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# EX1

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## Combe House Hotel & Restaurant

Country Hotel of the Year 2007

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# PICK OF THE CROP

Combe House Hotel & Restaurant - The Good Hotel Guide's 'Country Hotel of the Year 2007'

Built as an Elizabethan manor house and lovingly restored by Ruth and Ken Hunt, Combe House Hotel and Restaurant is an English country house hotel lit up by West Country hospitality. **Oliver Stone** is enchanted.

**T**his month, the latest edition of the annual Good Hotel Guide, featuring some 850 hotels in Britain and Ireland, is published. It receives more media praise than any other hotel guide in Britain.

The Good Hotel Guide also gives out some of the most important awards in the hospitality industry: the Césars. According to hotel inspector Walter F Stowy, writing in the Sunday Times, "they go to small, independent hotels — the kind of place run by a husband-and-wife team, on the kind of budget that wouldn't pay for the lobby furniture in some of our more highfalutin' designer hostels. Where other hotel inspectors count trouser presses, the GHG rates a place on the things that really matter, such as character, hospitality and good food."

Guide readers are closely involved too. They write to tell of their experiences at existing hotels or to make new recommendations. These reports are monitored carefully and anonymous inspections are made where necessary.

The key elements of the Guide have not changed since 1978. Hotels are not charged for an entry, nor is hospitality or advertising of any kind accepted. Hoteliers are keen to be included in it because an entry brings them many guests. The Guide's inspectors work

**"IT'S THE SORT OF INTACT, AUTHENTIC COUNTRY HOUSE HOTEL THAT'S HARD TO FIND THESE DAYS"**

anonymously, and are refunded only for their overnight expenses.

This is the crucial factor: the Good Hotel Guide does not accept freebies and unlike some rivals, hotels do not pay to be listed. Essentially the Guide is word-of-mouth recommendations in print. A hotel is considered for a Guide entry only if the nominator or inspector has spent a night there, and had the opportunity

to discover details that a tour with a clipboard does not reveal.

This year, the Guide's inspectors have awarded Combe House Hotel and Restaurant at Gittisham the coveted title of 'The Country Hotel of the Year 2007'.

**When you arrive for a weekend at a country house hotel, you bring with you a weight of expectation.** Will it be in a suitably tranquil and pastoral setting? Will you like your room - or will the chintz be overdone? And what will they give you for dinner? It's no good pretending otherwise: country house hotels seem to be universally posh and many of them very grand. But what they generally seem to lack is a love of entertaining, with friendly and flexible service.

There are country house hotels - and then there is Combe House Hotel and Restaurant.

Approaching 'Combe' is an impressive enough sight, it's a Grade I listed Elizabethan manor house sitting in 3,500 acres of



### THE ANNUAL CÉSAR AWARDS

The 'Oscars' of the hotel industry are given to special places considered to be outstanding. Those awarded have a distinctive character like Combe House Hotel & Restaurant, pictured on pages 14-22, offer good service, a warm welcome, and the feeling that the customer comes first.

countryside complete with Arabian horses and roaming pheasants.

It's the sort of intact, authentic country house that's hard to find these days, with no spa or pool. Instead, you have a perfectly intact Elizabethan manor and an award-winning restaurant. The beautifully maintained building, with just 15 bedrooms, has carved oak panelling, ancestral family portraits, antique furniture, plastered ceilings, coats of arms and enormous fireplaces.

At Combe House Hotel, proprietors Ken and Ruth Hunt have paid close attention to detail. They took over the house, eight years ago and have set about lovingly restoring the property – and the business!

And, although everything that would be expected of a modern-day top class hotel establishment is on site, Combe House's special charm is that it has all been done so discreetly, without losing the homely feel of the place. 'Combe' is one of those truly welcoming places – the genuine article.

It is the kind of hotel the Good Hotel Guide was invented for: more gentleman-farmer than lord-of-the-manor, it nevertheless punches well above its weight, and I'd be hard pressed to think of a small country hotel that's better run or more welcoming.

Ruth Hunt is in the hall to greet us when we arrive.

"The golden rule is that guests should be treated as family and friends," she says. "It's the welcome they get that is so important."

"The flexibility shown by our staff to ensure all the guest's needs are met is something we are proud of," adds Ruth. "We are only as good as the team that is in place and they provide a friendly yet unobtrusive service which allows guests to make the most of their experience here."

