# Cowley Manor Experimental, Cotswolds



So, where are we?

Nestled inside 55 rolling acres of quintessential English countryside – well, it’s the Cotswolds, that’s what they do – a twenty-minute taxi from Cheltenham Spa station in Gloucestershire. There’s a tiny little village – Cowley! - with a pub, The Green Dragon, just outside the gates; St. Mary’s Norman church inside the gates and countryside, countryside, countryside everywhere you look.

And where we’re staying...?

Cowley Manor, a Grade II listed, stately pile – a beautiful one! – that once belonged to the family that invented Horlicks, you know the malty bedtime drink. And it’s where Lewis Carroll apparently was inspired to write Alice in Wonderland, which would explain the rabbit door-knockers on the rooms and the funny little fairy-size doorways in some of the skirting boards.

What’s the style?

Well, the style of the building itself is as grand and imposing a Georgian-style mansion as you will ever see, all built in that gorgeous honey-coloured stone. But inside, it’s a different story altogether. Fairly recently acquired by the French Experimental Group, it has been totally reimagined to retain all the grandeur of the spectacular building (well, it’s Grade II, there’s no messing with the bones of it) while adding a layer of delicious retro 70s-esque sophistication. The dining room, for instance, is a huge wood-panelled hall but with funky furniture and just-so lighting, while the bar, which stretches the length of the room, is like an old Pan Am airport lounge. They’re having their cake and eating it here, and no mistake.

And the rooms?

Again, there’s a balance between old-school country house living and up-to-the-minute fizz. Four poster beds – but modern! – huge bathrooms with bottle green ceramic baths and sinks, terraces overlooking one of their lakes, if you get a room at the back and zippy furniture in unexpected colours.

Is there a story?

Well, there’s been a house here since the 1690s and the land was given by Edward the Confessor in exchange for the bit of London that Westminster Abbey is built on. The current building is actually not as old as you might think, being just 100 years or so old, which means it’s relatively modern in terms of comfort. It was also one of the first grand houses to have its own spa. The new one – a gorgeous glass and concrete number with indoor and outdoor pools, just over the way – is another massive upgrade.

And to eat?

Well, we’ve mentioned how delicious the room is – and there’s a large terrace for warmer weather, overlooking the lake and the vast grounds – but the food actually matches it. We had a vegan tasting menu that hit every spot while we could see delicacies like Gloucestershire Old Spot croquettes going by and people sharing côtes de boeuf and roasted cod in fennel butter. And those chips! And it’s here that the breakfast is served, with a buffet in the ante-room before you get in. In the bar, there’s an all-day menu that doesn’t disappoint and cocktails… well, Experimental invented The Experimental Cocktail Club so they do know their way around the most perfect dry martini.

So, to sum up…

With grounds this sumptuous (they provide the Hunter wellies!), an all-guns-blazing spa with spacious pools and this level of design, Cowley is definitely a country weekend with a difference. Add staff that are youthful and chatty and friendly, salons where you just want to plonk yourself in front of the fire and drink and Cheltenham Spa and Cirencester with easy reach, and you’ll agree that the Cotswolds just got a fantastic kick up the bum.

cowleymanorexperimental.com