

A hotel with a tower, portcullis, tree house and putting course puts the ‘big kid’ back into **Adrian Caffery**

Castle of dreams

The sign warned that we climbed the wobbly wooden staircase to the top of the medieval tower at our own risk.

But the hint of danger only served to fire our imagination and with every step we were entering deeper into the realms of King Arthur and Robin Hood.

After safely negotiating the staircase, we were able to cast our eyes over the castle-turned-hotel where we were staying for the weekend.

As we peered down from the top of the 900-year-old tower, oh how I wished that I'd brought a bow and arrow to fire at unsuspecting guests!

But I behaved myself and good job too because that kind of behaviour would not have befitted an establishment such as Amberley Castle.

The West Sussex castle has played host to Henry VIII and Elizabeth II and is now owned by the von Essen group of luxury hotels.

Approaching Amberley's twin-towered gatehouse along the gravel drive was like opening the pages of a Hans Christian Andersen fairytale.

I was reluctant to drive over the old drawbridge and into the courtyard for fear of spoiling the illusion for ourselves and other guests.

Strictly speaking, however, Amberley is more bishop's palace than castle with the curtain walls raised in 1377 to protect the manor house within.

The grounds, in the summer at least, are spectacular.

Koi carp laze in the ponds in the courtyard where camellias and magnolias provide a delightful setting for afternoon tea and aperitifs.

Nestled in the corner of the grounds is the thatched-roof Mistletoe Lodge, sitting in the bower of a mighty oak tree and reached by a rope bridge.

Unfortunately, this enchanting tree house, which overlooks one of Amberley's two lakes, is not for kids – not even big kids like me.

The lodge has luxurious furnishings and can be hired for a romantic 'dîner à deux' from May to September (weather permitting).

Amberley's resident florist can deck the interior to suit the occasion and it has already been the scene of at least one marriage proposal.

Across the sweeping lawn is a challenging, 18-hole putting course that's wonderfully landscaped with waterfall and gazebo features.

There's also a croquet lawn in the dry moat while keen walkers can be on the 100-mile South Downs Way within a matter of minutes.

Amberley has 19 bedrooms and suites, 14 within the castle walls, all featuring spa bathrooms and most with four-



The romantic Amberley Castle, in West Sussex, once played host to King Henry VIII and is the perfect setting to celebrate a special occasion.



Wine tasting on the windmill balcony at Nutbourne Vineyards

poster beds. All the rooms are furnished with antiques and fine fabrics and are made all the more snug when the gatehouse's oak portcullis is lowered for the night.

TV and Wifi reception can be a bit hit and miss but that's only to be expected when the rooms have 3ft thick stone walls.

The magnificent Queen's Room is the

main restaurant, with a 12th century barrel-vaulted ceiling and enormous fireplace.

We were taken aback by the imaginative dishes and professional service which has been recognised many times by the food industry.

Adjacent to the castle is the charming village of Amberley. Full of thatched cottages, it boasts a pub, tea room and small general store.

We would have happily stayed at the castle and village all weekend were it not for the award-winning vineyard down the road.

Nutbourne Vineyards, in nearby Pulborough, was first planted in 1980 and now produces between 25,000 and 50,000 bottles per year.

Six different types of grape are grown at Nutbourne, where the fertile green sand soil is the same as in the Champagne region of France.

There are 26 acres of vines and the range includes distinctive dry white wines, a full-bodied dry rosé and a popular sparkling wine called Nutty.

Visitors can learn how the grapes are

grown on tours of the vineyards, which are completed with tastings on the balcony of a windmill.

We also stopped off at Arundel, six miles from Amberley, which is dominated by a huge castle dating back to William The Conqueror.

But we had no desire to pay it a visit.

Not even Arundel, Warwick and Windsor castles rolled into one would measure up to Amberley when you're lucky enough to be staying there.

TRAVEL FACTS

■ Amberley Castle (www.amberleycastle.co.uk) is five minutes from Amberley train station. Rates start from £165 per room per night excluding breakfast.

■ Nutbourne Vineyards is open from May to October but the wine can be experienced either at home via purchases at www.nutbournevineyards.com or at Just St James restaurant in Mayfair, London (www.juststjames.com)