

GETAWAY

COREENA FORD discovers the perfect getaway from the daily grind in the Lake District

LAKE Windermere was as smooth as a mirror when I checked into the Beech Hill Hotel & Spa, the absolute epitome of picturesque tranquillity.

Yet only months ago this stunning landscape was ripped apart by Storm Desmond, the lake bursting its banks as more than 340mm lashed the county in 24 hours, spilling into homes, businesses and attractions all around its shoreline.

Thankfully, unlike others, the Beech Hill Hotel was not affected – and it provided the perfect base for me to see firsthand just how fantastically the area has recovered.

Tourism leaders have been impressing upon the rest of the UK how Cumbria is “open for business” following the floods.

And it's more than just open, it's positively thriving, revealing a region that's going through a stunning renaissance, and set to welcome many more visitors now that 'staycations' are on the rise once more.

It's been a while since I stayed in The Lakes, even though they're a relatively short drive away from where I live, and it's a pleasant journey too, cutting out chunks of motorway by winding across the North Yorks Moor.

And with magnificent scenery looming into view as soon as you hit Cumbria, it's the kind of drive where the holiday begins with the journey.

Needing a break from the city and some peace and quiet, Beech Hill hotel was surprisingly easy to find, overlooking Windermere – I didn't use the sat-nav once despite packing it for reassurance.

The hotel itself is an impressive seven storey building with 95% of all the hotel bedrooms, as well as the restaurant and terrace, overlooking the star attraction, Lake Windermere.

As soon as you walk into reception you're greeted by amazing views of the Western bank of the lake, the Old

The best view in the house

Man of Coniston, and it will take more than a panoramic shot or two on your phone camera to get it all in, trust me.

Owner Fraser Richardson is in the middle of a massive refurbishment project here, spending £300,000 on upgrading the bedrooms in a more contemporary style and we were staying in one of the new rooms, with tasteful decor in soft creams and purples. All the usual mod cons were present and correct: tea and coffee making facilities, hairdryer,

NEED TO KNOW

■ **COREENA FORD** stayed at the Beech Hill Hotel & Spa in Windermere. Room rates range from £115 per night (Classic single room, B&B) to £358 (Wordsworth Suite, B&B) but check for deals when booking directly at beechhillhotel.co.uk

widescreen TV, bathroom toiletries and soft towels.

And while Wi-Fi was only available in the lounge and reception area, our room was right above that area so we could pick up online connectivity on our phones and tablet, although being able to scroll through Twitter and Facebook with a view like ours was hardly essential.

I like to have a good look through drawers and bathroom cabinets and read through literature whenever I first arrive at a hotel, to check on

■ Dinner in Burlington's Restaurant costs £26.95 for two courses, £34.95 for three and £39.95 for five. The children's three-course dinner is £14.95. Afternoon tea for two is £28.95 or add champagne for £48.

menus, spa facilities, nearby attractions and so on, and this is where we hit a slight snag.

When eating in the hotel's Burlington's restaurant, the brochure said “we'd prefer it if you didn't wear denim”. Gulp. We had both brought clothes for exploring the countryside and smart jeans and tops – smart enough we had thought.

One quick peek into Burlington's restaurant and we were gripped by fear. The menu looked amazing... this was going to be as big a highlight as the location. The restaurant has held AA rosettes for two decades and everything looked beautifully presented in the hotel brochure, and in the restaurant itself immaculate placings had been set for that

evening.

So off we went to Bowness, in search of proper trousers!

Had we mentioned anything to the nice staff at reception they would have no doubt

stopped us. However, our fashion faux pas led us to discover beautiful Bowness, a genteel town five minutes drive away with a bustling pub, restaurant and cafe scene, myriad shops and attractions with winding back streets and a mix of independent boutiques and upmarket chain shops like Barbour, Pandora, L'occitane and Fat Face.

For a seasoned shopper like me it was bliss, and we also picked up smart trousers in the British Heart Foundation Charity shop, which had some fantastic labels. Laughing as we headed back with new John Rocha and Topshop trousers (£5.99 and 2.99!) we raced back to the hotel to

pamper ourselves.

Talking of pampering, our stay was unfortunately one week too soon to sample

the new spa and leisure facilities, The Lakeview Spa. The old pool and sauna has been replaced with a spa by Curveline Design that trumps any posh city spa, thanks to modern design and a view to die for.

