

travel

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▼ **BRIDGE OF HIGHS** The new-look Newcastle city centre offers much more than spectacular river views



Top Toon is place to go

By Stephen Stewart

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FORGET the ancient clichés about Newcastle Brown Ale and the Fog on the Tyne. Newcastle-upon-Tyne has undergone a transformation to become a Mecca for clubbers, shoppers and anyone after good food and lots to do.

My recent midweek visit to the city was a revelation. I saw for myself that Newcastle has joined the likes of Glasgow and Birmingham in the ranks of premier post-industrial cities.

The "Toon" has successfully reinvented itself as a thriving tourist destination offering one of the best mini breaks I have had in the UK.

I was hosted by the swanky Sandman Signature hotel – right next door to Newcastle United's football stadium and just two minutes from the hive of activity, which is the city centre.

The exquisite room offered the best of both worlds – a first class hotel room with all the bells and whistles, including two flat screen TVs and a luxurious king size bed with a kitchen for guests who wish to go for the self catering option.

The well-appointed kitchen had a microwave oven, cooker, fridge and everything else a guest would need to be self sufficient.

A designer coffee machine in the lobby also provides free tea, coffee and hot chocolate.

Visitors have everything they need should they wish to live a hermit's existence in the hotel's cosy luxury.

But Newcastle is far too good a place to squander an opportunity to enjoy the city's hot spots.

On the first night, I dined in the Shark

Club – a sports bar and grill within the hotel – which is festooned with big screen TVs to ensure that sports fans don't miss a trick.

Burgers, steaks and pizzas are the order of the day.

The service and atmosphere was excellent – definitely the place to be when you are starting a big night out.

The following day, I ventured further into the city to a restaurant with a great reputation to live up to – Cafe 21.

In the heart of the city's quayside, the restaurant was exceptional.

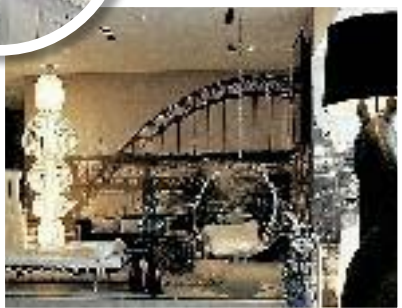
I was treated to six Lindisfarne oysters with spicy pork sausages followed by steak tartare with chips and green salad.

This feast was topped off with a knickerbocker glory for good measure.

The meal was fabulous and confirmed everything I had been told about this place by hotel reception staff and even local taxi drivers. A legendary venue in the making.

The city is only a couple of hours drive away but offers a superb and lively break.

▼ **LUXURY** The Sandman Signature Hotel has exquisite rooms with their own kitchen



▼ **STYLISH** The Barley Bree has been renovated to give it bags of style

I'll Bree

By Magnus Gardham

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THE Barley Bree in Perthshire, has quietly established itself as one of Scotland's best and best-loved restaurants with rooms to stay in.

But for all chef Fabrice Bouteloup's ever-growing list of prestigious awards, it remains something of a culinary secret.

That deserves to change and those in the know have been raving about it since it opened five years ago – and they are right to do so.

It's a brilliant, stylish gem of a place and we could not have enjoyed our recent visit more.

We arrived at this old coaching inn in the village of Muthill, three miles south of Crieff on the A822, just as a pleasant wintry afternoon was turning into a freezing night.

But a log fire was already burning away in the snug lounge and a perfect pint of local real ale was quickly on the table. Great start.

Our room was also faultless. Simple, contemporary and comfortable, with a complimentary whisky miniature, as well as all the expected tea, coffee and television facilities to get us settled.

But the real treat was still to come, and for that we headed down to the dining room – a beautiful, unfussy space of dark floorboards and exposed brickwork all warmed by a wood burning stove.

Frenchman Fabrice, and Scottish wife Alison, resisted the obvious temptation to turn the Barley Bree into a country gastropub when they renovated it back in 2007 for the



▼ **OWNERS** Husband and wife Fabrice and Alison Bouteloup



▼ **Tasty** The Barley Bree has a reputation for serving up good quality food



A gem of a restaurant with rooms is a secret paradise to delight gourmets

simple reason that they wanted to run a restaurant.

That decision has proved great news for foodies as Fabrice's cooking is outstanding.

It's all about great Scottish ingredients and hearty flavours.

Posh nosh, for sure, but never over the top or pretentious.

I wanted to eat every dish on the menu but plumped for the perfectly pink saddle of lamb with spinach, pinenut and ricotta conchiglioni pasta and a black olive and sunblush tomato for £17.50.

Julie chose slow cooked ox cheek with black truffle mash and sprouts and bacon also costing £17.50. Both were superb.

We'd already enjoyed a terrific



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