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for the North-East

JANUARY 2007

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HAPPY NEW YEAR!

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is produced by
The Northern
Echo/
Newsquest
Ltd.,
a Gannett
Company,
Priestgate,
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sharon griffiths

“There are times, however unlikely, when a hat is the only answer

AHAT. I had to get a hat. There are times, however unlikely, when a hat is the only answer. There are very few people for whom I would wear a hat, but I guess the Queen is one. And my only hat – a Wales woolly bobble hat – would, on balance, probably not do.

We had been invited to Buckingham Palace. Well, husband had been invited and the rest of us tagged along as an admiring chorus. And in among all the congratulations on his MBE, almost the first thing people asked me was “Have you got the hat yet?”

And I hadn't.

I had seven years of hats when I was at school. Navy felt in winter, straw boater with ribbons in summer. Detention if you were caught in town without one. The boys from the school next door were particularly good at snatching the boaters and skimming them, ribbons flying, over the high fence and down the hill to the banks of a particularly muddy stream.

It left me as a determined hat-hater.

My mother tried to persuade me otherwise. She once bought me a lovely black velvet job, which I was quite taken with. But when I tried it on for her to admire, she fell about laughing.

So you can see, can't you, why I did not love hats?

Anyway, I didn't need to. Until my late twenties I had long blonde hair that dripped down below my waist. If I had anywhere posh to go, I would spend an afternoon in the hairdresser and have my hair put up with great elaboration. It usually took about three hours and around 60 hair grips, but the results were terrific.

True, I did have a few enormous shapeless straw hats, around which I would tie a few of my collection of multi-coloured scarves and under which I would drift through summer parties. But they weren't what you would really call hats. Not proper, grown-up, serious sort of hats.

But when the Queen calls...

I was in Leeds when I stumbled across a hat shop. They were nice, down-to-earth Yorkshire women. I explained the predicament. No problem, they said, they could soon find me something. Easy peasy.

The first hat looked fun, with lots of felt flowers. When I looked in the mirror, I saw my grandmother. What's more, it was my grandmother when she was going to sell eggs at market. I took that one off pretty quickly.

There were hats like buckets, hats like lampshades, hats like my old school hat. There were berets, cloches, feathery cartwheels and neat sort of brightly coloured trilbies.

None of them did anything for me.

Eventually, one of the nice, down-to-earth Yorkshire women, by now helpless with laughing, said to me, very kindly, “You're not really a hat person are you?” Er no.

So that's when they pointed me in the direction of the fascinators. Fascinators aren't hats. They are token gestures of hats. A bit of ribbon and a few brightly coloured feathers. I thought they could be worn only by leggy young girls at the races in summer. But no, said the nice hat shop lady, still wiping the tears of laughter from her eyes, they can be worn by middle-aged women to the Palace in winter.

We tried a few. And apart from the one that looked like a sherbet fountain growing from my ear, they were a huge success. They were also a) easy to wear b) a lot cheaper than a hat proper.

I bought one. It was bright pink, with a big bow and a few skinny feathers on stalks. I took it home and every now and then I would try it on, practising – to the left, right, far back, forward... On balance, I was quite pleased with it.

Husband said it looked like the very bad beginnings of a bird's nest. Sons tactfully said nothing.

Finally in London, in the taxi on the way to the hotel, one of them sat on the box with the hat in. It didn't help. Then it was a windy day and after spending half an hour in the hotel very carefully arranging the hat this way and that, I ended up just plonking it back on my head while walking up the red carpet in the palace.

But for once I'd got it right, it was absolutely the right thing to wear. About a quarter of the women at the Palace had no hat at all. A quarter had “proper” hats – some of which looked absolutely stunning (and expensive), while other hats looked as though they might have been sitting on the top of the wardrobe since a niece's wedding a few years ago.

But at least half the women there wore little concoctions of ribbon and feathers, so it was the right choice.

Even if by then it was a bit wonky, a bit flat and minus a few feathers, at least I didn't look like my gran on her egg stall 50 years ago.

But do you know what? – after all that effort, the Queen never even said a word about it.

UP AND UNDER

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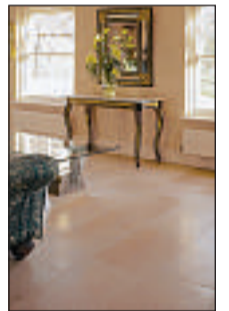


NE window shopping

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NEW LOOK: B&Q's Saturn flueless gas fire, £999. Below: Coral fireplace from Chesney's, £1,169



Being cool's okay, but at this time of year what you really want is to toast your toes. As the winter winds blow outside, GABRIELLE FAGAN looks at what's hot for the home

Hearth's desire

COSY'S not a word much used by interior designers – they prefer to concentrate on cool concepts such as style, design and trends. But at this time of year, when chill winds are swirling around outside, cosy is exactly what we crave.

Satisfy that need with the most enduring focal point – a fire – for instant toast-your-toes comfort and a warm glow that would melt the most fashionably minimalist heart.

Luckily there's no need to sacrifice good looks for practicality. Interior designers such as Kelly Hoppen, Jasper Conran and Jane Churchill have turned their talents to fires and hearths with glowing results.

They and others have transformed them into 'eye candy' and there's a selection to suit every flaming desire with traditional inglenooks right through to sleek wall fires for streamlined uber-urban lofts.

Purists will love a 'real fire' – and don't mind the mess of coal and kindling. Rising fuel prices also mean that wood-burning stoves are booming.

While real fires have a wonderfully seasonal Scandinavian feel about them, most of us prefer easy-to-clean gas or electric-powered fires and there's a growing range for those who want flickering firelight without the soot.

Fire expert Darren McMahon, head of Baxi Heating UK, says: "The conventional fire with classic mouldings is still very popular but it's the state-of-the-art, wall-mounted fires which are capturing the attention of style leaders.

"Electric fires are also really forging ahead partly because gone are the days of glowing or-

ange bars and uninspiring design. Now they're eye-catching in look, are ideal for rooms without a chimney or flue and are easy to install."

Considering the environment and our carbon footprint is key these days so don't forget check out the energy ratings of fires and appliances as well as focusing on their appearance.

And there's no call to be downcast even if you're limited to radiators – just make them a focal point by choosing ones that radiate style as well as heat.

Turn up the heat and follow our guide to the most hearth-warming fires around.

EYE CANDY

The fashion conscious will love ranges offered by companies ranging from B&Q to Baxi. "Landscape wall-mounted fires are a top choice, with black gloss, stainless steel and stone overtaking last year's brass, gold, silver and chrome finishes," McMahon says.

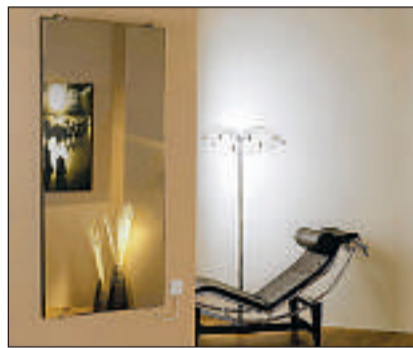
■ B&Q's Saturn flueless gas fire, £999, is an oval shape with a strip of flame. It's a modern look suitable for homes with no chimney or flue.

Black also dominates in fashion and in homes this season and the glossy, sleek Valor Distinction from Baxi Fires, £649, is a hang-on-the-wall flat-screen style electric fire.

HOT & MODERN

■ Next's trendy range includes the Malmo Fireplace, £375, which has an ivory coloured surround, and an oak or maple shelf with the popular pyramid of pebbles. It's suitable for homes without a chimney.





CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: anthracite Tall Focal radiator, £299 from Wickes; Valor Homeflame Dream, £599 from Baxi; the Myson Mirage mirror radiator, from £980; the Cotham solid fuel surround, £299 from B&Q

● ALL FIRED UP – See page 17



Coral in limestone with frond decoration. Invest in fire art from Diligence, whose designers combine cutting-edge technology with breathtaking style. Melt that plastic and get a Chromifocus fire with sliding doors so it can disguise itself as a work of modern art. It's a blistering £9,960, but there are other fires for around £2,000.

Get your hearth's desire by commissioning a fire surround from experts, Templestone Mason. They also have 13 designs in a standard range as well as making bespoke pieces. Prices start from £850.

SUPER STOVES

These have a homely Nordic feel and can be powered by gas or oil – but the eco-friendly choice is wood. As the latter is readily available and well-priced you don't need to be a lumberjack to take this option.

Euroheat's selection sourced from Denmark and Bavaria features traditional and modern styles. They start from around £925. Set a Yuletide scene with a Harmony 23 multi-fuel stove, £1,102, which even has a temperature remote control.

Danish company Morso has multi-fuel and gas stoves in cast iron that balance good looks and practicality. They start from £613 for a Squirrel, up to £2,526 for the Morso 8147, a contemporary stove on a rotatable plinth.

RED HOT RADS

A radiator that pretends to be a wall mirror and can double as a towel rail is just one of the clever designs from Myson. The Mirage starts from £980. The range starts from around £195 for an electric panel radiator and goes up to around £3,000.

Wickes has radiators that make a statement including the chrome Wave from £219 and the striking black anthracite Tall Focal radiator, £299.

