

SAMPLING SHIPSTON



IN ITS MOST SIMPLE FORM, A BOWER IS DEFINED AS AN ATTRACTIVE DWELLING OR RETREAT. THE BOWER HOUSE IN THE NORTH COTSWOLDS TOWN OF SHIPSTON COULDN'T BE MORE APTLY NAMED. GISELLE WHITEAKER CHECKS IN TO THIS COSY HIDEAWAY.



Top Right: The Bower House sits on a corner in the centre of Shipston.
Above: The bar area is visually arresting.



The exposed brick walls in the restaurant are packed with art.



The restaurant is a casual, cosy space.

Pretty villages abound in the Cotswolds, which is what draws the crowds, but there are still a few of those rare gems that are off the tourist route. The small market town of Shipston-on-Stour in South Warwickshire is a mere eight miles from the bustle of Stratford-upon-Avon, yet the friendly town escapes the busloads of tourists. There's an old-fashioned simplicity to life in Shipston – it's the kind of town where the butcher knows your name and people smile at each other on passing in the street. With more than 60 independent shops, including the fabulously flavourful Taste of the Country bakery, deli and grocery, it's one of those rare finds: a Cotswolds town with unspoilt charm. There are more than a few reasons it was voted *The Sunday Times* Best Place to Live in the Midlands in 2017.

Keen to escape fast-paced London life for a few days, I check in to The Bower House on a corner of the High Street. The restaurant with rooms is set inside a beautifully restored Grade II-listed Georgian townhouse, originally built in 1731. Once a purveyor of women's clothes, The Bower House is now a classy yet casual restaurant, with five individually designed rooms above.

Marked with period features, like wooden beams, crooked doorways and antique window frames, the restaurant, which doubles as the hotel reception, is enchanting. Despite its antiquity, it has a modern funky feel, with contemporary paintings hanging on old brick, an open fire crackling in the fireplace, smoky-blue walls contrasting with black and white floor tiles and russet with floorboards. Somehow, the vibrant colours make a soothing whole.

Owned by former editor of *The Economist* Andrew Knight, The Bower House is presided over by Australian duo Paul Merrony and Tracey Petersen. Tracey gives me a warm welcome as she guides me upstairs to my room, which features dusky pink walls, an enormous white, wrought-iron bed, wooden floorboards and a large bathroom with a freestanding roll top bath. Through the window, I have views over Shipston's rooftops and across to Saint Edmund's 15th-century bell tower. Tracey sates my curiosity about this Cotswold's nesting place, inviting me to peek into the other rooms, several with quirky feature wallpaper. It's one of those places where every room has a definite personality, including the family suite with a separate bunk room for the children.

I have just enough time before dinner to explore the highlights of Shipston, once a working Wool Town. The neighbouring farming hamlet of Barcheston was central to the history of English tapestry making – it was the first manufacturing home in England for the weaving of magnificent woollen tapestries, known as the Sheldon Tapestries. Ducking in an out of boutiques, the merchants engage me in conversation, extolling the virtues of the town. It's clear residents are proud of their town, and for good reason. Lovely period properties follow the main road, and everyone I meet has a genuine smile for an out-of-towner, evident from the camera slung around my neck.

When the night draws in, I take a seat at one of the weather-beaten wooden tables in the restaurant by the fireplace at The Bower House. Jazz tunes tinkle in the background and my friend Rob, who has joined me for dinner, peruses the menu, sighing with food lust before deciding on the crab bisque as a starter. I sip on a Bower Sour from the bar and select the beetroot and leek salad with goat curd, dressed with a light vinaigrette. It's the perfect starter, crisp and fresh, leaving room for the rich game main to follow.

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One of the generously proportioned bathrooms.



Feature wallpaper adds an eclectic touch.

While Rob delves into his generous portion of tender Roe deer, I start on the mound of Brussels Sprouts and cauliflower, flavoured with lardons and black pudding, that accompanies my perfectly-prepared duck breast. In addition to this heaped plate, I have a side dish of deliciously creamy potato gratin. This is hearty winter fare at its best.

For dessert, Rob and I opt for the most exotic sounding dishes: TBH tarte Tartin and Delice Jaconde. A roasted, caramelised apple perches on top of a disc of flaky pastry with a dollop of crème Anglaise as a semi-deconstructed tarte Tartin, but it's the creamy mousse of the Delice Jaconde, drizzled with a deep, dark chocolate sauce that has us salivating. "This is the kind of place you come to just for the dessert," remarks a happily satiated Rob.

After farewelling my friend, I clamber back up the stairs to my top-floor room and flop across the bed. Tomorrow, I'll pick up a hamper from Taste of the Country and explore further afield, perhaps dropping in to the Roman villa at Chedworth, the folly of Broadway Tower, or the 200-year-old Mogul Indian palace of Sezincote. I'm spoilt for choice. For now though, to misquote the bard, "to sleep, perchance to dream." ■

Tracey gives me a warm welcome as she guides me upstairs to my room, which features dusky pink walls, an enormous white, wrought-iron bed, wooden floorboards and a large bathroom with a freestanding roll top bath.

INFO
 For more details on The Bower House in Shipston-on-Stour, see <https://bower.house>



Shakespeare's birthplace in Stratford-upon-Avon.



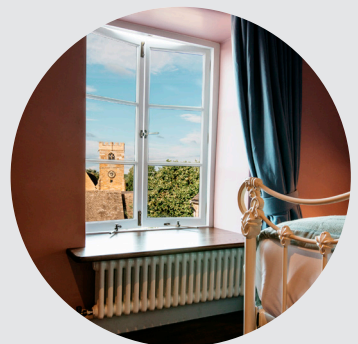
The beds at the Bower House guarantee a good night's sleep



His and hers sinks.



A book nook.



A view of St Edmund's bell tower.