

Best of British Getaways

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THE DETAILS

Billesley Manor Hotel & Spa rates start from £160 per night B&B based on two people sharing. For more information and to book a stay, visit bespokehotels.com, billesleymanor.com or call 01789 279955.

Stratford-upon-Avon

LIZ STANSFIELD

Check into recently refurbished Billesley Manor in the heart of Shakespeare land for a spot of cosy R&R



If a hotel is judged on its welcome alone, Billesley is surely the warmest of any I have experienced. Literally: there's a showstopping fireplace, lit logs and cosy corners at every turn. I've checked in for 48 hours of easy luxury in this recently refurbished 16th-century manor house, just outside of Stratford-upon-Avon in Warwickshire. This is Shakespeare territory – the main man was said to visit the manor and use the library, and he wrote *As You Like It* at this very location. If anything gives you the green light for sitting quietly with a good book – Billesley does.

R&R is the name of the game here, but there are two things that every guest should have on their manor-based 'schedule'. I enjoy an incredibly relaxing back, neck and shoulder massage and a bit of sauna and steam time, pleased to discover the spa's pool allows for some proper lengths after all that sitting about. And before we get our glad rags on for dinner and drinks, we head out to the grounds just before sunset for a turn about the *Alice in Wonderland*-inspired topiary gardens, part of 11 acres of gorgeous grounds.

An impressive cocktail menu awaits in the main bar, and dinner is a friendly – but fine dining – affair in the hotel's stunning Stuart Restaurant, where even the menu has a nod to treading the boards. I tuck into a starter ('Opening Act') of perfectly assembled prawn and crayfish cocktail; a rich plate of pink venison, hasselback spuds and veggies ('Main Event'); and a classic pud of crème brûlée ('Curtain Call'). After the last

18 months of elasticated leggings, it feels good to put on a frock and sit down to posh food and great wine in a super-special location.

If you can drag yourself away from Billesley, a day mooching about Stratford-upon-Avon is a day well spent. Independent shops and nice cafes await, and if the sun is shining you can book on to a boat tour for a relaxing hour on the Avon. We stop for lunch at local institution El Greco – a fabulous family-run Greek restaurant that serves up banquets with enough food, energy and general merriment to feed the 5,000. On the way back to my favourite fireside armchair, we book on to a gin tasting at the Shakespeare Distillery. Our guide gives us a brilliant tour before we enjoy numerous tastings and roll back to my now-claimed position in the main bar.

I check out and head home reluctantly, feeling rested and well fed, despite the flying visit. But I can confirm a trip to this gorgeous manor, be it long or short, will be a roaring success. ➤



From opposite: Billesley and its grounds; the relaxing lounge; an impressive four-poster room in the manor house



Jersey

AMANDA STATHAM

Sun, sea and scallops: the sophisticated Channel Island fringed with beautiful beaches is a seafood-lover's paradise for all ages



As my six-year-old son, Sol, tucks into the leg of a spider crab, I watch in awe and wonder what spell Jersey has cast over his previously unadventurous palate. We're here on a family holiday - it makes a change from the Med and

the whole Covid testing malarkey - and the largest (45 square miles) and most southern of the Channel Islands already seems a lot farther-flung than a four-hour ferry ride from Poole, with its golden beaches, pretty French-named harbours, soaring granite cliffs and restaurants offering delicious delicacies from the sea.

We're lunching at Jersey Crab Shack in St Brelade, easily identifiable by its cheery red awnings and striped picnic tables. It's the kind of restaurant that serves exquisite food in incredibly relaxed surroundings - pretty much the dream ticket for family dining. Finger-licking good crab tacos, chilli fried squid and truffle chips appear, followed by the spider crab with some shell-crushing implements, which my two sons pounce on and start wielding like mini surgeons. The fact they suck the legs clean of its sweet meat is testament to how delicious it is, and, bellies full, nobody asks for dessert.

Working off the meal isn't a problem though with glorious St Brelade's Bay on our doorstep. The kids run around in the salty air while we lie on the soft sand to recharge our batteries and soak up some sun (Jersey gets the most hours of sunshine in the UK) before retiring to St Brelade's Bay Hotel. Set just back from the seafront, this white, flower-filled oasis in five acres of gardens is an utterly charming mix of faded French glamour and chic Hamptons style - think Catherine Deneuve meets Grace Kelly in hotel form. Despite an afternoon at the beach, the kids clamour for a dip in the outside (heated) pool, so we dive in and float around on inflatable flamingos before drying off and heading out for supper at Feast in Gorey, a harbour village that sits in the shadow of medieval Mont Orgueil Castle.

Jersey's nearest neighbour is France, just 14 miles away, so it's little wonder the links are so strong, with many roads and villages having French rather than English names. I immediately fantasise about moving



Main image: St Brelade's Bay. Inset: the Greenhills Country House Hotel entrance

PHOTOGRAPH: GETTY IMAGES



to Gorey, falling for the pastel-coloured cottages, boats bobbing in the harbour, and scattering of restaurants with outside tables. Feast lives up to its name, delivering crispy crab cakes to the table followed by steaming bowls of plump moules mariniere with slim salty fries, which the kids dip into the garlicky, creamy juice with relish - another seafood success.