Ken and Ruth have a small attentive team standing by, but although the quality of the personnel is very important, it is the ambience of the place that makes it so special.

Described as "quintessentially English, utterly unspoiled", 'Combe' continually strives to always deliver warmth and personal service to all its guests.

"We don't sit on our laurels," says Ruth, "we know we're only as good as the service we provide to the latest guest who has stayed with us."

Many country hotels aspire to be just like home, but from the roaring fire crackling in reception in the winter months, to the lounge bar with its overwhelming collection of good wine, and a drawing room with agreeably comfy settees, Combe House has an atmosphere of its own.

However, a mere eight years ago, Ruth and Ken Hunt had bought a hotel in much need of tender loving care. As true visionaries, they saw further than the leaky roof and rotting woodwork. Instead they imagined fifteen



*The Good Hotel Guide describes Ken & Ruth Hunt as "thoughtful hosts, justly proud of their restoration of the house".*

romantic bedrooms and a restored Georgian kitchen that would be an ideal setting for candle lit suppers.

Fast forward a few years: Combe House is once again the gracious home it was but now the perfect place for a coffee, a romantic break or Sunday lunch.

Guests can dine on the local delicacies by candlelight, drink champagne in a bath of heated rainwater in the bath house in the grounds, or spend a night or two in a thatched cottage on the estate as a totally secluded, romantic hideaway. The bedrooms are furnished comfortably with a diverse mix of antique shop finds, old family portraits and chandeliers. There are scented candles by the baths and retro Roberts radios by the comfortable beds made up with cotton bed linen and hand-made quilts.

Ruth says: "A large part of our custom comes from referral and word of mouth, which is gratifying because it shows we offer a memorable experience."

Originally built as a country mansion for the Marker family, Combe House is the sort of country house hotel that is as remarkable for what it does not have — no spa, fitness centre or designer names — as for what it has, which includes stunning views over the garden and the estate beyond. There's a clear feeling of history that pervades the estate, which has existed for a thousand years dating back to the Domesday book. The views from the house offer a breathtaking vista of a secluded wooden valley flecked with roaming pheasants and Arabian brood mares and their foals.

Sipping tea in the drawing room, with the windows open, all we could hear were church bells and bird song. The hotel feels more remote than it actually is, with a deep and silent darkness at night that's instantly restful.

Our bedroom offered a comfortable four-poster, a rolltop bath, Penhaligon smellies and the sort of detail that so many hotels get wrong: coat hooks and light switches where I

needed them, and taps and plugs that I did not need an engineering degree to operate.

"It's a relaxed sort of place. We don't stand on ceremony — we like our guests to please themselves," says Ken. "We're a country house first and a hotel second."

And then there's the food. If I eat better in Devon, I'll let you know. My pan-seared, plump scallops and crispy pancetta with pea purée were divine, while my son tucked into the best roast chicken (or roast breast of chicken and ballotine of leg with bacon, summer truffle, white bean purée) and chips he could remember in a long history of devotion to chicken and chips. For pudding he was offered homemade, intensely flavoured dark chocolate mousse with frozen raspberries and hot white chocolate sauce.

The wine list was superb, too, with bottles sensibly ordered by style. Ken Hunt is a great wine enthusiast and Combe House is fortunate to have excellent local wine merchants like Christopher Piper Wines to supply its cellars.

The hotel's restaurant is as popular with locals as it is with guests and the menu, which changes every few weeks (and some dishes daily), is based on seasonal local produce. Seafood comes from Brixham daily, while seasonal vegetables and aromatic herbs are grown in the kitchen garden.

## "IT IS THE KIND OF HOTEL THE 'GOOD HOTEL GUIDE' WAS INVENTED FOR: MORE GENTLEMAN-FARMER THAN LORD-OF-THE-MANOR"

This is not the place to expect cottage pie and chips, or chicken nuggets for the children (in fact, if you really want to enjoy this whole experience, this is a place where the rugrats are best left at home).

Combe House is not a place for faddy dieters or the eat-to-live brigade either, but for those who like to savour something different, with a bit of quiet ceremony and discourse on what's likely to arrive on your plate.

