

→ flavour glencot house



A favourite with celebs and antiques lovers, *Glencot House*, just outside Wells, is one of

the most idiosyncratic hotels in the country. **Rebecca Gooch** checked in to meet its equally fascinating owner, Martin Miller...

Glencot HOUSE

When you arrive at a hotel and are greeted by a stag's head singing "Sweet Home Alabama", you know you are about to stay somewhere a little... unusual. No. Unusual is far too puny and pale a word to describe the wonderfully individual, luxuriously eccentric and unique Glencot House Hotel, a mock Jacobean mansion, idyllically sited overlooking the River Axe, just outside Wookey Hole in Somerset.

The chandeliers and gilt-framed mirrors hanging from trees along the drive are just a taster of the Glencot style, which can be summed up as "More is... more!" I began to take a note of all I saw: stuffed peacocks, sweets tumbling out of crystal bowls on every surface, masses of photos, binoculars, books, 1950s mannequin, squirrels, oil paintings, books, candelabra, books, books, books, stuff, stuff, stuff... After three pages of similar scribble, I gave up and just wrote "Aladdin's Cave meets Lovejoy's lock-up". "I call the style maximalist," smiles Martin Miller, the creator of Glencot – as well as two other similarly surreal, sensory overload establishments in London, which he owns, and three rather smart "Miller's Collection" pub-hotels in Hampshire and Berkshire, which he has an interest in. It's three years since he bought and

transformed the 15-bedroomed Glencot, making it quite literally a gin palace. Because this is the same Mr Miller behind Miller's London Dry Gin, and the hugely successful Miller's Antiques Price Guide. Hence the jam-packing of old curiosities and offer of complimentary premium gin on the breakfast menu. "Not as many people as we'd like take us up on that," Martin chuckles, pouring me coffee. In typical Glencot style, it came in one of the

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hotel's collection of novelty teapots: Punch and Judy for me, and a smiling frog for Martin. "Bit of fun, aren't they? Why be boring, that's my motto."

Martin's CV, as crammed and colourful as his hotels, reflects this philosophy, including such diverse accomplishments as writer (150 books including the *Essex Girls Joke Book*), freelance photographer (dolly birds once a speciality) and respected expert on art, antiques and architectural follies. "I suppose on my

passport it would say publisher, but I get most pleasure out of putting the hotels together – you know, buying stuff and putting up the pictures. I'm very involved, but not really hands-on. I deliberately don't want to know how the credit card machine works. I like to stay on the periphery of the nitty gritty business side, because often you can bring something fresh to it, and ask them to do ridiculous things..."

Gazing down to the garden, I see this in action. Staff are hoisting three giant inflatable parrots in a 7ft high pagoda high into a tree over the river. It was all a bit of extra visual fun for visitors to the inaugural Miller's Gin Flaming Art Festival, where contributed works of art were auctioned for charity, and all unsold daubs were hung on a giant frame as an installation. Then doused with petrol and lit. Unsurprisingly, the signed log anonymously dropped off by Banksy just before the party escaped the flames and

was bought for £1600. The event – such a success that next year's date is already in the Glencot diary – was held to celebrate the 15th birthday of Miller's Gin, which came about "like so many things, over a lunch. "I was with some friends in Notting Hill and we began discussing how good a gin we could make if money or practicalities were no object. The downside was that if it didn't work we'd just have an awful lot of awful gin to drink – which could be worse!"

After much experimentation, the friends hit on the perfect mix. The resulting premium gin is traditionally batch distilled, like malt whisky, in a beautiful old copper still called Angela in the heart of the Black Country. Then, in a quest for perfection, the spirit is shipped on a 3000 mile round trip to Iceland and back. "Because the water there is the purest on earth – ten times purer than bottled stuff like Perrier and Evian," Martin explains. "Why go to all that effort to make something taste fantastic, then use tap water? Mad!"

The hotel Martin has created at Glencot boasts sumptuously decorated bedrooms with all the creature comfort luxury lovers could desire. And the kitchen, headed by Frenchman Laurent Courtois, delivers a

well-priced menu (two-course lunch for £14.95) with uncomplicated but effective dishes such as Woolsergy goats' cheese and beetroot salad with pickled walnut, confit of pork belly with shallots, butter beans and parsley mash, and ginger and chocolate pudding with chocolate sauce and vanilla ice cream.

"I'd like to think we please all the senses here," smiles Martin. "And I'd rather we weren't thought of as a hotel, because people have such preconceived notions of what a hotel is – and we're different."

Unique, smile-inspiring and a hotel breed apart – vive la difference!

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Martin pictured with an original Banksy plank!

