

# Hotel spas raise the bar

Relaxing in a cowshed might not be people's idea of a soothing country break but as **Bridget Baker** (pictured) finds out **hotels need to be increasingly imaginative to compete**



While there are signs that more people are taking their main holiday in the UK this year, market researchers Mintel estimate eight million short breaks are also being taken here. Internet booking agents report that city breaks are increasingly popular meaning country hotels need to be more imaginative in their approach if they are to attract their share of leisure break visitors.

Over the past 20 years country house hotels have become an established feature on the UK's tourism scene. While these retreats traditionally offered a rural haven for city types their facilities were often limited to cosy bedrooms and fine food. With free time at a premium and wellbeing becoming headline news, however, a new generation of hotel guests are seeking more feel-good activities in their limited spare time.

The latest statistics from consultants PKF show country house hotels achieved an occupancy level of 67.4 per cent last year against a national average of 72.6 per cent. Although these hotels achieved a higher average room rate than the national market there are clearly still opportunities for them to sell more bedrooms.

Short breaks have the advantage in that people take them all year round and they have, in many cases, allowed hotels to sell rooms in what have previously been considered off peak periods. Spa activities are a popular attraction for a short break and with the spa breaks market estimated to be worth more than £50 million in the UK, hoteliers are keen to tap into it.

Pioneers in hotel spa development were the owners of Chewton Glen (pictured) in Hampshire who, in the early 1990s, established

what was then a significant spa suite offering seven treatment rooms and a large swimming pool. The spa's success led to its expansion and the addition of a hydrotherapy pool. Other leading rural hotels have subsequently developed extensive spas, including the award winning Pennyhill Park in Surrey and the newly opened Luton Hoo in Bedfordshire.

There can, however, be significant planning challenges in providing these new facilities. Most of these hotels are set in rural locations and often in listed buildings. When applying for planning permission hotel operators should be aware of the government's 'Good Practice on Planning for Tourism' guidelines. The document acknowledges that moderate-sized extensions 'can help to ensure the future viability of such businesses'.

It also recognises that there may be redundant or semi-obsolete buildings that can be used and that this can in turn improve a neglected site and help the local economy. Examples of where hoteliers have transformed existing buildings into spas include the former Bothy building at Luton Hoo and at Babington House in Somerset where the spa is a converted cowshed and the treatment rooms are in cabins in the woods (pictured).

In reality, many hoteliers have already used their available built space and will need to consider extending. If this is the case, the guidelines insist that the 'extension proposed is not disproportionate for the location concerned'. Cowley Manor in the Cotswolds was able to do this and gained English Heritage approval with its modernist semi-subterranean spa.

Other country house hotels are finding that they cannot compete with their rivals

unless they too are able to offer state-of-the-art spas. Another recent success story has been Ockenden Manor in Sussex where the local authority recognised the important contribution the hotel made to the local economy. The architects were able to draw up plans preserving the character and appearance of the Grade II\* listed building as stipulated in the planning permission.

If the country house hotel sector is to continue to thrive this type of imaginative approach will be increasingly necessary. 🏠



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