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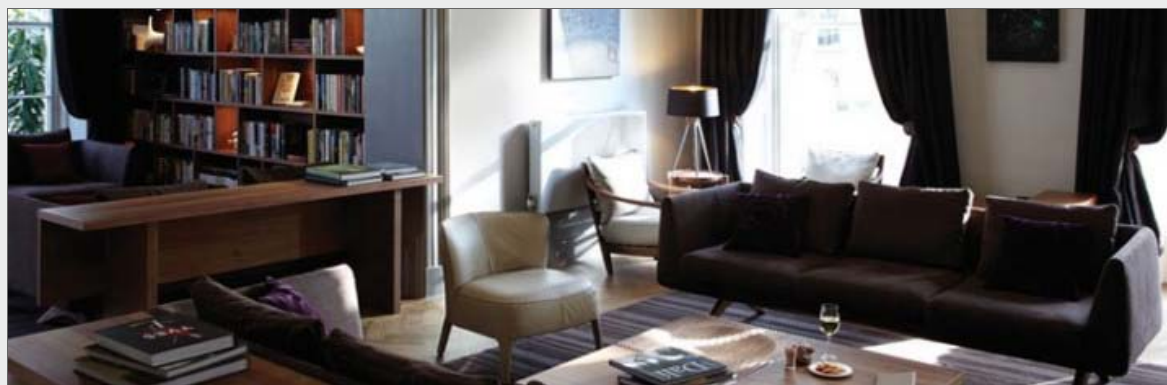
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The Montpellier Chapter

Cotswolds, United Kingdom

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Anonymously reviewed by **Luke Johnson** (Chairman extraordinaire)

My chauffeuse eases the Land Rover into the underground car park. The car radio is playing a rather evocative number from those New Romantic oldies, Duran Duran 'And the droning engine throbs in time with your beating heart.' I think the song is called 'The Chauffeur', and I vaguely recall a video with naughty goings-on in a basement. How appropriate – I think it is going to be a good weekend.

Of course the chauffeuse is Mrs Smith. We have come to Cheltenham to sample the cultural, aesthetic and refreshment delights of the old spa town. And we are staying in the groovy new Montpellier Chapter hotel. We push open the magnificently restored bronze front door and enter the lobby. It is so fashionable that there is no check-in desk, merely a giant lump of wood with a laptop, and a very friendly greeter. You don't even show your credit card – just mention your name and they give you a key. Hospitality research shows that guests judge a stay largely by first impressions: obviously Swire, owners of the nascent Chapter hotel chain, have taken this lesson to heart. Who has not despaired when arriving at big-branded hotels to see queues to register and queues at the lifts? Give me the small, personal offering every time.

The interior is full of high ceilings, original parquet floors, luxurious thick carpets and heavy wooden doors. The bedrooms are very hi-tech: an iPhone in each with an app providing all the necessary information. We dump our luggage and head down to the bar for an aperitif. The chauffeuse remarks on the furniture: it is all genuine designer kit, like De La Espada and B&B Italia. She is impressed. I am more taken with the wonderfully reviving Bellini I've ordered. The fact that the waiter offered me a choice of three flavours is a symbol of how sophisticated the provinces have become in recent years. And very good news it is too.

The lounge next door has a really excellent library, full of handpicked books carefully chosen under six intellectual categories: adventure; purpose; sense of place; style; perspective; and escape. Any hotel with a thoughtful selection like that gets full marks from me. I browse while my partner organises the evening's entertainments.

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After cocktails, we wander out into the marvellous spring evening. The town must be one of the most elegant in Britain. It is full of sweeping Regency terraces, largely well preserved. Montpellier itself is a convivial district full of wine bars, delicatessens and gracious parks. Opposite our hotel is a blue plaque noting the house as the birthplace of Arthur 'Bomber' Harris, who flattened Dresden. 'Thank goodness, the chap was on our side,' muses Mrs Smith, 'Otherwise the Georgian beauty of places like Cheltenham might not exist.'

We dine in a splendid restaurant called Daffodil, located in a converted art deco cinema in a happening section of the town called the Suffolks. The meal and service are first rate. Afterwards we sample some of the Cheltenham Jazz Festival, which takes place over the May bank holiday. It uses venues all over town, but its heart is a series of marquees in the Imperial Gardens, off the Promenade, Cheltenham's main drag. We miss Jamie Cullum and Hugh Laurie, but we catch some cool sax music and I buy a Nina Simone CD.

It seems Cheltenham is festival mad. In June, they have the highly regarded Science Festival, in July, a classical music festival, and in October, a notable literature festival. All strike me as civilised ways to spend a day or two, listening to great talent perform in various ways. And for gamblers and turf aficionados, there is the Gold Cup in March, the grandest event in jump racing's calendar. So a lot to do, apart from simply enjoying the smart shops, pubs and Cotswold countryside.

A solid breakfast in the hotel's conservatory starts our next day, and then we stroll up the road to Cheltenham Ladies College. Guests at the Chapter enjoy temporary membership of the sports club there, so we indulge in a bracing swim in the 25 metre pool, but decide against a game of badminton. Bizarrely the hotel spa is shut over the bank holiday, so I'm afraid to report we cannot sample its delights.

For lunch, we zip off to Cowley Manor, a fabulous stately home (and another Mr & Mrs Smith hotel), about 15 minutes from Cheltenham. There we enjoy a terrific brunch and walk the magnificent gardens in the hazy afternoon sun. Rather a better place for families than the Montpellier Chapter, but with fewer of the immediate amusements on offer in central Cheltenham.

That evening, we have an early supper in the hotel's restaurant – outstanding value at £15 for three courses of Modern British. I am discombobulated when a junior minister in the Coalition comes over to say hello: belatedly I remember meeting him when I chaired Channel 4 TV. The food – risotto for her, steak for me – is tasty, the service attentive. Afterwards, Mrs Smith has rhubarb crumble and I plump for sticky toffee pudding. We're sold.

Later, we undertake a bar crawl, and are impressed by the friendliness of the locals and the quality of the Pimm's. The weekend has been an undoubted success – Cheltenham and our hotel are both charming, and to be recommended to anyone who wants a romantic break. I can see why King George III had fun here (before he went mad) back when he made the place famous as a resort town in the late 18th century. In my favourite cartoon by James Gillray, 'A voluptuary under the horrors of digestion', his son, George IV-to-be is surrounded by the finer things, his tummy bulging from overindulgence. Indeed, the notorious bon vivant Prince Regent, could have been depicted in this very hotel.

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