

48 HOURS IN THE LAP OF LUXURY

Treat yourself to a weekend to remember as an early Christmas present...



DEVON



TOP:
Dartmoor ponies
Picture: Thinkstock

ABOVE LEFT:
Dartmoor
Picture: Thinkstock

LEFT:
Meeting the residents
at Pennywell Farm
Picture: Natalie Sadler

THE DELIGHTS OF DARTMOOR

Weekends tend to disappear in a blur of swimming lessons, household chores and football matches. It is not until you escape for a mini-break that you realise just what you can do in 48 hours.

Using the Hotel Ilsington Country House Hotel as our base for the weekend, we made it our mission to explore Dartmoor in two days, *writes Natalie Sadler.*

Our whistle-stop tour started with a trip to Pennywell Farm where visitors are encouraged to get up close with the animals. There are pony rides, talks on hedgehogs and the opportunity to feed goats and sheep and much more.

Many of the trails around the farm are concreted over, stopping it getting too boggy over the winter months, and the café's warming tomato and lentil soup comes highly recommended.

The indoor theatre offered shelter from the worst of the rain and between showers our nine-year-old loved pond-dipping.

Back at the hotel we took advantage of the modern swimming pool and spa area.

This was the part of the trip I was most looking forward to, relaxing in the hot tub and sauna, braving the ice bucket and swimming with our four-month-old baby. It was heavenly, so much so, that on Sunday morning while daddy was entertaining the baby and catching up on the Spurs' result, we sneaked down

for a second helping of relaxation - I have earned it after several months of broken sleep!

The Ilsington is family-run and the owners are working hard to cater more for children with a low-key dining area in the bar, family rooms and garden games all adding to the atmosphere.

Our room had a separate sleeping area for children, giving us some space and helping ensure everyone got a good night's sleep.

Breakfast is served in the very traditional dining room, which is also used in the evenings for more formal dining.

As well as the usual full English, croissants and cereals, there was salmon and kippers on the menu. The eggs are laid by the hotel's own chickens, and they were oozing freshness.

We ate in the bar area on Saturday evening and in contrast to the rest of the hotel, which is every bit the country hotel, it has a more rustic feel.

The menu is simpler than the main evening menu and is targeted at locals and families staying at the hotel.

As well as having its own chickens, the hotel also has a smokehouse and after smelling the rich oak scent we were compelled to try the smoked meat platter as a starter. Delicious!

The Ilsington is very much the rural country hotel right on the edge of Dartmoor. It's a chance to sit back and savour the food, order a gin (the hotel specialises in gins and artisan tonics, and I

THE SPLENDOUR OF THE SAVOY

It was the first luxury hotel in the country and remains a favourite. Lauren Cope visited the Savoy Hotel to put its opulent reputation to the test.

Location, reviews - and price. We all have boxes to tick when booking a break, and, for me, how much I'll wince when clicking 'book now' is well up there.

So when an email arrived, asking if I'd like to review a night at the Savoy, I almost choked on my coffee in my hurry to accept.

The offer: The ideal London weekend - a show, dinner, drinks and overnight stay, all, pretty much, under one roof.

With its distinctive entrance, personalised Rolls Royce, Edwardian femininity and Art Deco glamour, it's difficult not to be impressed by what is still arguably London's best-known hotel.

As we scanned the lobby for celebrity sightings, our bags were whisked away and a helpful concierge failed to bat an eyelid when we accidentally asked him to queue up for our theatre tickets.

We took our seats for Dreamgirls, a near three-hour spectacular of sequins, glitter, power ballads and more sequins.

Back at the hotel, our sumptuous junior suite, with two bathrooms, living area, walk-in wardrobe, bedroom and all the bells and whistles you could ask for.

We quickly agreed it was bigger than our flat, peered into the mini bar (worth more than our flat), made a Nespresso and ran the gigantic claw foot bath (again, bigger than our flat).

