and basins, old-fashioned light switches and a welcome lack of that puzzling technology on which so many new hotels seem to



rely. There's a TV and DVD player but you are far more likely to spend time pouring over the absorbing collection of books – from Kafka to Harry Potter and James Joyce to Zadie Smith – with which Alex has stocked the library. Apart from that, there's little to do, other than to fish (a ghillie is on hand to assist) or walk and picnic in the picturesque grounds, a fantasy of dells and grottoes, cascades and crags.

The problem for new hotels is that teething troubles are inevitable. The Polizzis prefer to employ locals as staff, and, though smiling and willing, they need time to perfect service. No problems with the chef, Nick Shapland, who has come from the Arundel Arms in Lifton, where he built a fine reputation: dinner was faultless.

So was breakfast on the terrace next morning, again with that view, in sparkling sunshine. Later, I made my way back along the smartly resurfaced drive, vowing to return. As to whether it will live up to Tresanton, my guess is yes, easily.

■ Hotel Endsleigh, Milton Abbot, Tavistock, Devon (01822 870000; www.hotelendsleigh.com); doubles from £210 to £350 per night, including breakfast.

