

By Paul Breeden

ONCE upon a time we had Proper Holidays. We all went to the seaside – a proper resort such as Weymouth or Skegness or St Ives.

There we could be assured of chips and ice cream and beer, sticky rock and sand-filled sandwiches and all the other ingredients of a real English vacation.

We only went once a year, so we were determined to have a good time – which was just as well considering the places we had to stay. The traditional seaside hotel or B&B was run for the benefit not of the guests but the owner who was nevertheless in a perpetual grump.

Inmates were served only food which was greasy or boiled and were kicked out after breakfast, forbidden to return until the next ration was due.

The cartoonist Giles was the best chronicler of the breed. His harridans posted rules headed Achtung! and No Singing and they glared at the whimpering tots who were supposed to be having A Wonderful Time.

All that's changed now, of course. We all go abroad for our hols and Giles and his harridans are gone. Yet some habits die hard. It is only a few years since a Scottish B&B commandant at first refused to give us a key because we wanted to stay out late at a wedding reception.

Followed their hearts

And I well remember the landlady, who when I remarked on the splendour of her view across Weymouth Bay said she didn't know, she didn't get the chance to look at it much.

Which brings us to St Ives. From where, after a weekend at the Primrose Valley hotel, I can report that I think at last the seaside holiday has grown up.

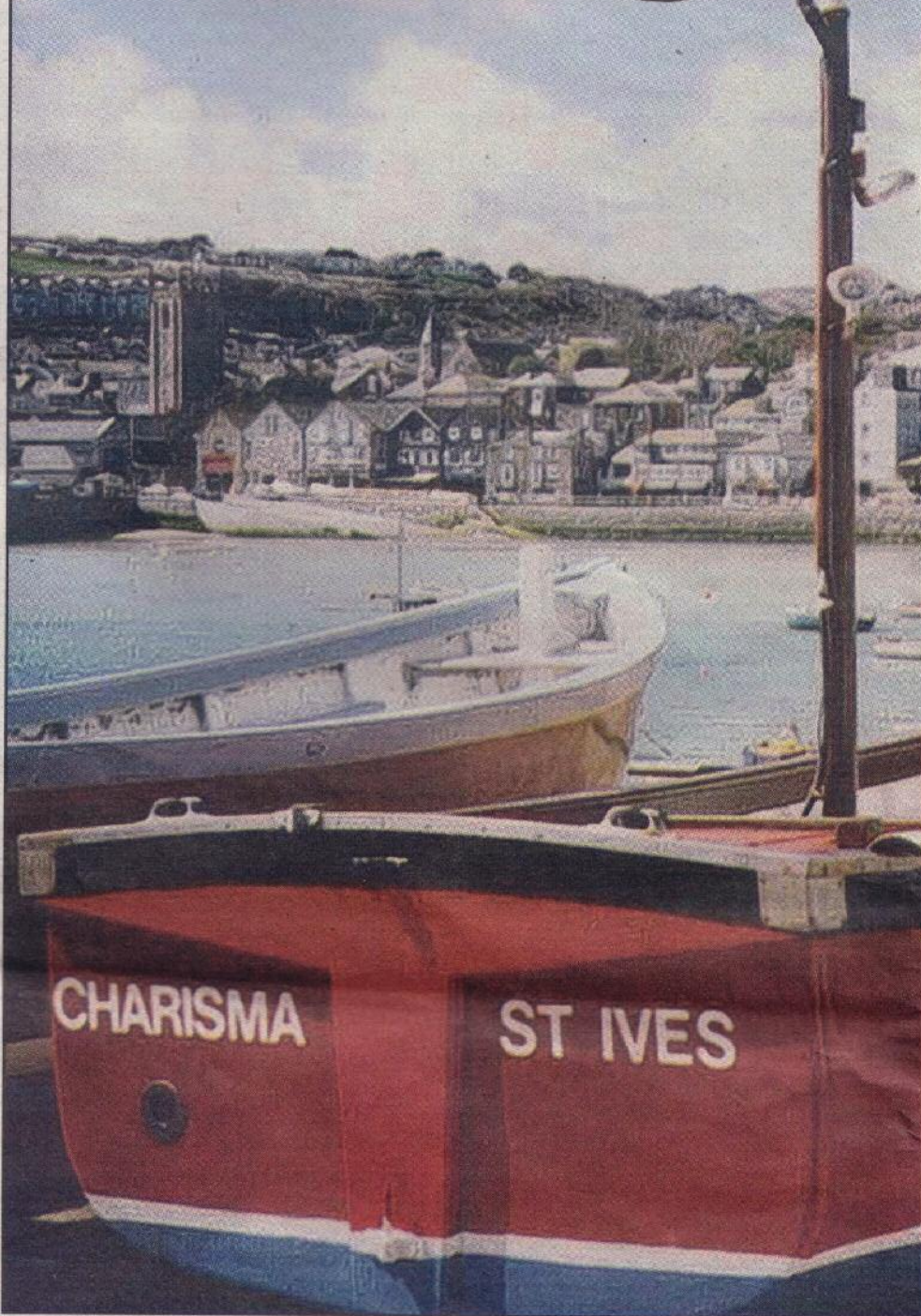
Andrew and Sue Biss have followed their hearts rather than a set of rules in bringing their Edwardian hotel into the 21st century. Once, no doubt, it was the scene of some Proper Holidays with everything Properly Boiled. Now, not only have the Bisses brought the food and the decor up to the best of modern standards, but the welcome has been upgraded, too.

