

# **HOTEL ASPIRE**

## **Customer Impressions**

**Report by**

**Solution Management  
Independent Hotel Evaluations**

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Solution Management Ltd  
Independent Hotel Evaluations  
Ferryview  
Grantown Road  
FORRES  
IV36 2SG

01309 672547  
[www.SMIHE.co.uk](http://www.SMIHE.co.uk)

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## **Author's Note:**

*Please note that this report is particularly verbose so that anyone reading it can get a feel for what it was like to stay at Hotel Aspire. We have no wish to insult clients by repeating to them what they already know, the facilities they have, what the rooms contain and so on. However, we would include such detail as we feel is necessary to aid readability and to indicate those features particularly appreciated by guests. It will be rare for a hotel to be as perfect as Hotel Aspire so a genuine report based on the interactions of real people is likely to yield many more constructive criticisms than can be found in this example. We recommend that you also take a look at the report on Hotel Letdown. This is in a different format but does provide an interesting contrast to the near perfection achieved by the Aspire.*

Hotel Aspire has 25 rooms and charges £80 per night. It is regarded as a 4 Star in the tourist brochures but caters mainly for business people. The hotel has its own restaurant, bar, small pool and multi-gym; facilities which are also open to the public.

Staying at Hotel Aspire was the most pleasant experience we have had in this job. From making the initial reservation to turning out the drive past the tubs of flowers we were pampered by sumptuous surroundings and staff that appeared to read our minds. The hotel is situated in a beautiful part of Scotland and is blessed with some fantastic views and a supportive town that offers the visitor a rich variety of things to do. This perfection is provided at a very reasonable price and this also makes the hotel one of the best value-for-money stays anywhere in Britain.

We have rated every area of the hotel as 5 stars. This is a tremendous achievement that has only been matched on one other occasion, and then by an establishment charging considerably more. This means that in every area from First Impressions through Dinner and our Night's Sleep to Departure the following day, Hotel Aspire met our needs *and* exceeded our expectations. We were constantly and pleasantly surprised by the efforts staff went to in ensuring our stay was one to remember. Hotel was not just a place to stay but a memorable experience that we will remember with affection for a very long time.

Everybody who has made Aspire what it is today is to be congratulated. From the interior designers to the gardeners, from the housekeepers to the waiting staff, and from the managers to the owners. Each executes their part with exceptional professionalism and concern for the customer. They not only met our every need but they exceeded it, often by a handsome margin.

For the first time ever, we have declined to make any recommendations. This should be seen as a reflection on the hotel as a whole and the positive message we want to impart to everybody involved. The main text does hint at some small improvements that could be made but the focus should be on maintaining the superb visitor experience as it exists right now. We sincerely thank Hotel Aspire for inviting us to test the facilities for ourselves and wish everybody at the hotel all the very best in the future. Thank you.

## INTRODUCTION

Hotel Aspire has 25 rooms and charges £80 per night. It is regarded as a 4 Star in the tourist brochures but caters mainly for business people. The hotel has its own restaurant, bar, small pool and multi-gym; facilities which are also open to the public.

We visited the hotel over the late May Bank Holiday weekend at the client's request. The regular day manager was attending his brother's wedding and the promising new night manageress was to be on duty. We had been asked to be demanding husband and wife team that were fussy, polite and not openly critical. Our focus was to be on the Manageress and how she coped over the busy weekend.

The team from SMIHE comprised of Mr & Mrs Johnson, a fictitious couple purporting to be on a short break touring the West Coast of Scotland. This was their second of four nights away. Martin Johnson works for one of the big insurance companies and Kate Johnson works part-time as a nurse. They have 2 older teenage children, who had stayed at home, and live in a detached house on the outskirts of Gloucester.

## RESERVATIONS (☆☆☆☆☆)

The reservation was made at 08:35 am on 14th February. This time was chosen to test how staff would respond during a busy check-out period. The telephone was answered within 6 rings, very good considering the time of day, and we were greeted by a very friendly female voice that did not seem hassled or stressed in any way despite the obvious activity in the background. She gave her name as Mandy.