HEARTH WARMING

Traditionalists won't need to get their fingers burnt price-wise if they source from B&Q. Its desirable polished metal fire surrounds are inspired by original Victorian fireplaces discovered in reclamation yards. A Cotham solid fuel surround costs £299 and a Rochdale, £249.

A classic gas fire like the Valor Homeflame Dream, £599 from Baxi, is energy efficient and would suit a hearth and traditional surround. It has a regal style fret and curved fascia in brass, chrome or black.

DESIGNER FIRES

Texture, outstanding design and detail are a feature of the fire surrounds designed by Jane Churchill for leading suppliers of period and classic fireplaces, Chesney's. Prices start from £934, rising to £1,169 for the ornate

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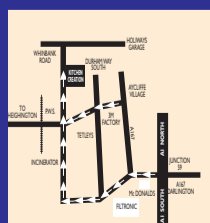
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NE interiors

Don't forget the mummy, honey

Internationally renowned Egyptologist Dr Joann Fletcher shares her North Yorkshire seaside home with her partner, her daughter, a cat called Django... and assorted goddesses and replica mummies. RUTH CAMPBELL takes a peek

DR Joann Fletcher had just moved into her dream home, a romantic converted lookout tower on the Yorkshire coast, when she stumbled across a dead body buried yards from her front door.

She and her father were sitting outside on the grass, drinking tea and taking in the breathtakingly beautiful sea view, when she noticed the outline of a skull emerging from the cliff face just feet away.

Where most people might recoil in horror, Joann, a world-renowned Egyptologist who specialises in analysing the hair and other decorative features of ancient mummies, was thrilled. "I knew it was old, I could tell it was medieval."

Like a scene out of a murder mystery, police arrived and cordoned off the area with yellow incident tape: "I told them I had found a body but it wasn't recent. They must have wondered how I knew. They sealed it off while they investigated."

The body, now in museum storage, turned out to be that of a woman who died in her early twenties about 500 years ago.

To Joann it seemed, almost, like a good omen: "If I had that turn of mind, in some ways it was almost like a housewarming present."

She is aware of other remains, including plague victims and bodies from the Civil Wars, complete with musket balls, in nearby ancient burial grounds. And the local archaeological society would love to dig up her front garden, where they believe more bodies could be uncovered.

"Perhaps, one day. It would be fascinating, right on my doorstep. I wouldn't have far to go to work," she says.

As honorary research fellow at the University of York, as well as consultant Egyptologist for Harrogate museums and arts, Joann's study of human remains takes her all over the world, to Libya, Peru, Chile, Yemen, Ireland and Sardinia as well as Egypt.

But this Barnsley girl's heart re-

mains firmly in Yorkshire. She bought the two-bedroom watch tower apartment in 1999, when she was 32. It was the first home she owned. "I used to come here on holiday and always wanted to live by the sea, it was a pipe dream," she says.

Her mother regularly sent her property pages. "When this came up for sale, there was no picture but I knew the address. I loved the building."

We look out through the huge windows of this large, light and airy flat at stunning, wrap-around views of the sea. "You see things as they happen, from sea mists to fets, storms and tides, it is never dull. Our surroundings are constantly changing."

When she outgrew the two-bedroom property after she and partner Dr Stephen Buckley had a daughter two years ago, they bought the flat above. Should neighbours wish to sell, they would love to extend further.

Stephen, a chemist from Cheshire who is also a key member of the York University Egyptology team, is now as fond of the area as Joann. Although both travel extensively through work, this is where they have put down roots.

"I will always live in Yorkshire," says Joann. "I love it, the people are very down-to-earth and don't muck about. It is a cultural thing, familiar and safe."

The couple met at a lecture Joann gave in London in 1999 while Stephen was researching mummification materials as part of his Phd at Bristol. "I had just moved into this flat. He offered to come up and paint the bathroom. He never went away again."

Their shared passion for Egyptology and history generally is evident throughout their home. Stephen points out his favourite gift from Joann, two original, rare velum scripts dating back to 1660 which she discovered in a junk shop.

There are photographs of them working together on archaeological projects in the Valley of the Kings. Even their daughter, not yet two, knows the difference between a mummy and a "mummy".





MINIMALIST WITH MUMMIES:
Dr Joann Fletcher in her calm white and cream sitting room

"I have a coffin in my office," says Joann, as if it was the most ordinary thing in the world. "She knows this is a mummy, of a different sort."

Joann introduces me to the reproduction, life-size ancient Egyptian figure. It is beautiful, painted gold and red with hieroglyphs. "It is bogus, although the hieroglyphs and the face are good. But it was the hair that did it for me, that is totally accurate."

Coming from a long line of Barnsley hairdressers, Joann is particularly interested in ancient beauty treatments. "I am fascinated by adornment, like piercing and tattoos, their ritual significance and how people through history used them to change how they looked," she says. "Men wore the loudest wigs and most make up, only women had tattoos. It's a complete reversal of what we are used to."

Joann, who has hennaed hair, wears a nose stud and loves kohl make-up, is no stranger to adornment herself. In fact, she confesses to being a bit of a Goth. In her bedroom, she has a collection of crucifixes, next to a stunning set of glass eyeball rings, in all colours.

"I love my eyeball rings. I want to make an eyeball necklace, if I could find a source of glass eyes, I'd have them set in silver." She has even flirted with the idea of having an Egyptian eye tattoo. "I am into eyes and hands and the way people use them to communicate."

In the hallway, she has a rail of men's coats, including one brightly coloured military jacket she bought because it was beautifully made. "I like funereal clothes, tail coats and dinner jackets. Men's coats are better cut."

Her wardrobe is full of exclusively black clothes. "From the age of 15, I have worn only black. I love it. I don't like bright colours on myself." She even owns a black cat, Django, which she rescued as a kitten from an animal centre in 1995.

In the somewhat tweedy, male-dominated world of Egyptology, down-to-earth Joann, whose passion and enthusiasm for her subject are infectious, is clearly a breath of fresh air. Her common touch and sparkling talent for communication – as well as writing articles and books, she has appeared in a number of hugely successful television documentaries – have



helped open Egyptology up to a much wider audience.

She has met some resistance. At University College, London, she worked as a chambermaid and shop assistant to pay her way. "I was a novelty. I encountered my first dose of snobbery, not from staff, but certain individuals. Later, one senior academic told me I'd never get anywhere in this subject if I didn't lose my accent. But why should we conform to stereotypes?"

Her aunt, Joan McMahon, took her to Egypt when she was 15, a dream-come-true for the girl obsessed with mummies from an early age. Her mother, a housewife, and father, a salesman, were keen amateur historians and their home was filled with books.

Continued on page 8 ►



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NE interiors



EGYPT ON SEA: reminders of Joann's line of work fill the otherwise minimalist flat on the North Yorkshire coast

► **Continued from page 7**

"I found pictures of ancient mummies fascinating. My parents were fantastic, they didn't regard my obsession as strange. I remember my mother telling me, when I was six, that I could become an Egyptologist. That was mind-blowing."

The careers advisor at her all girls' school told her to train as a nurse or teacher. "They are great professions but not what I wanted. I kept going on like a cracked record until they said OK."

Her aunt Joan, who died in 1992, fired her enthusiasm. She did the embroidered picture of Tutankhamun which has pride of place in Joann's office. "She was amazing, a massive influence. I dedicated my book, *The Search For Nefertiti*, to her."

A replica of a lioness goddess also looks down from her office window ledge. "She is gorgeous. She was made by Tutankhamun's grandfather, a great pharaoh."

Next to it is a small statue. "It's a shabti figure, the only original thing I have," she says. "There were 365 of these, known as answers, for every day of year, in a tomb. They would do anything the dead person wanted."

But every bit as treasured as these ancient artefacts is a colourful "To the world's greatest mummy" mug, a present from Stephen and her daughter.

Like the rest of the flat, the office is paint-

ed cream. As a contrast to her working life, which focuses so much on vibrant colour and decoration, Joann prefers everything plain and simple at home. The house is immaculately neat. "I am a Virgo, fussy about tidiness," she says.

"When I came here, it was all different colours – bright yellows, oranges and blues – with borders and stencils. I like all white, with cream curtains. I don't do bright colours. Why would you want anything fighting with that view?"

She loves writing here. "I hear the sea and the gulls. To be able to look out to sea is wonderful."

They have recently transformed the basement kitchen from old country pine to modern white with black. A small, rich, red book-lined alcove is the only colourful area in the flat. "These aren't work books, it's supposed to be where we relax but we hardly get the chance."

Their one indulgence is the large, luxurious spa bath in their en-suite, raised two feet so, while they soak, they can look out to sea. "With that view, you might as well."