The enthusiasm about food and wine is palpable. It's ideal for those who welcome the chance of getting in on the act of a young Masterchef of Great Britain, Hadleigh Barrett, who is hellbent on breaking the mould of country house dining. Prior to joining Combe House in 2001, Hadleigh had spent two years at the 5 Star Pennyhill Park in Surrey and a year working alongside another Westcountry favourite, John Burton Race, during his time at the 2 Michelin starred L'Ortolan Restaurant in Berkshire.



bouillabaisse sauce was light and delicate, a crab-infused foam doing much of the work on the taste front without detracting from the flavour of the fish.

That my companion remained silent as she tackled parmesan and sage gnocchi with a herb cream sauce was testament to its satisfactoriness.

Our brave septagenarian neighbour was waxing lyrical about his caramelised lemon tart and crème fraîche ice cream as we headed for the sack.

The sack, here, is as individual as the food. The hotel website conveys no sense of the flair with which the fifteen rooms have been designed. All are spacious and comfortable but no two are alike. Ken and Ruth have continued to improve on the already high standards.

Combe House is a small country-house hotel of the highest order, with attractive, beautifully kept bedrooms priced according to shape and size (my favourites are the quirky Pitt, with its bed under a mullioned window; and the Willington, for the thought-provoking four-poster. Both are straight out of the pages of a racy period novel.)

Breakfast was equally good. Things that make the hotel special - but should be standard everywhere - are real homemade jam and proper, thick-cut toast. And service was seamless: coffee and toast arrived almost as soon as we'd asked for them.

Unlike most hotels, this one may tempt you to stay put all day. What with the gardens and the food and all the charming staff there isn't much inducement to do anything else.

But if you are determined to drag yourself away, after an excellent breakfast, you can follow local walks around the village, return for lunch, then stroll around the grounds, and then linger over afternoon tea by the fire or in the garden.

**"BREAKFAST WAS EQUALLY GOOD. THINGS THAT MAKE THE HOTEL SPECIAL - BUT SHOULD BE STANDARD EVERYWHERE - ARE REAL HOMEMADE JAM AND PROPER, THICK-CUT TOAST"**

If you want to explore farther afield, options for day trips are carefully described (Sidmouth, Lyme Regis and the Jurassic Coast, Dartmoor, Exmoor, Honiton, Powderham Castle and Exeter are all within easy reach).

We did drag ourselves off the premises for show, though, to the extraordinary Lutyens house, Castle Drogo, built for a retail magnate. This, though magnificent, original and stylish in its way, was everything that Combe House is not: forbidding, a statement of male pride, and, ultimately, rather unwelcoming. We fled

back to the bosom of Combe House with as much relief as if we'd grown up there. I know it's a cliché to go on about feeling as if you are in someone's home, but that really is the way things are at 'Combe'.

The service is exemplary, you are made to feel that nothing is too much trouble to make your stay a delight. This trickles down from the very hands-on approach of the proprietors. Ken and Ruth are laid-back, but always around checking that their guests are being looked after.

Next morning we were chatting with some fellow guests. "We own a restaurant, too," they told us, "and we've got a Michelin star. But, to be honest, our food isn't as good as here." The star may have eluded them, but the readers of the Good Hotel Guide haven't. **EX)**

Combe House, which is in the very pretty thatched village of Gittisham (right), just outside Honiton, is about twenty minutes from Exeter on the A30, exit at Patterson Cross.

**COMBE HOUSE HOTEL & RESTAURANT**  
Gittisham,  
nr Honiton  
Tel: 01404 540400  
[www.thishotel.com](http://www.thishotel.com)





#### SPOIL YOUR SPECIAL SOMEONE

Stay in the sumptuous new 'Linen Suite' at Combe House, formerly the old laundry rooms, now skilfully converted into stylish and spacious guest accommodation. Many original features were kept in the makeover: note the large drying rack suspended from the ceiling.

# Combe Thatch Cottage

## Romantic Hideaway

Tucked away at the entrance to the mile-long drive leading to Combe House is the newly restored Combe Thatch Cottage - a charming romantic hideaway for two with its own private high-walled garden.



Abounding in character, a stay here is certain to relax and inspire.



Bathtime is fun when you have a bath big enough for two.



And so to bed - will you ever want to leave?!



The timeless good looks of an Aga have made it a style icon.



Romantic hideaway: Combe Thatch Cottage has its own private garden, tranquility assured.