Initially we asked for the night *before* our preferred date (knowing this to be fully booked by a coach party). The response was very apologetic but rather than ring off and leave us to our own devices, we were offered the names of two other hotels in the area that might be able to offer us similar accommodation. After explaining the nature of our short break, Mandy quickly picked up on our subtle hint that we could be flexible and suggested that there were still rooms available at the Aspire on the following night.

Relieved that Mandy had been astute enough to pick up on our situation so quickly, we requested a quiet, non-smoking room with a view overlooking the bay. We were offered a choice of Room 13 or Room 15, the former having a small balcony and mini-bar fridge for an additional £10 per night. We choose the later and felt secure in knowing that we not only had a room but also in knowing which room it was to be.

Mandy enquired about our approximate time of arrival and on hearing this was to be early afternoon, she offered information on activities we might like to consider, such as a short walk into town, a slightly longer walk around the bay or the use of the fitness suite and pool facilities within the hotel. This was useful as it helped us prepare and pack the right clothing for our visit.

We asked how to find the hotel and were given brief but clear instructions. These were obviously being read from a card but that probably only added to the quality of the information. Mandy offered to fax us a map, when we explained that we did not have a fax at home but did have email, she immediately offered to scan the instructions and send them to us. She did qualify this by saying that she was not very familiar with the scanner and therefore it might not be done straight away. The email arrived at about 4pm that same day although the large attachment size (nearly 1Mbyte) indicated that the hotel was not fully conversant with this form of

communication. A pre-prepared file ready for emailing to guests, along the lines of the earlier verbal instructions, with a clear black and white map of reasonable file size (less than 70kbytes) would have topped off the reservation experience nicely.

Mandy confirmed the price as £110. Since we had been expecting £160 (£80 per person) this was a pleasant surprise. She explained that the room was £80 for the first occupant and £30 for the second. We have always liked the American system for charging per room and intensely dislike the British system of charging per person. After all, the effort to provide and clean the room is similar whether one or two people have stayed. However, Hotel Aspire's pricing system is very fair, reflecting the extra cost of providing a second breakfast and additional towels etc.

Mandy wished us a pleasant stay and 'promised' good weather for our visit. Overall, making the reservation was painless; we were given good information and were left looking forward to our stay.

## **FIRST IMPRESSIONS (☆☆☆☆☆)**

Our first port of call after making the booking was to visit the hotel's website. Doing this after making the booking was deliberate to avoid compromising the experience of making the reservation but we accept that many people would have looked at the website before calling the hotel. To impress us, we like a website that renders quickly (most people still do not have access to a broadband connection), has a picture of the hotel, location map, facilities available, room prices and information about the local area. We don't expect the hotel to divulge its typical guest profile but we do like sufficient information to allow us to make a judgement for ourselves. For example, it helps to know if this is a hotel that focuses on catering for business people or families with young children.

Hotel Aspire gets full marks for its website; the front page was quick, clear and complied with the standards set by the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C). There were plenty of links to the more detailed information and several useful photographs that provided a good idea of what the dining room and the grounds looked like. Thoughtful touches included a copy of the dinner menu (with a reminder to check back regularly as the menu changed frequently) and the 'busy' periods in the fitness suite. We were surprised that the hotel had not mentioned the site when we made the reservation; they should be proud of it and tell as many people about it at every opportunity.

The day of our arrival was a beautiful sunny day which always helps but even before we got to the main driveway we found ourselves admiring the verges. The hotel was obviously responsible for the short grass, tubs and flower beds that greeted us as we approached. The short driveway was equally inviting and immediately appealed, particularly to Mrs Johnson who immediately spotted some unusual plants in the garden!

The hotel itself was an old building that was full of character and every bit as interesting as the photographs on the website had suggested. We pulled into an unloading area right outside the main door and were met by a porter as we opened the boot. He took our luggage into Reception, accompanied by Mrs Johnson, as Mr Johnson parked the car in the ample car park. As I joined my wife, we were greeted by the Manageress who welcomed us to the hotel and asked our name. This, we thought was simply a pleasant gesture but, by the time we had collected our thoughts and reached the front desk, the receptionist had been told who we were and was able to greet us by name and the porter was asking if he could take our bags straight up to Room 15.

