



MY DEVON HEAVEN

Creature comforts and dazzling eccentricity? It's got to be Fingals, Devon's greatest escape, says Angela Neustatter



GENERAL SIR MIKE Jackson's helicopter was guided into the field above the South Devon valley with a gesture of love. White sheets laid out in the shape of a heart led him to an impeccable landing. The door opened and the commander – at the time – of the British forces in the Balkans stepped out and strode towards a resplendent Queen Anne house, set in gardens of overhanging wisteria and riotous clematis.

The house is Fingals Hotel, in Devon's South Hams, and General Sir Mike had come for a brief break from the battlefield and a secluded tryst with his wife, Sarah.



Clockwise from below left: the village of South Hams; Fingals; one of the sculptures in the garden; the wood-paneled dining room

It was she who had invited me to join the welcoming group in the field, after we had met and chatted at dinner the night before.

This incident is typical of the relaxed sociability that defines Fingals, so that the hugely eclectic mix of guests find themselves drawn into a way of life more like a country-house party than a hotel, and one, at that, where boho chic rules.

The walls are a gallery of work, much by local artists, interspersed with a bizarre assortment of objects bought on whim by owners Richard and Sheila Johnston, often during their travels. There's a huge mural of Richard as a Roman emperor, painted on the wall of the swimming pool as a 50th birthday present, and don't be surprised if Sheila's white ducks potter in to observe while you are doing a few lengths.

In the garden, sculptures by Bridget McCrum lie supine – and guests are invited to do the same. A sensuously moulded green stone backside catches the eye by the Orangery, one of the many quaint places you can retreat to with a book and a drink. Sheila's passion for livestock means Fingals is home to two lurchers, 11 fat hens, a flock of doves and three pygmy goats.

I first visited Fingals 15 years ago. We arrived, with none of the unflustered ease of General Sir Mike, after a car journey down winding country lanes, through picture-postcard villages, and along a road hemmed by high hedges. But just as I had given up chanting *nil desperandum*, we saw a cheery green sign informing us that we had, indeed, reached Fingals.

Proprietor Richard Johnston was all smiles and greetings, as was his delicately gorgeous wife, Sheila. She showed us to a room with a balcony overlooking a lawn. There was an enormous bed with a pastel-blue bedspread and a mountain of scatter cushions; a deep armchair had a view from the window of roller-coaster hills. We swam in the heated pool, mellowed in the

sauna. There was a dinner of delicious locally sourced dishes.

Relaxation set in, reinforced next day with a blowy walk along the Blackpool Sands beach, a visit to Dartmouth Harbour and cream tea in an old-fashioned café. This was followed by an aperitif in Fingals' bar and a three-course dinner with a menu that changes every day. Starters included homemade soup and pâté, organic meats – lamb and duck on this occasion – and a choice of fish, along with vegetables from the Johnstons' garden. Good wines were on offer, including the now fashionable Lebanese variety.

The Johnstons do not scrimp on the quality of the food, but they are less good on timing: dinner promised for 8pm is

'Here at Fingals I have hobnobbed with a former poet laureate and sat next to Claire Rayner'

frequently announced nearer 9pm. There are also a few *Fawlty Towers* moments, such as when Richard, who had been keeping up with his redoubtable whisky-drinking mother, took newly arrived guests to see the swimming pool, misjudged his step and tumbled in.

In the bar Richard's irrepressible desire for guests to experience bonhomie is most in evidence. You are encouraged to raise a glass together, get embroiled in conversation and exchange information on activities ranging from sailing, kite boarding, windsurfing, walking coastal routes or visiting Coletton Fishacre, the spectacular house and 30-acre gardens designed in 1925 for the D'Oyly Carte family.

You can gather round the big log fire in the sitting room, with sofas that suck you into their depths, or if you take up Richard's invitation to dine together around the long table, exchanges of views on the meaning of life tend to ensue.

It is heaven for the gregarious like me. I

have hobnobbed with a former poet laureate and sat next to Claire Rayner. Sadly, I narrowly missed Pete Postlethwaite, Rik Mayall and Lady Antonia Fraser, but there have also been plenty of wonderful encounters with guests who don't register on the celeb scale.

It is 30 years since Richard came across the dilapidated farmhouse, renovated it and opened for business. Today, Fingals has nine bedrooms, all individually styled; a self-catering 'gîte suite' on a balcony with verdant views; a self-catering, two-bedroom green-oak barn; an old stone mill house, and the enchanting garden folly, a former mill, converted anew by local architect Andras Kaldor. The newest addition is an eco house, built with thermal

mass heating solar panels, which overlooks a natural wilderness.

We have returned often, and our sons have always come willingly. They swim, play tennis and take boating trips on the Dart with Richard. There have been vigorous walks reminding us what pleasure there is in scaling high hills and gazing over bucolic views. On a mellow summer day, we took the ferry from Dittisham Harbour across to Greenway Harbour, to see the erstwhile home of Agatha Christie.

So why Fingals when there are so many boutique hotels that offer comparable creature comforts? The best answer comes from comedian Vic Reeves, who declared, 'This place is bonkers'.

He meant it as a compliment, as do most of us who head for this singular hotel with its easy eccentricity and dedicated wish that one has the best of times. ♦

FINGALS HOTEL, Dartmouth, Devon:
01803-722398, www.fingals.co.uk