

The town is worth a visit just to experience the luxury of its newest hotel, says Nick Curtis

HOTEL REVIEW

THE FORBURY

READING'S really changing! That's what everyone at the magnificent Forbury hotel kept telling me, with almost evangelical zeal. From anywhere in The Forbury you could almost believe them.

The £6 million, 24-room hotel opened in March in the 100-year-old former County Hall and it is quite the most luxurious place I have ever stayed in. In front of it are landscaped Victorian public gardens. To one side is the imposing county court and the remnants of the Abbey. To the other, a piazza boasting a Carluccio's and a French restaurant called Forbury's which serves gastronomic-standard cuisine. It is only when you raise your eyes to the towering office blocks and malls, to the roundabouts stretching towards the horizon, that you remember you are in Reading.

Fortunately there is little reason to leave the Forbury itself. The place swamps you in luxury. If forced to make a criticism, I'd say the service is a little overattentive (a function of its newness, and me being a hack), the decor over-ornate. But that's all the negativity that I can muster.

The building has the imposing facade and grand public spaces with which civic dignitaries used to reward themselves, now strewn with overstuffed furniture, glossy coffee table books, and specially commissioned paintings of nudes and straining racehorses. Our room had previously been the first-floor council chamber — a double-height space so huge that it took my wife several seconds to run from the door to the four-poster bed, which she did several times, giggling with glee. Every guest gets a welcoming goody bag, including massage paraphernalia and candles. Our bathroom featured a free-standing, translucent-green glass bath, big enough for two. Or possibly three.

Now the management of The Forbury claims they are catering for the business needs of international travellers and corporations such as Microsoft, which are based in Reading. While the 30-seat cinema and three sizeable function rooms support this claim, I think the hotel — just 25 minutes by train from London —



Old meets new: the £6 million Forbury mixes Victorian grandeur with modern interior design

At last, a reason to go to Reading



Seductive: The Forbury's designer rooms

has also been designed as the ultimate dirty-weekend destination. Everything about it, from the art on the walls to plump pillows to the sleekly rotating Bang & Olufsen teily in each room, fosters a low-level hum of eroticism.

The Cerise bar and restaurant in the basement is full of nooks and booths and the tables in the small courtyard garden feel delightfully clandestine.

The food is great, the cocktails potent, the staff attractive. They serve oysters at the bar. Need I say more?

Tempting as it was to just sit in the sudsy upturned shell of the bath and order martinis from room service all weekend, we dutifully set out on Saturday to explore this corner of the Chilterns. The Forbury is admirably placed for Ascot, Wentworth and Henley, for lunch at Heston; Blumenthal's Fat Duck at Bray or Raymond Blanc's Le

The Forbury

26 The Forbury, Reading,
0800 789789.

www.theforburyhotel.co.uk

Room to book: Room 18, the former upstairs council chamber.

Hooray! Everything inside the hotel. Boo! Everything beyond the hotel and its immediate neighbours.

Thing to steal: One of the tasteful nudes by Alain Bonnefoit.

Rates: Rooms from £150 per night, suites from £295-£440. Dinner for two with wine in Cerise £80-£100.

Manoir au Quat'Saisons outside Oxford. For those (like me) with less elevated taste there are acres of rolling countryside dotted with excellent village pubs.

We even enjoyed a tranquil stroll along Reading's canal and a leafy stretch of the Thames. Mind you, the walk started behind the massive and vulgar Oracle shopping mall and ended with us traversing several multi-lane stretches of the city's bewildering one-way system.

Reading as a whole really hasn't changed that much. But the Forbury is such an oasis of civilised, slightly naughty comfort that it deserves to become a destination in itself.