If you seriously prefer children to be neither seen nor heard, perhaps you should stay away from Primrose Valley. But for us one of the charms of the place was the big open-plan lounge and dining room where there is plenty of room for toys to be rolled and adults to relax.

Here, the boards are bare and the furniture is leather and expensive, but there are no signs saying Don't Touch.

All in all the welcome is practically Mediterranean – and if the climate outside doesn't quite match, well St

Valley



Ives has been brought up to date in other ways.

The Tate is the most obvious example – too obvious to many locals. From some angles its jutting brutalism suggests an overlarge bingo hall among the holiday flats, but close up the rotunda entrance is dramatic and surprisingly sympathetic. Inside – and this comes from someone who would rather see Damien Hirst pickle himself than a shark – you're unlikely not to find something that draws you in. For me it was the elegant slate and polished brass of abstract sculptor Denis Mitchell.

On the seafront, the priciest restaurants signify superiority by drop-

ping the capital letters: 'alba' is the top seafood venue while 'onshore' has a national award for its pizzas. We were quite happy at tourist haunt Huers – monkfish tails for me, sumptuous fish pie for my other half.

But don't ignore humbly named Porthminster Cafe. This former beach tea shop could well be the best restaurant in the county. At £35 a head perhaps it should be, but I couldn't fault my pan-fried sea bass with smoked eel, nor my partner her salmon with steamed prawns and lemon verbena.

Back to Primrose Valley where nothing typifies the owners' approach more than their choice not to

of dreams



serve evening meals off season because they want to concentrate on fresh local produce.

Thus I can't report fully on the cuisine, though if it's anything like the 50-strong wine list it'll be top notch. Breakfasts, though, are divine.

Thumbs up, too, to the voluntary £1-a-room daily donation to the Marine Conservation Society, which does such good work fighting to preserve our seaside environment. Primrose Valley is the first hotel to come up with this bright idea and so far it's gone down very well with guests.

Expect some hi-faluting quango to copy the scheme soon.

TRAVEL FILE

■ For more information about St Ives contact the Cornwall Tourist Board: 01872 322900; Fax: 01872 322895; or go to the website at www.cornwalltouristboard.co.uk

■ Tate St Ives: Porthmeor Beach, St Ives TR26 1TG; 01736 796226; www.tate.org.uk/stives

■ Huers restaurant, Wharf

Road, St Ives; 01736 797999; www.thefoodplace.co.uk

■ Porthminster Cafe: Porthminster Beach, St Ives; 01736 795352; www.porthminstercafe.co.uk

■ Contact the Marine Conservation Society at Unit 3, Wolf Business Park, Ross-on-Wye, Herefordshire, HR9 5NB; 01989 566017; www.mcsuk.org

Double up here on Cornish comforts

Primrose Valley Hotel, Portminster Beach, St Ives, Cornwall TR26 2ED.
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www.primroseonline.co.uk

TUCKED away in a little suburban valley, this hotel has the best of both worlds – it's in sight of St Ives' picturesque harbour and within walking distance of all the attractions, yet still feels quiet and secluded and it couldn't be closer to the beach without being a sandcastle.

