

28 NOVEMBER 2006

Applications for the Considerate Hotel of the Year Awards 2006 are now closed. Whilst we await the announcement of the winners at the Awards Ceremony to be held on 15 January 2007 at The Dorchester in London, let's take a look at one of our winners from last year...

Imagine a country house hotel, set in an idyllic rural landscape, where owners, guests and staff combine to care for the local environment - its people, its wildlife, its landscape and its heritage.

That's just what has been achieved at Matfen Hall Hotel in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Northumberland, last year's winner in the Independent Category of the Considerate Hotel of the Year Award. The owners, Sir Hugh and Lady Blackett provide a perfect example of true dedication to the local environment and community.

What makes Matfen Hall special?

Originally built in the 1830s, Matfen Hall has remained in the Blackett family for over 170 years. Its restoration and transformation into a country house hotel, eight years ago, was the first major objective in caring for and maintaining this magnificent house in a rural environment.

Since then, Sir Hugh and Lady Blackett have considerably explored every part of the business, from re-using face cloths to landscaping the golf course, so that everything the hotel does has little or no negative impact on life in the surrounding area, both now and for future generations. Their whole ethos revolves around the community and the local environment. But whilst guests are subjected to fine cuisine and luxuriously high standards, it would appear difficult to establish which is the hotel's top priority - the guests or the environment?

So how do they do it?

Think local - Matfen Hall Hotel sources its food and cleaning materials from local suppliers wherever possible and provides clover-fed, organic lamb from its own estate in the hotel's restaurant. This all helps to reduce road mileage and enables the hotel to provide full traceability of origin. Local artists and florists are retained for bespoke projects, thus helping to boost the local economy. The hotel also maintains a good relationship with other local hoteliers, suggesting alternative accommodation when they are full.

Their community activities extend beyond just the local area. Being a member of the Newcastle and Gateshead Initiative, the hotel plays a major role in promoting Northumberland and the Tyne Valley as a tourist destination, together with its local traditions. The hotel's Director and General Manager, David Hunter, also maintains links with key local tourism bodies, such as the Northumberland NSP, which has been instrumental in setting up a tourism management plan for the local area. He is also a member of the Corbridge Visitor and Business Network, the local Hoteliers' Association and the Area Tourism Partnership. Involvement in these and other local associations not only enhances what the hotel has to offer, but what the area has to offer its guests.

Think people - A close relationship with its local community has always been a significant aspect of the hotel's operations and indeed it immerses itself in its local community. They get involved in annual local events, sponsor local clubs and charities and open up their facilities to local groups and schools. They have forged links with schools and catering colleges to offer students work experience, ambassador programmes and apprenticeships. They even provide a summer club for children.

Think wildlife - As a member of the Northumberland Wildlife Trust, the hotel actively encourages wildlife within the estate, using feeders and avidly protecting the red squirrels who frequent the area - the hotel has implemented a detailed feeding programme, which guests are made aware of. The gardens, which are freely open to guests, are planted to maximise seasonal interest, colour and scent. The golf courses are also designed to be sympathetic to the local environment and landscaped accordingly, planted with deciduous trees and wild flowers for the enjoyment of the guests, whilst providing a natural habitat for wildlife. The hedgerows and verges are maintained and updated as part of the Countrywide Stewardship. Further conservation continues as part of an ongoing programme.

Think environment - Matfen tries to follow a strict regime of environmentally-friendly practices. Needless to say, all glass and paper are recycled through the local authority. Cardboard is compacted on site and collected by a local company as is waste kitchen oil. Beer is disposed of via a digestive and drainage system, used face cloths are used as cleaning cloths, farm manure is used on the gardens, grounds and golf courses, with a limited amount of pesticides, the lowest possible temperatures are used for washing and fuel usage is closely monitored for heating and water supply. Staff are encouraged to car share and guests are encouraged to re-use their sheets and towels. A personal touch is added at Christmastime when decorations are handmade by the Housekeeping Department from items found naturally on the estate, such as twigs and pine cones.

Most importantly, guests are made fully aware of the hotel's environmental policies and strategies and this all assists in the overall wellbeing of the hotel and its environment, now and in the future.

The Considerate Hotel of the Year Awards 2006 sees the introduction of three new categories, sponsored by Envirowise, Oxford Brookes Hospitality/Sustain and Hospitable Climates. For information on the Awards Ceremony please contact John Firrell at The Considerate Hoteliers Association, t: 01308 482 313.

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