The Telegraph

This new hotel feels like the country home of your poshest friend – and is surprisingly good value

Our columnist found it hard to find fault with this newly reimagined 18th-century country house retreat in 16 acres of Berkshire countryside

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Owner Hector Ross calls it the Retreat, which perhaps makes it sound silent rather than gently buzzy, which it is. I call it a fine choice for a short break and, best of all, one that is more affordable than other places offering similar facilities. It's not Soho Farmhouse, it's not Heckfield Place, it's not Lime Wood – it's that rare thing: a mid-price hotel whose appeal differs very little from those luxury properties with luxury price tags attached.

It's certainly good looking: no mean feat for a hotel that was previously part of a workaday chain. The transformation from a Mercure to the second in Ross's Signet Collection (following the excellent Mitre at Hampton Court) has been created by Taylor & Turner, a young interior-design practice run by Harriete Cayzer and Anneke Gilkes.

As I have noted before, English country-hotel design is now firmly in the hands of women whose emphasis is on calm and stylish homeliness rather than bold statements and glitz, and the Retreat is no exception. "Think of your poshest friend," was Hector's brief, "and recreate their country home."

Yu is one of two restaurants at the hotel | CREDIT: Jake Eastham

They did, up to a point. It is still definitely a hotel (conceived – my guess – on quite a tight budget), if a relaxing and convivial one. For a start, it has not one but two restaurants – not something you find in many homes or, indeed, in many country-house hotels.

"We really wanted our guests to have a choice each night," says Sammy Ross, Hector's wife, an experienced property project manager who oversaw the hotel's refurbishment. Here the brasserie 1772 contrasts with the pan-Asian Yu, with its fringed lamps, comfy velvet seats, bamboo mirrors and woven fans (1772, by the way, is named for the year the house, once the home of the poet Shelley's widowed mother, was built).

As I walked past the oldest monkey puzzle tree in the country, then through a front door shaded by a jolly red-striped awning, I knew that restoring, rather than retreating, is what I would be doing here. In the lobby, comfortable sofas, armchairs and a rapidly proffered glass of complimentary sparkling rosé set the tone.

There is plenty to do, too. You might lounge in the stunning Atlas Room, which stretches from a wall hung with vintage oyster plates to the main restaurant, with the newly constructed Orangery, overlooking the North Wessex Downs, to one side.

Treat yourself to a soothing massage in the spa or wallow in the hydrotherapy pool | CREDIT: Jake Eastham

You might swim in the outdoor heated swimming pool, take a yoga class on the lawn, play a game of tennis, treat yourself to a soothing massage in the spa, wallow in the hydrotherapy pool or keep fit in the gym. For the children, there is a playground and an hour each afternoon when the pool is awash with giant inflatable fruit.

Hector and his delightful leftfield hotel manager, Frenchman Vincent Freulon ("I'm Hector's wild card"), both rightly understand that hotels like this one need to appeal to the local population as much as they do to overnight guests – and in the central courtyard there is an already popular deli and café, along with a hair and nail salon.

I knew it was time to get my hair done because I had started chopping at my fringe with a pair of kitchen scissors. How lucky that stylist Lisa Beale could fit me in for a highly restorative cut, though it was the salon's owner, Adam Russell, who made my day. He has swapped his role as top colourist at Richard Ward in Chelsea for a workplace closer to his Berkshire home. "I love your hair colour," he told me. "What? But I'm going grey and I don't dye it because I can't be bothered. Surely you should be begging me to do something about it?" "Never touch it," he replied. "You are so on trend."

Of the 55 bedrooms, 30 are in the modern (1990s) wing, 25 are in the main house, and all come beautifully coloured with lovely English fabrics | CREDIT: Jake Eastham

Gosh, me on trend. I slipped up to my room on a cloud. Of the 55 bedrooms, 30 are in the modern (1990s) wing, 25 are in the main house, and all come beautifully coloured with lovely English fabrics. Opt for a suite if you can; mine, the Sutton Suite, felt like being dipped into a calm, pale green pool, with soft and subtle wallpaper by Watts of Westminster and a flash of bronze thanks to the huge copper bath in the bay window. An imaginative breakfast ("build your own bacon roll") is included in the price, so even my bugbear with the increasing number of hotels that charge extra for breakfast did not apply here. Indeed, it was hard to find fault with anything at this refreshing, reviving Retreat.

The details

Doubles from £170, including breakfast (01635 800520; retreatelcotpark.com). See more places to stay in our guide to the best hotels in Berkshire.