

Christmas every week



The sight of coaches festooned with Christmas decorations reminds us that it's 'Turkey and Tinsel' time. Stuart Render headed to Hampshire to see how Warner Leisure Hotels and Mill Rythe Holiday Village deliver the traditional ho ho ho

It's 8am on Christmas Day at Sinah Warren Coastal Hotel, one of Warner Leisure Hotel's two properties on Hayling Island in Hampshire.

The decorations are up and 'Team Members' (Warner's name for its staff) are festively dressed to welcome guests to breakfast.

Santa has also popped in, clearly not exhausted by his previous night's travels across the globe. Assisted by a very enthusiastic elf, he's handing out presents to guests, many of whom are entering into the spirit of the occasion, wearing natty Christmas jumpers and red Santa hats.

On each table in the restaurant, guests find a Christmas card, personally written and signed by the waiter who's been looking after them since they arrived the previous day (Christmas Eve).

It's a slick operation, but then again, it should be. At this time of the year 'Christmas' happens every week.

It's 'Turkey and Tinsel' time, that coach tourism-inspired period where, in the world of Warner Leisure Hotels (and the company isn't alone in this of course), Christmas and New Year are brought to life on a four-night, five-day break.

Outside, in the real world, there's no indication it's Christmas. Why should there be? It's the beginning of November.

three floors. However, of the chalets that remain, 34 are used primarily for single travellers.

There's no single supplement for these, although being chalets does mean there's a few minutes' walk to the main building. Warners reminds operators to ensure guests booking this type of accommodation know a walk is involved.

Single travellers wanting to stay in the main building can do so of course, but as these rooms are intended for double occupancy, a supplement is charged.

The rooms in the 'new' block are spacious and well appointed. There is, however, one possible drawback, and it's something that tour planners need to check when booking.

It's a noticeably long walk from reception to the far end of each of the new blocks. On this visit, guests didn't seem to be put off by the distance, and there are some fascinating seafaring and naval prints to admire on the walls of the corridors along the way.

However, if you have passengers less able on their feet, do make sure you request rooms nearer to reception. Warner says it will always look to accommodate such requests, although clearly, getting a booking in early will help with this.

During 2016, Warner is adding balconies to some of the rooms in the main building.

Lakeside and Mill Rythe, a multi-drop routine carried out by many operators bringing groups to Hayling Island.

That's entertainment!

At Sinah Warren, Wi-Fi is only available in the public areas, resulting in the sight of smartly dressed pre-dinner guests gathered in the lounge areas tapping away on their tablets and smart phones.

Pianist and singer, Jack Cottle, provides the pre-dinner entertainment. Dinner itself, which is available between 6pm and 7.30pm, the early start to allow a full evening's entertainment, takes place in the 500-seat 'Driftwood' restaurant.

My waiter, Sean, who has responsibility for around 20 tables, shows me to my table. Around me are a mix of twos and fours, all on self-drive breaks. Groups are kept together.

I'm travelling alone, so I invite Adrian, the Dunwood Travel coach driver, to join me. Smartly turned out, and with a ready flow of anecdotes, none of which can be printed here, this is his first Turkey and Tinsel of the season. As he says, with a huge smile on his face: "I've got to enjoy Christmas and New Year six more times yet before the real thing!"

The menu choice is extensive, with waiter service for starter and

Christmas" from Adrian as he joins me at the table.

Today I'm joining Adrian and his Dunwood passengers on a day trip to Portsmouth. We pick up at Lakeside and Mill Rythe, where 'Christmas' also appears to be in full swing.

After dropping us in Portsmouth, Adrian takes the coach over to Lucketts Travel in Fareham for a wash and clean.

Most of the coaches are out on day trips. Guests on self-drive packages also get the opportunity to get away for the day. Warner organises day trips to Chichester on the Wednesday and Portsmouth on the Thursday, hiring-in from Lucketts Travel.

Guests staying at the hotel can take part in many different activities including aqua aerobics in the pool, archery and rifle shooting in the extensive grounds, or dancing and singing in the Pavilion.

For those that simply want to chill, there are an assortment of lounge areas, from conservatory-style to traditional.

Lunch, which isn't included in packages to give guests the choice of what they do, is served in the Spinnaker Lounge, a contemporary cafe area.

The Warner message is clear – you can do as much or as little as you want. It seems to be a popular message.

Christmas dinner brings crackers to pull and silly hats to wear.



