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Review: Soar Mill Cove, Salcombe, Devon

Crab thermidor, Kir Royals and the British seaside – we go on a retro trip to Devon.

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Soar Mill Cove
Soar Mill Cove hotel, Devon

According to a recent survey by Inspired Luxury Escapes, retro holiday destinations are back in vogue. Generation Z are the latest marketable group flocking to trendy destinations of yore, filling up Instagram feeds not with Phillippe Starck lamps and rooftop pools, but with motel signage, Adidas slides and 99s. Forget New York Time's 52 up-and-coming places to visit this year – it's time to look back at photo albums from the Golden Age of summer holidaying. It was in this spirit that I decided to do a road trip down to Devon.

Lowdown

The place was South Hams (near Salcombe); the hotel Soar Mill Cove. It's a property which has been in the Makepeace family's hands for over 100 years, and has hosted Audrey Hepburn as a guest (big retro points).

As we manoeuvred down a bumpy lane, the path suddenly and spectacularly opened out onto a panoramic vista: the jagged symmetry of Jurassic cliffs which framed the glittering sea beyond. There is little between the hotel and this view, save for a few lambs and cows.

The building itself has been largely unchanged over the years, owing to the fact it's on National Trust-owned land. The bungalow is part 1970s holiday home, part-Palm Springs Desert Modernism in its aesthetic, owing to its low roof, big windows and rectangular shape. It's very Instagrammable.

A more modern addition is the newly renovated spa, which has a saltwater pool and a small treatment room. Treatments are excellent value for money (when we went, a mani, pedi and seaweed scrub offer was £35), and the pool will be a welcome spot when the weather turns and the sea cools down after the end of summer.

You'll want to bypass the pool, though, and instead climb over stiles and walk through fields until you reach the eponymous cove, with its dramatic rocks and still waters, which are invitingly warm in summer.

Rooms

The rooms here err on the side of basic – there are no swanky bathroom toiletries or mod con fixtures – but they're big, clean and the beds are comfy. Many have double doors which lead out to a private patio complete with sun loungers, though they aren't 'private' per se – there are no fences between you and your neighbours, and people are often walk around the grounds, making for an intimate meet-and-greet if your curtains aren't drawn. We learned this quickly when, getting ready for dinner, an excitable Alsatian called Brody bolted straight for our shower.

This friendly nature harks back to a time when the summer holiday meant returning to the same place and seeing the same faces year in, year out. It's still very much like this – many guests we chatted to have been regular patrons for years.

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Soar Mill Cove

The lounge area at Soar Mill Cove

Food & drink

One of the main reasons for clientele loyalty is, no doubt, the restaurant. The dinner service is charmingly old-school, with a Friday evening piano man – whose repertoire includes Luther Vandross, Mariah Carey and many-a-Disney tune – and sunset views being the only entertainment.

The menu itself is a fresh affair – you'll be asked specify dinner dishes hours before so that the chefs can place orders with boats and markets. This how things have always been at Soar Mill Cove.

Big groups should order the fruits de mer platter, which comes complete with lobster tail, crab, clams, king prawns and, of course, a deliciously old-school Marie Rose sauce. The clam chowder is an obvious but worthwhile choice for starters. It's the hotel's signature dish – the chef uses the same recipe from 35 years ago – and it's a perfectly creamy and smoky delight. Other dishes include hand dived scallops from Start Bay with crab thermidor, whole lobster, and Salcombe crab on toast. Wine is varied in origin and honest – it's an edit of the owner's favourites (think Picpoul and a decent French rosé) – while cocktails are a lesson in 1970s disco: Tom Collins, Pina Coladas and Kir Royales.

Make sure to finish the evening with the strawberry meringue, made by the original Mrs Makepeace for a visiting Audrey Hepburn who declared it 'divine'.



Jade Conroy

Bantham Beach, Devon

Nearby

Situated only 10 miles from Salcombe, this should be your first port of call for a morning stroll. Pick up fresh juice from [Sailor V](#), before wandering the quaint streets filled with colourful-fronted houses, art shops and pubs. This is the land of the preppy look, so you'll find shops accordingly: Crewe Clothing, and the very first Jack Wills, for example. [The Ferry Inn](#), a ramshackle pub with mounted fish skeletons and interesting beers, is a great spot for an evening drink which has plus points for the waterside terrace. Art lovers can stop by the new Marc Quinn exhibition at the [The Drang Gallery](#).

The closest beach to Salcombe is a bustling tiny cove North Sands. [The Winking Prawn](#), its neighbouring restaurant, is a fun all-day boozier, with summertime barbecues a popular spot at weekends. If you make the short trip over the hill in the car, you reach South Sands beach, which is slightly more spacious. Its adjoining [boutique hotel](#) is a popular place for afternoon tea, while activities on the beach include the not-so-retro paddle boarding.

If you're after a proper beach day out, drive from Soar Mill Cove to Bantham, a beautiful surfing spot which has recently gained attention in the press when the National Trust tried to buy the village and adjoining coast. Make sure to take cash out before you go, and stop by [The Gastrobus](#) in the car park, which serves homemade burgers, pies, sarnies and cakes.



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Conclusion

Retro trimmings aside – the real sense you get at Soar Mill Cove is its honest approach to hoteliering. As we left, a daughter and mother were chatting to the manager about her upcoming wedding plans. Another family had made their way up from the Southwest Coast Path for fresh crab sandwiches. Nearly everyone we spoke to is a returning guest. One lady tells me that this time last year was a complete washout – though it's still just as beautiful when it rains, I imagine.

Soar Mill Cove, Nr Salcombe, South Devon, TQ7 3DS, rooms from £159, soarmillcove.co.uk

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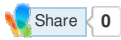


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