



Hartwell House, Aylesbury

ACCOMMODATION Gazing out over the manicured grounds from a wood-paneled suite the size of several studio flats, I felt very Lady Mary Talbot (*Downton Abbey*) on arrival here. And, settling into this National Trust-owned, 46-bedroom Jacobean and Georgian country pile, an hour's drive north-west of London, that feeling grew all the stronger. Because the real draw of Hartwell House, which served as the French royal court for the exiled Louis XVIII, is its authenticity: lounging about in its grand public rooms, you get a feeling of what it would be like to live in such an ornate building in centuries past.

Staff are attentive but in a congenial, rather than starchy, way; the beds cocoon you in a warm, silky cloud; the food is unfussy and consistently delicious. And then there's its business liaison credentials, which drew heavyweights from global finance here for a 2013 G7 summit meeting. Meeting rooms are neatly appointed, while the hotel's regular walks during which you identify tree specimens make for a refreshing break from work-related exchanges. Near the main building a beautiful spa with a pool offers guests further opportunity to unwind. *Suzanna McGloin*

hartwell-house.com

MEETING AND EATING

St James's Hotel and Club

Looking for somewhere unusual to take clients in London? Try the 'It's All in the Game Afternoon Tea' at St James's Hotel and Club. Designed by executive head chef William Drabble and in partnership with Hamleys toy store, the experience is based around traditional board games including backgammon, Monopoly and Scrabble. Guests are encouraged to log off and spend a long, relaxing afternoon indulging in treats and a game or two. Over several games of snakes and ladders, we tucked into a dark chocolate orange Monopoly top hat, a Battenberg dice and white-chocolate shortbread dominoes – all washed down with loose-leaf mint tea and glasses of Ruinart Brut champagne. For the nostalgia of playing the games alone, it's well worth the visit. *Behiye Hassan*

stjameshotelandclub.com/afternoon-tea



Samsung Gear VR Headset

TECH Virtual reality has had false dawns in the past, but can we now say it's finally here? The retail sector certainly sees a future in VR. Audi and Thomas Cook are two of a growing number of companies using headsets that allow customers to 'try before you buy'. There are obvious benefits for a travel agent, of course, as VR allows holidaymakers to explore a resort located thousands of miles away.

I donned Samsung's Gear VR Headset – currently only compatible with a Samsung Galaxy Note 4, 6 or 7 – and took a rollercoaster ride. The experience was about as close as you can get to the real thing, complete with a sense of dizziness once the ride had shuddered to a halt and I'd removed the headset.

The Samsung Gear VR is light, comfortable and, at £80, considerably cheaper than many of the other headsets about to flood the market. There is no question that headsets take gaming to another level but the jury is out on whether the wider public will embrace VR or see it as little more than another tech novelty. *Ryan Herman*

samsung.com/global/galaxy/wearables/gear-vr



Alibaba: The house that Jack Ma built

Duncan Clark



BOOKS In 2005, Alibaba, which claims to be the world's biggest retailer, proposed an e-commerce

deal with China's state-owned China Post, only to be told to "stick to its own business". The postal giant didn't believe in express delivery. It resulted in the rise of private courier firms across the country.

This is one of many stories in Duncan Clark's fascinating account designed to illustrate that Alibaba, founded by the eccentric Jack Ma, has continually confounded its detractors. Clark heads investment advisory firm BDA China and was as an adviser to Alibaba in its early days. He is uniquely positioned to explain why the business has succeeded against the odds, how the 2008 crash provided the catalyst for consumerism in China and what the future may hold for Ma. Clark also reveals that he turned down the option to buy shares in Alibaba in 2003 and "this mushroomed into a \$30m mistake". Ouch! *Ryan Herman*

harpercollins.co.uk