

Staying with the professionals

HOTEL WATCH

What irritates beyond measure is having to ask for something more than once at a hotel. We'll bring the towels up straight away is the usual response, but only after you ring reception a second time an hour later do they materialise. Oh, and there's something else. Weddings. They seem to spill over into nook and cranny of a hotel, so it never comes as too much of a shock to discover someone's great aunt Agatha trying to get into your room instead of hers on the floor below.

I knew there was something I forgot to ask before booking a Saturday night at the Felbridge Hotel & Spa - as soon as I saw that virtually every vehicle in the car park had ribbons.

But this is a very professionally run hotel. Even with two big weddings taking place simultaneously, staff still proffered wine and fresh fruit within minutes of being asked. On the other hand, they should have been in the room when we arrived, according to the internet blurb.

If I got married again, I'm not sure I know enough people to fill my share of the 500-capacity grand ballroom; so for Billy Fewer Mates, the Willow Suite (100) should be sufficient.

But the weirdest thing is, unless you'd been paying attention in the car park, you'd never know that two weddings were taking place just a matter of yards from where you were peaceably opening that bottle of red.

Muted tones of black and olive green gave the interior of our room a slightly seventies feel, although that's an observation not a criticism. I should say junior suite, to fit in with the Felbridge billing structure, although really it's just a bit bigger than the size I'd expect a normal room to be. But it's clean, comfortable, and with an air conditioner which doesn't disrupt a night's sleep when it kicks in. The double bed is two singles bolted together, but you'd only know that by lifting the covers, not from lying down. Business visitors won't fail to be impressed by the pin-striped sofa.

The minibar price of a bottle of Budweiser was £4, but any urge towards extravagance consumption was tempered by the fact we couldn't find the key. So we went over to the use the leisure facilities instead.

The gym and changing rooms set an extraordinary standard for housekeeping, and most hotel chains need to take this a lot more seriously (mentioning no names - oh, alright, Langstone Hotel, Hayling Island). A visit to Felbridge should be obligatory to find out how it should be done. And how many leisure facilities have you come across which provide complementary Hildon water? The gym itself has enough to keep you interested and the equipment looked as if it had been installed only that morning.

The menu for the Anise, one of two restaurants at the hotel, does more than declare a fresh produce, locally sourced policy - the names and locations of the suppliers are



papers for the room or at breakfast - no bible in the bedside cabinet either, but a cafetiere with freshly-ground coffee was a welcome change from the hermetically sealed sachets of instant that hotels palm off as a beverage.

If you're flying from Gatwick, £115 pays for a double room at the Felbridge with eight days parking and taxi transfers at £3.50 per person. A double room for the night (Saturday) was quoted at £79, or £179 for a junior suite.

Felbridge Hotel & Spa, London Road, Felbridge, East Grinstead RH19 2BH 01342-337700. www.felbridgehotel.co.uk

also listed. Tempting though the main course menu was - Dry-aged sirloin of Tottingworth Farm beef, duck egg ravioli, parsley sauce and snail butter/ Roast free range guinea fowl with heather honey and lavender, potato galette and braised peas for example - we sat down in the The Bay Tree restaurant because it was closest and we were hungry.

Starters include Cornish mackerel bruschetta with beetroot and orange dressing (£4.95); ham hock and smoked chicken terrine with pickled shallots (£5.95). The Tottingworth beef was also a main course here - this time with hand cut chips and Bearnaise sauce instead of the ravioli and snail butter (£19.95), but I'm always hooked by fish and chips restaurant-style whenever it appears on the menu. It's that notion of the professional chef pitting himself

against a guy operating a deep-fat fryer. Ale battered fillet of pollock with homemade tartare sauce and hand-cut chips (£14.95) was distinctive because the batter did taste as if the prefix had been added and the fish was tender enough to have been steamed. The organic calves liver with bacon, sage and creamed potatoes (£11.95) and the sweet potato, feta and apricot cake with Moroccan cous cous (£11.95) were serious contenders.

I was tempted to try the 'Selection of Artisan Cheese' so I could describe it as workmanlike, but greed did the ordering and I had the triple chocolate brownie with peanut butter ice-cream (£4.95) only because the chap at the adjoining table looked like a heart surgeon in case of emergency.

Oddly, there were no Sunday