

AWED BY ARTISTIC WELSH WIZARDRY

HOTEL REVIEW

MANORHAUS

Ruthin, North Wales

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A RAINY night in Chester. Not a great song title perhaps, but a reasonable summing up of our predicament one wet night after disgorging from the packed London train. The taxi whisking us across the Welsh border to the boutique comfort – and shelter – of the Manorhaus hotel in Ruthin got lost. Halfway to the hotel the sat nav ordered our driver to lurch off the main road and on to a narrow mountain track where we joked through a lonely dripping forest.

Nearly an hour has passed before we finally roll up to the hotel. Rarely has checking in been such a joyous ritual. Fortunately owners Christopher Frost and Gavin Harris were sensitive to the situation and we quickly ran through the formalities. This was no time for small talk.

We were quickly ushered through to the dining room, a wonderful Georgian-style wood-panelled chamber painted a deep shade of purple straight from the set of Cranford. The colour schemes are changed every month, a bit of a shame I thought, and an awful lot of work.

The hotel, a handsome and solidly reassuring stone building, lurks just off the busy main road that winds through the centre of the town. It was built in the 16th century and was the town's surgery until 1960. More recently it was owned by Cynthia Lennon, whose son Julian went to the local school, and who ran a restaurant there called Oliver's.

I don't know what Oliver's was like but the food throughout the weekend was revelatory. The braised local pheasant with wild mushrooms and baby onions, wilted kale and parsnip gnocchi was as good a culinary riff on the pheasant theme as I have ever tasted. And I love pheasant. Amazingly, so did my boys.



Design classic: Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona chair in a bedroom

Our room at the top of the house was compact, with, to be honest, little cat-swinging potential except by standing on the large double bed. But what it lacked in acreage it more than made up for in views, across the rooftops of the North Wales town to the Chrydian range of hills where our taxi driver had given us the unexpected nocturnal tour the previous night.

Next door the boys were in even greater raptures. Their room had a screen and a projector that allowed them to beam movies selected from a generous range of DVDs in the library a floor below. Curtains drawn and DVDs lined up they would have been happy – ecstatic even – skulking in darkness the whole weekend.

But there was Welsh countryside to explore. Sorry, boys. They were dragged out of their cinematic pit and taken off to the Llandegla Forest mountain biking centre about 20 minutes drive away. What a fun mud fest. We tackled the second easiest eight-mile blue route (the trails are colour coded like ski runs) and probably could have managed the red trail. Having seen the suicide mission that was the black, that would certainly have been our limit.

For a smallish country hotel there are many pleasures to be had at the Manorhaus – the spelling is borrowed from the German design movement Bauhaus to make it look less English – that would not be out of place at much larger establishments. The owners have cleverly carved one of the coziest saunas you have ever seen out of the thick stone walls of the building. Art runs as a theme throughout the hotel, which effectively doubles up as a gallery with dozens of works from local artists on display, and for sale, on every corridor and landing.

But art, schmartz. The pièce de résistance, once again, so far as the boys were concerned, was a cinema room in the ancient basement of the hotel, thought to be the sole surviving remnant of an earlier Tudor house.

So boys, what impressed you most about the charming cultured Manorhaus hotel, fascinating historic Ruthin and the gorgeous surrounding countryside? The answer seemed to be, the cinema in the bedroom and, er, the cinema in the basement. It does rather make you despair but they loved it. My nine-year-old declared it his happiest moment of the whole year.

So there we were, well rested, fed, exercised and entertained by the time we were waiting for our cab back to the station. We were a little tight on time but surely we would have a quicker run back. At least that's what we thought before the same taxi hove into view once again. We missed out on the mountain detour this time but still the route seemed odd. We made it. But only just.

■ Manorhaus, Wd1 Street, Ruthin, Denbighshire, LL151AH, has doubles from £90 B&B, manorhaus.com

Period drama: the Georgian exterior of boutique Manorhaus hotel; far right, art runs as a theme throughout the hotel, with artist-designed rooms



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