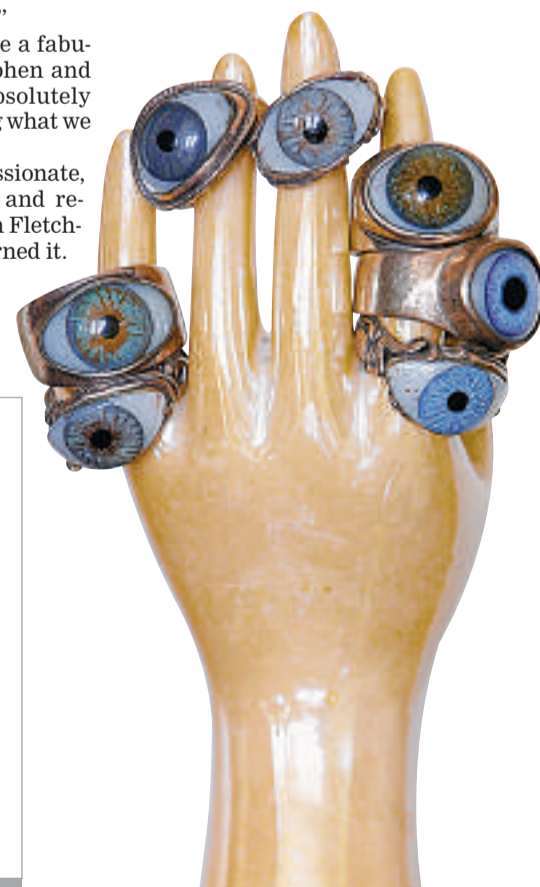
They have replaced all 22 windows in the flat, which didn't even have central heating when they moved in. "We were battling against the elements. After living in cities, I wanted fresh air. But it is so fresh here sometimes it pins you up against the wall."

We move out onto a small balcony to take in the view. "It is so peaceful, a real com-

fort. I couldn't live anywhere else."

Her life seems charmed. "I have a fabulous family. Ending up with Stephen and having our daughter has been absolutely amazing. We have a great life doing what we love."

But anyone who has met the passionate, hard-working, incredibly driven and refreshingly down-to-earth Dr Joann Fletcher would have to agree she has earned it.



I found pictures of ancient mummies fascinating. My parents were fantastic. They didn't regard my fascination as strange



Pictures: RICHARD DOUGHTY



ROOMS WITH A VIEW: from top – the monochrome kitchen; the restful master bedroom; fantastic views of the coastline from the family's home

THE MUST-SEE SHADES THIS SEASON

FOLLOWING its glamorous launch a few months ago, Crown can reveal the top selling shades from its new Fashion For Walls collection. So which colours are now adorning the best-dressed walls in the country?

Dark Elegance has proved the most popular range within the collection with Eveningwear (plum/deep red) coming in as the nation's favourite fashion shade. Tailored (a deep chocolate), from the same range, comes in at third place. Budding interior designers are clearly inspired by the return to grown-up glamour, opting for sexy, intense shades in their home. These bolder colours are perfect for the winter months, adding warmth to any room.

But sales of the Fashion For Walls collection also show that the nation still has a fondness for lighter, more delicate colours. Five of the Flawless Powders shades feature in the top ten, including Purity (white/cream) and Flawless (peachy pink). The Flawless Powders palette is inspired by the trend for nude make-up, layering soft natural tones for a sophisticated and feminine interiors.

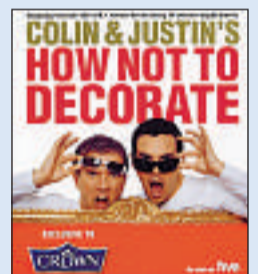
The Fashion For Walls paint collection is comprised of four ranges: Flawless Powders, Soft Originals, Dark Elegance and Playful Moods. Each collection includes a combination of soft, classic colours teamed with more daring tones.



WIN A DECORATING BOOK

TO help you with more decorating problems Crown has teamed up with The Northern Echo to offer 20 copies of Colin and Justin's How Not to Decorate to lucky winners. To stand a chance of winning one, just tell us which Crown Dark Elegance shade was the favourite. Answers, by January 14, on a postcard or the back of an envelope, to Crown Paints

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NE gardening

First she makes the garden beautiful, then she paints it beautifully. BRIGID PRESS meets a woman whose joint passions marry seamlessly together

NATURAL TALENT: Shirley loves painting flowers, but also loves broader subjects. See below



Pretty as a picture

Location: southern outskirts of Middlesbrough
Age of garden: 38 years

Three favourite plants: Rhododendron, poppies, anemones

Tools I can't live without: poker, secateurs and three-pronged devil's fork

Maintenance: daily potter with the help of occasional gardener.

Worst job: pulling up Spanish bluebell bulbs

THERE is something quintessential-ly English about sitting in Shirley Johnston's garden. Time slips serenely away as we gently sip cups of tea and converse about colour, form and shape. Friends, family and neighbours come and go, some joining us on the wooden table by the pond for a brew, others only to swap and share sentences. Shirley is unfazed by all the comings and goings. Hers is a warm and welcoming home, reflected in a large and happy family unit.

Shirley's garden, just like all gardens, has evolved over the many years that she has lived in the small village just on the outskirts of Middlesbrough. It has seen her children come and go (and come and go again) and now provides a playground for her grandchildren, but one main theme has always run through it, and that is art. Shirley has long been an important figure in the local art scene, gaining fame for her paintings and flower arranging skills. Her garden has provided the inspiration for many of her pictures, and supplies her with all the material that she needs for her floral sculptures.

She cites anemones as one of her favourite flowers, not because of their growing habit, their colour or the fact that they provide some of the first cheer early on in the year, but because she enjoys painting the centre stamens, and has a special brush for doing just that. Shirley also likes irises as she has learnt to re-create the

petals on paper with just one swipe of the brush, and the translucent, papery thin flowers of poppies are also a joy to emulate on canvas.

The main border in the garden bursts with just about every colour, shape and texture that you could ever wish to have in an English cottage garden. There are sapphire blue geraniums creating a backcloth for creamy, pale pink roses. The soft form of phlox bubbles out from the centre of a clump of stiff and strident iris. Acid yellow alliums show up vividly against the purple Patty's Plum poppy, and the scattered heads of the rich ruby scabious are easily picked out amongst the densely packed crown of the pale pink thalictricum. Fragrance wafts through the garden from a large yellow-leaved mock orange (philadelphus) bush, and from the yellow butter-balled buddleia.

This living picture is best viewed from the chunky set of wooden chairs that sit next to the pond by the back door. The pond is deep and clear, shaded by water lilies, marsh marigolds, lady's mantle, alpine strawberries and flag iris. Sophie, the cat, likes to lie basking in the sun on the low bench by the pond and watch the huge prehistoric looking dragonfly larva as it hunts down tadpoles and sticklebacks. Shirley means to clean the pond every year, but always relents as it is also home to an active newt colony and her garden is filled with the jewelled colours of dragon damselflies.

Shirley laughs as she tells me that the first ever paid gardeners that she had working in her garden were Peter and Michael Wilkinson. They

were both very young at the time, under five years of age, but came to weed out dandelions, speedwell and groundsel. They must have enjoyed their time in Shirley's garden as they went on to set up one of the areas most renowned landscaping business and she doubts that they would come and work for her two shillings a morning today.





Most of the work in the garden is done by Shirley herself, as she gently potters around during the day. Her husband helps out when something manly needs doing, such as staining or chopping, but he also enjoys trying to scare Shirley by jumping out from behind shrubs and trees (usually with a cup of tea in hand).

A gardener comes in as and when necessary, and Shirley will often work together with them on a project, or on a particular section of the garden. Their next piece of work is to create a seating and barbecue area out of a space that currently houses plants in pots, waiting to get into the ground. When they first moved into the house, the garden was filled with fruit trees. There were 27 of them in all. Slowly, she has had them taken out, or they have succumbed to canker and disease. A handful remain today, most are contorted and twisted, and supported on crutches, but they still bear a good crop every year. The huge vine that used to grow in the conservatory became too large, and suffered badly from mildew. It has now been replaced

by outdoor varieties, accompanied by a healthy passionflower. A delicate mulberry tree, with its large, heart-shaped leaves will soon provide her with branches filled with juicy fruit, but for the moment is still a little bit immature to do so. The tree earns its place through its beauty though.

Foliage for flower arranging is provided by the leathery leaved griselinia, ribbed crocosmia lucifer and long straps of phormiums. Other players are golden cypress, contorted salix and variegated eleagnus. Some of the smaller shrubs, such as a blue spruce, come from other peoples arrangements which have been dismantled after shows, and grown on as cuttings. The larger blue conifer that spreads along the ground at the bottom of the garden, though, was given to Shirley and her husband as a silver

wedding present. She smiles as she tells me that she spent many years trying to get it to grow tall and straight, only to find out that it is the horizontal growing variety.

Shirley has long been an important person in the local art scene, gaining fame for her paintings and her flower arranging skills

Fun, laughter and life are fundamental influences in Shirley's garden. Everything is practical, has a purpose, and is inspirational. A half caught glimpse of a ray of light hitting a petal at an unusual angle might be the motivation for her next painting. A curious colour combination might set off a creative spark whilst searching for ideas for an impending arrangement.

Every plant in the garden is a potential subject for one of Shirley's beautiful paintings. The more beautiful the garden becomes, the more art it inspires.

This is one garden that can truly lay claim to being as pretty as a picture.