## **ARRIVAL (☆☆☆☆☆)**

Being just after 2pm, the check-in desk was quiet and the formalities were completed quickly. Before we headed off to unpack, we asked if there was any chance of something to eat as we had skipped lunch to reach the hotel as soon as possible. The Manageress stepped in and asked what sort of thing we had in mind and we said sandwiches would be fine but, to be 'demanding' as per the brief, we pointed out that my wife didn't eat red meat and we preferred brown bread. The Manageress offered to speak to the chef and would call us in our room if we wanted to go on and freshen up.

As we unpacked, word came through that sandwiches were available, would we like these in our room or in the lounge and would we like tea or coffee to go with them. Ten minutes later we were enjoying sandwiches and tea in the lounge. We would have been happy with almost anything but what we got was a selection of salmon, egg, chicken and cheese sandwiches neatly presented on a plate and garnished with salad. This was well above our expectation and has us enthusing about the hotel right from the start.

## **ROOM (☆☆☆☆☆)**

The room smelt fresh and had a very homely feel about it. This was quite unexpected as hotels with predominantly business clients tend to be bland, uniform and lacking in character. The room was of a good size and had, as promised, a wonderful view across the bay. The double bed was an American Kingsize which was fantastic. A break away from home should be a pleasant, memorable experience that offers something over and above that available at home, Hotel Aspire was certainly meeting this requirement.

All the usual consumables were present, including a reasonable quality shampoo and separate conditioner. Some delicious locally produced biscuits accompanied the tea and coffee making facilities. Information about the hotel included a short history and architectural information as well as listing the facilities, annotated with simple but useful snippets of information such as, 'Towels are provided in both the fitness suite and pool areas'. The clear, concise and well referenced text was nicely presented in a bound folder alongside another similar folder containing local information. In addition to the normal plethora of leaflets, this second folder contained a locally produced map with driving times to the main attractions. Details of local walks, cycle routes and the local town were also included. Finally, there was a comprehensive section on local restaurants that was clearly up-to-date and unbiased. The owners were obviously proud of the area and the facilities it had to offer.

The wardrobe contained plenty of normal coat hangars, a welcome change from the half dozen two-piece types often found. Drawer space was minimal but complemented by shelves within the wardrobe, thereby making good use of space and providing a variation in the size and shape of storage areas. A small keypad operated safe was fitted in the bottom of the wardrobe and was a welcome, discreet security feature. We used it for our camera although, such was the positive, trustworthy ambience in the hotel, I am sure it could have been left in open view with no problems. A writing desk, occasional table and two chairs completed the furnishings and added to the homely feel. The room was larger than most in comparable hotels and the space well utilized.

In the context of our scenario, the television assumed little importance but we know how important this item can be, especially for solitary individuals on longer stays. Infuriatingly these are often tiny 14" portables, which we find completely unjustified in these days of low cost TVs. Not surprisingly, Hotel Aspire had not fallen into this trap and provided a good quality 21" that offered the free digital TV channels. However, no Sky or cable channels were provided, which

we know would disappoint some residents. No hotel information was provided via the TV; this is a common feature in America and, particularly during a long stay, we like the opportunity to 'surf', check how our bill is accumulating, find out about local events, what's on at the cinema and so on.

A trouser press, a free-standing standard lamp and desk lamp plus a telephone with an integral dataport completed the minor accessories. It was good to find a dataport allowing Internet connection; although this is now common in city hotels there are still too many rural hotels claiming to be business hotels that do not provide this facility. Decoration was to a high standard, both in the main room and in the bathroom, there were no chipped or cracked tiles and few scratches or blemishes to spoil the appearance. Colours were co-ordinated and were reflected in the carpets, walls, carpets, curtains, pictures and furniture fabrics without being overpowering as is occasionally the case with colour co-ordinated designs.

