

ESCAPE EXTRA TRAVEL // CULTURE // ADVENTURE

DRIVING up the honey-coloured gravel drive between sprawling lawns to a handsome, ivy-covered, red-brick country mansion in deepest Berkshire, I'm in love. And not (just) because I'm here on a romantic weekender, but because the setting is drool-worthy, with a tennis court, walled garden, sizeable outdoor pool and sweeping views across Berkshire's Ridgeway.

Inside, I feel my heart beat even faster as my Insta-radar starts twitching: the reception houses a stylish mishmash of colourful patterned wallpaper, gold-framed mirrors, antique paintings and furniture upholstered in bright, candy-coloured fabrics, just waiting to be uploaded to the grid.

This grade II-listed building was built in 1772 by the fabulously named industrialist Anthony Bushby Bacon, and was once owned by the mother of 19th-century poet Percy Bysshe Shelley (you can buy a book of his opium-fuelled Romantic poetry here).

The owners have kept many of the original features and blended them with tasteful contemporary touches. There are 55 rooms, including three suites, all named after local landmarks and historical figures or Newbury racehorses - the historic town is only 20 minutes' drive away.

Rooms are decorated in pastel colours - dusky rose, deep damson,

Suite spot: Elcot has stylish rooms and hearty food



Super spa: Elcot was built in 1772

Room for romance

THERE'S PLENTY OF POETIC APPEAL IN THE DREAMY RETREAT AT ELCOT PARK, FINDS **LAURA MILLAR**

slate blue or pale pistachio. Some have freestanding baths - book or ask to peek into the Sutton Suite, where a gleaming copper tub is set boldly in the bedroom. You'll find cute lion motifs everywhere, as the owner's son is obsessed with them.

The glass-walled 1772 brasserie serves a hearty help-yourself

continental spread - with bloody mary station - at breakfast, and crowd-pleasing mains such as roast duck breast or fish of the day for dinner.

USP There's an on-site spa with a mud room, flotation tank, steam room, sauna, indoor hydrotherapy pool and treatment rooms, as well as a

gym-fitness area. If you fancy being more active, you can play croquet, borrow an e-bike, do yoga in the walled garden, enjoy live music (on Saturdays) or visit the whisky lounge.

Who goes there? There's a mix of laid-back older local couples, hip younger ones here to chill, and the

occasional yummy-mummy family unit with ridiculously well-behaved children. The relaxed, travel-themed Atlas Room doubles as a co-working space, so you'll spot creatives and techies hard at it.

Venture out The friendly staff can provide you with a map of walking trails, which take you down charming country lanes, across fields and through copses and vineyards. The hotel's website features about 50 attractions within easy reach, including Blenheim Palace, Highclere Castle - where Downton Abbey was filmed - and the Kennet and Avon Canal, where you can travel on a horse-drawn barge.

Make time for a pint at the nearby Halfway Inn, the mid-point between London and Bristol, and visit the pretty market town of Marlborough, its high street happily lined with pubs, antique shops and cafés specialising in cream teas.

Rooms from £150pn, retreatelcotpark.com

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