For dinner we'd chosen Simpson's in the Strand, which has been in the capital since 1828. Its menu is a smorgasbord of British classics, and our scallop and beef tartar - with smoked egg yolk - starters were

packed with flavour.

The beef wellington and roast lamb mains were superb, and the service hard to fault.

You will be astonished, I'm sure, to hear that it probably isn't for those on a tight budget - but with starters ranging from £12 to £16 and mains up to £42, there are certainly more expensive restaurants nearby.

It was certainly somewhere I'd recommend for a special occasion.

Next up was the American Bar, the Savoy's historic watering hole, voted the best in the world in part thanks to its innovative cocktail menu. We steered clear of the whiskey-based concoctions, choosing instead a Garden of England-themed coriander, gin and apple-based tippie, and the Art Deco style of the capital in a gin and champagne combo.

But the childlike joy of staying in what felt like a small palace was too much to ignore, and we hurried back to the suite to watch some telly (fine because, remember, we were in a small palace).

London can be hard work. Getting there, and about, is costly and often slow. Not at the Savoy. We walked little more than 100 metres during our stay and it's hard to deny its ease and comfort.

Our eggs benedict breakfast was served bright and early the next morning. And, with that, it was time to go home, to what now feels like a shoe cupboard.

There's no point pretending a Savoy weekend is in everyone's budget - but for some Christmas shopping, a special anniversary or a what-the-heck-that's-what-credit-cards-are-for getaway, you won't go wrong.

SAVOY



1) A deluxe king room in the Savoy Hotel's art deco side. Picture: Erik Lorincz



2) The Savoy Hotel. Picture: Canon Photos

3) The Grand Divan in Simpson's in the Strand. Picture: Simpson's in the Strand



ABOVE LEFT: The view from the hotel during our autumnal break. Picture: Natalie Sadler

am returning to sample some when I can drink again) and enjoy having time to sit and talk as a family

Main courses on offer include root vegetable and chickpea cassoulet, steak and pork and leek meatballs and prices range from £10 to £26.

The sea bream, served on a smoked haddock risotto, was beautifully presented, stacked in a tower and served with roasted veg that added a warm splash of colour to the dish.

By the time desserts were served it was getting late so instead of a heavy marquise or sickly sweet posset, I went for the intriguing-sounding lavender ice cream with a scoop of honeycomb as well.

Presentation really is everything when it comes to dessert and the Ilsington nailed it.

On Sunday morning we stopped in at the House of Marbles, an unassuming attraction we had accidentally stumbled upon earlier in the weekend.

Entry is free and you can see glass blowers at work even on the day of rest. These skilled craftsmen seem unperturbed by the added pressure of an audience and went about their business producing bespoke glassware for sale in the on-site shop.

We were captivated by their talents and the raging fires, precise movements and brightly-coloured glass held the attention of the younger visitors.

The marble runs on display are mesmerising to watch, the engineering that goes into them turns these twisted metal structures into fascinating works of art.

The place is well worth a visit whatever the weather but was particularly busy on this damp morning.

From there we set off for another hidden gem, Lord Exmouth's Canonteign Falls. This is the UK's highest waterfall and was created by the Victorians to channel water to the mill below and despite being regular visitors to Devon, we had never heard of it. The walk up takes about an hour and is far from buggy-friendly - we were prepared

with our own baby carrier but the shop hires them out for £2 if you don't have one.

On the way up boards point out some of the natural and man-made features, and you can count the original, crumbling Victorian steps.

It may have been a little rugged in parts and a challenge for little legs but we all agreed it was worth the ramble when we reached the top and looked down at the jagged cliff edge.

Once back down, you can walk around the lakes, zoom down the zip wire or sneak into the café for a well deserved slice of home-made cake.

On a summer's day, you could take a picnic and make the most of it but in winter it is simply an opportunity to stretch the legs, see some glorious scenery and get some fresh air.

The trip back up the M5 and along the M4 is much quicker during the autumn months than it is during the busy summer months thankfully and we were soon home reflecting on an action-packed family weekend. And, yes, well worth the drive.