We felt our room may have been untypical of others in the hotel so we took advantage of our early arrival to quickly view a couple of other rooms. Neither of these were as large as ours but were still of a good size and furnished to the same high standards. Had we not seen Room 15 first, we would still have been extremely happy with either of the others.

## **FACILITIES (☆☆☆☆☆)**

Information in the room about the hotel included a map of the hotel complex, a simple and useful guide for new visitors. This allowed us to find our way to the fitness suite with the minimum of fuss. We also knew from the same information pack that towels and lockers would be available on production of a room key. The changing room was clean and well equipped. The availability of individual changing cubicles would be particularly welcomed by some guests and the mini spin dryer and roll of plastic bags for wet costumes was great news for those using the swimming pool. Shampoo and soap in the showers and hair dryers provided everything else we needed.

Although the room containing the fitness equipment was quite small, it had been well planned with a variety of different machines and was air conditioned. Each machine had clear instructions and a qualified member of staff was available should extra assistance be needed. The essential water cooler was well stocked and paper towels and cleaning fluid were available to wipe down the machines after use. All these thoughtful touches kept standards high and made the experience all the more pleasurable.

With our demanding hat on, we pretended to be complete novices when it came to using the equipment and sought the assistance of the staff. As soon as they realised we were not familiar with the equipment they took us on a tour of all the machines, what muscles they exercised and how to use them. During the tour they quizzed us on our health and overall fitness level and made appropriate recommendations to ensure we did not overstretch ourselves. Aware that they had imparted a lot of new information, they encouraged us to call on them for further assistance if needed. We did, and not always when they were not busy but they were always supportive and helpful and did their job with a smile of encouragement.

After a couple of rounds in the fitness suite, we moved on to the swimming pool. Most hotel pools are quite small and this one was no exception. However, the clever pear shape meant there was space for the 'loungers' and those with small children and those who like to swim. A circular swimming pattern around the bulb of the 'pear' was advised and this worked extremely well, avoiding the usual problem of swimmers bumping into each other as they fight for a 'lane' in the widest section of the pool. Novel and effective.

After the swim we headed for the sauna and was pleased to find comprehensive guidance on how long to stay in, suitable temperatures, when to make steam and what activities to do before and after the sauna to achieve the most beneficial effects. Our sauna, steam room and Jacuzzi went as expected and we left the fitness centre suitably relaxed and impressed.

At this point we elected to explore what had been described as the library on the hotel map. This turned out to be our favourite room. Not only was it furnished with numerous books but also some elegant furniture and antiques. The books had been chosen with the short stay guest in mind which made them ideal to just pick up and browse for 10 minutes or an hour. The book on painting seemed to be one of the most popular. No wonder, the library had such splendid views over the bay that anyone would be inspired to pick up a paintbrush and capture the moment. We had barely had time to absorb the room before we were offered afternoon tea. The homemade scones looked and smelt beautiful but we couldn't bear to undo all our work in the fitness suite so we settled for just tea. The bone china cups and presentation of this simple beverage amongst all the antiques and ambience of the library took us well away from the hi-tech world and stress of business and for a whole 90 minutes we felt we were in another place and in another era, one of peace and tranquillity.

## **DINNER (☆☆☆☆☆)**

The dining room caught us quite by surprise because it was so different to the main part of the hotel and the richness of the library. The dining room was modern, very modern. Modern furniture, modern art, modern decor. The atmosphere was very fresh and vibrant. Not so much electric as tingly; tingling in anticipation of what might come next. Whether you loved the contrast or didn't, it was certainly a talking point that kept us engaged in conversation for hours, not only between ourselves but also with other guests.

We accept that modernism is a personal taste but we both agreed that we liked it. Mainly because of the way it had been implemented, high quality furniture, linens and tableware, art that was definitely modern but recognisable and inoffensive, and all set off by the excellent use of coloured lighting. We are not connoisseurs of music but did appreciate the low level background music that was relaxing but meant we could talk without shouting and listen without straining.

Tables were arranged in small clusters and we thought this worked very well. Each party had their own table but within the clusters the tables were close enough that you could talk to people on adjacent tables if you wanted to. The striking features of the dining room meant most people made at least some passing remarks with their neighbour. However, the cluster arrangement gave the waiting staff plenty of room to walk around the cluster and serve meals. For those wanting more privacy for a special occasion, there were two secluded bays available.

