

# A Touch of Britannia

England rules at offhandedly genteel Deer Path Inn, in leafy Lake Forest, Illinois. BY ELIZABETH AUSTIN

Strutting through the eyes of a Romantic, the Deer Path Inn, outside Chicago in Lake Forest, would pass for an English country house, an imposing pile of half timbers, stucco, and stone. Diamond-mullioned windows look out onto a long row of arching elm trees, while decades of ivy slowly creep up the 12-gable facade. All that's lacking to complete the scene is a green lawn, dotted with croquet

players dressed in crisp white linen. Instead, the inn faces a tidy but decidedly unromantic gas station. This incongruous juxtaposition creates a faint air of make-believe, as if the inn had been plucked from a manorly setting in old England and plunked into the downtown section of Illinois's poshest suburb.

## SETTING

Actually, Deer Path Inn's relentless Anglophilia fits right in with the rest of shady Lake Forest, which a young F. Scott Fitzgerald once considered "the most glamorous place in the world." Home to the richest of Chicago's horse set for almost a century, the village has consciously cultivated an English flavor in an architectural nod to its residents' WASPY origins. Its winding, leafy avenues curve past Tudor-style

mansions, while the self-possessed little stores and flower-filled window boxes are clearly modeled on an English high street. As you walk past ramblingly moneyed houses flanked by century-old oak trees, Lake Michigan's deep blue water

sparkling in the distance, you'll feel like you've wandered into a Ralph Lauren catalog. Jolly shopping in the chintz-laden Laura Ashley boutique, you'll have to remind yourself in the hushed surroundings that the bustling City with the Big Shoulders is just 30 miles to the south. While some of Lake Forest's English accents may be somewhat affected, even the staunchest of middle-class visitors has to admit that the result is undeniably appealing—an ideal portrait of gracious living, Anglo-Midwestern style.

## TELLING DETAILS

From the moment you pass under the Union Jack and open the inn's heavy oak front door, you're showered with bits of Britannia. Above the lobby fireplace hangs a portrait of an unidentified nobleman casting a supercilious eye on entering guests, as if daring them to muss the furnishings. Hunting prints (what else?) join other stately portraits lining the hallways, while lilting English baroque music tootles through the air.

Time is not of the essence for diners in the English Room; Deer Path's comfortably formal restaurant lends itself to conversation.



## ROOMS

The inn is a mildly bewildering labyrinth of 54 guest rooms, widely varying in size and style. The best and most spacious quarters, the garden suites on the first and second floors, look out onto the courtyard garden. Rooms are decorated with more of an eye to comfort than style, just as they would be in an English country manor. In the St. Hughurst suite, for example, the small table and burgundy wing chair in the sitting room are perfect for tea with the vicar. Suites on the third floor evoke vacations tucked into your well-to-do uncle's rec room.

## HISTORY

The inn comes by its country manor pretensions honestly. The first structure here was a small hunter's cabin, built in the 1800s on a deer path leading toward the lake. By the 1870s, cabin and land had been bought by an affluent Chicago family for a country estate. In time the family converted their residence into an inn, which soon became a fashionable weekend retreat for well-to-do Chicagoans.

By the 1920s, the original inn's Victorian architecture looked passé, so the owners replaced it in 1929 with the current Tudor-style building, modeled on the Manor House—which, despite its generic name, is a specific 15th-century mansion in Chiddingstone, Kent, owned now by the National Trust of England. Thanks to the Deer Path's baronial style, it is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

## CAST OF CHARACTERS

In a touch from an Agatha Christie country house mystery, the Deer Path Inn has two full-time tenants, both el-

derly ladies, who have lived in the hotel for years. Other regulars, such as one 82-year-old resident from nearby Evanston, have visited for decades—"since high school," she noted, as she was being seated for yet another of the inn's legendary Sunday brunches. "A group of us used to come here for lunch," she explained. "And it hasn't changed a bit."



The inn's White Hart Pub (above) is the perfect setting for a pint and fish-and-chips. Inn accents (below) include call bells and metal harts.



## FARE

Brunch is served in the beautifully appointed English Room: white damask tablecloths, Chippendale chairs, Wodgewood blue walls, and arched French doors leading to an enclosed porch on the courtyard garden. The deluxe decor is more than matched by the brunch itself, best described as lordly. The menu changes with the chef's whim, but standards include champagne, platters of smoked whitefish and salmon piped with whipped cream cheese, and shrimp in jumbo they verge on mutation. Trays of pûtes and terrines alternate with plates of roasted vegetables. Then there's the dessert table, a tooth-numbing selection of sweets; you can't miss the pyramid of

cream puffs called a *croquembouche*, nor the chocolate-dipped strawberries that have been murtared together into a spire with chocolate mousse.

Downstairs, with a far less ambitious menu, is the White Hart, a re-creation of a classic English pub. The "pub grub" includes beer-battered shrimp, buffalo wings, and—it almost goes without saying—fish-and-chips.

## PACKING LIST

■ **Golf clubs.** The rolling links of Deer Path Golf Course may prove irresistible (Apr.-Oct.).

■ **Swimsuit.** Forest Park Beach's inviting crescent of white sand spills into Lake Michigan. Just make sure to get a parking permit at the inn; nonresidents' cars are subject to hefty \$50 parking tickets.

■ **Credit cards.** Lake Forest is chock-full of charming little shops catering to the area's well-heeled consumers. The inn is just a couple of blocks from Market Square, built in 1906 and listed on the National Register of Historic Places as the nation's first planned shopping center. Shoppers with shallower pockets can visit over 200 outlet stores at

nearby Gurnee Mills Mall.

## TIMING A VISIT

For temperate weather, plan a May-June or Sept.-Oct. visit (autumn leaves here are spectacular). Summer, though sometimes hot, is festival season in nearby Chicago. Nov.-Dec., holiday events and lighting transform Lake Forest.

## NUMBERS

Deer Path Inn, 255 E. Illinois Rd., Lake Forest, IL 60045; reservations 800-788-9480, 847-234-2280, fax 234-3152. Doubles and suites, \$145-300 per night.

ELIZABETH AUSTIN lives in Oak Park, Illinois, and reads *F. Scott Fitzgerald* novels.