



**STEVE BACKSHALL**

► Mount Bosavi was so epic, everything I planned to say to the camera went out the window

**THE SUNDAY TIMES**

# A hotel inspector calls

The star-rating system for hotels is changing. We go undercover with a hotel detective to learn more

Stephen Bleach Published: 14 August 2011



You won't want to just stay at Combe House, you'll want to move in (PR)

Hotel star ratings: they're a load of cobblers, aren't they? They're either made up by the hotel itself, and thus worthless, or awarded by box-ticking, jobsworth inspectors from the tourist board, who are more interested in counting the trouser presses than assessing whether or not it's a nice place to stay.

At least, that's what I thought until last week, when I went under-cover with an incognito inspector from VisitEngland. It has just overhauled its criteria for awarding stars. That may sound like this week's dullest piece of news, but, if you ever stay in hotels, it matters — because, in the words of VisitEngland, the stars should now reflect “the overall guest experience, rather than the facilities offered”. In other words: stuff the trouser presses — would you want to stay there?

It has picked an interesting time to do it. Earlier this year, John Penrose, the minister for tourism, said that star ratings were history, and that we should choose hotels by looking at customer-review websites. Which just goes to show how clueless he is. As our news pages reported last month, TripAdvisor and its ilk are far from impartial. You could be reading something written by the owner, or by someone paid by the owner, or by the owner's rival down the road. Maybe not the best guide.

Are VisitEngland's new star ratings a viable alternative? I went to see first-hand how they are awarded. Posing as a business colleague, I met Ms X (I've sworn under a blasted oak not to reveal her identity) at Combe House, near Honiton, Devon. I'd expected her to be one part Soviet commissar, two parts traffic warden, and yes, she's slightly formidable, but she's also entertaining company. Like all her colleagues, she has worked in the hotel business and knows it inside out.

It's an interesting case, Combe House. VisitEngland has long rated it three-star, which to me means “perfectly nice, but not the stuff of which dream weekends are made”. See if you agree. It's a Grade I-listed Elizabethan manor house secluded in 3,500 acres of rolling Devon landscape. Inside, the flagstones undulate smoothly with centuries of wear, the ancient oak staircase is just a little tipsy and an atmosphere of potent antiquity hangs over everything — but the welcome is warm, the service is sharp (my bag was in my room way before I was) and it's all in perfect nick. The grand fireplace would accommodate a small family car, the sofas are big and squashy, the food is ambitious and locally sourced.

In short, it's gorgeous. Forget a holiday, you'll want to move in. Three stars is a travesty. Why on earth hasn't it got more?

“It failed on two criteria,” Ms X whispers over tea and ham sandwiches in the lounge. “It doesn't have 24-hour room service, and there's no porter on duty all night.”

That seems a touch petty — it's a little country-house hotel, not the Ritz. I'll bet the guests don't expect 3am club sandwiches, and there's a number to call if they need help during the night. Surely we should judge these places on what they do do, rather than what they don't?

“Yes — and common sense has prevailed,” Ms X says. “Now we're able to give dispensations, so a technicality like that won't hold a hotel back. It just has to cater properly to its market.”

This doesn't mean box-ticking is history. Ms X has 73 areas to grade on our overnight visit — yes, 73 — and, while she's able to give the place a bye on some points, uncompromising standards must be reached on service, food and upkeep to earn a coveted extra star.

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She times drinks service, assesses the provenance of sausages and runs a forensic eye over carpets. If anything isn't spanking clean, properly cooked or perfectly functioning, she'll spot it.

"People accuse us of being picky," she tells me, "but there's logic behind everything we do. Will they help with your luggage? A four-star should — that's important for less able people. Is the bed made daily? Is there a shaving socket in the bathroom?

Can I reach the bedside light? Does the door lock work? And yes, I've had plenty that don't."

There's masses more where this comes from — VisitEngland has it all in a 62-page brochure of teeny type, if you're interested. The thing is, as you may have noticed, all this is rigorous on quality, but not on taste. The wallpaper can't be torn, but there's nothing to stop it being hideous.

"It's not about my personal taste," our inspector says over dinner. "Saying 'I liked...' is banned in our reports. We're objective."

Yes, they are — and that's both the strength and the weakness of VisitEngland's ratings. As an assurance of standards, they are impeccable.

Inspections are held annually, incognito (they even ask for a discount when booking — "Everyone does these days, we'd be rumbled if we didn't"), and are rigorous to the point of obsession. If you want to know that your hotel will be clean, comfortable and well run, they're the gold standard — certainly miles better than trusting to strangers on TripAdvisor.

But they won't tell you some of the things you most want to know. After checking out in the morning, Ms X revealed who she was to a suddenly nervous receptionist, and asked for a spot inspection of the rest of the bedrooms. (She tries to see 75% of each hotel's rooms.) We reached the wonderful Linen Suite, a huge converted washroom with a 6ft circular copper bathtub. We both stared at it thoughtfully. "Plenty of room in there," I said.

"Yes, it's a sex bathroom," she agreed briskly. "But I can't say that in my report, and I don't suppose you can in yours, either." Oh, okay. Moving on...

In the light of my inspector tour, how would I suggest you book hotels from now on? Well, first, look at the VisitEngland star rating, to take care of the fundamentals; and second, read some reviews — from guidebooks, magazines or this section, which has given Combe House more than one glowing write-up — for the juicy details. Because you don't get stars for baths, you know.