

Chocolate box PRETTINESS

As the credit crunch tightens so do belts, and the mini-break, much beloved of Bridget Jones, is definitely going to become the new holiday.

And where better to indulge yourself with a weekend away from it all than the glorious countryside of the Marches on border between England and Wales.

The cathedral city of Hereford is just three hours from Pembrokeshire. You can get there even faster if you sacrifice scenery for speed and take the M4 route, but then you miss out on the splendour of the Towy Valley, the majesty of the Brecon Beacons and the chocolate-box-pretty of the Tudor villages en route.

Hereford is a gem of city, small enough to do everything on foot, but with a nicely-sized shopping centre and cultural treats aplenty.

The cathedral, as well as being a beautiful and peaceful religious building, is also the home of the Mappa Mundi – a 13th century

map of the medieval world and a mecca for history fans. Hereford is also at the centre of cider country and there is an interesting and informative museum and interpretation centre dedicated to this popular drink.

Heading out of Hereford on the A49 brought us to the attractive riverside town of Ross-on-Wye and our destination for the evening.

We stayed at the picturesque Wilton Court Hotel which dates back to the 15th century.

It's owned by Helen and Roger Wynn, who came to Hereford via London's Dorchester and Hong Kong's Shangri-La hotels.

The influence of their time in the orient is evident throughout the ten-bedroomed hotel, and the eclectic mix of eastern decorative touches sits well with the medieval and Jacobean architecture.

Each of the en-suite bedrooms is individually styled and either overlooks the river

Wye or the hotel's charming gardens.

It's the little things that make all the difference when staying in a hotel.

One often wonders if the people who run the faceless chains ever actually spend a night beneath the roof. One has no such doubts at Wilton Court.

Our room was large enough to contain a small sofa and chairs, so we didn't have to perch on the bed to watch TV.

The selection of thoughtfully-provided toiletries come in full-sized bottles – no fiddling about with sample sizes; there's also cotton wool and cotton buds – the things you always forget... and bathrobes. Bliss. Why on earth is it not compulsory for hotels to provide robes, and prevent the necessity for dragging damp towels into the bedroom?

Other nice touches were luxury biscuits, a choice of teas, fresh milk (yes!) and a TV that also played videos and DVDs – a boon for families.

Ross is packed with restaurants, hotels and all kinds of places to eat – but why bother when there's an award-winning restaurant at the hotel.

In contrast to the oak-panelled bar with roaring fire the restaurant is housed in a light and airy garden room, with contemporary furnishing and plenty of space.

The cuisine is heavily influenced by the Italians, surprising in view of the oriental theme to the rest of the hotel.

I started with carpaccio with asparagus, beautifully presented and quite literally melt in the mouth. My companion chose the creamed artichoke soup which went down equally well.

For mains we ordered the tiger prawns with garlic and chilli on a bed of tagliatelle and the Monmouth free-range chicken with pesto, fine beans, green peas and red wine jus. The prawn dish is always a favourite of mine, but I doubt I will eat a better example than Wilton Court's. It was simply sublime, with just enough chilli and garlic to enhance the plump prawns sitting on a bed of buttery

tagliatelle.

The chicken made an imaginative twist on the old favourite roast dinner, with full-flavoured meat brightened considerably by excellent pesto.

For dessert I plumped for fresh fruit meringue with rose petal sorbet, refreshing and delicious, while my dining partner chose strawberry soup with blueberry ice cream and pronounced it 'amazing'.

As much produce as possible used in the kitchens is sourced locally, and the difference in taste is marked.

The hotel has already been awarded three AA stars with an 80% merit score, two AA rosettes and Visit Wales three stars with 80% merit score.

For the breakfast alone I would give them a gold star. Local sausage, bacon and eggs freshly cooked was a real treat. No hot plates or warming dishes, just good food, freshly cooked and served. Alternatively the scrambled free range eggs and smoked salmon or smoked haddock were equally delicious.

Helen and Roger take their business as hosts seriously and are always on hand to offer advice on getting the most from the local area and facilities.

Sadly we had to bid them farewell, but with the Wye on the doorstep I'm sure we will return in the fishing season.

We compensate with a visit to the beautiful Symmonds Yat and the quaint Hay on Wye on the way back to Pembrokeshire. The narrow winding streets and endless bookshops never fail to delight and provided a wonderful finale to a mini-break that didn't break the bank.

We stayed at Wilton Court Hotel, Ross on Wye. Check it out on www.wiltoncourthotel.com. As well as catering for diners and individual stays the hotel can also be booked as a whole for family events. Contact info@wiltoncourthotel.com for details.

Currently Wilton House is offering special minimum two-night stay breaks from £120 for dinner, bed and breakfast.