'Christmas' began at Sinah Warren...



where contemporary rooms...



and a leafy setting...



and some 'snow'...



delivered an enjoyable festive break...



in early November!

Monday – Christmas Eve

But let's go back a day. It's 'Christmas Eve', and the Warner team is hard at work getting Sinah Warren ready to welcome its first 'Turkey and Tinsel' break of the year.

Sinah Warren is one of Warner's 13 hotels and villages dotted around the UK, from Nidd Hall Hotel in North Yorkshire, to Norton Grange Coastal Village and Bembridge Coast Hotel on the Isle of Wight.

Warner Leisure Hotels is owned by Bourne Leisure, the Warner brand originating in the 1920s when Captain Harry Warner started developing what were then called holiday camps on the island.

You probably know the Warner offer: adults only; quality accommodation and food, a raft of daytime activities; and quality evening entertainment.

Sinah Warren, which looks out over Langstone Harbour in the bottom south west corner of Hayling Island, was originally a 15th century health farm believed to have been run by monks. The word Sinah is believed to have come either from the name of a herb that could cure a wide range of ailments, or from the name of a breed of long-tailed rabbit. The latter might explain the use of the word warren.

The hotel has 280 rooms, and, according to the AA sign in reception, is classed as a three-star property. To many, this is a misleading classification as the overall impression is more of a four-star hotel.

Most of the original chalets that used to fill the grounds were demolished in 1999, replaced by a modern, 175-room block on

Let it snow

For this first 'Turkey and Tinsel' of the season, Warner is expecting three touring coach groups: West Midlands-based Dunwood Travel; North Wales-based Jones Holidays; and South Yorkshire-based Nova Tours. There's also a private group arriving with Nottinghamshire-based Vallances Coaches.

It's a surprisingly mild November afternoon, and the Warner welcome will be carried out in the dedicated coach arrival and parking area. On rainy days, coaches drop-off outside the Leisure Club next to the main Reception area.

On duty are team members Melanie (pictured on page 25) and Amber, both dressed in Santa outfits.

The first coach arrives, a Jones Holidays-branded Mercedes-Benz Tourismo operated by Alpine Coaches of Llandudno. As Melanie steps aboard, the driver starts unloading luggage and Amber starts checking luggage labels and adding a new label that carries the room number.

Guests are guided towards the main reception building, a short walk away, where 'snow' has appeared around part of the entrance.

Warner's excellent team of friendly porters arrive at the coach with an airport-style luggage trolley to take bags straight to the rooms.

Nova Tours' VDL Bova is next to arrive followed by Dunwood Travel's newest coach, a 15-plate Irizar i6 that was seen at the Group Leisure Travel Show at the NEC in Birmingham in October.

The Dunwood coach has already dropped off passengers at

dessert, and two serving stations for the main buffet. Table service with dishes prepared in the kitchen is also on offer.

Christmas Eve entertainment takes place in the Pavilion, a 500-seat theatre-style venue, just a few steps from the restaurant. This is a 'pillar-free' auditorium in a horseshoe design, with excellent views throughout. Dancing gets the evening under way, with guests who clearly have taken time to practice the moves, demonstrating the rumba, waltz and quickstep.

The hard working 'ents' staff get the capacity audience in the mood with a frenetic delivery of 'The 12 Days of Christmas'. Partridges, Lords-a-leaping, and French hens have never been so entertaining.

The highlight of the evening is the 'Warner Welcome Show', a well-produced song and dance extravaganza.

Tuesday – "Happy Christmas"

Christmas morning, and everyone seems to be joining in the fun. "Happy Christmas", I say to one couple as they join me for the walk to breakfast. "Happy Christmas to you," they reply. It's all great fun, and only slightly surreal.

Even the housekeeping team are joining in, although "good morning" seems to be the welcome of choice. I do wonder if, in their daily mission to housekeep, they actually know that for us, it's Christmas Day.

The aforementioned Father Christmas and his elf, now recognisable as two of last night's ents crew, CJ and Abi, offer a cheery welcome to breakfast. I receive a "ho ho ho, merry

Adjoining to the Pavilion, there's time for dancing before Christmas night bingo. Warners knows its audience and it's noticeable just how full the auditorium is for this coach tourism staple!

The star 'turn' for Christmas night is comedian Paul Adams, who gently warms up the capacity audience, and gently, and then not so gently, puts a slightly drunk guest who insists on heckling firmly in his place. It's been an unusual Christmas!