▼ **How do you get there?** From Bristol allow four hours to drive – the M5 and A30 can be grim. Best to download the hotel's directions from the website because the road into Primrose Valley is easily missed. St Ives station is only a short walk away with connections to Bristol, Exeter and Taunton, or fly to nearby Newquay, low-cost with Air Southwest from Bristol from as little as £5 – www.airsouthwest.com. Flights also from Gatwick, Leeds Bradford, Manchester, Dublin and Stansted (Ryanair).

▼ **First impressions:** A breath of fresh air. Open plan but welcoming interior a matter of yards from the beach – "hide and chic" is the motto.

▼ **What are the rooms like?** Some small, but beautifully furnished – exquisite throws and cushions, dramatic bathrooms and a neat tiny night light to guide you to the loo.

▼ **What else can you do?** Modern but comfy cafe bar and separate airy lounge. Family-friendly atmosphere

that's unusual in an English seaside hotel.

▼ **What's on the menu?** Dinners are served only from June to September, but if they're anything like the breakfasts they'll be terrific. The traditional English fry-up has Cornish back bacon and local sausages yet manages not to be too heavy. Gorgeous local goats' cheese on homemade sunflower seed or mixed grain bread/toast is one of many alternatives, or try the homemade marmalade and jam. There is a stunning wine list – sample the local Camel Valley Seyval Blanc, a crisp surprise from Bodmin. Cornish cider is also worth sampling.

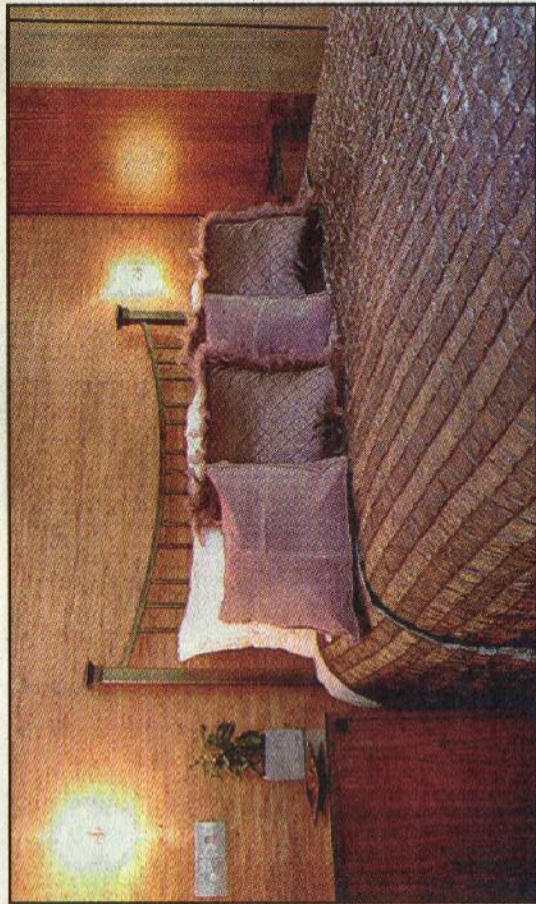
▼ **What else is there to see and do?** St Ives' cobbled streets can consume many hours browsing, supping or boozing. Or dive, surf, swim, ride, cycle, golf or wander the South West Coast Path 30 yards away. You may not have time for the Tate gallery, the Eden project or the Trebah gardens.

▼ **How much does it cost?** Depending on season, double/twin rooms £66-£105, family rooms £80/£157.50. VAT and breakfast inclusive. Also Garden Mania: four nights April-June at £185-£210 pp B&B including entry to Eden Project and Trebah Gardens. And Strive To Dive In St Ives: four nights B&B from £330 including scuba dive course with Padi-accredited instructors.

▼ **The verdict:** Hard to fault. There is still evidence of traditional B&B swirly carpet in some areas, but this will be removed. Shame we couldn't sample the dinner menu.



Restaurant: Dinners served only from June to September, but a stunning wine list



Bedroom: Some are small, but beautifully furnished with exquisite cushions