



Outside Barnsdale Lodge

A touch of canine COMFORT

Barnsdale Lodge offers a warm welcome for humans and dogs alike, as **Hannah Gray** found out.



For four years, until March last year, my partner and I had lived quite peaceful lives together.

There was just the two of us at home and we came and went as we pleased.

Our house only needed a weekly clean, and when it was raining and cold we could barricade ourselves away from the awful weather.

Then, almost out of nowhere, we decided there was a dog-shaped hole in our lives, and so along came McKenzie, a beautiful, floppy-eared mutt.

The peace was replaced by his barking and the funny grunting noise he makes when he's chasing a toy.

Our social lives are now restricted as we have to make sure we don't leave him alone for too long, and our lovely laminate flooring is always filthy from his mucky paws.

And now, when it's chucking it down, we're

among the mad few outside battling the elements because the pooch needs a walk.

But, despite all of this, we are smitten.

McKenzie is, in my unbiased opinion, the cutest little boy in canine history.

We talk about him all the time, and bore our friends and family rigid with tales of his 'hilarious' escapades.

When we went on our honeymoon last October – and yes, I am suitably embarrassed to admit this – we missed him.

I had resigned myself to the fact that we'd have to give up holidays in hotels because we hate the thought of being apart from him so much.

If he can't go, then we won't go, has become our motto.

So when we heard about a hotel where our little man would be welcome, we packed our bag (and McKenzie's too, as dogs come with

nearly as much stuff as children, it turns out) and were on the A1 in a flash.

It's important to stress that Barnsdale Lodge is not a hotel solely for dog owners or even dog lovers – it's just a hotel which welcomes well-trained pooches.

On average, one dog a fortnight stays at the hotel and when we visited there were lots of guests without dogs.

You are not likely to be asked to leave if you can't name your favourite breed within 10 seconds and you are perfectly entitled to ignore any dogs you many encounter on your stay.

Even if you actively dislike dogs, Barnsdale Lodge is a great venue for a short break or even just a special meal out, because it is a fantastic hotel and restaurant, with cosy rooms, wonderful food and a beautiful setting.

That said, the welcome they give dog owners is something very special indeed.

Barnsdale Lodge makes you feel like it's absolutely fine to be bonkers about a species of animal that classes chasing its own tail as entertainment.

From the very top of the company down, dogs are adored. There are portraits and photographs of owner Thomas Noel's beautiful black Labrador Niggles around the hotel and when we arrived, managing director Ed Burrows' dogs Maisie and Coco were hanging out behind reception.

Barnsdale Lodge charges an extra £10 for a dog to stay, and canine guests are allowed in all public areas except the dining room.

Our particular concern when taking McKenzie to the hotel was how well he'd get on being left in our room while we went off to eat.

He's not by nature a destructive animal but he's still not very old, and does sometimes get alarmed in new places.

What set our minds at ease was that staff at Barnsdale Lodge are more than happy to set up a table in the bar or lounge area if you can't leave the dog in the room (or at home if you're a local), so there would always have been that option if we were too worried.

As it turns out McKenzie was so tired after a walk in the rain that he was perfectly fine to be left while we had dinner, and as much as we love him, it was nice to get dressed up and not be covered in dog hair for a little while.

The following morning, however, we did have to ask for a table in the lounge for breakfast as he was hyperactive and noisy and we were worried about him disturbing other guests.

The staff made us feel like this was no bother at all and McKenzie watched the world go by while we ate the delicious breakfast.

One of the things I particularly liked about Barnsdale Lodge is that being dog-friendly is about more than opening the hotel up to a new market.

Ed Burrows, the managing director, firmly believes that dogs help make for a good atmosphere, a sentiment I thoroughly endorse.

"A lot of people have their own dogs at home and it gives the hotel a real homely atmosphere so that even if they haven't got a dog with them, guests might like to interact with one," he said.

With that in mind, Barnsdale Lodge does not simply allow you to take your dog, it does everything it can to make your pooch welcome.

McKenzie was given a complimentary dog bed for his stay, which he was very taken with.

The next time he visits, however, he will be able to rest his weary legs on a bed covered in material designed by fancy fabric designer Emily Bond, as the hotel is in the process of upgrading its canine comfort.



Barnsdale bedroom



Rutland Water



McKenzie



Conservatory at Barnsdale

When the new beds come in, dogs will also get a little welcome pack with treats and other goodies, including dog waste bags as there is, of course, a downside to dog ownership.

Ed Burrows has recently overseen the creation of a short woodland walk where dogs are welcome to run about off the lead, meaning that for that first leg stretch of the morning, you don't even have to leave the grounds.

Because dogs and their owners are shown such affection, Ed believes this is returned by the guests themselves.

"I am very impressed with how people who come to the hotel with dogs do respect the environment they're in," he said.

I really don't think we could have wished for a better place for our first hotel trip with our dog.

At first it felt slightly strange to be taking McKenzie into a bar because as a dog owner, you are generally relegated to the picnic benches outside a pub or restaurant.

But because the staff were so welcoming and relaxed about McKenzie, we soon got into that state of mind as well.

After just a few minutes we were sitting happily

in the lounge enjoying afternoon tea with our boy at our feet.

For his part, McKenzie seemed to have a fantastic time. He was made a fuss of by staff and other guests alike, and was in seventh heaven with all the walking we did and the other dogs we met.

His curly tail didn't stop wagging all weekend – the highest accolade you can get from a pooch.

As far as Ed Burrows is concerned, it seems logical that dog owners would want to bring their pet when holidaying somewhere like Rutland, and I thoroughly agree.

"We're in the countryside in Rutland, we've got fantastic grounds here so why put the dog in kennels?" he said.

"Instead of spending all that money on kennels, bring your dog with you and then treat yourself to another bottle of wine."

■ *Prices for one night's bed and breakfast in a double room start at £90, and vary depending on whether you stay in high or low season and what day of the week you stay. The restaurant is open to non-residents. For more information, visit www.barnsdalelodge.co.uk or call 01572 724678.*

WALKS NEAR BARNSDALE LODGE

Whether you're with pooch or without, there are lots of walks close to Barnsdale Lodge that will get you out in the fresh air.

Rutland Water is the obvious one, as it is only a quick stroll from the hotel to get to the shore.

Hambleton Peninsular juts out into Rutland Water and is worth a visit in its own right, and boasts the added attraction of the Finchs Arms, a 17th century country inn.

For more information on Rutland Water, visit www.anglianwater.co.uk

Just a few minutes away from Barnsdale Lodge is Exton Park, a large country estate with access available through footpaths and bridleways.

The countryside is enjoyable to walk through, but the highlight is Fort Henry, a mock-Gothic fishing folly built in 1788, which sits on the shore of one of two lakes.

■ For more information, visit <http://home.btconnect.com/extonpark>