



A ROMANTIC WEEKEND

A weekend escape to Saunton Sands Hotel offers more than the sum of its parts – it's the perfect place to nurture a little romance in your relationship, discovered **Gemma Chilton**



Friday

DON'T GET THE wrong idea when I tell you that a recent romantic getaway to the Saunton Sands Hotel with my husband kicked off with a luxurious bit of 'me' time ...

It was Friday and Paul wasn't finishing work until later that evening. Hotel check-in, however, is from 3pm and as luck would have it I was free for the afternoon – free as one of those birds soaring across the windswept Atlantic Ocean... At least, that was the view I enjoyed from the hotel window, when I looked up every now and then from the novel I was reading in the bath with a cup of tea ... Romantic, right?

This start to the weekend also meant I could stretch out on the king-size bed and take time to smell the fresh flowers on the sideboard. By the time I answered Paul's knock at the door at 6pm, I was bathed and refreshed and wafting the scent of my favourite perfume – feeling very much the queen of her castle. And he was just in time for a drink.

We made our way downstairs to be greeted by the hum of conversation at the hotel bar and a smiling waitress who took our order – a gin and tonic for me; pint of lager for Paul. Around us, one group was clinking glasses and sharing jokes, while a couple sat over a chessboard, engrossed in a game and sipping glasses of rosé.

Outside the weather had taken a turn – rain lashed against the windows in the evening dark. Settling in on a lounge seat next to the spot where young local musician Milli Taylor was setting up to provide the evening's entertainment, we sipped our drinks, snacked on olives, chatted about the week and happily people-watched. Eventually, Milli's acoustic guitar and Eva Cassidy-inspired vocals floated through the lofty space and followed us into the adjacent restaurant, providing the soundtrack to our evening meal.

The restaurant has been refurbished in the last few months in homage to its 1920s origins – and to great effect. Crystal chandeliers hang grandly from the ceilings, while panelled deco mirrors fan out along the north wall – reflecting by day the view over Saunton Beach, by night, the twinkle of the candle-lit restaurant.

A hefty wine list was presented by the enthusiastic sommelier who told us tales from Australia to South America and France. On his advice we selected a Chilean merlot to see us comfortably through our three-course dinner.

Saturday

THE FOLLOWING MORNING we swept open the curtains to greet the wild, untouched beauty of Saunton Beach. It was still windy, but bands of sunshine peeked through gaps in the cloud cover.

After trying and failing to exercise sophisticated restraint at the breakfast buffet, we made our way down to the beach to walk it off and enjoy what we'd really come for – crisp salty air and an endless horizon.

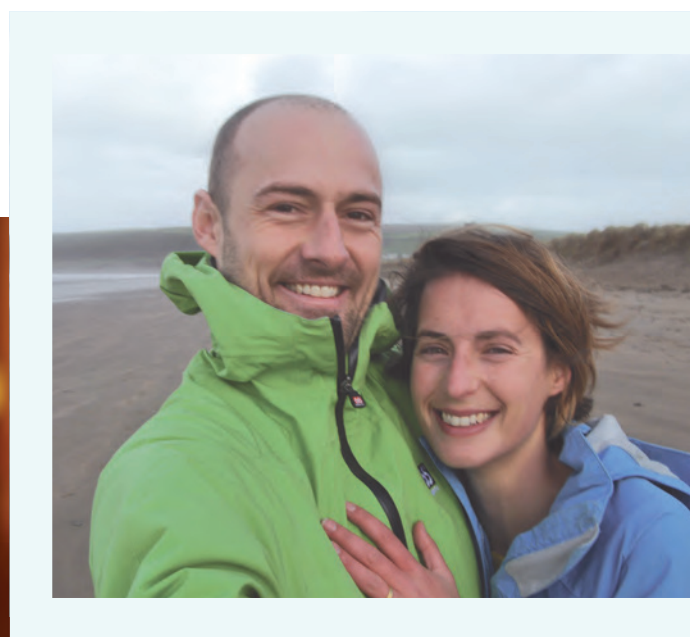
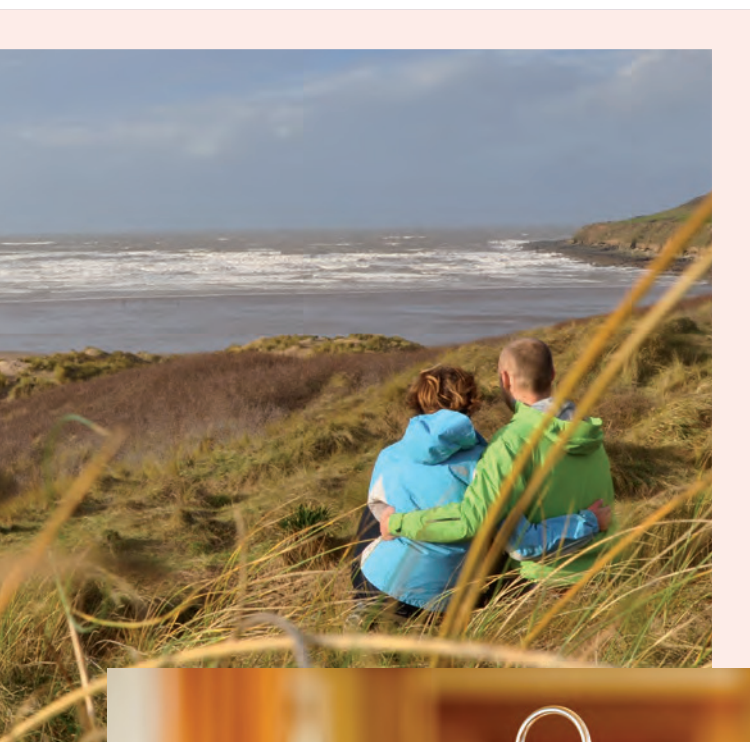
As our weekend getaway took place during a quieter time of year, outside school holidays, Saunton Beach almost felt like our own personal playground. The wind in our ears had that uncanny effect of making you want to shout out – to lose your voice into the vast open space that's become a rare, precious commodity these days. Maybe it was all the coffee we drank with breakfast, but we soon became a little delirious with it all, laughing hysterically as we leaped from the dunes and dared the wind to blow us away into infinity.