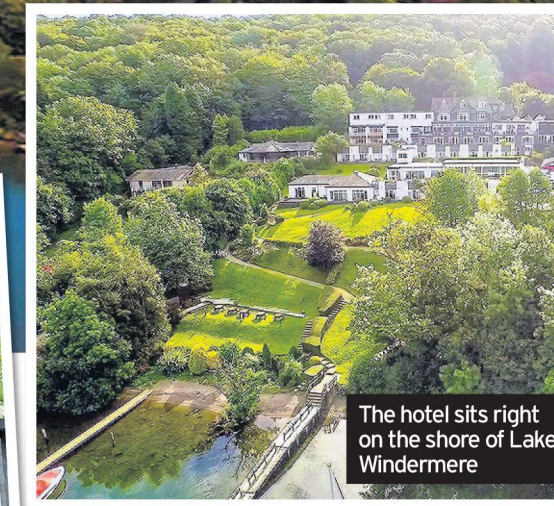
Outside there is now a vitality spa pool, surrounded by comfortable loungers in a garden area and inside is the Himalayan salt sauna, aroma steam room, a new swimming pool and two treatment rooms.

With its fabulous mix of contemporary lights, slate decor and calming lights, the completed spa looks amazing and also brings a traditional hotel bang up-to-date

The view over Lake Windermere from Beech Hill Hotel



Accommodation at Beech Hill



The hotel reception



The hotel sits right on the shore of Lake Windermere

offering treatments in a facility lots of people hope to take advantage of on trips away.

The communal centre of the hotel revolves around the lounge and bar area – a rather traditional comfortable area packed with leather sofas and chairs.

Twinkling fairy lights come on along the terrace at night, bringing a Mediterranean feel to evenings as you wait to be seated for dinner.

A small selection of crispy, delicate appetisers were brought to us in the lounge as we ordered from the menu before being taken through to our table in Burlington's, which was named after the local slate (spotting several people

wearing jeans, obviously).

The restaurant itself is very traditional, with dark wood furniture and simple lighting and sparse decor, with all of the theatre playing out in the immaculately laid tables and immaculately turned out waiting staff, who delivered the perfect balance of attentiveness.

Mind, we were completely absorbed in the food – crispy lamb breast confit and chicken livers and bacon parfait to start and chicken supreme and fillet steak for mains, all wonderful.

I didn't really have room for pudding but couldn't turn down the sweet shots; mini creme brûlée lemon, raspberry posset and chocolate mousse. For £34.95 for

FIVE THINGS TO DO AROUND WINDERMERE

■ GO FOR A WALK

The biggest attraction is all around you, and there are many walks you can take in the area. www.visitcumbria.com can help with maps.

■ TAKE A BOAT TRIP

Boat companies sail out of Bowness several times a day including www.windermere-lakecruises.co.uk and at certain times of the year you can hire boats, too.

■ VISIT SOUTH LAKES SAFARI ZOO

Just down the road in Dalton-in-Furness is the most fantastic zoo where you can get up close to a raft of animals and even hand-feed some of them. Visit www.southlakessafarizoo.com

■ RAINING?

Royalty Cinema in Bowness is a traditional picture house that also organises movie meal deals with nearby Fat Olives brasserie. See www.windermere.nm-cinemas.co.uk

■ SPLASH OUT

If you're feeling adventurous try the Low Wood Bay Watersports Centre. Enjoy waterskiing, canoeing, sailing, wakeboarding, boat hire, paddle boarding and flyboarding. See www.englishlakes.co.uk/watersports/

three courses, not including wine, this was top notch food at good value and well worth the trip alone.

And after a good night's sleep in a comfy bed the gastronomy continued at the buffet breakfast, with locally sourced bacon and sausages sitting against the more typical fayre of fruit, cereals and toasts and jam.

Thankfully the hotel sits right along the shoreline so there's no excuse for not walking off the hearty food you'll have here, and there's myriad yomps to enjoy in the surrounding area.

But, like us, you'll no doubt be more than content to simply recharge your batteries in this relaxing escape.



P&O Cruises' Azura cruise ship

CARIBBEAN CRUISE

P&O CRUISES is offering a 14-night cruise on Azura (A630) from £849 per person for an inside cabin.

Departing October 28, 2016, the price includes return flights to the UK, round the clock kids' clubs, full board meals and entertainment on board.

Leaving from Southampton and returning to Barbados, ports of call include Azores, St Maarten, St Lucia, Dominica and Grenada. To book, visit pocruires.com, call 0843 373 0111 or visit your local travel agent.

GREECE

AIRTOURS offers seven nights in Zakynthos, Greece from £375 per person based on two adults sharing staying at the three-star Paradise Apartments on a self catering basis, flying from Manchester on September 1.

To book visit your nearest Co-operative Travel store, call 01733 224 901 or go to airtours.co.uk