

Perfect places to eat, sleep... and shop 'til you drop

Denise Barkley stays at a hotel handy for Harrods and finds the perfect bolt-hole for hitting the Cotswold shops

The Levin: a hidden jewel

If you are planning a Christmas shopping trip to London, then Harrods will definitely be on your list.

Those magical shop windows draw Christmas shoppers into the iconic Knightsbridge store, all decked out in festive finery and oozing with an endless array of opulent gift choices and foodie temptations.

Relax after a hard day's shopping with a West End show or perhaps indulge in the festive nostalgia of Winter Wonderland in Hyde Park – it opens on November 18.

So where to stay? Well, I've discovered a charming little gem of a hotel literally yards from Harrods' gilded front doors. The Levin is a boutique townhouse hotel located in a nearby quiet residential street. As well as Harrods, you are within a stone's throw of Harvey Nichols and the designer shops of Sloane Street and Beauchamp Place, while Hyde Park and Kensington Gardens are a short stroll away.

This bijou, cosy hotel sits next door to its sister hotel, the five-star The Capital. You may like to relax with a post-shopping glass of Champagne in the bar there, or dine at celebrated seafood chef Nathan Outlaw's Michelin-starred restaurant, Outlaw's at the Capital. You are welcome to cross-charge to your room at The Levin.

Or stay put and enjoy the refined charms of The Levin. You know you are in for a treat

as soon as you step into the Art Deco duck egg blue reception. Upstairs there are just 12 individually designed guest rooms, all in authentic 1930s' style. Our room was large and luxurious with a snuggly window seat from which to watch the busy street below, and a 1930s' crystal chandelier with little red shades – it's by designer Sharon Marston and stunning.

The Levin has everything for an indulgent break including 24-hour room service, complimentary Wi-Fi, Champagne minibar, Nespresso coffee machine and a selection of Penguin classics. The luxury bathroom has gorgeous Temple Spa toiletries – fill the bath and revive those shopping-worn tootsies!

The Levin's best-kept secret is its basement bistro The Metro. This bright and funky eatery is a favourite with those in the know – serving delicious uncomplicated food right through the day from breakfast to dinner.

With a set three-course dinner menu, plus glass of wine, for £22.50, this is great value for those who want good food at a reasonable price. We dined simply – for me, hot smoked salmon pate followed by fish and chips, and fishcake then confit duck with mashed potatoes and spinach for my daughter Joanna. It was all perfectly cooked and delicious. We accompanied it with glasses of chilled Le Vin De Levin Sauvignon Blanc Chardonnay, from hotel owner David Levin's winery in the Loire Valley.

David's enthusiasm for the world of



hospitality is all-encompassing. He has close links with Oxford where he is visiting professor at Oxford Brookes University and funded a refit of the training restaurant.

So, the cat is out of the bag – The Levin has it all, and one of the best addresses in London. Christmas shopping here we come. **The Levin, Basil Street, London SW3 1AS, call 020 7589 6286, helevinhotel.co.uk.**

The Sheep: a charming retreat

Christmas shopping is a pleasure in Oxfordshire where our historic city and county towns offer a cornucopia of choice – but have you considered combining your gift shopping with a weekend break in the countryside?

And you don't have to go very far at all – we have the beautiful Cotswolds on our doorstep and the sparkling array of little shops and boutiques offer gift choices that you won't find on the high street. It's the perfect excuse to book yourself in for a night or two in a cosy hotel and get going on that Christmas present list.

Stow-on-the-Wold is probably my favourite Cotswold town for shopping. There's a host of original and quirky shops, many of which have become my personal favourites.

