

His mission:
To test hotel
hospitality
to the limit

AN INSPECTOR CALLS



TODAY is the coldest day in years. The walk from the station (45 minutes from London on the fast train) is parky in the extreme, but must be good for killing off any lingering lurg. The hotel stands next to a mini roundabout in an area for which the expression 'gin and jag' could have been invented.

It's glam suburbia, where I get the impression the car you drive is crucial. I had noticed a couple of Porsche windscreens being scraped at the station, and almost opposite the hotel is a Bentley showroom.

The Elephant, in the Thames-side Berkshire village of Pangbourne, is the latest production from a rising star in the hotel firmament — Hillbrooke, which the charmingly handsome Christophe Brooke founded after taking over the Victoria at Holkham Hall.

Then he persuaded the Marquess of Bath to let him run the Bath Arms at Longleat. Sadly, he's no longer involved with

the Victoria, but has the New Inn at Colin St Aldwyns in the Cotswolds, and is about to open up in Hampshire.

'Quirky luxury' is the company motto, and it works brilliantly. You can choose your room on the Internet; they're all there for your perusal.

I chose Mandalay because I liked the look of one of the walls featuring a collage of garish photographs from Indo-China.

On arrival, a ditzzy girl on reception hands me a key attached to a wooden elephant and I skip up the wide stairs. The door to Mandalay is open, with the bedside lights on — a nice touch which makes for a far more interesting corridor. The room next door — Oplum — is also open for inspection. It's smaller than mine and has black walls. The door to Spice, at the end of the passage, is closed,

which must mean it's occupied. Mandalay is pleasingly moody. It features lots of photographs of Burma, extracts from Rudyard Kipling (who wrote Mandalay in 1892) and the cover of Daphne du Maurier's Rebecca. The Taj Mahal is there, too. The decor accounts for the quirky part of the equation. The luxury comes in the form of seemingly acres of creamy duvet and soft-feathered pillows.

My only aggravation is that I can't open the window. So I call the receptionist, who politely asks if I have spotted a second window hidden behind a red blind. Terribly sorry — I haven't.

The downstairs bar is called Babar. You can eat here, but it lacks atmosphere and is too brightly lit. A far better option is to wander into the dining room at the back of the building, where a huge wooden elephant greets you.

I opt for the Game Menu, which



Indian-themed. The Elephant in prosperous Pangbourne

comes in at £20 for two courses and starts pigeon salad (pink and perfect) followed by pheasant, with lots of root vegetables. Because I'm alone, there's a chance to cast an eye about the room, which really isn't very pretty, but there are so many interesting artefacts, palms, screens, flickering candles and Persian rugs that you hardly notice.

Next morning, after a delicious bowl of porridge and a couple of

double espressos, the thought occurs that it would be ideal to slip into a Bentley and drive along the Thames. Instead, Jack Frost awaits — but The Elephant has left me warm and glowing.

The Elephant, Church Road,
Pangbourne, Berks.
Tel: 0118 984 2244,
elephantihotel.co.uk
Doubles from £140, B&B

★★★★☆