

in no shelter or food. And I with their own expressions and magnificent Yangtze River. We floated galloping. There are now 11 million guided excursions.

YOU CAN tell a lot by that first telephone call to a hotel (which is a reason for not booking via the internet) and even more when you make a second one to ask directions when you're tired.

Somehow, the 'my name's Dawn and how can I help you', approach is a guaranteed turn-off. Thank heavens, you won't come across any such nonsense at the Bath Arms, near Warminster, on the estate of Lord Bath, the wacky owner of Longleat.

Perched on a hill, this is a former Young's boozier that has metamorphosed into a wonderfully cerebral pub-come-restaurant-come-hotel at prices that put to shame many like-minded options. Well, like-minded is not strictly accurate. I don't know of any others that have a

AN INSPECTOR CALLS



His mission: To test hotel hospitality to the limit

portrait in their dining room of a grinning Lord Bath wearing a turban. Although it only opened a year ago, the Bath Arms has success written all over it. The man in charge is Christoph Brooke, and he has form in the shape of The Victoria at Holkham in Norfolk, which is much-loved

both by locals and weekenders. The Bath Arms dates back several centuries and oozes charm and character.

There's time for a quick drink in the snug and the woman who gave me directions takes my dinner order. For £27 you get a three-course dinner, or you can order from the bar menu but eat in the dining room. My faultless scallops are beautifully succulent. They are followed by roast pork, mashed potatoes and cabbage, all cooked to perfection.

My room is next door to Kama Sutra, just underneath one called The English Eccentric. The pretty-patterned curtains clash terribly with the floral bed-spread, but it doesn't matter. Far more important are the soft, creamy pillows and duvet – and the towels in the bathroom are a proper size for a change. Dropping off to sleep here is a joy, and I don't emerge

until long after breakfast has stopped being served. Except that there are no real rules at the Bath Arms and I am offered the full works anyway. Before leaving, I ask if I can sit somewhere with access to the Internet. It's suggested that I adjourn to the skittle alley, where there's terrific Wi-Fi reception. On Sundays, they show movies in this huge room. 'It's something we are just starting, but already there's been a lot of interest,' a member of staff tells me. I don't doubt it. Any excuse to visit the Bath Arms is welcome.

*The Bath Arms,
The Longleat Estate,
Warminster BA12 7LY
Tel: 01985 844308; batharms.co.uk
Doubles from £80 B&B
★★★★★*