

FIONA DUNCAN



Our hotel guide
in the UK and

MONTPELLIER CHAPTER, CHELTENHAM

I don't often get all anticipatory about the opening of a new hotel, but I did about this one. That's because I recently stayed in another new place - Upper House in Hong Kong - operated by the same owners and was bowled over. Upper House has an equally successful sister hotel in Beijing, Opposite House. Both belong to Swire, owners of Cathay Pacific among much else, whose foray into hotels has now extended to Britain, kicking off here in Cheltenham.

Further branches of their Chapter brand are due to open in Exeter and Bristol. With their key component of affordable contemporary luxury, they are poised to become, if you follow me, the *Hotels du Vin de nos jours*.

The exceptional interior design of Upper House takes you on a mood-changing journey; the specially commissioned art is beautiful, the rooms sensual, the food in the animated top-floor restaurant delicious and the service Asian-impeccable, something that no British hotel can replicate.

Swire, I concluded, are creating hotels with attitude and integrity. If I can't go back to Hong Kong, at least I can go to Gloucestershire for another dose of their medicine. Diluted, of course.

But though Upper House is fearsomely expensive and Montpellier Chapter deliberately affordable, there are similarities in the calm, Zen-like approach to the design: specially commissioned art, paperless check-in (weird: staff hang around a giant nut topped by a portable computer), room information on iPod touch, huge downloadable film and music library, complimentary minibar.

A book-lined sitting room leads to a deliciously pretty Victorian conservatory, and an elegant glass-walled atrium surrounding a courtyard hides the 61 bedrooms.

The handsome 1847 building has been a hotel for many years. Existing bedrooms have been refurbished with a sober palette, with slate-grey bathrooms that left me unmoved - "luxury Novotel", I found myself thinking, waspishly.

More alluring are the 16 newbuild, open-plan Crescent rooms, all blonde wood, pale stone and creamy curtains to divide bed from bath, though passing through the bathing area first gives the odd impression of living in a bathroom with a bed in it, rather than the other way around.

And once in the bath, you have to



be a performing monkey to reach the infuriatingly bolted-on shampoo and gel.

But in general, my Crescent room was much more reminiscent of Upper House in its calm and comfort, and good value for the standard and extras.

There's commitment at every turn here and if they add some bustle and soul, Montpellier Chapter will be very good.

That admirable chef, Simon Hopkinson, has had a hand in the simple, effective menu, though probably not in the decision to display the wine list on an iPad (guys, *Lebanon* isn't spelt like that and nor is *Chili*).

We liked the open-to-view

HOW IT RATES

ROOMS ★★★★★

Some lacking character; all superbly equipped; I prefer Crescent rooms

SERVICE ★★★★★

Staff are a bit green but go the extra mile

CHARACTER ★★★★★

Cool, intelligent design but a bit soulless - will surely improve with time

FOOD & DRINK ★★★★★

Simple, effective menu, executed with care; excellent breakfast

VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★

Cutting edge luxuries; standards high, prices not

kitchen, though the dining room felt a tad institutional ("a bit blank and draughty" commented my son, Alexander, "but don't put that, because I really like this hotel").

I like it too, despite certain reservations, and I think that the cities to be graced by Swire's Chapter Hotels are lucky. Montpellier is not the Upper House, but it's a highly polished addition to Britain's stock of urban places to stay.

● Bayshill Road, Montpellier (01242 527788; www.chapterhotels.com). Doubles from £140 per night, including breakfast. Adapted rooms for guests with disabilities