



Zara's look of love

ZARA Phillips is sparkling with happiness after boyfriend Mike Tindall proposed.

The Gloucester rugby player asked the Queen's eldest granddaughter to marry him after a seven-year courtship.

And the news came hot on the heels of the engagement of Prince William and Kate Middleton last month.

Accomplished horse rider Zara, 29, who lives with her long-time partner in Cheltenham, said she was left shocked but very happy when he proposed.

She showed off her bespoke diamond and platinum engagement ring – a single solitaire diamond sitting on tens of pave set diamonds on a split platinum band.

Mike, 32, who has been capped 66 times, was ecstatic and said: "I am delighted Zara has agreed to marry me. We are both very excited about the next stage of our lives together."



Pure luxury and all the trimmings



Sophie Conran has created luxury Christmas retreats at Temple Guiting Manor



Forget the endless shopping lists and treks to the supermarket . . . a luxury escape to Christmas in the Cotswolds is what we all need, with everything taken care of. **LUCY PARFORD** found out more about a dream break away from it all

WHEN the snow's falling outside, your shimmering new Christmas dress is swinging from its hanger and you've logged off from work for a fortnight, what could be more exciting than escaping to an exclusive country retreat for Christmas and New Year?

Sophie Conran for Temple Guiting offers bespoke country house parties which really come into their own at this time of year.

Forget last-minute cooking stresses and trying to squeeze everyone on to your sofa, just roll up to the picturesque grounds of the Grade I-listed Temple Guiting Manor and everything will be taken care of.

Sophie, who is the daughter of designer Sir Terence Conran and sister of fashion designer Jasper Conran, has converted barns within the grounds of the manor house into a luxury escape.

An idea of what she can create for a two-night Ultimate Christmas package includes lunch on arrival followed by an afternoon with wrapping expert Jane Means who will teach you how to wrap every Christmas gift perfectly.

In the evening enjoy a three-course seafood feast cooked by a private chef.

The next day, see all the Christmas classics created from brandy butter to a Christmas pudding with Maxine Clark, a former teacher at Leith's Cookery School in London.

Sample some of the different varieties of mincemeat and smoked salmon from all over the UK and in the afternoon enjoy a hands-on class to create an array of Christmas treats and canapés.

The break, which costs £899 per person, finishes with a special festive dinner.

Sophie, who is a mother-of-two and splits her time between Bayswater and West Sussex, says: "My perfect Christmas would be one surrounded by family, thick snow, and acres of candles, fairy lights and festive decorations.

"There would be a trip to midnight mass at a tiny local church which hands out homemade mince pies and mulled

wine – very cosy and friendly. That would be followed by a day of stocking opening, communal cooking, presents, too much to eat with silly hats and crackers, giggling, a big family walk, finishing with scrabble by the fire."

Sophie's retreat in the heart of the Cotswolds is one of her many projects which also includes designing the Sophie Conran for Portmeirion range of kitchen and tableware and writing for magazines such as House Beautiful.

The venue offers state-of-the-art facilities and is surrounded by award-winning gardens designed by Jinny Blom. There are five luxurious suites in the barn, all decorated to Sophie's impeccable taste, and a further three suites and two double bedrooms in the main Manor House, making it the perfect site for a large family get together.

Both the barn and Manor House are feeling sparkly and snug with the log fires glowing and beautiful Christmas trees in situ.

The pre-Christmas weekends have proved popular with a Champagne reception, a tasting menu with matching wines, overnight accommodation and continental breakfast from £220 per person.

If you can't quite stretch to an all-inclusive Christmas escape this year, Sophie has some great advice for pulling off a Christmas to remember, wherever you are.

"On Christmas day itself, there's no need to take on every responsibility even if the celebrations are happening at your home," she says.

"It's important to make your life as simple as possible, while maintaining the sense of occasion.

"Nothing is worse than being stressed on the day. It's supposed to be fun for you and should not turn into a nightmare. Prepare as much as possible beforehand and delegate, delegate, delegate.

"To save stress in our family, we divide up the workload so that every adult is assigned a part of the meal. One person will bring a starter and another a pudding.

"There could be a sauce-chef who brings the cranberry sauce and bread sauce, and another the crackers and table decorations. In this way, you only have to concentrate on



Festive red and white candles and floral arrangements adorn Sophie's Christmas table

the turkey, veg, stuffings and timings.

"I always get the kids to do the table and they make it look lovely, with great place names."

Sophie, who has written two recipe books – Soups and Stews and Sophie Conran's Pies – along with producing a range of cutlery with Arthur Price, revels in the traditional side of Christmas.

"We always wrap pound coins or lucky charms in tinfoil and push them into the pudding before cooking, anyone who finds one will have luck for the year ahead," she says.

"This year we bought our lucky charms at Cox & Cox, one of my all-time favourite websites for gorgeous home accessories and gifts.

"Once cooked, light the pudding. The best way to do this is to heat the brandy to near-boiling point, light it while it is still in the pan, and quickly pour around the pudding."

Sophie Conran for Temple Guiting is booked out for Christmas and New Year's Eve this year but the venue can be enjoyed all year round.

In the warmer months guests can make the

most of the pretty herb garden and terrace and outdoor activities.

It is perfect for a glamorous hen party, where Sophie held her own earlier this year before marrying Nick Hofgren in Bermuda, with afterwards full of cake decorating with Peggy Porschen, cocktails with cocktail guru Ruiari Gillies or flower arranging with Nicky Tibbles of Wild at Heart.

■ If you are interested in booking a group stay at Temple Guiting, or you would like some further information or inspiring ideas, call 020 7706 1309 or email info@sophieconran.com



Make a wreath

FLORIST Robbie Honey's creative masterpieces have graced some of the most talked about weddings and parties in the social calendar.

You can book him for a workshop at Sophie Conran for Temple Guiting where he will show you how to recreate the glamour and style of his signature arrangements in your own home.

Robbie's Christmas wreath

A Christmas wreath is a cheerful welcome on a front door and also looks wonderful on the table with a candle in the centre.

You can buy readymade spruce wreaths to which you can add decoration or buy a sack of moss, a wire frame and a bundle of spruce and do it yourself.

The key is not to skimp on trimmings. Be lavish and fearless and decorate it with bundles of cinnamon tied with raffia, rustic cones jostling with whole dried limes and dried orange slices and bunches of lavender.

Try choc pots

ONE of the food and drink experts who shares her passion with guests at Sophie Conran for Temple Guiting is chocolatier Chantal Coody of Rocco.

Chantal is the author of four books about chocolate and has three shops in London.

Chocolate Tea Pots by Chantal Coody

This is one of the simplest and most delicious chocolate pudding recipes. The scalded cream cooks the chocolate, and the earl adds a delicate, perfume.

Ingredients

150g/6oz real dark chocolate
350 ml/ 12fl oz double cream
1 Earl Grey tea bag
1 teaspoon orange flower water

Method

Make the tea in a cup using a couple of tablespoons of boiling water, leave for one minute and squeeze out the tea bag.

Chop the chocolate and put it into a jug. Scald the cream by boiling it, use a pan with plenty of room for expansion. Pour the cream on to the chocolate, and let it stand for two minutes.

Using a hand held wand mixer, whiz the cream and chocolate until you have a very smooth emulsion or ganache, then add the tea and the orange flower water, and give it another quick whiz.

Pour into small coffee cups, glasses or ramekins and chill for at least two hours.

