



A WEEKEND AWAY

MONKEY ISLAND ESTATE

A PRIVATE ISLAND LESS THAN AN HOUR FROM LONDON PROVIDES ONE OF THE MOST JAW-DROPPING BEDROOMS WE'VE EVER SET EYES ON

Words: Anna Prendergast

Every time I return to my suite at Monkey Island Estate, there's another surprise in store. Glossy strawberries dipped in chocolate; freshly-baked muffins with an apricot compôte centre; lavender spray on my pillow. At arrival, there's an ice bucket and instructions on how to create the house cocktail – a gin-based infusion of lavender, jasmine tea, lemon and cardamom. I soon find myself looking for excuses to leave in order to return again, but a combination of being both weighed down by such treats and smitten with

my quarters make it a challenge.

The Wedgewood Suite is unquestionably the icing on the cake – almost literally, as the Wedgewood jasperware after which its intricate ivory plasterwork is named and modelled looks like icing sugar or marzipan, sculpted into mermaids, seashells and mythical creatures. Sure, the design team at Champalimaud studio also created 40 river-view bedrooms, but they're not generous in size and their pristine design (black lacquered surfaces, pleather chairs) jars with the history of the place.

'Nothing makes sense or fits

together,' admitted Andrew Jordan, executive vice president of YTL Hotels. 'But once you're halfway across the footbridge – you just get it.' YTL is the parent company of the estate, a fish-shaped island on the Thames, built on rubble from the Great Fire of London and acquired by Charles Spencer, Duke of Marlborough, in 1925. Augustinian monks, monarchs, aristocrats and artists (roughly in that order) have taken up residence in the estate since the 16th century, and Jordan is right – they've all stitched their history into the island, now a patchwork of architecture, design and art. It's after

the art that the island gets its name – despite its roster of fine residents, monkeys were never one of them: they simply skip across the ceiling of the Monkey Bar, in a painstakingly-restored singerie scene by French artist Andieu de Clermont (right).

When Spencer bought the property, Palladian architect Robert Morri created two new buildings, now the Grade I-listed Temple and Pavilion. There are also a handful of private cottages, which come with the use of a Mini and the option of a private chef, perfect for families dropping anchor at one of the two moorings the hotel offers. Bar one bedroom that accommodates a cot, the hotel itself is virtually adults-only – a relief when you find yourself blissfully comatose from a massage in the Floating Spa and don't want your sense of inner peace ruined by tears and tantrums. The spa itself is a cobalt-blue barge on the water, which rocks soothingly when other boats pass. With three treatment rooms and giant carboys of 'monks elixir' in the cabin, it's a truly unique space for decompressing. It closes once a year for maintenance, so check before you book.

HOW TO GET HERE

The fast train from Paddington to Maidenhead takes 15 minutes

WHAT TO BRING

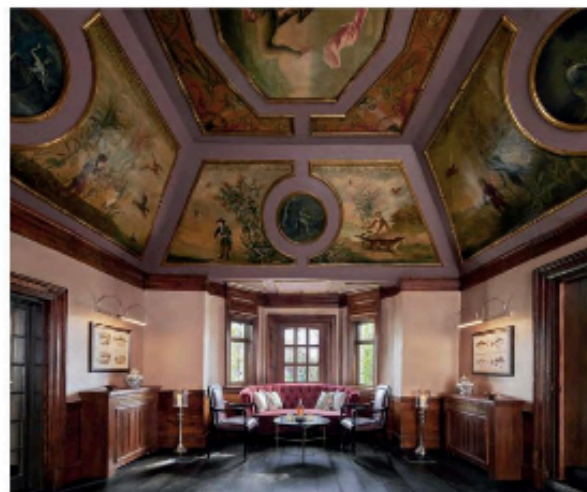
Your own toiletries – the hotel hasn't tackled single-use plastic quite yet

WHAT TO WEAR

Cashmere roll-necks and Ralph Lauren blazers

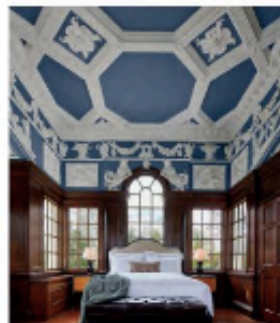
WHERE TO GO

Make reservations at The Fat Duck (it's closed Mondays and Sundays) and explore the medieval-esque village of Bray on foot



Bray, nearby, is renowned for its cuisine, with seven Michelin stars and chefs like Heston Blumenthal cooking the village into the country's collective foodie consciousness. Monkey Island's kitchen was originally headed up by Will Hemming (of Simpson's at the Strand), followed by Alex Tyndall (of Chapters in Blackheath). But the idea was never to compete with their neighbours – the restaurant here is an informal brasserie serving good wine and decent food including a catch of the day in quantities so satisfying I felt the need to loosen my shoelaces after two courses.

Back in my bedroom of dreams and demigods, I find a pear with its stem tipped in red wax, just like those in France, where *Passe Crassane* pears ripen after they've been picked and the wax seals in the water to



stop them going bad. The room is dark – two bedside lamps glow in the corners of the room, but after nightfall, it's a drowsy kind of light, and I'm reminded of a lovely line in Yann Martel's *Beatrice & Virgil*. 'Slice a pear and you will find that its flesh is incandescent white. It glows with inner light. Those who carry a knife and a pear are never afraid of the dark.' Perhaps that's why there's a pear in every bedroom – it's just another way in which you're taken care of on this island of magic and monkeys. ■

Double from £275; monkeyislandestate.com

