



## A facelift for genial George

### A makeover has worked a treat for this former coaching inn — and that's before you sample the fabulous menu



**HOTEL REVIEW**  
THE GEORGE, RYE  
SEBASTIAN SHAKESPEARE

**W**HENEVER I arrive at a hotel the first thing I want to know is the timing of the last sitting for breakfast. So it was music to my ears when the manager of the George said: "Whenever you like. If you are late you can sit in the bar." And dinner? "Whenever you like." Ah, this was my sort of place.

Rye, one of England's best preserved medieval towns, is famed for its cobbled lanes, cream teas and illustrious inhabitants. Henry James and EF Benson both lived here and put it on the literary map. To this list of attractions must be added the George, a newly refurbished 16th-century coaching inn. It has just undergone a major facelift and from the outside doesn't look a day younger than 300 years old, which is much to its credit.

The interior of the building has been preserved with its warren of interconnecting rooms and beamed ceilings but it has been given a contemporary makeover. Richard

reception. Games of Cluedo and Monopoly nestle on the window ledges of the oak-panelled sitting room.

It reinforces the point that you are here for leisure and to have a good time. Relaxation is the key. (Talking of keys it is also one of the few hotels I have been to where they give you a his and her key. Good touch. No matter how uxorious you are, you may not want to spend all your time with your partner.)

I was not looking forward to staying at the George. It is run by a friend of a friend. What if I didn't like it? Thankfully, my initial misgivings were misplaced. The George advertises itself as a hotel for the raffish, languid and marvellous. Don't let that put you off.

The East Sussex hotel has been converted by Alex and Katie Clarke, who quit their jobs in London and spent a couple of years refurbishing the venue.

They have made a virtue of its twin features — an atmospheric bar with open fireplace on the ground floor and a handsome Georgian ballroom on the first floor used for weddings and banquets. The latter is a great space and pretty without being twee.

On the downside the hotel has no car park because it is situated on the high street but this is not such a hindrance as there are endless car parks within a five-minute walk.

Our room (one of 24) was a junior suite in the eves. After arriving we made a cup of tea, and a pot of fresh milk arrived on a silver platter. The rooms have humorous decor and our bedroom lived up to the billing. On walking in we passed a ceramic behind on the wall. "An objet d'art or an objet d'arse?" remarked my wife. The room was not completely de luxe (no hi-fi, for example) but had fine trimmings and mod cons such as a Tivoli radio and flat-screen television.

The bathroom's grey-mushroom colour scheme and elegant blinds were very London. The freestanding bath and two elegant chairs provided continuity with the bedroom. A word of warning: mind the beams. I hit my head countless times. That's the price you pay for nostalgia.

Another major selling point of the George is the food. The chef (ex-Moro) didn't disappoint. All the produce is reasonably priced (£4.50-£7.50 for starters, £10-

£15 for main courses) and sourced locally, although they don't advertise this on the menu which is a bit of an oversight.

For my first course I had scallops (sweet and fresh) with Spanish chorizo and frisee salad. My wife ate calves' liver with cumin and yoghurt. Perfectly cooked, was her verdict. Romney marsh lamb with celery gratin followed (delicious, even if serving lettuce with hot food instead of vegetables seems a bit lazy). Slow roasted belly of pork with winter vegetables and apple sauce was also a winner.

The homemade bread was good if a little floury. Our dinner was rounded off with some yummy homemade yoghurt ice cream. It is rare in my experience to go to a restaurant where every course hits the mark.

It was odd not to have butter on the table and our pepper pot was also empty. You forgive the slightly amateurish younger staff for their errors because they are so sweet. But they could do with some finessing.

Ditto the hotel literature. It caters for "ethereal wedding receptions", whatever they are. And the DVD library offers a film called "Shakespeare in Love".

The next morning we ambled round the town to see Lamb House (where Henry James lived) and Ypres Castle. It takes all of 20 minutes and we paid £2 to climb the church bell tower, which offered a panoramic view of the sea over the village's rooftops.

After a splendid George-cooked breakfast we drove down to Camber Sands, which is the archetypal seaside town time forgot. My advice: don't. It's heinous. We rapidly felt nostalgic for Rye.

Rye deserves to be not only on the literary but the culinary map and is certainly worth a detour. The George is in many ways the perfect hotel —

it is quite sophisticated without being pretentious and has managed to keep the old crowd while pulling in new punters. To have a French sommelier persuade you to drink English wine and a Brazilian chef restore your faith in English scallops is quite an achievement. This Shakespeare was in love with genial George.

#### WAY TO GO

The George, High Street, Rye, East Sussex, doubles from £125 B&B (01797 222114, www.thegeorgeinnve.com)



**Handsome George: a hotel for the "raffish, languid and marvellous"**