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BEST PLACES TO STAY

Hotel of the Year 2021: Callow Hall, Derbyshire, review

Relaxed, riotously chic and satisfyingly eco-friendly, this year's winner is a vision of how hospitality could be



Susan d'Arcy | Thursday October 14 2021, 5.30am, The Sunday Times

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“Undiscovered UK” has been one of the breakout search terms of the pandemic. So it's perhaps fitting that our Hotel of the Year might prove a struggle to locate — for some. Callow Hall, a fabulously stylish country-house hideaway set in a 35-acre patchwork of meadows and woodlands, is just outside the market town of Ashbourne in Derbyshire. But for the geographically challenged it might as well be on the moon.

“People ask if I’ve got a nosebleed from being so far north [Derbyshire is in the Midlands],” says Callow Hall’s owner, Ed Burrows, who hails from Hampshire. “Or they think it’s in the Lake District [it’s actually on the southeastern fringe of the Peak District]. We’ve been surprised by how many guests don’t really know where they are.”

Surprised but gratified. Wildhive, the group for which Callow Hall is the flagship, was founded by Burrows and Charles Randall, his business partner, five years ago. Their concept — hotels rooted in nature in lesser-known locations and with an emphasis on a better work/life balance for staff — seems remarkably prescient as the double whammy of Brexit and Covid turns the travel business on its head.



Callow’s imposing Victorian architecture — grand staircase, mullioned windows and elegant fireplaces — and ringside seat over the tumbledown Dales mean it can more than hold its own against venerable hotels such as Cliveden and Bath’s Royal Crescent. In fact in 2008 all three were sister properties under the Von Essen banner, an attempt to bring the crème de la crème of British hotels under one portfolio that ultimately ended in administration.

The hall was sold on, became a wedding venue and gradually fell into disrepair. After a £7 million, three-year renovation, its grade II listed interiors are now an enviably chic riot of colour, pattern and texture. It’s a clever trick: the relaxed vibe brings to mind a home stay with close (and rather privileged) friends; yet the surroundings are grand enough to warrant this being one of only three UK hotels sponsored by the Pol Roger champagne house (the others are Gleneagles and the Ritz).



It is clad in warm recycled pallet wood, with sloping ceiling, pared-back rustic furniture and loads of wholesome charm. I can imagine Gwyneth Paltrow Instagramming from here.

As with rooms in the main house, there are plenty of thoughtful touches, including complimentary treats such as Two Farmers hand-cooked Woodland Mushroom & Wild Garlic crisps in plastic-free packaging. From our deck we can touch dewy sycamore leaves, hear owls hoot and forget what a facemask is. By next summer there will be 11 hives and two self-catering treehouses.

A complimentary yoga class with the instructor Gavin in a light-filled studio in the coach house turned wellness centre sets us up nicely for the day ahead. It is a delightfully Derbyshire experience as Gavin guides us through the seated poses with a refreshing lack of standard spa twaddle.

The Garden Room, the hotel's glass-box, living-roof restaurant, wouldn't look out of place in a stylish corner of LA. We drink Mapperton Mule cocktails and dine on Colchester oysters and Cornish brill. Munro, the head barman, has a stash of marshmallows behind the bar and, after dinner, we take some out to the (not very) secret walled garden.

Its strip of lawn has deckchairs and a fire pit tucked in among the rose bushes and flower borders. Further along are raised beds bursting with salad leaves, beans and kale. As we toast our marshmallows, we rack up the reasons to return. Gavin has tempted us with yoga in the woods during bluebell season and we'd like to channel our inner Attenboroughs spotting badgers on the soon-to-be-installed Wildhive Cam. The summer pop-up opera on the croquet lawn sounds magical and I'd love to snuggle down in the Dovedale Room, used for private dining but doubling as a screening room.



And while we manage a bit of antiques hunting in Ashbourne, a 10-minute walk away, there are numerous local highlights we don't get a chance to enjoy this stay: the Tissington Trail, which snakes 13 miles into the national park, is a two-minute walk away; it's a three-mile riverside dawdle to Dovedale's stepping stones; and the photogenic Chatsworth House is 40 minutes away by car.

There are niggles. The hives are the prize accommodation, but the hill climb to reach them could get interesting in winter. Something else that's a bit steep are the charges for bike hire, up to £30 a day for an e-bike. I'd expect them to be complimentary. Callow has also joined the worrying trend towards quoting room-only bedroom rates. Country-house properties should always include breakfast — please complain. Hotels would still be charging for wi-fi connection if we hadn't all kicked up a fuss.

And, sadly, as the hotel is 30 per cent down on optimum staffing complement, its restaurant is currently closed for lunch on Mondays and Tuesday. Such headaches are not peculiar to Callow Hall however. I've been to more than 50 hotels this year as part of the research for our Best Places to Stay guide. Budget or luxury, town or country, they are all experiencing recruitment shortages, supply issues and the Herculean task of keeping both Covid-cautious and Covid-cavalier guests happy. It's soul-destroying for an industry that has lost about £35 billion since the crisis began.

At Callow Hall, though, the mood is rightly upbeat. It's a sophisticated, future-focused bolt hole and although it only opened on September 1, one couple has already returned for a second visit while others have extended their stays or rebooked.

So where is the group targeting for its next hotel opening? Burrows mentions Norfolk and Northumberland. For those who aren't sure, that's East Anglia and the nosebleed north.

Susan d'Arcy was a guest of Callow Hall, which has room-only doubles from £179; hives from £259; mains from £18; Mappleton Road, Ashbourne DE6 2AA; wheelchair accessible; dog-friendly; children allowed

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