

QUEENWOOD: A PRIVATE GEORGIAN LODGE IN A STATELY HIDE-AWAY

How to personalise a 'country house hotel experience' exclusively to you and your friends

A wonderfully private four-bedroom Georgian lodge - cuddled within Capability Brown parkland, in the heart of Wiltshire - offers a very special bolt-hole for those seeking treats more usually associated with a short break in a country house hotel. What sets Queenwood Lodge on the 4,000 acre Bowood estate in a class all of its own, though, is the chance for you and a select group of friends to be its only occupants with husband-and-wife team, Karen and Chris Dawson on hand to dedicate themselves totally to you during your visit.

As you enter the grounds at Bowood (home to the Marquises of Lansdowne for some 250 years), through the majestic 'Golden Gates' built by Sir Charles Barry in 1840, and head down the bluebell-lined drive you'll know that you are in for a very special time. Turn off the main drive, between the 7th and 8th fairways of the 18-hole Bowood golf course, and you will see Queenwood Lodge rise up to greet you as it peers out over a small stream, tucked away from the real world.

Karen Dawson will be waiting to welcome you on arrival. Husband and chef, Chris will be hard at work in the kitchen preparing your dinner for the evening and it will be these delicious smells that waft out towards you as you step through the front door, in time for tea by the fireside.

Lady Lansdowne's country house style

Inside Queenwood, the interiors have been decorated lovingly by the Marchioness of Lansdowne. Running her own interior design business and having previously worked at Colefax & Fowler for over 15 years, she has matched up regency stripes with pastel floral prints in the sitting room while opting for full-bodied reds to give the dining room its distinctiveness and warm glow. Each of the four

bedrooms (all with their own en-suite bathroom) is individually-decorated with soft-furnishings that are beautifully and elegantly co-ordinated in a very English country house style, truly in keeping with this enchanting Georgian manor house.

Oil paintings, ceramics and antique furniture didn't need to be purchased for Queenwood when it was redesigned in 1993 but were simply relocated from other homes on the estate. Book shelves are well stocked with quick reads and coffee table books that cover art, history and gardens - very much reflecting the character of Bowood.

Lady Lansdowne's role in turning the lodge into a glorious home does not stop at the fabrics and furniture. Exotically striped tulips from her garden often make up the dining table's centrepiece and if asparagus is on the menu then you can count on it being from her garden too.

Chef, Chris Dawson comments, "It is also marvellous to be able to use herbs that have been grown by Lady Lansdowne, plus other organic ingredients from the private Lansdowne gardens. Fabulous fresh, seasonal foods – from apples, plums and rhubarb to potatoes, broad beans, all types of other green vegetables and salad leaves – hold their optimum flavour as the dishes and recipes featured at Queenwood celebrate the best of the estate's produce, at the time. Cheeses served are all from the southwest and we do not need to venture beyond Wiltshire and the Cotswolds for our ingredients."

So, 'Modern British' cooking at Queenwood is no hollow description with Chris harvesting the very best of English food in this way. Indeed, if the term 'home cooking' is to be adopted here on account of the Queenwood backdrop then the phrase is redefined fabulously, thanks to the Dawsons. "It's great to have the opportunity to develop menus that are truly in keeping with Queenwood's environment," says Chris. "Being extremely fortunate in having the freshest produce available means that I really can keep things simple and uncomplicated, cooking food in the best way it deserves. Without having to resort to heavy sauces, the very best taste and texture can be achieved. For instance, a typical dinner might include Spring Wiltshire lamb with roasted garden vegetables in a thyme jus, followed by a vanilla pannacotta with poached berries."

Queenwood's double act

Chris and Karen Dawson have recently arrived at Queenwood, in April 2005, and are full of enthusiasm for how to optimise Queenwood's potential for visitors. Both 33, they met in March 1992 at the Hotel Maes-y-Neuadd near Harlech in Wales where Chris was Sous Chef and Karen was Restaurant Manager. This teamwork continued as they moved around the country together, marrying in 2000. Significantly, they helped to put the prestigious Northcote Manor in North Devon on the map while most recently they owned and ran the very popular Dawson's restaurant in Newton Poppleford, near Exeter, where they gained 2 AA Rosettes in the first year there and inclusion in the Good Food Guide and the Michelin Guide.

