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take time out at

DONNINGTON VALLEY HOTEL & SPA, BERKSHIRE

It really does go without saying that a visit to the spa is a great way to relax, de-stress and unwind from the day-to-day. However we should never need an excuse for a little pampering. After all, many of our modern-day spas have deep roots, dating back thousands of years. Hence my lack of guilt in booking myself and Mum in for a weekend stay at Donnington Valley Hotel.

A privately owned hotel, spa and golf club, Donnington Valley is located just off the M4. Arriving in the surrounding beautiful Berkshire countryside, this truly felt like a retreat.

Sharing an Executive suite, we were graced with gorgeously comfy beds and a rather spacious bathroom! We quickly put on the robes provided and made our way to the spa. There we had a luxury 55 minute Sonoma Aromatherapy Massage. Melting our tensions away, my thoughts drifted to the hustle and bustle of life, and what a rarity it is to have 55 minutes to yourself to just...be. It occurred to me how important it is to take time for yourself. It's a win-win for everyone too surely, as by feeling and looking your best, you are better able to take care of your loved ones without feeling burnt out.

We took ourselves off to the capacious pool, and made use of the indulgent sauna and steam rooms, not to mention a quick lounge in the jacuzzi, before quickly freshening up for our dinner reservations. On the menu: scallops on a bed of pea purée, black pudding and smoked pancetta, followed by a juicy sirloin steak, all complimented beautifully by some well-recommended wine, and last but not least followed by a delectable espresso martini. Naughty? Yes. But perhaps we all need to take a weekend every once in a while to look after number one.

Kate O'Connell | donningtonvalley.co.uk,
rooms from £135 per night



find sanctuary in the city at

PARK PLAZA LONDON RIVERBANK

As a former Londoner who now resides in the countryside, there is always a thrill when returning to the capital. The beauty of being a visitor, instead of a resident, is getting to appreciate the wealth of culture, architectural marvels and general buzz of this sprawling metropolis. And there is nowhere better located to explore it all from than the Park Plaza London Riverbank.

Located on the south side of the River Thames, it sits near many of London's most legendary tourist attractions. The Houses of Parliament, the seat of England's political authority, are just across Westminster Bridge, and the London Eye, the city's enormous Ferris wheel, is only a 15-minute walk away. My room had an uninterrupted view out to Big Ben and the Palace of Westminster. Being so central might feel chaotic, but the hotel really does feel like a sanctuary away from it all.

I visited with my small niece and nephew in tow - travelling with children is never easy, but the London Riverbank hotel has taken a huge step toward making it a breeze - it has just launched the capital's first hotel room designed by families, for families - featuring elements such as chalk board walls, neon lights, a bunk bed for the kids, and chic décor and iconic London view for the adults, along with bespoke services. The suite is available from just £179 per night and can be booked by visiting parkplaza.com/ultimatefamily

Daniel Weston | radissonhotels.com/en-us/hotels/park-plaza-London-riverbank Rooms from £119 per night

sleep like a royal at

HARTWELL HOUSE, NR AYLESBURY

I would call myself an explorer, but it isn't often that I can feel as I'm back in the 17th century and living as the royals once had. That is exactly how this weekend felt, exploring the warmth, romance and delicious cuisine that Hartwell House had to offer.

The hotel makes an impression straight away - the exquisite drive to the front entrance, greetings from smiling staff and the aroma of a burning stove made us feel we were somewhere very special.

As we settled in our large room, with far-reaching views across the fields we were very pleased by the little touches - the room's decor transporting you to an era of vintage style. History oozes from every pore of this house and there is so much to be explored - even the walk to dinner took us past the characterful staircase - each spindle of the bannister is hand carved into a caricature - we delighted in spotting famous historical figures, including a grave-faced Winston Churchill.

The house has both Jacobean and Georgian features with outstanding decorative ceilings and panelling, fine paintings and antique furniture. It has a remarkable history too: its most famous resident was Louis XVIII, exiled King



soak in the views at

THE Highbullen Hotel & Country Club, North Devon

Arriving after nightfall to a hotel destination is always a bit of a treat - there is something exciting about waking up to an undiscovered view - pulling back the curtains to reveal the surprise.

This delight surely hits its peak at the Highbullen Hotel, nestled in the rolling hills of North Devon. As I ambled, sleepily, from the sumptuous seven-foot bed in our suite, I opened the curtains with a cup of tea in hand, I was greeted by the most glorious, expansive views - rolling hills, a view down the Mole Valley and out towards national parks. From the hotel's high vantage point on a ridge between Dartmoor and Exmoor, on a clear day you can see for 18 miles across pristine British countryside - it really is something to behold.

An opportunity to enjoy these views is never missed - as well as a lovely reading nook in our own room, the elegant drawing rooms and sun terraces offered chances to sit and soak it all in. The hotel's Devon View Restaurant also offers these panoramas, alongside its 2 AA rosettes - making for a very special dining experience. With a changing daily menu featuring the best local, seasonal produce, the restaurant is a foodie destination in its own right. We dined on the house-smoked salmon with avocado, a deliciously light leek and cheddar tart and perfectly succulent lamb cutlets with a perfect umami punch. The portions are perfect, leaving just enough room for a shared dessert of treacle tart with clotted cream - simple dessert pastry at its best. This is

of France, for five years from 1809 - no wonder we felt like royalty.

That evening we shared a decadent three course dinner. The food was wonderful and the ambiance pure romance - with a piano playing in the background. I would highly recommend a starter of scallops or smoked salmon, the cod for a main and a trio of the delicious sorbets to finish it off.

The majestic tone set the night before continued at breakfast - the spread pure elegance - hand polished silverware, white table cloths and loose leaf earl grey tea. Then it was out to explore the grounds. Hartwell House is a National Trust owned property with Capability Brown-inspired landscapes - we pretended it was all our domain as we strolled from one spectacular vista to another.

Then it was time to relax even further in the beautiful spa - with its stylistic echoes of a Roman bathing house. Our treatments were sublime - taking away all the strain of a working week.

From the first sights of history, to the genuine comforts of a homely room and stunning food, I arrive back in the big city, relaxed, romanced and so full of fond memories. Hartwell House comes highly recommended and I can see why - it is the perfect weekend away, only if you wish to get lost in time and take a moment to enjoy your surroundings.

Lucy Elamad | hartwell-house.com, B&B from £250 per night



also the restaurant where residents can enjoy breakfast - it's a great spread with lots to choose from.

If the dishes in the restaurant gets you in the indulgent foodie mood (and they will) you can also head down to the lovely Laura Ashley Tearoom on site for a classic Devon cream tea or a more indulgent offering with fizz.

As well as the main hotel, guests have accommodation options in self catered cottages - meaning the facilities of the whole resort are still on their doorstep. An 18-hole USGA golf course set within richly wooded parkland, tennis courts, a multi-sport simulator, a leisure centre, fishing, shooting, snooker - the list is expansive and caters for every member of the family, making it a wonderful holiday destination. Keen walkers can also make the most of miles of local country walks, Exmoor or the nearby South West Coast path.

*Katie Thomson | highbullen.co.uk,
B&B from £110 per night*