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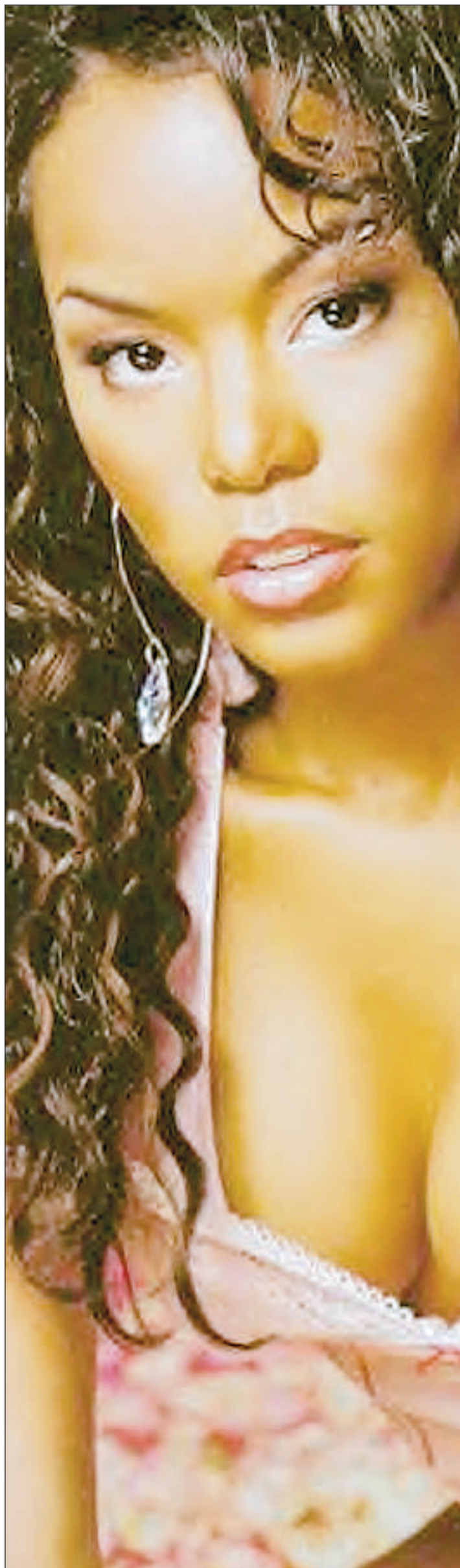
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New Year, new habits?

The stars make their New Year's resolutions

OVERINDULGED over the festive season? Of course you have... A New Year's resolution is the perfect excuse to give yourself a life makeover. We ask some famous names whether they will be bothering with New Year's resolutions this year.

LAURENCE LLEWELYN-BOWEN, TV PERSONALITY, 41

"I THINK it's a bad idea to make New Year's resolutions. It's a very depressing time of year. I gave up smoking about three or four years ago by doing it before Christmas. I found that a really good way of doing it because you're distracted. I won't make a resolution this year, other than to continue to sprinkle loveliness throughout the planet with gay abandon and every reserve that I'm given."

JO WHILEY, RADIO 1 DJ, 41

"I make the same New Year's resolutions every single year. They're always: be more organised, go to the gym more, the usual stuff. The organisation thing is the big one and I fail year after year. I just get a little more acceptance each time that I'm never going to be one of those organised people."

ROSS KEMP, ACTOR, 42

"I'VE never made any resolutions that I've ever stuck to, so I don't really make them to be honest. Life's too short to be doing that."

LETOYA, SINGER, 25

"I TRY to make New Year's resolutions, whether I stick to them is another question. It's always, I'm going to take control of my life and I'm gonna be more organised. You can try that but you never know what tomorrow's going to bring so it's hard to stick to those. In the music industry there's no way of being organised because every single day you don't know what the day has in store for you. All you can do is try to make sure you're on top of things. I have to make sure I get enough sleep and that I'm eating, because I don't want to be sick out here on the road. But it's hard to get stuff to eat when you're travelling and on these planes."



JOHN THOMSON, ACTOR, 37

"I ONLY make New Year's resolutions idly. Last year we had a brilliant party at home so my resolution was to never spend so much money on a party again. My resolution this year is to find a new vice that I can give up for 2008."



CHRIS DE BURGH, SINGER, 58

"MY New Year's resolutions will be exactly the same as they have been for the last 30 years: exercise more, drink less, eat less."





**CERYS MATTHEWS,
SINGER, 37**

"I DO not make New Year's resolutions. I think there is too much pressure to keep them, and maybe you should make them around Easter or June or something, because at that point of time, at Christmas, it's quite difficult to make a decision because you are filled up with sugar and alcohol. It's the worst time to make a resolution – it's cold, miserable and you can't commit yourself to such a momentous proper decision. I've never made one and not regretted it straight away."



**SUSANNAH CONSTANTINE
(TRINNY & SUSANNAH),
STYLE GURU, 45**

"IT'LL be the same as every year for me: stop smoking. I try and do it every year. I don't smoke very much at all, but that will be my resolution. I don't really do New Year's resolutions though – it's always just smoking. Maybe I won't start again but I've got a sneaking suspicion that come Christmas parties, I'll be having a few sneaky cigarettes again."

NOEL EDMONDS, PRESENTER, 57

"I DON'T make New Year's resolutions because I always break them, like everybody else. How long does that diet last? And if you say I'm going to have a dry January, then somebody in an advert pops a cork from a bottle of champagne and you're finished. There is no point making them unless you are going to carry it through, so I'm not going to bother this year."



**RUPERT PENRY-JONES,
ACTOR, 36**

"I NEVER make New Year's resolutions, I don't believe in them. I would never stick to them. You've just got to go with what your heart is telling you to do. I'm not making any rules and enforcing them on myself. You should just do what you want."



You've just got to go with what your heart is telling you to do



NE my style



CLASSIC WITH A CONTEMPORARY TWIST: cardigan by St Martin's at Sarah Coggles in York; Seven jeans and pink and fold shoes by Fornarina. Right: dress from George at Asda



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Max Freer is the owner of Love Marketing, Public Relations & Events. She lives in Middlesbrough

Describe your look

I love clothes and don't subscribe to fashion for fashion's sake. I tend to wear more classic clothes mixed with contemporary key fashion trends. I will also go the other way and wear something completely different and quirky. My mam often says to me: "What are you wearing now!"

What's your favourite item of clothing?

I have a really nice black leather jacket by People's Market. It is very versatile and can be worn with a smart pair of trousers and crisp white shirt for a tailored classic look or it can be vamped up with a pair of skinny jeans and killer heels.

What's the most you've ever spent on an item of clothing?

I bought a fab suede brown and gold mac style coat in America, which set me back a few hundred quid. It is so nice I daren't wear it, but when I do I just love it.

What's been your worst buy?

Should I admit to this one? A shell tracksuit, but this nightmare purchase was when I was in my early teens, and shell tracksuits were in fashion then. Now I look back, I resembled Vicky Pollard from Little Britain - yeh, whatever, it was fashion... then.

What are your favourite shops?

I love all types of shops as I love shopping. Sarah Coggles in York is my favourite. I have an eclectic taste so will wear anything from the high street,

Topshop and H&M. Primark is a girl's best friend for cheeky cheap things. I also spend hours in charity shops and frequent car boot sales; hidden in a boot of a car I've found vintage bags and coats.

What's your favourite beauty product?

I use Clarins products. I use three of their products for every day. I am pale skinned and find it hard to get away with wearing a heavy matt foundation. I use Clarins foundation for blondes, which is really light to wear and provides a flawless cover. My other little treat is beauty flash balm and I swear by this, and Clarins lip balm.

Have you any beauty tips?

I have a normal routine like most girls. I am in my mid 30s so recommend always taking your make-up off at night. Try to use all products within a brand as they work better with one another. I apply a face mask maybe once or twice a week, that's my treat.

Which celebrity's style do you admire and why?

This is always a hard question to answer. I want to say Kate Moss because she can reinvent herself. I tend to go for understated people like Kate Bosworth; she is simply classic and can wear mostly any look. I have recently seen a picture of her wearing a 1930s-inspired outfit including head wear and I thought she looked great. What I also like about her is she doesn't show loads of flesh.

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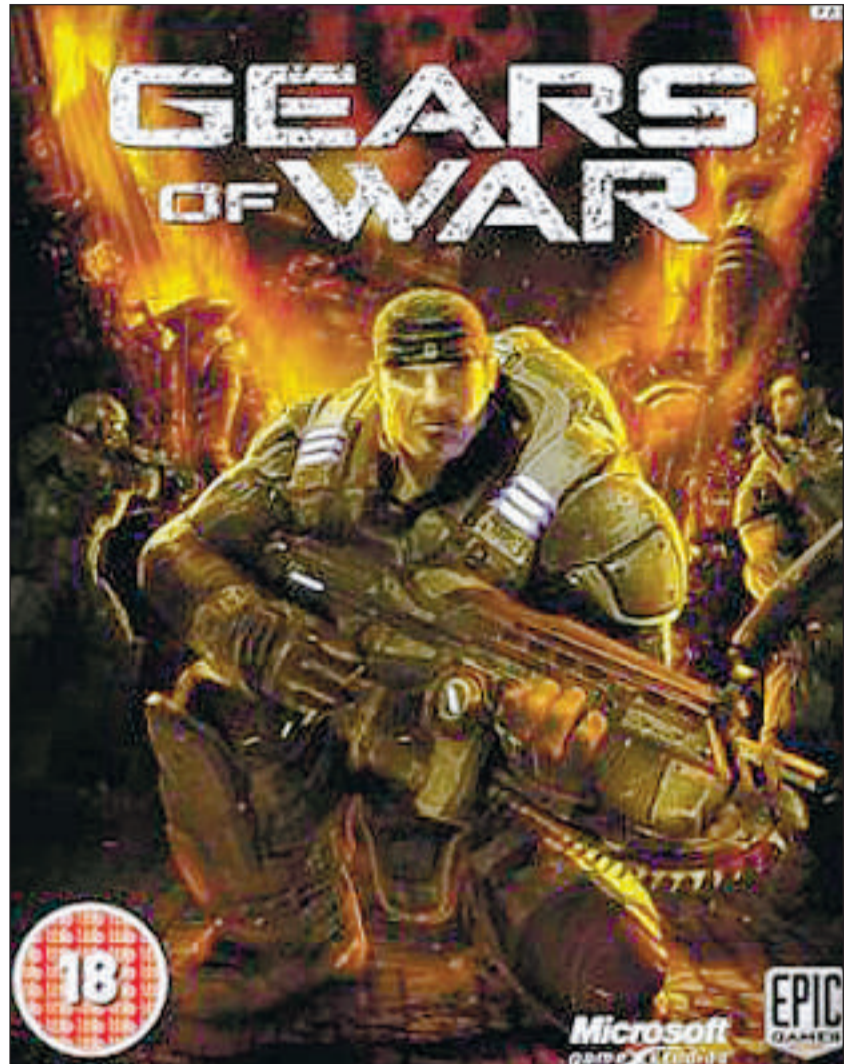


