

TASTY SUGAR FREE SWEETS

Your guilt-free treats!



Vegan



Palm oil free



Lactose free



Gluten free

Ricola

SWISS MADE

Find out more at Ricola.com

DARTMOOR

AMY BONIFAS

It's all about outdoor pursuits and royal-standard dishes at this indulgent castle retreat

And now you're going to get us up there,' says our driving instructor Harry, pointing to the steepest, muddiest hill. We're off-road driving in one of Bovey Castle's huge Land Rover Defenders - with a limited turning circle and, of course, no power steering. Here I am, roaring through muddy swamps of water as the rain continues to pour, taking on epic corners and inclines, hands shaking as I shift down into first gear and begin to ascend.

Moments later, we're standing at the top of said hill, looking over the hotel grounds and leaning against the front grille of the car. I feel a real sense of achievement, and I quickly realise that this is what a trip to Bovey Castle is about.

The hotel is a luxurious retreat, with generous rooms, two restaurants and a blissful spa and yoga studio. But it's also a place to push yourself - whether that means braving the cold (and rain) for a long hike around the grounds, or trying archery with a local expert. Returning to one of the hotel's numerous open fires makes these experiences all the sweeter.

WARM WELCOME

My husband, Pete, and I arrive at Bovey Castle Hotel & Spa on a grey and squally Friday afternoon, the rain lashing down as we pull up to the castle with its moody, dark stone and grand fountains. With a shiver, we step over the threshold of our junior suite, grinning like kids as we take in the minibar - including homemade sloe gin - and claw-foot bath.

The treats continue as we venture down to dinner. The newly updated Great Western Grill restaurant is headed by chef Mark Budd, whose portfolio includes The Ritz, The Dorchester and even the royal family. His menu sparkles with indulgent ingredients, such as local Exmoor caviar, fresh truffle and Bovey Estate venison. Vegans look away now...

We're overwhelmed by choice, so decide the only solution is to settle in for five courses with wine pairings. Highlights include grilled lobster Thermidor with a delicate spiral of saffron linguine, Dartmoor beef Wellington glistening with a rich Madeira wine sauce, and truffle-parmesan courgette fries. The sommelier keeps us topped up right through to the ice-cold dessert wines, paired perfectly with a towering banana and sticky caramel soufflé



and a selection of local cheeses.

In the morning, after a much lighter breakfast, we gather on the terrace to meet the hotel's resident birds of prey. Falconer Martin releases

a beautiful hawk and delights in how the bird's vast wings and talons sweep precariously close to the tops of our heads. 'He doesn't like direct eye contact,' Martin jokes, as we put on our bravest smiles. Also on our list of activities is gin and cider making. We smell the wood smoke from the open fire before we see the long barn emerging from the woodland, lit with candles. We load the 100-year-old press with apples and turn it together. We're lucky enough to taste the sweet tartness of the first press, along with homemade strawberry and raspberry gin liqueurs.

But the adventures don't stop at the hotel: the heather-strewn moors and granite tors of Dartmoor National Park are on our doorstep. So we lace up our walking boots and follow the hotel's path to the pretty village of North Bovey, where we discover the Ring of Bells pub - serving all-organic drinks and dishes - and fill up on its pillowy crab and brown shrimp beignets before our return.

Over one final cream tea by the fire (yes, we just about have room), we peruse my newly full camera roll, including shots of us smiling by the mud-pelted Land Rover and clinking wine glasses in the Great Western Grill.

Add Bovey Castle to your travel list and prepare to be amazed by just how much adventure - and food - you can fit into a short break. ►

Clockwise from top left: Amy and Pete in the hotel grounds; beautiful Bovey Castle; beef Wellington and lobster Thermidor from the Great Western Grill. Below: falconer Martin with feathered friend



THE DETAILS

Bovey Castle offers rooms from £239 per night, based on two adults sharing on a B&B basis. For more information and to book, visit boveycastle.com