Wednesday – Boxing Day?

The next morning, only slightly the worse for wear after a late-night drink or two, listening to Fran Kirk, another of the

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multi-talented ents team, singing in the Pavilion bar, I'm unclear where we are in the festive calendar.

"What day is it now please?" I ask Melanie on reception.

"It's Boxing Day today Stuart," she replies. "All day".

Boxing Day it might be, but I have a reservation to keep over the other side of Hayling Island and my visit to Sinah Warren is nearing its end.

In just two days I've found myself getting immersed into the Warner way.

What has been most noticeable is the way that the team works hard to engage with guests. Many team members wear 'WorldHost' badges indicating they've attended the customer service training programme run by workforce development charity People 1st. It's training that shows.

Christmas at Mill Rythe Holiday Village

A few miles away, on the north eastern side of Hayling Island, is Mill Rythe Holiday Village, my destination for the second half of my 'Turkey and Tinsel' break.

The welcoming smiles from the team on 'Guest Services' make me feel at home. But there's a burning question to be answered.

"What day is it here?" I ask, hoping the question doesn't make it

million pound loss.

"We began to bring the site back to its former glory, refurbishing the chalets and all the facilities. Last year we made a profit of around a million pounds, with every penny being reinvested to support the development of Mill Rythe.

"What's amazed us is the number of customers who have remained loyal. They love this place. They tell us they're so pleased that we've brought Mill Rythe back to life."

Cathy explains the move to engage more with coach tour operators.

"It's important for us that coach tour operators come and see what we have to offer," she says. "We can offer full or half board. We listen to what operators and customers tell us, making sure that we're really delivering exceptional value for money. Our restaurant was fully refurbished at the start of 2015, and we're updating and refreshing many of our chalets. On top of that we can now sell tickets to a number of local attractions, including Portsmouth Historic Dockyard. This helps tour operators to include added value in their packages."

There are 286 rooms at Mill Rythe, which caters for between 450 and 500 guests. Most of the rooms are chalets which come in different styles and grades, from Standard through

This chalet has clearly benefited from a full refurbishment and the bright, modern bathroom, complete with walk-in shower and motion-sensor lighting rivals many higher quality hotels.

Getting from your chalet to the restaurant, Ballroom and other facilities requires a relatively short walk along well-lit paths. Being early November the weather is changeable, but guests seem well prepared with brollies to hand.

Dinner is served from 6pm to 7pm. My waitress, Mafalda, who hails from Portugal, welcomes me to my table and explains the process.

"Have a look through the menu," she says. "I will bring you your starter and your dessert. You can either go to the buffet for your main course, or I can bring you what you want."

The option of staying in your seat clearly goes down well with guests who don't want to queue for their main course.

Always the entertainer

Over dinner, there's an opportunity to look through the entertainment schedule – and it looks as though I've missed some treats.

On 'Christmas Eve' the resident show cast and house band presented two shows, a *Christmas Spectacular* and *A Christmas*

Bill and Margaret Phillips, from Wolverhampton, who have been coming to the holiday village for the last three years, say that the quality of the entertainment is hard to beat.

"The team put on some fantastic shows," says Bill. "The food is good and there's plenty of it. It's a friendly place, full of friendly staff. It's also good value for money. It's good to see the chalets being refurbished.

"We've stayed at other holiday parks and this one knocks spots off them."

Let the show begin

On a Turkey and Tinsel break, New Year's Eve is traditionally the final night and the entertainment tonight has been billed as the highlight of the week. The hard-working resident show cast, together with resident band Jetset, will present *The Greatest Musicals of All Time*, featuring shows from the West End and Broadway.

As the lights come up on the stage, and the audience goes quiet, it's clear that we're in for something rather special – after all, there's a large glass chandelier laying across the stage. How can the show go on?

The cast arrive from the rear of the Ballroom, and start to re-



At Mill Rythe Holiday Village...



contemporary chalets...



in another leafy setting...



and a hard-working entertainments team...



brought this 'Turkey and Tinsel' experience...



to a memorable end

look as though I'm losing my marbles.

"It's Boxing Day today Sir," comes the reply. It all sounds rather familiar.

The Mill Rythe site has been a holiday village for more than 70 years, owned at various times by Captain Harry Warner, who originated the Warner brand, Pontins, Haven, and Renowned Holidays.