LEATHER LOOK: Topshop jeans; T-shirt from Bershka; jacket by People's Market

gadget man

The triumphs
and turkeys

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NIGEL BURTON nominates the winners and losers in the gadget game over the past 12 months

IT'S been a great 2006 if you enjoy video games. The year started with Microsoft's excellent Xbox 360 making waves and ended with the debut of an innovative new console from Nintendo – one that promises to take video gaming into the realm of family entertainment. In between, there has been a steady stream of excellent software titles and one or two genuine classics.

Only the no-show of the Sony PlayStation 3 spoils an otherwise vintage year. But I guess we still need something to look forward to in 2007.

So what were the winners and losers in the past 12 months? Allow me to share my prejudices and provide some pointers if you have a great wad of Christmas cash burning a hole in your pocket.

BEST FOOTBALL GAME

THIS is a tricky one. Normally it's

a bit of a no-brainer: Pro Evolution Soccer wins if you like to take control of the players and the seminal Football Manager nicks the silverware if you fancy yourself as a master tactician. But this year we saw a determined effort by Electronic Arts to nick the console gaming honours with FIFA '07.

The gameplay in FIFA has been tweaked (again) to make it more than ever a clone of the mighty Pro Evolution Soccer. Your players tend to make sensible rather than suicidal runs and the team actually responds to a mid-game change in tactics. There's even a management option built in.

And it all looks mighty fine with beautifully modelled stadia and accurate player likenesses. The soundtrack is excellent and the presentation generally excellent, a fiendish menu system notwithstanding.



So anyone who found a copy of FIFA lying beneath the Christmas tree shouldn't feel too let down. More than ever the EA franchise is hot on the heels of the market leading Pro Evo.

In fact, Pro Evo almost handed the title to FIFA this year partly because, in some respects, the latest version is a step backwards. The CPU opponents are either woeful or frighteningly good – and form seems to have no bearing on how they will perform – while the graphics haven't shown the same attention to detail as a FIFA game for a couple of seasons now. And yet Pro Evo still nicks it thanks to the sublime controls and the excellent ball physics that feel (and look) just right.

Next year, though, Konami will have to step up a level if it isn't to be found wanting.

As for Football Manager 2007, what can you say? It's still the daddy of all management sims and the stubbornly 2-D match engine remains a work of genius. If you own a PC and love football then be prepared to lose a whole chunk of your life to this game.

BEST ROLE PLAYING GAME

THE difficulty when you have attained near perfection is consistently maintaining the gold standard time after time.

The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time on the N64 would figure in anyone's list of a top ten all-time greatest video games – which makes the task of following it up on a new console something of a thankless task.

The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess takes no chances. You won't find the daring innovation once used in Majora's Mask or the unusual graphical look afforded The Wind Waker.

Instead, you use the Nintendo Wii's wireless controllers to battle your way



through another classic adventure.

Initially it feels a bit strange using the analogue stick to control movement while the remote targets the bad guys, but the lure of Twilight Princess is so great that within a few minutes it all seems to be second nature.

Which is just as well because graphically this game is nothing to boast about. In fact, it wouldn't have looked out of place on the Nintendo Game Cube and Xbox 360 owners will scoff if you point to Twilight Princess as one of the very best games available on the Wii.

And yet Nintendo has always known that great graphics don't necessarily make a great game – and proves it here once again.

Once more a zeal game provides a compelling excuse to upgrade to a new platform.

BEST INNOVATION

THE wireless controllers used by the Nintendo Wii are taking gaming to a whole new level.

Only last week I was browsing at a large computer store and spotted a family (mum, dad and two kids) enjoying a game of tennis on the Wii. The two kids had the controls but mum and dad clearly couldn't resist having a go themselves. After a couple of rallies they were grabbing the controls and taking to the courts for a husband-wife grudge match.

And all this was going on within the confines of a bustling computer superstore.

I'm willing to bet that neither parent would have dared pick up a PS2 controller or an Xbox 360 to "just have a quick go". The Wii has done the impossible – made parents and non-believers understand what makes video games fun.

GAME OF THE YEAR

THERE were so many contenders but, in the end, the choice was easy. Gears of War has been a long time coming. Microsoft rolled out a video demo of the game in progress every time it wanted to

show off what the Xbox 360 really was capable of producing. After a while it began to look as though Gears could never live up to the hype.

Thankfully, it does – and some. This is more than just a Halo-beater for a new generation; it's a whole new experience. Even people who aren't directly playing the game can get a kick out of something so breathtakingly beautiful and cinematic. This is the first game to show us what the next generation of games consoles are capable of achieving and the future is truly bright.

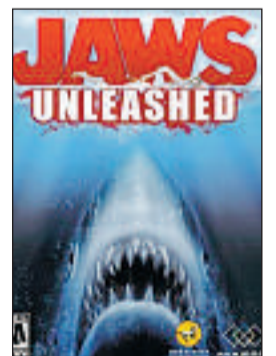
STINKER OF THE YEAR

IN theory creating a video game from a classic movie should be easy, especially one with as many set pieces as Jaws.

So what went wrong? Perhaps it was the ridiculous liberties taken with the storyline, or the "super powers" the fish appears to possess or the way the graphics were so bad it was quite possible to get your shark stuck on a bit of scenery with no option but to start again.

Whatever you do, don't go into the games shop and buy this truly awful concoction.

There was another late entrant for this category: British Telecom for failing to reconnect my phone line after I moved house before Christmas and driving me crazy with a stupid automated voice answering service with its patronising answers to pertinent questions. If that is service, I'm a Dutchman. No on-line gaming for me over the holiday season then.



NE shopping



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STORE owner Glenn Carter is celebrating a major victory in clinching retail park status for his Furnique Creative Furniture business. He opened the store on Darlington's Neasham Road site late last year and is delighted with the achievement.

"It's quite something for a small business to get on to a retail park. Usually it is much bigger concerns which get these slots," he says.

Glenn is drawing on his 25 years of retail experience to take the business forward.

He says the Furnique range of oak and pine furniture ties in well with the area surrounding the park. The store caters for a wide range of tastes - from flat-packs to built furniture, of which more than 70 per cent is made in the UK.

Furnique does office, bedroom and dining, plus a wide selection of mattresses and beds, suites and chairs and accessories such as mirrors and ornaments.

Glenn arrived in Darlington from Stockton, where he had a store in an ex-car showroom on the Mandale Triangle. "We conquered Stockton," he says, "and made a lot of friends in that area."

He says trading in general is difficult at the moment but adds: "We are holding our own even though it's tough in this sector right now. A couple of months ago things were buoyant,

but I think of late people have lost a bit of confidence regarding their spending."

Glenn says Furnique can offer much that bigger stores can't. If a customer wants a special item which is not in store, he will try to source it for them.

"We get a lot of compliments from people as we offer a more personal service than many other stores," he says.

The range on offer is well set out in 5,000 sq ft of space on one floor.

Delivery usually takes two to three weeks, although most items are in the warehouse and ready to go.

"In the future, I would love to open more stores in the North-East but it's early days. It will be down to hard work and a bit of luck," says Glenn. "We now have regular customers coming from as far afield as Leeds and that's a very good sign. Our furniture is mostly UK-built and of the finest quality and people latch on to that."

Offering creative goods to suit all tastes and budgets, the Furnique showroom is a treasure trove of bespoke furniture.

Furnique is open from 9.30am to 6pm Monday to Saturday and 10am to 4pm on Sundays. The store is next to Matalan on the Neasham Road retail park, Darlington. Tel: 01325-488999.





Heat treatments

Businessman Colin Wood is all fired up ready for the challenges of the coming year, he tells SHEILA WEBER



WHEN it comes to fires and fireplaces, Colin Wood is certainly blazing a trail at the County Durham Open Fire Centre. And he has by no means finished yet. He has big plans for the business he bought last July and is buzzing with ideas for turning the centre into the best in the North-East.

You only have to step into the showroom to get the feel of what Colin aims to achieve with his seemingly boundless energy and drive. Fires, stoves, range cookers and fireplaces are all well set out.

And upstairs is a Fire Desire range, which Colin describes as his 'platinum collection'.