Pink cheeked and wind-swept, we arrived back at the hotel after midday. In lieu of lunch, we popped into the Terrace Lounge and booked in afternoon tea for two. In the mean time, we returned to a freshly made up room to relax, read our books or simply gaze out at the view.

Our stomachs were grumbling by the time we emerged for afternoon tea – which was just as well. This is a decadence worth saving room for. In the sunny daytime atmosphere of the Terrace Lounge we perused the tea list and made our selection – then barely stifled our *ohs* and *ahs* as the smiling waiter delivered a tray of dainty assorted sandwiches alongside freshly baked scones (with proper clotted cream and strawberry jam) – followed by a slice of cake of our choosing, and then yet more pastries and sweets.

There was only one sensible way to follow all that cake, which was a trip to the heated indoor pool – but not before a game of table tennis, obviously. While Paul is a dedicated fan of ping pong, I fear I may not have been the most worthy opponent. And so, it wasn't long before we quit that and waded into the pool – royal blue under an enormous skylight that was dimming as the day turned to dusk.

Next it was time to wash away the chlorine in a hot shower and pad around our room in our dressing gowns and slippers. We even cracked open a couple of beers from the mini bar, linked my iPod to the room's clever Bluetooth speaker set-up, and pulled out a deck of cards for a round of Gin Rummy – a game to which we formed a bit of an addiction during a long camping trip last summer.



At about 8pm we headed down to the hotel restaurant again – we weren't done with that menu yet. Paul had been jealous of my starter the previous night of whisky-cured Plaistow trout and insisted on his own serving, while this time I tried the Vulscombe goat's cheese 'Waldorf'-style – with apple gel, walnuts and truffle honey. For the main I dug into an Exmoor venison loin (pork fillet for Paul). And yes, we even managed to fit in dessert.

With the end of the weekend creeping into our consciousness, we raised a toast to more weekends away (and to that diet starting next week).

Seamless service saw us through the evening in style, and we felt a world away from having to return to work on Monday.



'One group was clinking glasses and sharing jokes, while a couple sat over a chessboard, engrossed in a game and sipping glasses of rosé.'

Sunday

BETTER TO HAVE loved and lost, than never to have loved at all – or so they say, and we felt a little sad as we checked out the next day.

As our pots of fresh coffee were delivered, I sensed we were unconsciously lingering over breakfast, but all good things must come to an end so we reluctantly left to make our way down onto the sand one last time. There's something about fresh sea air that feels like it could cure any ailment of the body or soul – including Monday-itis.

Losing all sense of time, we wandered along the beach – our only company a couple of other walkers and their leaping, happy dogs. Behind us stretched two pairs of footsteps, side-by-side in the sand.

MEET THE TEAM



Marcio Marques De Menezes

HOTEL BAR SUPERVISOR

What do you do?

I make sure everything is running smoothly at the bar – that the customers are enjoying themselves and staff are on the ball.

I also make cocktails and coffees, and I was previously a wine waiter, so I can help people choose from our list of wines.

What is your speciality?

I make the best mojitos in North Devon!

Best part about working at Sauntons

The view is amazing, it always makes me happy. But the best part is receiving positive feedback from happy customers and getting to know the regulars.