The next day we head to Royal Bay of Grouville for a tour with Shannon and John Le Seelleur, whose family have been farmers on the island for 17 generations and who now run Seymour Shellfish



and one of the largest farmed oyster beds in Britain. With the tide fully out, we stroll a mile out to sea to the very edge of their impressive 15 million oyster plot.

Sitting on a tractor trailer beneath a sky the shade of forget-me-nots, I'm offered a glass of chilled Champagne and told about the three-year harvesting process from tiny seed to full oyster, while the kids poke around in the sand pools. Shannon expertly shucks oysters and offers them with a squeeze of lemon, producing satisfied sighs as we marvel at the freshness (my sons nibble one, screw up their faces in disgust and hit the crisps). The sun beats down, glasses are topped up, more oysters slurped, conversation flows and we're all reluctant to move. Only the threat of the incoming tide is enough to shift us back to shore.

Next up is a Jersey Seafari exploring the north coast in a rib. The crew greets us at St Catherine's slip and soon we're bouncing across the sea while Bob Marley blasts through speakers and the coastline whizzes past. It's exhilarating and instantly jolts us from any bubbles and oyster-induced drowsiness. The boat does slow down for key sites like Devil's Hole, an eerily dark cave with a dramatic blow hole above, and Bonne Nuit Harbour (so called because fishermen sheltered there to get a good night's sleep), where we're transfixed as the guide brings to life stories of the island's German occupation during the second world war, including heroic information-gathering solo missions.

Clockwise from top right: the St Brelade's Bay Hotel pool; spider crab served at The Crab Shack; Sol checks out the oyster beds



By early evening the family's famished, so we leave the coast for Greenhills Country House Hotel's two AA rosette restaurant in St Peter's Valley. Technically you're only ever a 10-minute drive from the sea in Jersey, yet this gorgeous converted 17th-century granite farmhouse has distinctly rural vibes, with terracotta tubs overflowing with flowers, oak floors and antique furniture.

THE DETAILS

Rooms at St Brelade's Bay Hotel from £130 per night, including breakfast (stbreladesbayhotel.com). Condor Ferries (condorferries.co.uk) has various daily crossings to Jersey from Poole (four-hour fast ferry) or Portsmouth (10 hours).

The menus created by chef Lukasz Pietrasz are really a love letter to the island's best produce; think firm flakes of perfectly cooked Jersey turbot fillet with lobster ravioli, globe artichoke, crab bisque, samphire and tarragon oil. I also squeeze down a silky smooth vanilla panna cotta with fresh berries and Champagne sorbet while the kids devour a chocolate duo so good they lick their plates, to the waiter's horror.

Our final morning is spent inland at La Mare Wine Estate in St Mary, which might sound an odd choice for a family activity, but it turns out to be great fun, with friendly guide Bob entertaining adults with tours of the vines and wine-tasting, while simultaneously keeping kids amused with jokes, juice and chocolate samples.

There's just time for one last meal before catching an overnight ferry home, so on a whim we pick up a portable barbecue from a supermarket, handmade sausages from Brooklands Farm and freshly caught lobster and scallops from The Jersey Catch, then head to Plemont Beach on the wild north coast for a barbecue sheltered by caves.

It's a suitably scenic and tasty end to our seafood-and-eat-it trip, which has shown us you don't need to fly half way around the world to find an island with pristine beaches, great restaurants and fab hotels. Sometimes they're just a four-hour ferry ride away. ►

London

HELENA LANG

The Beaumont Hotel in Mayfair is a delicious spot for a bit of couple-time in the capital

On a cold, wet afternoon in October last year, I left the office early and hopped on a bus to London's West End. Jumping off opposite Selfridges and clutching a small holdall, I turned off frantic Oxford Street into a quiet – and previously undiscovered – Mayfair side-street (Brown Hart Gardens) to arrive at the chic, glamorous art deco Beaumont Hotel. Having crossed the smart, chequerboard-tiled lobby to check in, I was shown up to a room by a smiling member of staff. The door clicked shut – and bliss, I was alone in a luxurious hotel room with hours to kill.



What to do first? Flop on the multi-pillowed luxury bed and turn on the giant telly? Hell, yes. Plunder the giant fruit bowl that would satisfy the most indulgent Roman emperor? Of course. Wrap myself in the divine satin-trimmed robe and fill the white marble bathroom with steam and the scent of the delicious D.R. Harris toiletries? Most definitely.

At 6pm my other half arrived and there was something romantically illicit about his quiet knock and 'It's me' at the door. He too took great delight in diving into the hotel's chocolate truffles, rifling through the bedside playing cards and games suggestions before washing and dressing for dinner at the hotel's Colony Grill Room restaurant.

Waiting for the lift is another movie-style experience, with the retro art deco floor indicator dialling up to our floor and the doors swishing open before zipping us down to ground for cocktail hour in the Le Magritte Bar. This temple of dark wood, rich leather and artfully displayed black and white photography is an intimate space in which to nibble on some snacks and sip a Manhattan, Negroni or house Bloody Mary. I imagined that at any minute a rich American millionaire might arrive alongside Hercule Poirot for a murder mystery extraordinaire, but instead we drank up, I grabbed my evening bag and headed on in to the Colony Grill Room.