The Open Fire Centre had been established 20 years when Colin decided to buy it. "I had been in the industry a long time, working for a number of manufacturers," he says. "I was full of ideas for changing the image of the business and had gained valuable experience while working for others. I know what sells and what doesn't."

Since Colin took on the OFC, the showroom has already had a major facelift, introducing touches such as solid limestone flooring and carpets. Fire Desire brings in the designer element. Customers climb up to an area featuring comfortable leather chairs, coffee tables and ultra-modern fires inset in the walls. Subtle works of art are dotted around the walls and these can be bought as part of the fire package.

"I want to bring in bespoke packages at a reasonable cost, to keep the core of the centre but also cater for those who want something that little bit different," he says.

"Our range is very varied and we score in that we do understand clients' needs. When people come in here we treat them as individuals, listen to their needs and tailor-make them a package," says Colin, adding that 80 per cent of his business comes from referrals.

Colin likes to think of the centre as "a stove

shop which does fireplaces". The centre offers an impressive range of gas, electric, LPG, oil, wood and solid fuel fires and stoves, all backed up by an installation service contracted out to specialists. The starting price for a fire and surround is around £900. The most expensive one Colin has done is £4,000.

Colin, who is 38 and comes from Hartlepool, served in the RAF and after that worked for British Gas as a sales consultant, always staying within the top ten for sales nationally. He is now happy to be his own boss. Colin is also a Corgi and Hetas engineer, so not only can he design something that is visually stunning to look at, but is also technically correct.

"It's my aim to turn people's fireplace dreams into reality and I will go to any lengths to do that," he says.

Working with Iain Macrae as customer services manager, Colin now designs some of the Fire Desire range himself. One on show is gas-fired and granite-lined with a row of white pebbles, the flames being reflected at all angles. It comes in three sizes and looks great under a wall-inset TV.

In 2007, there are also plans for an inglenook with a living fire, a woodland floor and trees area called Out of the Woods and a Home on the Range area. Colin also wants to develop a kitchen area with a variety of range and stove brands such as Aga and Rayburn. He is also planning a new frontage, with floor to ceiling glass, so that people can see what's on offer at the OFC.

"I put my heart and soul into this business," he says. "I am Mr 100 per cent. I don't want to be the biggest fireplace company in the North-East, but I do want to be the best."

■ **Open Fire Centre, 12b, Dragonville Industrial Park, Durham City DH1 2XH. Tel: 0191-383-0981. www.openfirecentre.co.uk**

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I don't want to be the biggest fireplace company in the North-East, but I do want to be the best

– Colin Wood, above



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Sports Development Coachwide Database

A new Coach Database system has been launched by Darlington Borough Council's Sports Development Team to assist schools, clubs, community groups and leisure providers to access qualified sports coaches.

The scheme ensures sports coaches have the necessary qualifications, are Criminal Records Bureau checked and meet the Council's criteria for coaching before being entered on the database.

The team can also help coaches wanting to be included on the database to access professional development courses to enable them to be registered.

Any schools, sports clubs, leisure facilities or community groups looking for coaches, or coaches themselves, wishing to be included on the database, should contact Paul Foreman, Sports Development Officer, on (01325) 254370 or e-mail him at paul.foreman@darlington.gov.uk

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NE beauty

A fresh start to 2007

Now the days of gross over-indulgence have been packed away along with the Christmas decorations, ROSAMOND HUTT discovers the best ways to detox body and soul

FEELING a little guilty about how you treated your body over the festive season? A detox could be the perfect way to make amends for all those mince pies, savoury nibbles and alcohol-fuelled gatherings.

Introducing healthy changes to your eating habits will help to shake off post-party blues and boost your energy levels. But food is only part of the story. It's also important to recharge your batteries by setting aside time for gentle exercise and relaxation.

Following a detox plan for a month will help to kick start your immune system and give your body a hand to get rid of toxins, while shifting those pesky extra pounds. It will also help to relieve stress and put you on the right track to good physical and mental health.

The digestive system, the skin and especially the liver and kidneys will have been working overtime to process the rich Christmas food and alcohol. Give your internal organs a well-earned break – eat plenty of fresh fruit, beans and veg, which are packed with nutrients and protective antioxidants, and avoid all greasy, salty, or sugary food and processed meals.

Why not order a regular delivery of organic fruit and veg from a local farm supplier – you'll not only be eating well, you'll also be shopping ethically too.

Instead of relying on a cup of tea or coffee for a wake-up call, start the morning by squeezing the juice of half a lemon into a glass of hot water. Make sure you drink at least eight glasses of water each day to flush out toxins and to give your body the hydration it needs. If you're struggling to up your intake of water, try replacing one or two glasses with herbal teas.

Quit smoking and cut out alcohol, caffeine and fizzy drinks, even diet versions which are mostly sweetened with chemicals.

Don't worry if you experience mild headaches or feel sluggish in the first week of your detox. It's a normal reaction as your body sluices out the toxins.

Before you join the throngs of people burning off excess Christmas calories at the gym, remember January is often the busiest and most expensive time of year to sign up for or renew a membership. Why not try your hand at some exercise classes rather than pounding away on a treadmill? Tai chi, yoga and pilates are excellent ways to strengthen and tone the body while relaxing and destressing the mind.

And if you find it hard to squeeze in a proper workout, be sure to fit at least some exercise into your day.

Give yourself time to walk to work, or get off the bus one stop early or park your car a kilometre further away and make the rest of the journey on foot. Escape the office at lunchtime and go for a stroll around the park,

and take the stairs not the lift whenever you can.

Regular skin brushing stimulates the lymphatic system and helps the expulsion of toxins. Make sure the skin is dry and use long, smooth upward strokes.

Detoxing is not only a good way to cleanse your body of toxins, it also offers an opportunity to spring clean stresses from your life and focus on what is truly important.

Losing the clutter and clearing out piles of junk from your home and workplace will help to concentrate your mind and energy and allow you to prioritise tasks. Donate old clothes to charity or send them to a recycling bank. Recycle old newspapers and magazines



SUPER SKIN: brushing aids circulation



f Give your internal organs a well-earned break – eat plenty of fresh fruit, beans and veg, which are packed with nutrients and protective antioxidants

and take everything else to a car boot sale.

You'd be surprised the difference switching off the television, especially at meal times, can make to the atmosphere at home. Replace a half-hour TV programme with meditation and breathing exercises, or simply curl up with a good book.

After a week on the detox plan you should notice a difference in the way you feel and look. Your energy levels will increase, you will sleep better, your skin will be clearer – and you may begin to look at your life afresh.

Why not reward yourself for sticking to a healthier lifestyle and give your detox a further boost. There are an array of luxurious spas to choose from, but for a soak in country's only thermal waters try the newly opened Thermae Bath Spa. Lie back in the mineral-rich waters and take in the spectacular views from the rooftop pool over the abbey and the honey-coloured stone houses to the hills beyond. The spa also offers a range of calming therapies including watsu, a combination of water and shiatsu.

Don't forget there's one place you can always escape to for pampering that won't break the bank. With a few simple touches you can turn your bathroom into a slice of paradise. Just turn on the taps, place aromatherapy candles around the room, scatter dried or fresh petals in the bath and add a few drops of rosemary, peppermint, pine or juniper essential oils.

And for a post-detox treat, splash out on some luxe bath products such as The Sanctuary Spa's Kyphi Hot Sugar scrub, £9.95, for body polishing and deep cleansing, followed up with Kyphi Nourishing Body Butter, £7.45.

f Make sure you drink at least eight glasses of water each day to flush out toxins and give your body the hydration it needs

HUNG-OVER HAIR

"If you've been regularly styling and loading hair with products over the party season, it will benefit from a detoxifying treatment every fortnight," says Charles Worthington. "Some products cling to the hair shaft and over time will build up, causing hair to look greasy, dull and unhealthy, while too much heat styling leaves ends frizzled."

The celebrity stylist recommends massaging the scalp with a detoxing shampoo, followed by a deep conditioning treatment to give hair that much-needed moisture.

Try Charles Worthington Results Balancing Act Oil-Regulating shampoo, £4.19 at Boots, Frederic Fekkai Apple Cider Clearing Rinse, £13 at Space NK (020-8740-2085 www.spacenk.com), TRESemme Vitamin C Deep Cleansing shampoo, £3.99, or Aveda Hair Detoxifier, £8.50 (0870-034-2380 www.aveda.com).

NAILING IT

NEXT step on the beauty detox is sorting out your nailcare regime.

Throw away bottles of old polish or outdated shades – according to Superdrug, British women have an average of eight bottles of nail polish on the go at a time.

We should also take steps to make our talons look better than ever. "Very few women have perfect nails – childhood nail biting, lifestyle factors and air-conditioning can weaken and dehydrate nails, while smoking or using badly formulated nail colours can stain nail beds," says manicurist Leighton Denny.

Each of his new treatment regimes, from £26 (0845-004-2053 www.leightondenny.com), contains a serum, base coat and polish remover to address different problems such as dry brittle nails, soft weak nails and yellow discoloured nails.

Apply Depend's Myrrh oil, £9, for weak nails, Sesame Oil, also £9, for flaky nails, and Cuticle Gel, £6, to protect and strengthen them. All available at Boots.

