



ESCAPE

Above The branches and tree trunks in the bar were foraged from the Charlton Hall Estate. TreeLocate made the arches of faux foliage. The kidney benches sit on a Kardean floor design, a scaled-down version of the one in the estate's wedding venue. **Opposite, top** The orangery, where most meals are served, is a welcoming space. **Bottom** The reception area with its jaw-dropping Van Gogh-inspired neon installation

The Tempus

Take a tumble down the rabbit hole at this wonderfully over-the-top hotel just south of the border

Photography ZAC and ZAC Words Miriam Methuen-Jones

A

lot of hotels promise more than they deliver. Think of all those “individually designed” rooms that turn out to be nothing more than bland corporate uniformity. But when word got out that Jeffreys Interiors, the Edinburgh interior design studio, had completed work on a new hotel at the Charlton Hall Estate in Northumberland – and that it had an Alice in Wonderland theme – I had a feeling it was going to live up to expectations.

The Tempus is part of a larger project which first focused on Charlton Hall as a wedding venue. “At the time, Northumberland had the most wedding venues in the UK,” says designer and co-owner of Jeffreys Interiors, Jo Aynsley. “With young owners, and us being young designers, we knew we wanted to be different and to give it a USP. We didn’t want to be competing with every other venue, so we decided to play around with the rules and create ▶





somewhere that not everyone will love, but which everyone will talk about!"

The plan was to create a place that would lure young couples from nearby Newcastle and Edinburgh, as well as being somewhere that local farmers would feel comfortable coming for dinner. Quite a trick to pull off, it has to be said.

You're greeted on arrival at reception by a wild art installation, with neon lights cascading out from a central tree. "Trees being used in interiors has been done to death," says Jo, "so I wanted to do something special here, something unexpected. For the installation, I worked with April Key, a neon light artist I'd met at uni. When we were discussing ideas, we both mentioned we'd been to the recent immersive Vincent Van Gogh exhibition and, inspired by that, we settled on a reference to his *Starry Night*." The strips of blue, white and yellow light hanging overhead are a contemporary recreation of those dazzling stars. A print of the famous painting is on the wall nearby, to reinforce the connection.

The main bar and dining space are reached by way of a moody lounge. The walls are plum, the wood is dark, and panels of hand-painted tortoiseshell decorate the walls. The benches are laid out as a slight maze for you to walk through, an ode to Wonderland. Step through the double doors, however, and

it's a fantastic assault on the senses. Light streams in from the orangery and hits off the disco balls overhead. You don't know where to look first.

"The brief stemmed from this feeling of falling down the rabbit hole," explains Jo. "We didn't want you to walk in and see pictures of Alice or the Cheshire cat everywhere, but we did want you to experience a sense of wonder and excitement."

The first thing I focus on is the wallpaper – probably the most on-the-nose reference to the book. It's Jean-Paul Gaultier's *Beriba*: a monochromatic forest background complete with oversized flowers, overlaid with colourful versions of the suits from a deck of cards.

Behind the counter, drinks are laid out in unusual fashion: bottles are grouped together on golden platforms. "Those are inspired by cake stands," smiles Jo in another subtle nod to the source material. It's actually a useful feature as well, as the components of the signature cocktails can be stored together for easy access. I try a 'Smile Without a Cat' with dinner: prosecco, lemon juice, lemonade and melonade. It's disarmingly delicious.

Antique Indian arches lead from the bar area into the orangery, which has proven to be the most popular spot for dining. The palette is slightly gentler in here, with muted ▶



Opposite Part of the dining space and bar downstairs. The monochrome stripes allow the lush planting and pops of colour to stand out. **This image** The bedrooms are drenched in colour and treated to statement headboards and wallpaper. **Below** The en-suite bathrooms are just as lavishly decorated as the bedrooms





oranges and greens cropping up in the upholstery. Another bar is tucked at the end of the room, this one dealing only in wine at dinner (and tea and coffee at breakfast).

Upstairs, the 15 bedrooms are all slightly different, while fitting into the same colour story. Statement wallpaper is used to great effect; in the three suites, for instance, it begins at the floor and then fades into a colour-matched paint as it reaches the apex of the ceiling. Lusso Stone fittings and Mandarin Stone tiles create a sense of luxury in the bathrooms, but wherever possible the bath has been brought out into the bedroom and tucked behind a partition.

Kristina Barnes at Kreative Lighting was responsible for configuring the bedroom lighting. Each room has a touchpad of options. I choose 'relaxing' and watch the overhead lights fade away and the bedside lamps ease into a soft glow. It's a very

comfortable space, with a gargantuan bed that's difficult to will yourself out of. My rumbling stomach is the only reason I resist the siren call of an afternoon nap.

With so much emphasis on the interior design, I honestly don't have the highest hopes for the food. Happily, the Tempus can do it all: the simple but exquisitely executed menu is a stroke of genius, clearly appealing to folk from all walks of life. I sample scallops and steak (cooked to perfection), handmade pasta and a decadent sticky toffee pudding – all superb. Jo's plan to give the hotel wide appeal has come to fruition, and I am joined in the dining room by a whole host of different faces. It's a relaxed atmosphere, with lively discussions about which bits of the decor folk would have in their own homes. The consensus? There is no consensus. Predictably, we've all fallen in love with different bits. ■ From £195 for bed and breakfast at the Tempus. charltonhall.co.uk



Top A lively House of Hackney fabric wakes up the headboards in this family bedroom. **Above** At the back of the hotel is a terrace with seating and a copper water feature. There's a path leading to a pond, where guests can relax by the water. **Right** The largest suite has a generous living room, with a bathtub hidden behind the partition (and within easy reach of the cocktail trolley)