

# Travel insurance

Park your doubts about hotel chains, says Jay Rayner. The City Café in Leeds is just the ticket



**CITY CAFÉ,  
CITY INN HOTEL, 2 WHARF  
APPROACH, LEEDS  
(0113 241 1000). MEAL  
FOR TWO, INCLUDING  
WINE AND SERVICE, \$65**

To steal the old gag about Peter Jones on Sloane Square, in the event of a nuclear war I'm going to head straight for the nearest City Inn, because nothing bad can ever happen there. I say this as a man who was woken at 12.45am by the chap from front desk knocking on my door because he wanted me to sign someone else's room service bill. Very forgiving, me. The fact is that so much about the operation is so very right, in a tidy, organised, stylish, obsessive-compulsive way, that I'm willing to overlook small things like that. The worst you might say about the City Inn aesthetic is that it's like living in an Ikea room set. Then again, as I enter the depths of middle age and my kids the depths of middle childhood, my house has become so cluttered with accrued crap – drifts of pointy plastic toys, bits of dead dull paperwork I can't bring myself to throw away, objets d'art which are repulsive in every way but too valuable to be binned – the thought of an Ikea room set is sometimes very comforting. Oh to live somewhere which, unlike my arteries, is not clogged up with ugly stuff.

And so to the City Inn Leeds, where that crisp aesthetic carries right out of the lobby, into the City Café overlooking the regenerated canal, and finally on to the plate. I am, of course, meant to disapprove of the corporate, to venerate the individual and the independent over the chain, and usually I do. But sometimes a bit of organisational nous and economic power combined with a modicum of good taste and good sense can deliver, and here it really does. The City Café is the sort of smart, unchallenging but



Chain reaction: the smart decor of The City Café and, below, smoked haddock and salmon fishcake

reliable bistro any major town needs. The pricing – £5ish for starters, low teens for mains, £20.95 for three courses – is smart; the changing market menu, offering the same for £14.95 at lunch, is smarter still. I chose from that because it contained things I wanted to eat, not because of an outbreak of parsimony.

A smoked haddock and salmon fishcake from that menu was unencumbered by stodgy fillers, and lay on just enough of a brisk chive velouté. Slices of chicken breast played a supporting role to a much more enticing boned confited leg, all crisp skin and the whiff of goose fat. There was a proper hockey puck of fondant potato, a pile of acidulated cabbage and carrots, and a good old-fashioned chicken gravy to bind the lot together. At the end a fine-enough chocolate brownie came with a better peanut butter ice cream. The fact that I adored the latter is proof, if proof were needed, that I am just a greedy child at heart.

From the main à la carte, crab spring rolls weren't really, in that they contained nothing other than freshly picked white crabmeat. This is not a complaint. They came with a mango salsa with a finely judged chilli kick. Most impressive dish of the day was a brassica-green pea and broad bean risotto with pieces of that fine Italian blue cheese Dolcelatte melting happily across the surface like the last snows of winter on an alpine

meadow. An appalling simile, but this one's a little better: risottos are like pantry flies, boringly common but easy to kill. A good risotto is a rare creature, and this was very good indeed, the texture of the rice spot on, the flavour clear and clean without being demanding. At the end a slice of banana and hazelnut "arctic roll" was, like the spring rolls, a bit of a misnomer, being more a slab of light hazelnut parfait banded by a ribbon of chocolate and sponge. This, too, is not a complaint.

It is accomplished, proper cooking from a menu which manages the odd flourish while also throwing in a few dishes – pea and ham soup, steak frites, fish and chips – which will provide balm for the weary traveller who just needs to be fed. To complete the love-in, the wine list gets top marks for managing to offer nearly half the wines by the glass. Of course, differences among various outposts of any chain are legion, and this one has been open just a couple of months, so they will be at the top of their game. Still, this is a serious operation trying to offer something many notches above standard hotel slurry and sludge dining. If they can promise not to wake me up in the middle of the night again, I might even return. ★

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