One waitress or, in our case waiter, was assigned to each cluster. In his first visit he checked our room number and thereafter referred to us by name. He was smartly dressed and had a flamboyant, individual style that we liked. He clearly enjoyed interacting with his customers and compared well with the best that we have come across anywhere in the world. However, he remained sensitive to the response of each of his charges and tailored his approach accordingly. One older couple in our cluster were treated a great deal more formality than we were but obviously felt much more comfortable with this approach. We talked to them later and they said that initially they had been taken aback by the waiter's familiarity but quickly came round as he adapted his style to suit their more conservative tastes. Later, they too began to relax as they saw the way he worked and appreciated how attentive he was to everyone's individual needs.

The menu had a good range of choices, including several vegetarian options. The waiter took care to explain the specials and encouraged questions about dishes on the main menu. As

someone who doesn't eat red meat, Kate was quite quizzical about a number of dishes to make sure they didn't contain ham or bacon. Since our waiter was able to answer all these questions off the cuff, she probed harder about nuts; on the pretence that she had a friend with a nut allergy who might visit. The answer required a quick trip to the kitchen, where upon he reappeared with the chef. The chef asked a couple of relevant questions and then provided us with an assurance that our friend could safely eat his food. Nobody need have been in any doubt about what they were ordering. At this point it was difficult to be a demanding customer as there was very little else we could have wished for. We decided to keep our powder dry for later by ordering a very oily fish off the menu with the intention of asking for it to be changed once we had had our first taste.

One menu was left on each table, which was a fantastic idea because most people browsed this and used it as a talking point whilst they were waiting for their first course. People are much more likely to return on another evening if they have already pre-selected another option they fancy trying.

Any thoughts that a modern restaurant might mean modern nouvelle cuisine sized portions were dispelled with the arrival of our first course. We had both chosen light dishes as we didn't want to spoil the main course, a wise decision as it turned out. With the arrival of the main course, we had planned to act disappointment and dislike of Kate's fish choice. As it turned out, this was not hard as the fish really was not to Kate's liking even though it had been cooked perfectly and was well presented. Kate had her back to our waiter but he must have sensed her initial reaction whilst he was serving an adjacent table. He looked up directly at us but then returned to the kitchen. One minute later he returned with a menu under his arm. He didn't even ask if everything was alright with the meal, 'Mrs Johnson, am I right in thinking you would prefer a different choice of main course?' and passed her the open menu. We cannot tell you how good this made us feel, even in our role as difficult guests. We were immediately at ease and Kate was able to make another choice without feeling guilty or a nuisance.

Whilst there is a welcome trend in UK restaurants for waiters/waitresses to ask if the customer is enjoying their meal, it rarely feels like they are listening or care about the answer. Our experience at the Aspire went beyond this basic courtesy and bordered on the sixth sense. Our waiter was certainly very pro-active and handled the situation very well indeed. We had expected some resistance and for the Manageress to become involved but the episode was handled discreetly and efficiently at the table with the minimum of fuss. Top marks.

Coffee was complimentary and we were asked if we wanted it in the library, the bar or whether we wished to remain in the dining room. Our decision was important to our waiter as the china would vary to suit the surroundings! We took ours in the bar.

Finding good chefs and good waiting staff is not easy. Hotel Aspire had some of the best we have come across. We were particularly pleased to learn that our waiter was a local man that had shown a particular flare for working with people and had been trained by the hotel to bring out the best in him. It seemed to us to be a true partnership to the real benefit of customers, many of whom returned again and again.

## **BAR (☆☆☆☆☆)**

The bar itself was a simple affair and designed to be a serving point for the staff rather than somewhere for the guests to sit at. Customers, by virtue of the room layout, were encouraged to sit away from the bar and be served at their seat. Once again, a lot of thought had gone into the design, two big open log fires dominated either end of the room with horseshoe seating that made it very cosy for couples or bigger groups. Areas with armchairs and areas with upright

chairs were also available, depending on whether you wanted to relax, play cards or whatever. The bar, like all the public rooms, was designated a no smoking area. As non-smokers, we found this a very pleasant change from most bars we visit.

