

LANDSCAPE PAINTING

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'Grockles' is what Devon folk call tourists who drive along the country lanes – hello trees, hello sky – oblivious to the growing tailback of local drivers behind them. But driving from Tavistock up towards Endsleigh House, it's best to take it slowly: the twisting, narrow roads are steep, not clearly marked, and potentially treacherous, especially at night.

The turning for Endsleigh House is clearly visible, though – it's even marked on Ordnance Survey maps. It was built in 1812 by the Duke of Bedford – at that time one of England's wealthiest landowners – as a country retreat from his main residence, Woburn Abbey in Bedfordshire. This quiet place for the Duke and his shooting and fishing guests included stables and sturdy cottages for the dozens of staff who ensured the main lodge maintained the same standards as the best stately homes of the day.

But Endsleigh House is no stately home. Despite the mile-long private drive, the cluster of buildings looks more like a farm when you approach it from the road. 'Cottage orné' is the term used to describe this bucolic style of architecture: ornate, deliberately overgrown with creepers, and blending into the landscape. But if you arrive after dark, the

naked flames of candles and torches illuminate the entrance, gardens and public areas of Endsleigh House: 180 of them, lit every evening.

Owner Olga Polizzi (Forte heiress, hotel designer and owner of the acclaimed Hotel Tresanton in Cornwall) has been careful not to introduce too much modernity to the Grade I listed building, which didn't even have central heating until she took over. There is a huge log fireplace in the entrance hall, oak panelling in the reception rooms, and Regency colour schemes used throughout. Only in the details, such as modern fabrics, carefully considered lighting and some surprising contemporary sculptures is Polizzi's hand evident.

The main dining room has an almost Prussian feel, with heraldic crests and a sculpture of an eagle dominating an alcove. The well-mannered staff and guests greet new arrivals with a 'good evening', then let you get on with studying the menu.

Director Alex Polizzi – Olga's daughter – who is on the premises most of the time, is keen on using local ingredients where possible. Air-dried ham from Denhay in Dorset is used in a starter platter with radishes and beetroot salsa; Devon Red Ruby beef is

CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT
Both house and garden
are Grade 1 listed.

—
Georgina, Duchess of
Bedford, and her three
eldest sons laid the
first stone at Endsleigh
in 1812.

—
Installing modern heating
and plumbing were the
biggest jobs in converting
the property to a hotel.

—
The Bedford family once
owned about a third of
Devon and thought this
spot the prettiest.

Hotel Endsleigh's bucolic architecture and naturalistic gardens make for a weekend of pastoral bliss





CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT
Hand-picked furniture.

—
Chef Shay Cooper is building a fine reputation.

—
Modern British cooking showcasing local produce.

—
The character of the Regency building has been respected.

—
Bathrooms have original shutters and cast iron baths.

—
Hand-painted wallpaper.

—
Hard to believe the National Trust chose not to buy it.



served with a raviolo of wild mushroom and poached leeks. A simple soup of mussels, leek and potato with saffron cream was excellent. The kitchen is brave enough to put that seventies classic, baked Alaska, on the menu and pull it off with aplomb rather than irony. The English cheese board is also good, and there are comfort puds aplenty, such as warm treacle tart or bread and butter pudding.

After dinner, some guests repair to the library with its honesty bar and collection of books, curios and parlour games, but most retire early. The rooms generally are not large, they're well appointed with firm beds, a selection of pillows, and top-quality towels and bed linen.

With good noise insulation and no passing traffic or farm machinery, it's the light through the windows that wakes you. If you've chosen a room with a view, this might be a vista of mist lifting over the River Tamar, a renowned stretch for salmon and sea trout fishing at the bottom of the grassy slope in the front of the house. Or it could be of the rose pergola and terraced garden that has been restored by the small team of gardeners.

Weather permitting, the terrace overlooking the Tamar Valley is a good place to take breakfast, where you might also be entertained by pied wagtails on the lawn or by the resident pot-bellied pig, Georgina (named after the original Duchess of Bedford), who appears to think she's a puppy.

Unless you're a keen angler, there aren't many 'activities' at Hotel Endsleigh, but that's part of the charm. The grounds now consist of 108 acres of woodland and garden, and a stroll around them takes only a couple of hours. Humphrey Repton, a leading gardener of his day who was also responsible for the grounds of Woburn Abbey, created the picturesque landscaped gardens. They are naturalistic, seemingly influenced by oriental gardens, with rocky outcrops, small pools and tiny streams, but as you follow the narrow paths down the valley, they lead to thatched cottages and a very English millpond.

Afternoon tea is provided free of charge for guests and includes an impressive spread of finger sandwiches, excellent scones with Devon clotted cream and a small selection of sublime cakes. Like the whole experience of staying at Hotel Endsleigh, the afternoon tea is unpretentious and avoids unnecessary trimmings, making it all the more satisfying.



vital statistics

Rooms and suites: 16

Weekend rates: £210–£360 per room per night; weekend bookings must be for at least two nights

Checkout: 11am

Smoking: permitted in all bedrooms

Children: welcome

Dogs: welcome, but not in the bedrooms or the restaurant

Note: Hotel Tresanton at St Mawes, Cornwall, is owned by the same company.

FRESH AIR, HEALTHY LIVING

Guests are free to explore Endsleigh's 108 acres of woodland and garden. Salmon and trout fishing is available in the Tamar.

BRING HOME

Tavistock's covered Pannier Market is a five-minute drive away and includes an excellent cheese shop, Country Cheeses. Pipers Farm Shop at Langford, Cullompton, is worth a visit for organic burgers, steaks and oak-smoked bacon.

