

THE TIMES

The Cool Hotel Guide: Swain House, Watchet, Somerset

Watchet is where Samuel Taylor Coleridge, while on a walking tour, was inspired to write *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. There's a statue of an "ancient mariner" on the esplanade overlooking the high sea walls of the marina - the Bristol Channel can get very rough. Swain House is a short stroll from the statue, in the centre of Watchet (population about 3,700), and it makes a perfect base for exploring the nearby countryside and coast by foot.

In a nutshell

It's easy to find, in the centre of town next to a run of antique shops in an 1890s townhouse. There are four rooms in this stylish little B&B, run in a laid-back but efficient manner by Jason and Annie Robinson, both of whom previously worked for Disney in London (which explains the small model of Mickey Mouse in the lounge) but moved to west Somerset to be close to relatives. Swain House opened two years ago.

What are the rooms like?

They're surprisingly large and each has a wall poster showing a detail from a work of art from either the National Gallery or the National Portrait Gallery. In room four, for example, there's a picture of the wistful-looking female figure depicted by Claude-Marie Dubufe in his painting *The Surprise* (from the 1820s), while in room one you expect a close-up of the hand of Charlotte Sophia of Mecklenburg-Strelitz,

as painted by Allan Ramsay (1762). Room two shows another painting by Ramsay - of a rather self-satisfied King George III. While these features might sound intrusive, they somehow work alongside the neutral colour schemes of the rooms: pencil-grey carpets and whitewashed walls. The spotless bathrooms have slate floors and REN products.

Which is the best room?

Room four is at the front on the second floor with a detail of the ruby-ringed hands of Christina of Denmark by Hans Holbein the Younger (1538). It gets afternoon sunlight through the sash windows.

So what is the food like?

The cooked breakfasts are just right, with a choice of either a full English, vegetarian (eggs, "herby mushrooms", halloumi, roasted tomatoes and vegetarian sausage), or pancakes with either berries, yoghurt and maple syrup or bacon with a poached egg. Jason serves the food swiftly, along with fresh coffee and juice. My full English was top-notch and not at all greasy: crispy bacon, pork sausage, poached egg and roasted tomato with tasty herby mushrooms. For dinner the evening before I went to the Spice Merchant (01984 633010), a brilliant nearby Indian restaurant recommended by Jason, who said "it knocks out most places on Brick Lane" - and he was right.

Who goes there?

Most visitors are hikers. Brandi Carlile, the American folk singer, has stayed.

What else is there to do?

Take a ride on the West Somerset Railway (west-somerset-railway.co.uk). There's a stop at Watchet, and you can hear the hoot of the steam trains from Swain House. The line is England's longest preserved steam railway. The Quantock Hills are close by and you can go along the coastal path, which becomes the South West Coast Path at Minehead, running 630 miles to Dorset (southwestcoastpath.com).

The highs, the lows, the verdict

Eight out of ten
Good value big rooms in an interesting spot, but there's a bit of traffic noise.

Need to know

Swain House (01984 631038, swain-house.com), 48 Swain Street, Watchet, West Somerset TA23 0AG; B&B doubles from £125; no wheelchair access rooms; single occupancy rooms from £110 Monday-Thursday.