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The official fuel consumption figures in mpg (l/100km) for the Mazda RX-8 PZ: Urban 18.1 (15.6), Extra Urban 32.5 (8.7), Combined 25.2 (11.2). The official CO2 emissions are (g/km) 234. Model shown: Mazda RX-8 PZ £25,995 0TR. Prices and specification correct at time of going to press.



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NE motoring

Doing things differently



PZ WITH PIAZZZ: the Mazda with twin rotors and back-to-front doors

Motoring correspondent IAN LAMMING enjoys a twisty winter ride over to the Lakes in Mazda's new RX-8 PZ

It should have been the worst of drives. Wet, windy and wild, winter's worst hurled everything it could at the Yorkshire Dales landscape.

Stretching before me, 80 tortuous miles of narrow, minor roads that led from home in North Yorkshire to a holiday house in the Lakes.

It simply shouldn't have been any fun as the black asphalt, strewn with branches and thick with mud, twisted left and right, flanked by threatening dry stone walls.

The fact it wasn't a bad drive at all must have been testament to the quality of the test car and my unconditional love of the North, whatever its mood.

Mazda's RX-8 has always been a driver's car with an ability to charm, thanks to its blend of performance and handling.

Critics never thought it would catch on because of its alternative engine – the only rotary motor on the market – and the odd rear door set-up, but it has and you certainly see plenty of them on today's roads.

Three years down the line it's time to freshen the brand and while its aesthetics and dynamics have stood the test, launching a "special" doesn't go amiss.

RX-8 PZ gains bits and pieces the real enthusiast will appreciate. Mazda has called upon one of motorsport's greats – Prodrive – to tweak and tune and hone and fiddle with the top-of-the-range 231bhp RX-8.

The first thing this fine and splendid company of enthusiasts did was lower ride height and swap suspension components to improve ride and handling – which it does to great effect.

The result is clever rather than miraculous because the standard RX-8 is pretty good on its pins. What the changes do succeed in doing is improve ride, which is brick-hard on the standard model but much more forgiving and refined on the PZ.

Electric power steering is also sharpened, giving the RX-8 cat-like responses and the Mazda has a wonderful feeling of grip, poise and balance that drivers will adore.

The motor remains the same quirky twin

rotary affair but the new exhaust makes it a tad more vocal. It's a curious and unique motor. No cylinders in sight just two big holes, inside of which triangular rotors spin at up to 9,000 revolutions per minute.

The result sounds and feels very different to conventional engines. It has to be worked hard to perform as there isn't too much in the bag below about 5,000rpm. When it does vent its spleen, it almost sounds like a motorbike. It is quick – it will crack 60mph in just over six seconds and has a top speed of 146mph – but there is a price to pay at the pumps and you shouldn't expect to see much more than low to mid-20 in the miles-per-gallon stakes.

PZ also gets new painted, 18in, dark silver, ten-spoke, lightweight alloy wheels courtesy of F1 aficionados OZ, a marked-up boot spoiler, PZ and Prodrive lettering on the side, aerodynamic pack, twin chrome tail exhausts, low drag sports door mirrors and mesh grilles. Overall, the look is lean and mean but remarkably discreet.

There are many nice touches, such as the way the rear fog light, alloy headrest inserts and gearlever knob ape the triangular engine rotors.

RX-8 remains unique with its freestyle rear doors, which open the opposite way to the conventional front doors. There really is space in the back for two passengers too and though it doesn't look it, it is comfortable enough.

The dashboard is a fine example of design and the interior oozes quality – and sounds great too with its upgraded Bose hi-fi.





LAPPING IT UP: the recent Beatrix Potter movie has made the Lakes an international magnet

Walking in a winter wonderland

WITH its snow-capped mountains, cut-glass lakes, frosted dry-stone walls, and top hotels and restaurants, the Lake District – usually flooded with tourists in the summer – is the perfect place to relax by a log fire and unwind. Alternatively, you could get togged up and brave the great outdoors. Here, we suggest some things you could do in the Lake District this winter.

WALK

HEAD for Lake Grasmere or Rydal in the central Lake District, a beautiful, sparsely-populated valley ringed with fells and home to cosy cafes, independent shops and easy walks around the Lake shore. Check out the Lion and Lamb rock formation watching over Wordsworth's village from the summit of nearby Helm Crag. Alternatively, order a hot tea and feed the swans from the banks of the Lake at the mystical Celtic Faery Tea Rooms.

www.grasmere.com

LUNCH

TUCKED away off the beaten track on the mountain road between Ambleside and Ullswater is a traditional Lake District pub in a village no bigger than a street, called Troutbeck. Sandwiched between the Hundreds and the famous High Street mountain walk, the Mortal Man commands a great view across the atmospheric valley and has been serving sustenance to all those who've called at its door since 1689.

www.themortalman.com

HOTEL

CUMBRIA and The Lake District have hundreds of top hotels, self catering cottages and contemporary B&Bs to choose from, complete with cosy fires, luxurious rooms and views to die for. There are few better places to watch the dark nights descend than from the picture lounge at the Sharrow Bay Hotel, which has a huge window which frames Lake Ullswater in an ever-changing portrait. Alternatively, head for Armathwaite Hall near Keswick for 400-acres of deer park and woodland, four poster beds and six-star views of the Lake District at Bassenthwaite

www.sharrowbay.co.uk or www.armathwaite-hall.com

HOT AIR BALLOON

SEE the majestic, muscular landscape like never before from the perspective of the ospreys which have made their nest high in the forests above Bassenthwaite Lake. Marvel at the soaring mountains, the intricate patchwork of dry-stone walls and glittering lakes below. Martin Casson, of the Bowness-based hot air balloon com-

pany High Adventure will even serve up a glass of champagne on your gentle return to earth.

www.high-adventure.co.uk

GET ACTIVE

MUD, sweat, gears and beers. That's what Lake District weekends are all about for some. With hundreds of challenging courses, downhill daredevils and winding country lanes, whatever your bike and however well equipped you are, there's plenty to choose from. Try the new ten-mile single track around Grizedale Forest near Windermere, which takes you along leaf-encrusted lanes and pine-pungent pathways. Alternatively, head for Whinlatter Forest near Keswick for a one-stop-shop experience of courses, a cafe and visitor centre.

www.forestry.gov.uk/forestry

ONE FOR THE KIDS

WHETHER the kids are two or 20, they'll all find something to enjoy on a trip to one of the country's foremost conservation zoos. Get close up to Sumatran tigers, hippos, giraffes and baboons at the South Lakes Wild Animal Park at Dalton-in-Furness.

www.wildanimalpark.co.uk

INDOOR ATTRACTION

IT'S wet, it's cold, it's winter. You want food, drink, warmth and entertainment and you do not want to venture too far for all four. Head for the Rheged Centre, just off the M6 at Penrith (junction 40) with its double-decker sized movie screens showing perfect Sunday afternoon epics like Shackleton, Vikings, the Serengeti and Everest. There are also regular exhibitions, a children's indoor play area, toy shops, a gallery, a stylish food bar called Taste and a modern cafe serving everything from ciabattas to pizzas. Before you leave, call in at the food hall to bag some smoked meats, British cheeses and great wine for when you get home.

www.rheged.com

■ For more information go to www.golakes.co.uk. To book accommodation call 0845-450-1199.



NE connections

Being pampered at Harvey Nichols and spending the night at a great hotel – what could be a better combination for a girly trip to Leeds? Women's Editor SARAH FOSTER and her sister take a break



THE sun was out, the sky was blue, and we were heading for the shops – could there be greater joy than this? My sister Emma, a shopaholic, and I were bound for Leeds. As it was years since she and I had been away, and even then we'd been with mum and dad, I thought a night at an hotel was overdue. And knowing Emma's love for clothes (as well as handbags, coats and shoes) I figured Leeds would meet our needs.

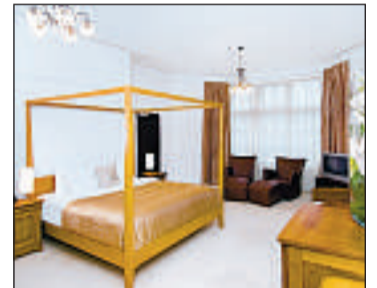
We'd booked a night at the Woodlands Hotel, outside the sprawling city centre in quiet Gildersome. It took just 15 minutes to reach the thriving central hub and what we lost from the commute we gained from countryside and peace.

Our stunning bolthole, with stone facade and well-kept grounds, is one of three top-notch hotels owned by The Tomahawk Group. Comprising 17 tasteful rooms, each one unique, it welcomed its first guests two years ago. Prior to that – which probably explains its old-world feel – it was the residence of a man who owned a local textile mill. We checked in quickly – the shops were calling – and soon a taxi was transporting us their way.

At Harvey Nichols I had my make-up done while Emma watched. My hour appointment, with a consultant from Trish McEvoy, had been arranged by the hotel. Though not a massive make-up fan (my normal look is just mascara and lip balm) I did enjoy the consultation. What really helped was that it worked with what I knew – and I kept my natural-looking face. The only downside came from having super-sensitive skin, which despite assurances to the contrary, reacted badly to the products.

