

Horsing Around

Coworth Park captures the English countryside's equine spirit and sense of humor.

COWORTH PARK, a new 240-acre retreat that opened as part of the Dorchester Collection in September, sits on the outskirts of the village of Ascot in the English countryside. The resort is just 10 minutes by car from the famed Ascot Racecourse, whose premier annual event, the five-day Royal Ascot meet, is a most formal affair, requiring that ladies wear “a hat or substantial fascinator” and men “black or grey morning dress with either plain or stripped [*sic*] trousers, including a waistcoat, with a top hat.” Guests should feel no such pressure at Coworth Park. In fact, they “should feel welcome enough to slide down the banisters,” says general manager Zoe Jenkins.

Whether her invitation is sincere or not, Jenkins—who adds that “the English countryside is well known for its relaxed sense of humor”—clearly wants her guests to feel at home at Coworth Park. And while this first country resort from the Dorchester Collection—which operates eight hotels including the Dorchester in London and the Beverly Hills Hotel—may eschew the formality of its neighbors, it embraces the area’s penchant for fun.

The Dorchester Collection, for one, certainly appears to be having fun in the countryside. Front-desk managers at Coworth Park wear three-piece suits fashioned from plaid chocolate-brown tweed, and, during the fall and winter months, staff members working the front door dress in brown button-down capes. Interiors throughout the estate—which includes a spa, fine-dining venues, and 70 accommodations divided among the main Mansion House and various other new and restored buildings—connect quite literally with the surrounding meadows, ponds, polo fields, and woodlands. Some suites feature four-poster beds styled after bare tree branches, with little bird figurines perched here and there. A pedestal table in the shape of three life-size swans is a centerpiece of the Drawing Room, where table lamps resemble stands of cattail. Hanging on

the walls in the resort’s main bar are portraits of horses sporting salon-coiffed hairstyles. And in Coworth Park’s Stables accommodations—set in the property’s former stable houses—huge close-up photographs of equine noses, necks, and other body parts hang over sitting areas, as if someone left the stable door open.

Horses, however, are taken quite seriously at Coworth Park, and reside in newly built stables near the estate’s entrance. Equestrian manager Laura Richardson, a British dressage champion, handpicked the resort’s horses, of which Monty, a Russian-bred Grand Prix horse, is a favorite with guests. Richardson’s program focuses on one-on-one instruction for everyone from beginners to experts. With clients who own their own horses or who ride regularly, she ascertains their jumping and competition experience before selecting the ideal horse. “To have the horses that we have here is quite special,” says Richardson, who enjoys introducing guests to dressage movements. “It takes about five years for a horse to learn a new movement, and it’s much easier for you to learn new movements while sitting on a horse that knows what it’s doing.”

Though known for its equestrian heritage, the Ascot area offers a range of other diversions. “Ascot is less well known for riches such as its arts and antiques stores, the stunning grounds of Windsor Great Park, and activities like boating and kayaking on the River Thames,” says general manager Jenkins, who encourages guests to chat with a staff member to learn about activities in the area. Most of all, she believes, guests at Coworth Park should simply relax and have a good time. “We are clearly not our London counterpart, the Dorchester,” she says, “and we know that well enough to not take things too seriously.” —JENNIFER RYAN



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Coworth Park's main Mansion House, which dates to 1776, features newly renovated rooms and suites that overlook distant polo fields.