Here, it's like another performance from start to finish. The room – decorated with vivid landscape murals and Bloody Mary coloured leather – is staffed by wonderfully fun, friendly, informative and highly skilled staff. Watching them talk to, assist and



interact with guests is a pleasure and so is ordering from the everything-sounds-good menu. Eventually we choose a classic New York shrimp cocktail starter and Scottish halibut main course for me and an Orkney scallop escabeche and huge Blythburgh pork chop for him. The triumph, however, was the theatre of my Bananas Foster, cooked and flambéed table-side with all the oohs and aahs you would expect. Even the TV celebrity dining with her husband and friends a few tables over was impressed.

The next morning, while my beloved continued to snooze, I sneaked down to the mini-gym and attempted to work out on the state-of-the-art equipment before breakfast. Here, the most important meal of the day is an offering varying from the virtuous – such as Agen prunes in Japanese tea or the prettiest and sweetest fruit salad in a camomile infusion – to calorie-loaded sustenance, like sweetcorn fritters with a fried duck egg, or a bulging blueberry and violet muffin. It was all delicious.

All too soon it was time to quit the movie star lifestyle, pack up the holdall and check out... naturally smuggling some of those chocolate truffles in, too. Real life, along with the rain and the Oxford Street chaos, beckoned, but our memories will live forever.

THE DETAILS

Rates start from £470 per night for a Classic Room, which includes a 'Beaumont baker's basket'. Visit thebeaumont.com for more information.



From top: The bold Colony Grill Room restaurant; Le Magritte Bar; New York shrimp cocktail; camomile-infused fruit salad



Kent

LOUISE ATKINSON

A personal quest for a luxury eco-friendly staycation leads our writer to Frasers of Egerton near Ashford

When you start a quest to become more environmentally friendly, you expect your staycation options to be limited to yurts with compost loos or mud-walled buildings whiffing of incense. But it was the 'luxury eco' tag that drew me to Frasers of Egerton, where Lisa Fraser has repurposed a 300-acre farm into a rustic-chic wedding venue that also offers green-themed 'meal with room' options for the already married or anyone else who fancies a few nights away.



Over sparkling pink – locally sourced – wine, Lisa tells us how she studied environmental science at university, became a barrister, then married her farmer, Adam, and, after bringing up their children, set about rekindling her passion for sustainability by converting parts of the farm into a 'rural retreat'.

The bridal suite is a 17th-century oast house, but we are sleeping in a long barn, once the milking parlour but now four carbon-neutral bedrooms all powered by solar and air-source heat pumps, with harvested rain water running through the taps.

Our huge room has vaulted ceilings and French doors opening to a private terrace with stunning views and is decorated with an eclectic mix of velvet cushions, fur throws and pre-loved or repurposed furniture. Luxury eco indeed.

However, there's no time to test the spring of the enormous bed, as Lisa is keen to show us around the farm and leads us across a huge field of thigh-high grass to admire recently created wildlife ponds already attracting



rare and precious greater crested newts. The environmental theme extends to dinner (which we're encouraged to pre-order the day before to minimise food waste). Everything on the 'field to fork' menu is seasonal and locally sourced (the furthest anything has to travel is the fish, driven in daily from the Kent coast 31 miles away) then lovingly prepared by the Michelin-trained chef in a lofty, oak-framed two AA rosette restaurant.

Thankfully, although vegans are catered for, there's not a mung bean in sight. After sharing a 'chef's selection' of seasonal savoury treats as a starter, I am served a *huge* chunk of slow-cooked belly of Kentish pork topped with the crispiest crackling I've ever crunched, and my husband, Jon, happily digs into his sirloin of Sussex beef with triple-cooked chips and spring vegetables. I'm proud to say we also gave a proper taste test to quite a few of the English wines on offer, too.

Kent might not previously have been high on my list of destinations for a romantic weekend mini-break, but, leaving our grown-up children to fend for themselves at home, we were able to pack in a flurry of fun activities all within an hour's drive – whizzing around Canterbury Cathedral without anyone saying 'I'm bored'; trooping through Sissinghurst Castle without any evident eye rolls, and even hitting Camber Sands

for a wonderful beach walk.

On the way home we stop off for a tour at the Chapel Down vineyard, where our environmental odyssey was completed with the surprising news that although global warming is very much a BAD thing, it does appear to be improving the yield, variety and general deliciousness of the locally grown English grape. A small silver lining perhaps? ■



THE DETAILS

B&B in a double room in the eco-friendly 'Stags Barn' starts at £200. The seven-course seasonal tasting menu costs £65, or just drop in for brunch, lunch or afternoon tea in the garden. Frasers is closed on Mondays (and the restaurant is not open for dinner on Tuesdays). Visit frasersegerton.co.uk or call 01233 756122.

From top: the Partridge room in the Stags Barn; the Frasers farm from above; seasonal savoury treats: green bisque, tempura prawns, arancini balls and goat's cheese crackers

BEST OF BRITISH

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