

## Devon's bay of tranquillity



SUPERB SETTING: Dining area at South Sands Hotel

**JO KESSEL finds a chic seaside retreat tucked away in a walkers' paradise on the South Coast**

Picture: PHOTOLIBRARY.COM



CLIFFTOP PARADISE: The exotic gardens at Overbeck's offer spectacular views across Salcombe

**I**T IS 9am. I'm snuggled under a duvet, propped up by plump pillows, staring ahead. The view is so mesmerising that despite a petulant stomach's campaign for breakfast I cannot budge. Outside the window lies a shimmering sea, boats bobbing on the surface.

The soporific lapping waves have lulled me into a trance. From where I'm lying it's impossible to see where the sea begins and it feels like my room is actually hovering over the water. Reach a hand over my Juliet balcony and the sand is almost close enough to touch.

In the four months since the boutique South Sands Hotel in south Devon opened, it has created quite a buzz. Looking at its chic, New England-style clapperboard exterior, it's hard to believe that two years ago this building lay abandoned and derelict. Thanks to a couple of entrepreneurs with a vision, the hotel has been lovingly restored and its spectacular location, tucked away in its own secluded bay, sets it apart.

Wall-to-wall French windows give the place a wonderfully light feel and the décor throughout its 22 rooms and five two-bedroomed apartments is neutral and calming.

A porthole and tide-clock are quirky nautical touches in my bedroom, where oatmeal carpet is offset by American white oak furniture. There's not just one centrepiece but two; an expansive bed with a glorious handmade mattress covered with scatter cushions and a decadent, roll-top, claw-footed bath by the window.

When my friend Debs and I make it to breakfast, thick butter spread on bouncy granary toast is a treat as are creamy scrambled eggs with grilled whole mushrooms.

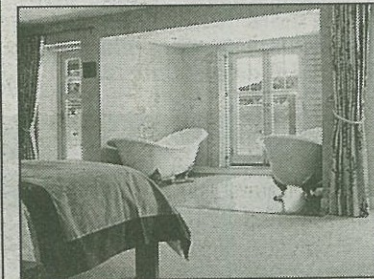
Stepping outside, the air is salty and clean. The sea sparkles under strong autumnal rays and nearby Salcombe, a pretty pastel hillside town with centuries-old low brick walls, has a distinctly Mediterranean feel, save for the

olde worlde shops and pubs lining its narrow, cobbled alleys. There are tearooms and ice cream parlours galore.

A seal frolics beside the little ferry boat which shuttles us back to the hotel's beach. Here we wave adieu to our performing friend and climb towards the cliffs.

This part of southern England is a walkers' paradise and there are nearly 10 miles of heritage coast on the hotel's doorstep. The cliffs tumble towards a pure aquamarine sea curving around unblemished cove after cove. Yachts glide towards the horizon. "Who needs to go abroad?" asks Debs.

We have the place to ourselves bar the chirruping birds and



CALMING: One of the bedrooms

crickets and the Red Admirals that flutter past. A circular hike takes us inland, through fields of cows and isolated stone farms to Overbeck's, a National Trust property perched on a cliff shelf. Set in exotic terraced gardens which include a banana plantation, this Edwardian residence is a gem with a breathtaking view.

The house is packed with curios collected by its eccentric former owner Otto Overbeck. One of his most inspired inventions was The Rejuvenator, an electrode machine designed to defy the ageing process.

The Rejuvenator might come in handy after indulging in dinner at the South Sands. The romantic, low-ceilinged restaurant is full of chatter and high-backed wicker chairs. Food is locally sourced with a menu designed by celebrated seafood maestro Mitch Tonks.

Scallops roasted with garlic and herbs is followed by a delicious grilled lemon sole. Dessert's a toss-up between chocolate brulee and sticky toffee pudding, the latter winning out (light and not too sweet, with lashings of cream).

The neighbouring watersports school offers the perfect antidote: sponge pudding. Paddleboard the latest craze, a punting and surfing hybrid glamorised by Jennifer Aniston and Courteney Cox. The next day, during a two-hour taster session, instructor Ben crowns me his loudest ever customer. Squeals while attempting to balance on a moving 10ft boat scare away the gulls. It's an all-over low-impact workout suitable for young and old.

More magical still is peeling the wetsuit and returning to my room for a roll-top bath. Submerged in Molton Brown Relaxing Yuan Zhi bubbles, I float from the English Channel.

Stress knots ease away in the South Sands Hotel. Subtle pampering (free organic chocolate shortbread) and friendly, laid-back staff make you want to come for more. Plans to transform the bar into an intimate lounge will log fire will make this a lovely year-round seaside bolthole.

This pocket of south Devon remains relatively undiscovered and locals, says Ben, are keen to keep it that way. I'm on their side. So please, don't tell anyone.

**GETTING THERE:** South Sands Boutique Hotel Beachside Restaurant (01548 000/southsands.com) offers doubles from £120 per night (two sharing), B&B. First Great Western (0845 700 0125/firstgreatwestern.co.uk) offers return rail fares from London Paddington to Totnes from £4. South Sands Sailing (01548 8451/southsandsailing.co.uk) offers a two-hour paddleboard taster session, £35. Visit Devon: 01548 843 927/visitdevon.co.uk