

Hotel Endsleigh in the Fairytale Forest of Devon



Endsleigh in the morning mood. You only hear birdsong and the wind. There is no car noise and no light pollution at night / © Photo: Georg Berg

Olga Polizzi creates the perfect place for a break from everyday life

It lies there, like an enchanted place where elves float from chimney to chimney and the seven dwarves could walk whistling around the corner at any time. Endsleigh is a Grade II listed Devon estate surrounded by over 100 acres of fairytale woodland. The extensive grounds with follies, grottos and garden pavilions were designed by England's last great garden architect, Humphrey Repton, in the early 19th century. It was commissioned by the Duke of Bedford, who owned a third of Devon at the time. The place reminded the Duchess of Bedford of her native Scotland.



Along England's longest trim discounts. A wide variety of garden games can be played on the green / © Photo: Georg Berg

The Duchess made a good choice. Endsleigh is situated on the edge of what is now Dartmoor Nature Reserve and nestles in beautiful rolling countryside through which meanders the Tamar, England's best river for trout and salmon fishing. The Duke laid the foundation stone for the fishing and hunting lodge in 1814, which became the summer residence for his large family of 13 children. But like so many great houses, Endsleigh was asleep for a long time before it was kissed awake by Olga Polizzi in 2004. As head of design, the well-known interior designer built up the Rocco Forte Hotel Group together with her brother Rocco Forte. She says of Endsleigh that she bought it with her heart more than her head. The building was in dire need of renovation. The extensive garden with its award-winning trees and rare plants had grown wild. Today, Endsleigh is the perfect place to switch off and leave the hustle and bustle of everyday life behind. The only sounds here are the chirping of birds, the wind and the river. Ideal for strolling, playing croque on the lawn or sipping a Devonshire cream tea in the drawing room, immersing yourself in the tranquility of 19th century high society.

A walk in the park with the chief gardener

The terrace overlooks the valley and looks across the lawn along England's longest continuous cove, the *Long Border*. In May 2017, Endsleigh was voted number 1 in *Best for Gardens* by The Times - and that's saying something in a country famous for its beautiful gardens.



Boots and rain jackets are available for house guests. The garden can thus be explored in any weather. Wrong clothing is no longer an excuse / © Photo: Georg Berg

For garden lovers who want to learn more about the history of Endsleigh Garden, a guided tour with head gardener Ben Ruscombe-King is highly recommended. Ben takes us on a detailed tour of the various highlights and curiosities of the garden.



Ben Ruscombe-King Head Gardener in Endsleigh points from the lily pond to the Duchess of Bedford's small dairy farm in the distance / © Photo: Georg Berg

The Duke of Bedford was a great *plant hunter* and so it is that Endsleigh Garden has an arboretum with very old trees including a number of National Champions. Ben shows us one of the former masters, a sequoia planted in 1860. A storm involuntarily cut it down and it lost the title of tallest tree. In return, Endsleigh has since reclaimed the title of tallest sequoia in the country for another tree. Ben can't hide his pride.



The Duke of Bedford had a greenhouse with huge heating pipes built especially for a monkey puzzle tree, a decorative Chilean fir. Today only the foundation walls are left and vegetables for the restaurant grow in the beds / © Photo: Georg Berg

White smoke for romance and other follies

English gardens are also known for so-called *follies*, unusual ornamental structures. Endsleigh has several optical *follies* to offer here. The shell house at the end of the long trim discounts is covered with shells on the walls, floor and ceiling. Across the river is the Swiss Cottage, a simple shack that used to have only one purpose, which was to produce lots of smoke. Up until the 1950s, a servant would row across the river daily and light a log fire in Swiss Cottage. The smoke, which floated picturesquely through the valley, could be seen from Endsleigh and provided the intended picturesque impression of not being completely alone in the valley of Tamar.

milkmaid bill

To an even greater folly, Ben leads us through winding paths. The garden has many small dead ends that were deliberately created by architect Rapton. The gentlemen wanted little adventures. The thrill of getting lost and having to turn back should add variety to days in the country. The Duchess of Bedford had very different ideas about variety. She wanted to escape from being a duchess in the summer residence and so the duke had a small but fine dairy built for her.



Holiday activity for a duchess. In the small dairy, the lady could play milkmaid true to the original / © Photo: Georg Berg

Once a year, dressed as a milkmaid, she went to the dairy and made butter and cheese there. Two longhorn cows were kept for the perfect illusion. The homemade dairy products were of course also on the table, reports Ben, which leads us straight to the next garden trend from the 19th century, the "rockery". At that time, the first wealthy Englishmen traveled the Alps and had rocky passages built in their gardens as a reminder of the mountains.



Head gardener Ben Roscombe-King at his favorite tree, a 200+ year old weeping birch. It has actually already exceeded its maximum age and the gardeners sometimes have to support its huge branches / © Photo: Georg Berg

35 gardeners worked year-round in Endsleigh Gardens. Even today, according to Ben Roscombe-King, the entire area of 43 hectares has not yet been redeveloped. Just a year ago, he and his team of five discovered a waterfall that had been designed by Rapton but had been completely forgotten. A small path now leads there. Beyond is more land with possible botanical surprises. On the way back we pass a Rapton Tableau. This is another garden trend of the time that documents the Chinese influence.



Trees were deliberately placed close to artificially created rocky outcrops, and waterfalls were harmoniously placed in the hills. The Rapton tableau. After more than 200 years, however, some trees fell over the edge of the rock / © Photo: Georg Berg



A worthwhile tour: Ben Roscombe-King has exciting details to report. So he tells that the Duke of Bedford was not only a great collector of plants, but also collected animals. Including the gray squirrel. It reproduced so well in captivity that he gave away the offspring to friends, thus heralding the beginning of the end of the red squirrels in the British Isles / © Photo: Georg Berg

Humphrey Rapton was a master of presentation. He convinced his clients with the help of his famous red books. A replica is on display at the Hotel Endsleigh and guests are encouraged to browse through.



Garden architect Humphrey Rapton put a lot of effort into the presentation and convinced many of his clients with his Red Books / © Photo: Georg Berg

Rapton used the before and after trick. He drew the current state of the landscape and then had folded cards with the new garden dreams placed over them. He also convinced the Duke of Bedford.

Hunting fever and other pastimes



The River Tamar is now the border between Cornwall and Devon. The Duke of Bedford was a passionate angler and had waterfalls and weirs built in the course of the river so that salmon and trout settled there / © Photo: Georg Berg

The game warden (Ghillie in Scottish) is also happy to give guests fishing assistance or accompany them on a hunt. If you don't like fishing or hunting animals, you can take a trip to nearby Tavistock. The Paneer Market is a covered marketplace with daily changing offers. Of course, there are also Antique Days when you can snag an old piece inspired by the decor at Endsleigh.



Before starting work, chef Jose Graziosi loves to roam the garden and collect mushrooms or herbs for the kitchen. Here he shows me the wild sorrel growing between the wild garlic / © Photo: Georg Berg

Carraturo – archetype of the pasta machine

Chef José Graziosi raves about “Il Carraturo”, his favorite kitchen utensil

Angela Berg

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