The horseshoe seating was ideal for us because it allowed us to talk to some of the other guests with ease and without feeling that we might be intruding. As we sat down, a fresh bowl of salty snacks was brought to us and our drink order taken. The snacks obviously encourage drinking and are a nice touch but, as I cannot resist them, even after a full meal, we asked they be taken away. The dining room was the first point of conversation and we managed to bring a party of 6, a party of 4 and two other couples into the conversation. This meant we were able to get a good cross section of views as well as make some new friends.

Fully one half of our group were regular visitors to the hotel and all but one American couple said they would come back again. One person did not like the dining room at all, arguing that it was out of keeping with the rest of the hotel. One young couple had fallen in love with it the moment they saw it but most, like us, were so taken aback that it was taking time to be sure of what our own feelings were. The regulars had plenty of words of encouragement, mostly saying that it grew on you. One lady, on the fourth day of her stay, advised us to sample it at breakfast before passing final judgement.

So comfortable and friendly was the atmosphere in the bar that it was 1am before we knew it. At no time had we felt pressured to leave, drink more than we really wanted to or been left searching for a member of staff to get another drink. A more desirable evening would be hard to imagine.

## **NIGHT'S SLEEP (☆☆☆☆☆)**

After such a memorable evening, we could probably have slept on straw but even allowing for our subdued state, the bed was exceedingly comfortable. At 6' 3" I often find that I cannot get comfortable, especially in a strange bed, but the combination of American kingsize, a medium firm mattress and light blankets ensured this was not going to be one of those nights.

Heating was fully controllable and provided a constant temperature throughout the night. Clear instructions were provided but were not necessary as the system was self evident and easy to comprehend. There was adequate ventilation and the window could be opened for those who like plenty of fresh air when asleep.

With the hotel being set back from the road, there was no traffic noise to speak of and no noisy pubs or clubs to keep us awake.

We had booked an early morning call to test the timing and friendliness of the staff. The call was given within 2 minutes of the requested time and we were greeted by a pleasant voice giving us a quick summary of the weather and asking if we wanted to take breakfast in our room.

The shower was powerful and refreshing with plenty of hot water. Flushing the loo did not affect the temperature. A neat shelf had been incorporated into the tiling and was large enough to accommodate a full sized bottle of shampoo and soap. The mini-shampoo and separate conditioner provided was of good quality but the soap was a bit small and fiddly. We don't like waste but a slightly bigger soap would have been appreciated. Towels, warmed by a heated towel rail were of luxurious quality and matched an equally luxurious bathrobe we found hanging in the wardrobe.

## **BREAKFAST (☆☆☆☆☆)**

In the cold light of the morning, the dining room really looked in its element. Its simplicity and freshness really helped us to wake up and prepare for the day ahead. The layout was also very functional. Two serveries had been rolled in, one large octagonal one had the cereals, continental foods, fruit, etc and the other was straight and dispensed the traditional cooked breakfast.

The Maitre d' met us at the door and with no delay and took us to our table. She had been on duty the night before and remembered our names. She didn't ask for a room number but why would she need to? It all added to the professionalism and personal touch so evident at Hotel Aspire. She explained the procedure; a waitress would take our order for tea or coffee and would give us the choice of being served at the table or to help ourselves. We opted for the latter. Whilst we were being seated another couple arrived and were immediately greeted by a passing waitress who took them to their table. The Maitre d' then caught up with them as soon as she had finished with us.

Hotel breakfasts are an important meal. We feel they are part of the hotel experience and it seems that most people like to choose something different to that they usually have at home. Therefore, we were delighted with the wide choice of cereal, fruit, meats, yoghurts and cooked items on offer. The purpose built octagonal servery was ideal, having 2 sides of the octagon for each food group, thus allowing plenty of access. Some sections were refrigerated and there were holes to take empty cereal packets and other rubbish. These small details, along with the clean design, helped keep the servery clean and tidy with the minimum of attention from the staff.