We went from here to meet two friendly personal shoppers. Their services are free and can be used by anyone, yet we felt privileged as we entered their domain – a separate wing of Harvey Nichols. Perhaps the highlight of our stay, we got to don designer gowns – from jewel-encrusted Alice Temperley to Alexander McQueen – while sipping complimentary wine. It made our day, and while we didn't buy a thing, we loved just seeing how they looked. At least if one of us becomes rich, we now know where we'll go to shop.

A further treat, which the hotel had also planned, was coming back the following day for Emma's make-up consultation. This was with Pout, a young and funky product line, and she was thrilled to have false eyelashes applied. The make-up artist glued



WOODLANDS HOTEL: old building with a modern twist

on lashes one by one, so that instead of one thick line, she had just some at the far corner of each eye. She loved the fresh and dewy look achieved by nudes and subtle pinks and wished the make-up could be purchased nearer home.

Of course there's more to shopping in Leeds than Harvey Nichols, and we made sure we did the rounds of other stores. The giant Primark (where would we be without it?) provided bargain fashion buys and there were plenty more around. Worn out and clutching several bags, we made our way back to the hotel, where we had time to really take in its luxury.

We had adjoining double rooms and both were sumptuous and smart. My spacious suite – the largest room in which I've stayed – was labelled 'Sarsenet'; like all the rest, a name from Woodlands' textile past. I loved the huge four poster bed, the brown silk curtains and the views, but most of all I loved the bath – a giant airbath, to be precise. It was a room I could have lived in for a month.

We dined like queens in the hotel's contemporary restaurant – I chose fish pie while Emma plumped for the roast beef – and then enjoyed a hearty breakfast the next day. We left with batteries re-charged – and one more day to hit the shops.

■ Shopping break packages at Woodlands Hotel, including a full Yorkshire breakfast, chauffeur-driven transport to and from Harvey Nichols, make-up consultation, personal shopping and afternoon tea at the hotel, begin at £89 per person. For more details on this and other packages, visit www.woodlandsleeds.co.uk or call 0113-2381488.

NE connections



PARADISE REGAINED: Mike and Lindsay chill out

LINDSAY JENNINGS wondered how she would cope on a remote, paradise island – just her and the new husband for seven days. The answer was, wonderfully

WE have barely been on the propeller-plane flight for more than five minutes when what appears to be dry ice begins pouring out of the air conditioning vents. The plane rocks from side to side and husband Mike and I fight each other to peer out of the tiny condensation-filled windows. Are we going to touch down alive?

“Theeeeees is not your usual flying huh?” says the Danish woman sitting in front of us, giggling nervously.

We’re flying with Berjaya Air (Bejeezus Air, as Mike will later christen it) a mere 40 minutes from Singapore en route to Tioman Island, off the east coast of Malaysia, described as one of the most beautiful islands in the world.

Suddenly, as the plane lurches dramatically to the right, it comes into view. And wow – what a view. Tioman’s pale, sandy beach can be seen snaking in front of stunning, mountainous greenery.

We’re booked into the Bagus Place retreat, to the south of the island, accessible only by a 20 minute speedboat ride. Yohan, the French bar manager of the resort, meets us at the airport.

“Ow was your treep,” he says, with a laid-back smile and hand outstretched to relieve us of our heavy suitcase. “Fine,” we chime.

We’re about to enter a world where stress is unheard of.

As the serviceable speedboat bobs over the waves, we’re given an indication of what’s to come in the shape of other resorts dotted around the edge of the island. Tioman, said to be the haunt of pirates in the 18th century and, more recently, the setting for the 1950s Hollywood film *South Pacific*, is only 39km long and 12 km wide. Beyond the resorts lies virtually untouched lush jungle teeming with wildlife and beautiful waterfalls.

Finally, as we speed around the island, we reach Bagus Place (Bagus means beautiful and good).

“It looks like an episode from *Lost*,” says Mike.

Two mountainous rocks stand guard over a beautiful sweep of private beach. In the trees can be seen one of Bagus Place’s three spacious chalets, and in the distance its wooden bar and restaurant.

Bagus Place was initially set up by Parisian Eric Prose and his friend Yono bin Rajiman before they were joined in the business by Surrey-born Ajay Barai. (Eric has since sold his share to the fathers of Ajay and Yohan).

Two mountainous rocks stand guard over a beautiful sweep of private beach...

The resort opened in June 2004 and took about two years to create with most of the building materials being recycled or locally sourced. The aim was to create a holiday with a difference while minimising the environmental footprint on the earth. And they have certainly achieved their aim.

After a welcome drink in the bar, we head off to our own chalet, Rock House, which, as the title suggests, sits on rocks overlooking the South China Sea. The view is stunning and our shoulders relax another couple of inches.

Inside, the chalet is pristine with electric ceiling fans and a tiled bathroom and shower pumping plentiful amounts of hot water. The lounge area contains a day bed, a mini-fridge packed with drinks and doors which lead onto the veranda and those magnificent sea views.

Upstairs is a double bed, with clean white cotton sheets and a mosquito net, and a veranda.

Dinner, like breakfast and lunch, is served in the candlelit wooden restaurant, with the waves lapping against the supports.

Susi, the resident chef, brings out an Indonesian-style chicken curry with coconut milk, served with fried potatoes, rice and sautéed vegetables. It’s absolutely delicious. For the next few nights

we munch through beef and chicken dishes and exquisite fish baked in foil on the barbecue. There is always a choice too. Lunch ranges from burgers to fried rice and squid. Breakfast is cereal, scrambled eggs or banana pancakes – depending on whether the cheeky monkeys have pilfered them all. I am desperate to see the monkeys, who are just a tiny part of the wonderful wildlife here.

During the day we go snorkelling. Bagus has plenty of equipment you can borrow, all included in the price. We snorkel to the end of the pier, hand in hand, feasting our eyes on royal blue and fluorescent yellow fish; pink coral, and black sea urchins.

On other days, Mike heads off into the jungle with Yohan for a trek to the local waterfall. On another, we hire a water taxi (160 Malaysian Ringgits – about £23) to a nearby resort which has an impressive golf course overlooking the sea. While the boys head off



Honeymoon heaven



LINDSAY Jennings travelled from London Heathrow to Singapore with Singapore Airlines. Contact www.singaporeair.com. Tioman Island is reached via a 40-minute plane journey from Singapore or Kuala Lumpur. Berjaya Air (www.berjaya-air.com) fly regularly to the island. Bagus Place costs from £30 per person, per night including all meals, local excursions and transfers. For more information log on to www.bagusplace.com.



for a round, I indulge in a spot of pampering – a massage Tioman-style.

No sooner have I laid down, than the tiny masseuse leaps onto the bed like a cat, and begins kneading and pushing out the knots in my back with her tiny, forceful palms. Pleasure, pain, pleasure, pain. “Is the pressure okay for yoooo Maaaaaaaam?” she says. “It’s fine,” I say, grimacing into the bed.

Afterwards, however, my back feels amazing and all the knots have gone, while Mike declares it one of the best places he’s ever played golf.

We head back towards the water taxi and stop off at bustling Tekek, next to the airport. We have lunch at a small, busy cafe sitting on yellow plastic chairs and drinking water out of brown and orange enamel mugs, which I last saw in my mum’s kitchen in 1977. We’ve

ordered chicken rice and I’m nervous.

“Someone’s just ridden a motorbike into the kitchen,” points out Mike.

Then a small woman in her 60s emerges, her grey hair pinned back, bringing out a bowl of something wet.

“Soup,” she exclaims. “You,” she points to me. “Soup, eat.” We didn’t order soup, but it’s flavoured, if a little watery.

Then the main dishes arrive. The chicken is plump and spicy; Mike’s squid is declared “delicious”. The bill for three is 20 Malaysian ringgits – about £2.80.

On the way back, Yohan sits cross-legged on the front of the boat to make it go faster. It cuts through the waves, bucking up and down like a rodeo ride, and we hold onto the ropes, laughing.

We spend the evenings chatting to the amiable Yohan and the only other couple on the resort, Tom and Nicola, who are also on honeymoon. In the daytime, we park ourselves at opposite ends of the paradise beach, which is just how we want it. But they are fun company and the nights are never dull, particularly with a game of Karam – like snooker but with chequers – which we play until the wee hours.

One evening Yono organises a barbecue on the beach. We light a huge fire, feast on baked fish and rice and drink Yohan’s “special punch”, which certainly packs one. Then the guitars come out.

Tom, it emerges, used to play in a band. Yono is fantastic too.

They jam together, their fancy fretwork lit by the flames. Tom launches into the Guns and Roses tune *Knocking on Heaven’s Door* and a feeling of complete and utter contentment washes over me as I look up at the black sky, pin-pricked with diamond-like stars.

The monkeys don’t come out until the last day. On the way to breakfast, I spot three of them, picking fleas from one another. Another one swings in, and they all stare at us defiantly. As we eat apple pancakes and honey, a huge monitor lizard slopes off into the jungle.

This place is magical. The people so friendly, the food – all included in the price – superb. It’s the kind of place you can hear your inner voice for once, the one usually drowned out by modern living.

I’d been concerned that there wouldn’t be enough to do, that I would end up talking to myself like Robinson Crusoe. But in the end, it’s hard to tear myself away.

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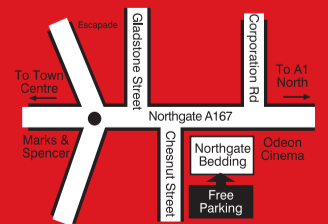
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