



From Times Online

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The best B&Bs in England, 2004

Five-star welcome, one-star price - and not a nylon sheet in sight. Sean Newson checks out the official top nine

by Sean Newson

Fried egg and bacon. With mushrooms. And sausages. And baked beans. And tomatoes. And toast. And cereal. And a fruit salad. In almost all the places I visited this was just the start of it, and when you're testing a B&B there's no option but to get stuck in, is there? Now I can pinch an inch.

But it was worth it, because in the course of my trip I got quite an education. There is a B&B revolution taking place in this country and the bad old days of porcelain dogs and plastic sheets are well and truly on their way out. Many of the properties I visited are at the forefront of this revolution. They offer accommodation of a style and quality you'd normally expect from an upmarket hotel, served up with a sense of genuine hospitality that no larger establishment could ever match. And at a fraction of the cost: less than £40pp a night. At that price, we can all afford to loosen our belts.

1. FIELD HOUSE, Hindringham, Norfolk

A wonderful place to start. Wendy Dolton is the driving force behind the property, and there's something of the alchemist about her, because she's conjured gold-standard accommodation from the base metal of a run-of-the-mill, suburban-style house. She runs it with a restless perfectionism, filling her rooms with the kind of mod cons you'd expect to find in boutique hotels, and maintaining them in spotless condition.

She can cook too. Dinner is an optional extra here, and the meal she prepared was an ambitious undertaking. Lots of things came stacked on top of other things, and there was plenty of drizzling, crinkling and general frilliness in its presentation. Sounds awful, doesn't it? But this wasn't at all. I ate a double-baked cheese soufflé on a bed of tomatoes; organic salmon with a rich lemon-and-cream sauce, laid on grits and spinach; and a chocolate-coffee-and-ginger confection for pudding — and in each course the flavours and textures layered up, one on top of the other, each complementing the last and adding to the overall effect. It was, in short, a triumph.

The bed: a little soft for my taste, but soft by design, rather than as a result of age or accident. The bedding itself was luxurious, and there was a CD player, a flat-screen TV and a DVD player to keep me amused after dinner. The bathroom was big, well-stocked with toiletries, and immaculately clean. 9/10

The breakfast: just like dinner, excellent. There was a selection of cooked courses, all the jams were home-made, and my choice of newspaper was waiting for me at the table when I arrived. 9/10

The decor: low-key country living, with the crisp modern lines of the architecture softened by some eye-catching antiques. 9/10

The service: Wendy and her husband, Graham, aim to be as unobtrusive as possible, but always seem to be there when you need something. 9/10

The location: on a quiet country lane in north Norfolk, about 10 minutes' drive from the coast. The tight medieval town of Walsingham is within easy striking distance, as is Nelson's birthplace, the RSPB reserve at Titchwell

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Marsh, and seal-spotting at Blakeney Point. 9/10

Do they do dinner? See above. 10/10

Value for money: 10/10

Page 1 of 9

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