



CHECKING IN

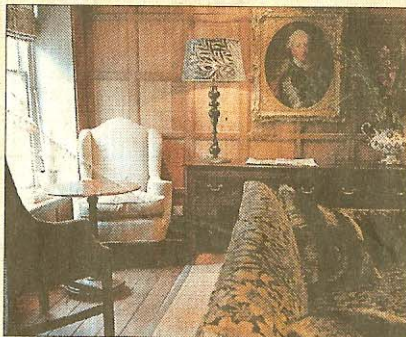
THE GEORGE, RYE

98 High Street (01797 222114;
www.thegeorgeinrye.com)

With its narrow cobbled streets, antique shops, hanging baskets and tea rooms, the Sussex town of Rye has turned twee into an art form (not to mention a lucrative tourist industry). And when it comes to upmarket and characterful accommodation, the town has got serious form. The quintessentially English Jeake's House, with its four-poster beds, resident cats and afternoon tea, is a hit with American tourists, while the venerable Mermaid Inn has been welcoming guests into its wood-panelled rooms since the 12th century. Which makes Alex and Katie Clarke's decision to open a contemporary boutique hotel in the middle of the high street a somewhat brave decision.

The exterior of this former coaching inn, dating back to the 16th century, gives little away. But anyone who visited this place in its previous incarnation as a down-at-heel pub and restaurant will be in for a shock stepping through the front door today.

'It was a bit of a dump,' Katie tells me as she takes me on a whistle-stop tour of the hotel. 'Swirly carpets, terrible staff, cartwheels on the ceiling... all very 1970s.' Needless to say, the cartwheels and carpets have been consigned to the skip and in their place are modern art, contemporary fabrics and comfortable armchairs.



Modern style in a traditional setting.

Original beams, panelling and fireplaces remain and the overall effect is warm and welcoming - a nice contrast to the stark, over-stylised or self-consciously quirky look so many boutique hotels go for. In the guest rooms Katie's background as a prop

buyer and set decorator in the film industry becomes apparent. Each of the 24 rooms is different, from the cosy attic hideaway with its beamed ceilings and views over the higgledy red rooftops of Rye to our large ground floor suite with its smart navy-blue colour scheme, plasma TV and rolltop bath.

Everything oozes quality, from the Tivoli radios to the Aveda toiletries, and it doesn't surprise me to learn that Katie gets dozens of emails every week from guests asking where they can buy the fabric/lamps/furniture in their bedroom. The welcoming bar and small dining room on the ground floor are designed to be attractive and welcoming to non-guests, and both were busy on the night we visited. Any restaurant worth its salt these days will trumpet the seasonality and locality of its fare, and The George is no exception. My starter of dressed crab (from nearby Winchelsea) and a main course of grilled Romney Marsh lamb were spot on - as were the attentive and friendly service. But then, I sort of had a feeling they would be.

We liked: fab food, lovely rooms, friendly staff and great location.

We didn't like: no designated parking.

The verdict: a breath of fresh air - exactly what this town needs.

The cost: Standard double £125 a night including full English breakfast. Deluxe doubles are £175 and junior suites £225.

Joanne O'Connor