Tucked away in Talbot Court is Pure Silver Design which sells a stand-out range of silver jewellery at reasonable prices. The earrings



Denise loved her room under the eaves at The Sheep





The Levin's bright and funky Metro restaurant serves food all day



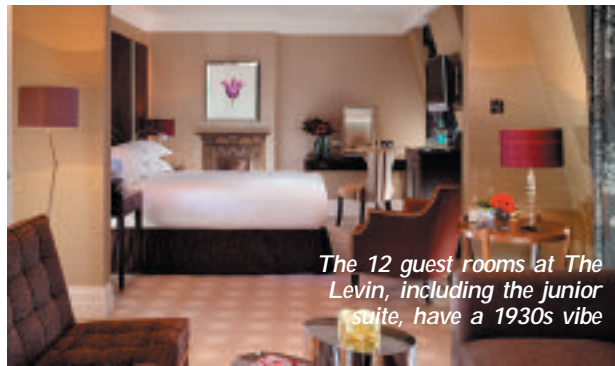
The elegant duck egg blue reception of The Levin hotel in Knightsbridge

are particularly gorgeous. While I'm in here my husband usually pops in to see what master craftsman John Cronin has on display in his window opposite. John makes, repairs and sells fine vintage and classic watches and he's a fascinating guy to talk to.

It is definitely worth browsing the rails in Stow's charity shops, which are renowned for their choice of designer labels, and I've found unusual homewares, artisan pieces and beautiful clothes at Law & Company and Saltmarsh. The art galleries are gorgeous here – a piece of artwork makes the most personal and thoughtful of presents.

Of course, Stow has long been synonymous with the renowned homes and gardens company Scotts of Stow. The company has four shops in the town centre – the original Scotts of Stow shop, plus Scotts Outdoor, The Original Gift Company and, the newest addition, Bloom – selling sumptuous silk flowers.

So where to rest those weary feet after all that shopping? The Sheep on Sheep Street launched this summer with dapper rooms, restaurant and bar designed to bring a touch of Soho chic to the Cotswolds – and I think they have succeeded rather well. Vintage meets contemporary in this 17th century hostelry, and it isn't in the slightest bit pretentious. We found it ultra-relaxing, with genuinely friendly service, good food, stylish décor, comfy beds and a convivial buzz.



The 12 guest rooms at The Levin, including the junior suite, have a 1930s vibe

The piece de resistance is the full-length bar, definitely reminiscent of a London pub. It flows to a dining counter in front of the open kitchen and wood-fired pizza oven where you can enjoy your meal informally, perched on a bar stool. The restaurant is spacious and thoughtfully designed with a teal blue and grey décor toning with the quirky tiled and wood-panelled floors, artfully jumbled furniture and pretty objets d'art. I really loved it.

Our endlessly helpful waitress Jenny brought us some delicious food. To start, tender pan-fried scallops for Steve and garlicky gambas (prawns) with a pokey Bloody Mary mayo for me. He progressed to a juicy Wagyu beef burger with chips and onion rings while I enjoyed a Caesar salad with flaked chunks of hot smoked salmon and delicious sweet potato fries.

And so to bed – which was in a lovely spacious room up under the eaves of this

lovely old building, and absolutely charming. There are 22 rooms accessed via Cotswold stone corridors and little flights of stairs. The digital corner bath and shower was a rather quirky addition, and the Temple Spa bath goodies were divine. We slept exceptionally well in the ultra-snug bed and woke revived and ready for anything after a breakfast of very good Eggs Benedict.

The next day you might like to widen the scope of your Cotswold Christmas shopping spree. At Moreton-in-Marsh I love The Toy Shop, a veritable Aladdin's Cave of childhood temptations. There are

nine interconnecting rooms stuffed with toys in this lovely old Cotswold building. It's been here for nearly 50 years under the supervision of the Jeffrey family. On the High Street here you will also find the gorgeous Cotswold Grey, an emporium of beautiful homewares and gifts.

The two "Chippings" – Chipping Campden and Chipping Norton are nice places to browse the shops and relax over a coffee, and then there's the, more touristy, Broadway and Bourton-on-the-Water. Cirencester is another great option – I particularly love the Parlane shop, full of lovely things for your home that also make wonderful Christmas gifts.

With a bit of planning, Christmas shopping doesn't have to be a chore, and adding in an overnight stay adds even more twinkle!

The Sheep on Sheep Street, Stow-on-the-Wold, Gloucestershire GL54 1AG, call 01451 830344, thesheepstow.co.uk.



The Sheep has a full-length bar with a dining area in front of the open kitchen



The Sheep is a relaxing place to enjoy a drink or meal