



CLOCKWISE Plas Dinas Country House, Lord Snowdon and Princess Margaret on the lawn of Plas Dinas in 1962, the Gun Room and Prince William with owners Julian and Andy Banner-Price during his visit in January

## Fit for a princess

Kay Li follows in the footsteps of the world's most famous bridegroom with a visit to a Welsh hotel that's fit for a future king...

For ordinary folk like me, it is a rare treat to experience how the other half live. But this was exactly the opportunity I was afforded when my partner and I were invited to stay at Plas Dinas Country House Hotel, past residence to that long lineage of Welsh aristocracy, the Armstrong-Joneses – whose most famous son was Lord Snowdon, former husband to Princess Margaret.

Indeed, in the 60s and 70s, the royal couple were regular visitors to this impressive country pad. And the royal patronage continues: in January, man-of-the-hour Prince William visited Plas Dinas to enjoy a three-course lunch, cooked by proprietor and chef Andy Banner-Price.

It is easy to see why the hotel still attracts such rarefied attention. A beautiful, Grade II listed building, the original part dates back to the 17th century and was built around an enormous fireplace that still stands in the now quirky but distinctive Gun Room. As time passed, the house was extended with Victorian additions, lending to its general air of splendour. Plas Dinas is very much a gentleman's home and the evidence of it is everywhere: a grand entrance; exquisite antique furniture, including original pieces belonging to the family; imposing, original family portraits that greet your every turn.

A stroll around the extensive gardens reveal the panoramic views on offer; undulating farmland stretched out for miles, the sea in

the distance. On a clear day, you can even spot the Snowdon mountain range.

If I could forget I was in a five star AA rated hotel, there were welcome reminders. All 10 of the en suite bedrooms are individually designed in a classic Victorian style with a modern twist. All are well equipped with the latest mod-cons and little luxuries such as wall-mounted, flat screen TVs, iPod docking stations, Molton Brown toiletries, white fluffy bathrobe and slippers. The end result is a perfect balance between historic country house and stylish boutique hotel.

On a quirkier note, the corridor walls were adorned with old photographs, newspaper cuttings and memorabilia that piece

together the Armstrong-Jones family tree, much of which was provided by the current Armstrong-Jones heir, Peregrine, who currently resides in London and is famous for organising events and parties for the rich and famous. This explains the wedding menus of the likes of the Beckhams and Elton John that hang in the dining room.

After checking in, we were shown to our room. The Lady Armstrong-Jones Room is charmingly decorated in a black and white monotone, with red accent soft furnishings and a four poster bed. After enjoying the complimentary clotted-cream fudge with a cup of tea (fresh milk provided – luxury indeed!), we headed to the historic town of Caernarfon while the night was still young.

Built in 1283 by Edward I, Caernarfon Castle was intended as a military stronghold, as well as a royal palace. As one of the more famous Welsh castles, the intimidating fortress walls guard over the serene River Seoint with its many residing sailing and fishing boats, lending to a wondrous panorama. The fun of the place is running up the narrow stone stairs that spiral up the polygonal towers to the battlements at the top. From there you get magnificent views of the town and countryside beyond and a real sense of what it would have been like as a medieval soldier in battle, surveying the enemy approaching below, shooting arrows from the narrow arrowslits.

The next morning, after a hearty breakfast at the hotel (no buffet in sight, all fresh and cooked to order: fresh fruit salad, aromatic coffee, cooked Welsh breakfast with award-winning, locally sourced sausages, bacon and black pudding), we drove to Llanberis to catch the Snowdon Mountain Railway steam locomotive to Snowdon's summit – at 1,085m, Wales' tallest mountain. The weather was typically Welsh: heavy rain that came at us from an angle, rendering our umbrella useless. We were warned that visibility was poor at the top but missing Snowdon was not an option: you wouldn't go to Paris and not see the Eiffel Tower.

Despite the dismal weather and being practically shoe-horned into the tightly packed train carriage, the ascent up Snowdon was truly inspiring. Into ancient forest, witnessing a dramatic waterfall. Through Rocky Valley, we could see where it got its name. Massive boulders on our right side inspired myths of the giant ogre Rhita. On the left side, deep valleys and ridges, gorged by the ferocity of the ice age. It was breathtaking. A taste of the spectacular scenery to be had at the summit? Unfortunately not. We reached the

recently opened Summit Visitor Centre to see nothing but thick dense fog. But that's life, isn't it?

On to the eccentric tourist village of Portmeirion, famous for being the set of cult 60s TV series *The Prisoner*. Built by the equally unconventional architect Sir Clough Williams-Ellis between 1925 and 1975 to resemble an Italian town, Portmeirion is certainly unusual. As pretty as it is with its bright coloured frescoes and delicate manicured gardens, it is hard to escape how artificial and manmade the village feels. Then there are the strange misplaced oddities, such as a Buddha statue that appears from nowhere. Coupled with the fact that every corner we turned seemed to have an eatery or souvenir shop, I felt I was walking through a Disneyland for adults. It was a slightly surreal experience, but the trick is not to take it too seriously.

Back at Plas Dinas, we enjoyed a fabulous three-course dinner in the evening – a civilised affair starting with a glass of wine and olives in the drawing room while perusing the menu. Once the starters were ready, we were shown into the dining room, an intimate but sophisticated space that encourages a relaxing atmosphere.

The menu offered long-established favourite dishes such as lamb shank, fish pie, fruit crumble and chocolate torte among others, but updated for the discerning modern taste bud. It anticipated food that promised quality and did not disappoint.

Afterwards, we were taken back to the drawing room where a fire had been lit and was roaring away, to be served coffee and chocolate. There we happily stayed, whiling away the late hours chatting to other guests with a night-cap from the honesty bar. Like I said: a very civilised affair indeed.

When I first arrived at Plas Dinas Country House Hotel, I asked friendly and hard-working hosts Andy and Julian Banner-Price what makes their hotel special. Andy said it is 'all in the details; details that add up to an experience that cannot be described but lived'. I wondered then what he meant. At the end of my stay I understood completely: a certain gentrified fineness balanced by a warm and relaxing atmosphere, situated in the middle of some of the most beautiful countryside in the country. Plas Dinas Country House Hotel is simultaneously traditional yet contemporary, homely yet sophisticated, stately yet relaxed. If it was good enough for Princess Margaret and the future King of England, it's definitely good enough for me.

## FACT FILE

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Superior rooms from £140 per night;  
deluxe rooms from £170 per night;  
super-deluxe room from £225 per  
night. Includes full Welsh breakfast.  
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Saturday and should be booked  
24 hours in advance.



FROM TOP

Lady Armstrong Jones room  
Snowdonia  
Caernarfon Castle