All the cooked food looked fresh, mainly as a result of using small containers. These allowed variety, as well as meaning a high turnover of freshly cooked sausages, beans, etc. Signs invited you to request anything special to be cooked to order, kippers, omelettes or eggs done in a certain way. We felt obliged to test this out and had no trouble in finding a chef, on one of his frequent refill runs, to request some fresh scrambled egg on brown toast (for my wife) and a very soft omelette, with no brown on it, for me. Although we took a leisurely stroll past the juice counter, we had hardly sat down when both breakfasts appeared and were just as we had ordered. I hadn't asked for toast but as soon as I tried to 'pinch' some from my wife, the waitress came over and offered to get me some of my own. In other circumstances I would have felt guilty at being caught out but such was the friendliness of the hotel and the staff that I didn't feel at all awkward.

The waitress was just as quick to notice when our coffee ran low and bought a refill without being asked. We took this through to the lounge where we sat reading the morning papers. There was also a wide choice of magazines so it was a good hour, during which more coffee was provided, before we moved up to our room.

## **DEPARTURE (☆☆☆☆☆)**

Our check out was as smooth as the rest of our stay. The receptionist probed for any chinks we might have found in the hotel armour but there really was no criticism we could give as in every area our expectations had been exceeded. We didn't even have to carry our bags to the car as the porter already had them in hand. How he remembered which car was ours I don't know but he went straight there and then disappeared. He obviously wasn't looking for a tip and thus we avoided the embarrassment that can arise when someone does something for you unasked.

A neat final touch was including the hotel business card along with my returned credit card. Thus ensuring I would always have the details to hand should we ever be in the area again.

## **MISCELLANEOUS (☆☆☆☆☆)**

We must mention the garden. The hotel grounds are not extensive but the variety of planting certainly is. Most were labelled so that we could further appreciate the variety and copy down the names for further book research later. We had also been lucky enough to meet the gardener the previous evening. He obviously loved having a large plot to design and plant even if it wasn't his own garden. It transpired he came down most nights to keep it in order, little and often he said, but he was still willing to chat and describe the plants and the conditions they liked best, etc. He even gave us a few cuttings, which really put the icing on the cake as far as Kate was concerned.

## **CONCLUSIONS (☆☆☆☆☆)**

Hotel Aspire was one hotel we did not want to leave. From the moment we arrived we had been made to feel welcome. The staff treated us with the personal touch and everything, from the decor to the food had a touch of quality. At £110 per night for the 2 of us, we also considered it excellent value for the level of service we had received.

We were slightly frustrated that we did not have the opportunity to be more awkward to test the reactions of the staff and the Manageress in particular. However, the owners and staff can smile smugly knowing that their proactive actions simply dispelled any opportunity for us to be 'difficult'. We were also pleasantly surprised that we were unable to unearth a chink in the armour, all the staff pulled together in such a harmonious, complimentary way they would have done credit to an Olympic relay team.

The staff and customers are surrounded by an idyllic environment that makes the hotel one of the most pleasant places to work or visit. The attention to detail is everywhere in the design through to the implementation. Matching the crockery to the area we wanted to sit for our after dinner coffee really brought this home to us. With so much tradition and so many antiques throughout most of the old hotel, we accept that the dining room may not be to everyone's taste but our own final conclusion was that we loved it. We must also mention the excellent service, which we rate as good as any we have experienced anywhere and far, far better than most restaurants can manage.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

We have rated every aspect of Hotel Aspire as achieving 5 stars; therefore, it would seem churlish to make any recommendations. Indeed, we would have to be nit-picking in the extreme and then it would only be over matters of personal preference. Hence, for the first time ever, we are not making any recommendations.

One problem with achieving such a high standard is maintaining it. Arguably, the only way to go is down. We saw no signs that suggest Hotel Aspire couldn't or won't maintain its exceptional standards but we would be delighted to be invited back to check on this. Meanwhile, we can assure you that Hotel Aspire will be the first hotel we recommend to our friends searching for a special weekend away.