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Colorado class: Take a gondola in Aspen

WHEN Jackson Hole's cable-car was laid to rest a couple of years ago, it looked like no new lift would be built to the top of Rendezvous Mountain. Now a new tram opens this season. Stay at the base in **Hotel Terra**, a condo-hotel new last winter and run on sustainable green principles. From £1,020pp. **Ski Dream** (0845 277 3333, www.skidream.com).

WHISTLER, host for most of the ski events at the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympics, sees the opening of the 4.4km Peak-to-Peak gondola. It cost CDN\$52 million to build and is the first on-mountain link between Whistler and Blackcomb.

Stay at new boutique hotel **Nita Lake Lodge** at Whistler Mountain Creekside. Rooms have floor-to-ceiling rock fireplaces and heated stone floors. From £1,038pp based on two sharing a studio.

Ski Independence (0845 310 3030, www.ski-i.com).

■ Prices are for seven nights including flights and transfers, unless stated.

■ Felice Hardy is co-author of Hardy's Skiing & Snowboarding Guide 2009 (Cadogan Guides, £15.99) and editor of www.welove2ski.com.

LEARN TO SKI FOR FREE

TO cheer us up in the current economic climate, the **Association of Snow Sports Countries** is launching free skiing lessons for 1,400 would-be skiers (must be 18 or over) heading to Austria, Canada, Switzerland, France, Andorra, Norway, Italy and Finland for a week from 17 or 24 January. Book a trip and total beginners get free tuition, equipment and a ski pass. Inghams (020 8780 7711, www.ingham.co.uk), one

of seven tour operators involved, has seven nights self-catering in Arinsal, Andorra (18 January) from £352pp four sharing, including flights and transfers.

www.freshersskiweek.com.



Lazy days, Kentish-style

Ramsgate is all Regency charm, as you'll find at one splendid harbourside retreat

WEEKEND AWAY
THE ROYAL HARBOUR HOTEL,
RAMSGATE
CLIVE ASLET

THE RE is probably nowhere more agreeable to spend a lazy hour in the south of England than the balcony of the Royal Harbour Hotel, Ramsgate. You look down on the pretty, 18th-century harbour, you watch the departure of the ferry (leaving for Ostend) from the port. With the Sunday papers and a coffee, life holds little better, providing the sun is out. In winter, a real coal fire crackles in the grate of the bedroom behind you. This is an enchanted place: a 20-room hotel that bubbles with warmth and personality. "People don't come to Ramsgate to do a lot," observes the Royal Harbour's bustling owner, James Thomas. Guests might stroll along the golden beach — famous from WP Frith's painting Ramsgate Sands, now in the Royal Collection — to Broadstairs; or pedal off on a bicycle towards Sandwich (there is a nature reserve on Pegwell Bay).

Or they might explore a town mostly built after the Napoleonic Wars, with street names to match: the Royal Harbour Hotel, on the west cliff, stands in Nelson Crescent; the east cliff boasts not only a Wellington Crescent but a street called the Plains of Waterloo.

Even those terraces built after Queen Victoria came to the throne stuck to the Regency vocabulary of bow windows, fanlights and stucco — much to the horror of the Gothic Revivalist, AWN Pugin, whose home, The Grange, has just been restored by the Landmark Trust and is open to the public on Wednesday afternoons. There are other attractions. Canterbury is nearby, or it's only a short hop over the Channel for a good lunch. But in general, it's a place to chill, and the Royal Harbour Hotel has been designed for the purpose.

The front room — you could hardly call this elegantly curious room a lounge — is an inviting space. Plump sofas and solitaire, a log fire and an honesty bar: these would be unbeatable ingredients by themselves. But added to them are individual, even eccentric touches that reflect the owner's personality, making this hotel, even for guests who know it well, a constant surprise and delight.

Boats are a theme. Models of them crop up in windows and out-of-the-way shelves; upstairs, a couple of bookcases have actually been made out of old rowing boats, with the names still painted on the sides. Naturally, there is a nautical air to the decoration — plenty of stripes — and some of the artworks. Did I say artworks? There are paintings everywhere: seascapes, street scenes, landscapes, battles from the days of Empire, a portrait of the Queen. If



Seaside character: above, harbour-view rooms at Ramsgate's Royal Harbour Hotel. Right, boats and books are a recurring theme in the hotel lovingly maintained by owner James Thomas

'Every spare corner has a shelf of books: a glorious mixture of old paperbacks and forgotten novels'

Thomas likes something, it's there. Don't expect a shiny digital sound system: the Supertramp or Frank Sinatra playing of an evening emanates from an old-style gramophone, rotating one of Thomas's vinyl record collection. Guests seem to love it. They keep giving him their old records.

Every spare corner has its shelf of books: a glorious mixture of old paperbacks and forgotten novels. "Some of them disappear," says Thomas, philosophically, "but that's part of it. Guests often leave books as well."

Thomas doesn't believe in putting hotel phones in rooms, which are often charged at exorbitant rates. Instead, there's free wi-fi, and Skype.

A recent addition has been a walled garden, where an olive tree enjoys the Mediterranean temperatures the area



reached in summer. In the hotel basement, independent film producer Elaine Wickham and director Jan Dunn have created an editing suite.

The cinema, complete with red plush seats rescued from the King's Street cinema, can be used by guests to watch DVDs in style.

When I first visited the hotel, I thought it would be enormous — it has that sort of name. It isn't. It occupies a couple of houses in Nelson Crescent, one of Ramsgate's many Regency terraces.

Part of the charm of this seaside town is that it never became quite as grand as it might have hoped, rarely achieving the regularity of the terraces around Regent's Park; Nelson Crescent is a happy muddle of different verandahs and parapets, as though

it has always been making do. Some of the rooms in the Royal Harbour Hotel could best be described as compact, and inevitably those at the back look out over chimneypots rather than sea. But all of them have been given personal touches (hot-water bottles on winter nights) that make up for any snugness in the dimensions.

While the hotel serves breakfast on an epic scale, lunch and dinner (beyond complimentary cheese, pâté and fruit) must be found elsewhere.

No problem: the dawn of a food awakening has begun to shine in Ramsgate. Seek out Age and Sons (in an industrial building that used to be called Page and Sons, until the P dropped off) — it is destined to make a considerable splash with its stylish seasonal cooking. Children can play boules on the nearby boules court, or jump on some ingenious carved-brick sofas around the corner, if they get bored during lunch.

Locals rave about the Siam Kitchen, another new arrival, overlooking the harbour. Ramsgate is a town on the up. No wonder Thomas has plans to expand the Royal Harbour by buying the building next door.

WAY TO GO

The Royal Harbour Hotel (01843 591 514, www.royalharbourhotel.co.uk), Nelson Crescent, Ramsgate. Doubles from £98 B&B.

■ Clive Aslet is editor-at-large of *Country Life*.



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