I discover that Mill Rythe was the location for many of the scenes for the BBC sit-com *Hi-de-Hi!*

In 2010, Mill Rythe went into administration and was bought by Hemel Hempstead-based Away Resorts, a company established in 2008 that now owns three other holiday villages: Whitecliff Bay on the Isle of Wight; Tattershall Lakes in Lincolnshire; and Barmouth Bay in North Wales.

Engaging with operators

I'm meeting Cathy Murphy, Head of Sales, and someone who's becoming an increasingly familiar face at trade shows as the company moves to engage more with coach tour operators.

Over a welcome cup of coffee in the lounge area, the centerpiece of which is an enormous snowman that's been specially designed for the company, Cathy explains why Mill Rythe is special.

"This place has quite a history," she says.

"We have older guests coming to stay who tell us they remember coming here as children. When we acquired the site in 2010 it had been run down and was running at around a half a

to Ambassador. Groups will usually be kept in the same area of the village. All the Standard rooms are being refreshed and refurbished.

Arriving part way through this particular 'Turkey and Tinsel' break means I've not been able to witness the Mill Rythe 'welcome'. Cathy explains what happens.

"Coaches drop-off by our main reception," she says. "We meet and greet with mince pies, roasted chestnuts and mulled wine. Groups are taken into the Ballroom while their luggage is taken to their rooms.

"We can take up to six or seven coaches at peak times, but four or five is typical. This week we have groups from Isle of Wight-based The Holiday Shop, Doncaster-based Wilfreda Beehive, and Dunwood Travel."

Contemporary design

For many tour planners, the very idea of staying in a chalet may be enough to put them off using somewhere like Mill Rythe. *Hi-de-Hi!* has a lot to answer for!

However, arriving at my own chalet and I'm pleasantly surprised. It's a modern, contemporary and relatively spacious room. French windows lead you from the walkways into the room. Most hotel rooms fail to provide a peg upon which to hang your wet coat. Not so here where two sets of five pegs provide more than enough for your needs.

A full length wardrobe with metal coat hangers provides ample storage space.

Carol. On Christmas night, guests were taken back to the 1940s with classic from the Andrews Sisters, and a tribute act to Frankie Valli.

Tonight, the star turn is Bobby Crush, who readers of a certain age may recall as being the fresh-faced pianist who won the TV talent show *Opportunity Knocks* in 1972. Now, some 43 years later, he's still a showman, entertaining the capacity audience with music and anecdotes.

Mill Rythe attracts a good mix of entertainers, including Showaddywaddy, Boney M and Joe Longthorne.

Thursday – New Year's Eve

After a good night's sleep, I awake to New Year's Eve. How time flies on a Turkey and Tinsel break.

After a hearty breakfast (available from 8am to 9am), and once again served to the table by Mafalda, there are opportunities to take part in a range of activities.

However, Cathy and I are off to Portsmouth to get up to date on developments at the Emirates Spinnaker Tower and the Mary Rose Museum at the Historic Dockyard.

Returning to Mill Rythe in the late afternoon there's time to have a walk around the site. The location, alongside Chichester Harbour is certainly picturesque, and the outdoor swimming pool, the scene of poolside parties in the summer, is clearly a major attraction.

Talking to a few guests the attraction of Mill Rythe becomes clear.

enact the opening scenes from *The Phantom of the Opera*.

The chandelier rises into the air. The cast then take us through many shows, including *Chicago*, *Little Shop of Horrors*, *Hair*, *Jesus Christ Superstar* and, of course, *Les Miserables*. It's a tour-de-force and the performances are quite superb. Watch out for Amanda Poyner, surely a star in the making.

It's a fitting end to a week of festivities, but there's one final flourish.

At 10.45pm, on Thursday 5 November, a countdown sees in the new year. Guests and cast gather on the dance floor for *Auld Lang Syne*.

Happy New Year!

COACH MONTHLY SAYS

At first glance, Warner Leisure Hotels and Mill Rythe Holiday Village offer two quite distinct propositions. But there's something that both operators share – a commitment to offer good food and accommodation, superb entertainment, and exceptional value for money.

The 'Turkey and Tinsel' product works well for tour operators and hoteliers, and on this visit to Hayling Island, was delivered to perfection. If you're a tour operator you're going to know whether Sinah Warren or Mill Rythe is right for your customers.

Based on one week in November, whichever destination you choose, you can be confident your customers are going to have a most enjoyable break.