"Queenwood opens up a whole new dimension for us, too," explains Karen, "as we hone our restaurant and front-of-house experience, for the benefit of groups of up to just eight people at a time. It feels like welcoming friends into our own home and it's wonderful to see people relaxed and happy... and telling us they plan to return again soon."

Reasons to stay

Karen continues, "Some guests may come to Queenwood because they want a celebratory black-tie dinner to be the focus of their visit while others may just want to unwind and relax in style. For dedicated golfers there's a championship golf course (considered to be one of the finest in the southwest) on our doorstep while those wanting to learn for the first time will be buoyed up by knowing there's also a three-hole teaching academy and three PGA-qualified teaching professionals at Bowood Golf & Country Club.

"Whatever draws people to Queenwood, there'll be drinks and canapés in the sitting room before a four course dinner at a time of their choice. For those who might want to curl up in front of the television afterwards - either to watch a crucial episode, Hollywood classic or catch a nail-biting sports final - coffee, nightcaps and petit fours can be served in Queenwood's cosy study. Breakfast the next morning will also be at your leisure and full English breakfast will definitely be on offer.

“Formality and informality go hand-in-hand at Queenwood and the sense of occasion can be shaped exactly as you wish,” adds Karen, who with Chris will leave guests to their privacy once they have had everything they need...but will be back again at breakfast.

So much to do.....

There’s a great selection of nearby attractions for Queenwood guests, without having to leave Bowood at all! While some may be content to spend as much time as possible on the golf course for others it will be the fabulous gardens that beckon.

Bowood Gardens & Pleasures Grounds cover virtually every period of English garden design from the Georgian period through to today, with the fashionable 18th century garden designer Capability Brown having mapped out the 2,000 acres of Grade I Listed Great Park at Bowood in the 1760s. Such whimsical backdrops as rock landscapes, cascades and grottoes, a hermit’s cave and a lakeside Doric temple are all to be found here.

On a separate part of the estate, a woodland garden of rhododendrons, azaleas and camellias extending over 60 acres, then bursts into life for a six-week flowering season from late April-early June. Two miles of pathways meander through these beautiful sun dappled glades and around the Lansdowne family Mausoleum, built by Robert Adam around 1762.

Queenwood guests shouldn’t miss the chance, either, to visit another ‘living and breathing’ home on the grounds – yet one on a much larger scale. Italianate terraces front Bowood House which contains a treasure trove of antiques and architectural delights. Robert Adam designed the House’s interiors throughout the 1760s and created the magnificent ‘Diocletian’ Orangery wing. Here and in the Sculpture Gallery is housed a selection of the Lansdowne collection of paintings, sculptures and tapestries. There’s a private Chapel too and the Laboratory where oxygen was discovered by Dr. Joseph Priestley in 1774. Over several floors, The Bowood Collection displays: aspects of Georgian life, souvenirs brought back from India by the 5th Marquess who had served there as Viceroy, mementos of Queen Victoria’s wedding day, an insight into Napoleon’s life and times plus tantalising watercolours and porcelain – all united by belonging to various members of the Lansdowne family, down through seven generations.

For those who want to make the most of the great outdoors, then there's a number of picturesque walks to follow as soon as you set out from Queenwood's front door. "We'll point you in the right directions to make sure you don't get lost!" assures Karen.

To hire Queenwood for a night, rates start at £115 per person to include tea on arrival, a four course dinner, overnight accommodation, full English breakfast, 36 holes of golf and - from mid-March through to the end of October - entrance to Bowood House & Gardens.

For further enquiries and reservations, telephone: 01249 822228 or e-mail: golfclub@bowood.org.

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