

THE SUNDAY TIMES SECTION 8 | SEPTEMBER 7, 2008

travel



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THE PLANET)

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PUBS GO POSH

Cosier than a hotel, cheaper than a guesthouse, the new style of pub with rooms ticks all the boxes for an indulgent weekend. By Susan d'Arcy

A new breed of classy rural hostelry is changing the way we weekend, combining the best virtues of ye olde English coaching inn — cosy fires and bars, fat breakfasts, friendly service — with the classiest trimmings of a 21st-century hotel.

Think of them as bonsai country-house hotels, with a suitably diminutive price tag — most have rooms for little more (and sometimes quite a bit less) than £100 a night.

Here are 12 of our favourites. Welcome to the new wave of impeccably comfortable, thoroughly affordable weekends away.

1 THE INN ON THE TAY
Grandtully, Perth and Kinross
Geoff and Josie Wilson swapped the Glasgow rat race for Perthshire's slower pace last year, seduced by this inn's spectacular setting on the banks of the River Tay, flanked by forested hills.

Their bar's new deck maximises the views, as does the restaurant's wall of window. Home-cooked dishes celebrate the local bounty, including game from the surrounding estates and haggis made using their favourite butcher's secret recipe.

Rooms are spacious enough to accommodate a family of four, and all have contemporary decor, fresh flowers and windows opening onto the roaring Tay. Doubles from £60, B&B; 01827 840760, www.theinnonthetay.co.uk

2 THE SUN INN
Kirkby Lonsdale, Cumbria

Chocolate-box cute and quietly classy, Kirkby Lonsdale's cottages cosy up alongside artisan shops such as the award-winning Churchmouse Cheeses. The Sun fits in beautifully, its rooms held up by exposed stone and dark beams, but newly accessorised with blond wood and contemporary furniture.

Once you've visited the bar, take your tittle out the back to drink in "Ruskin's View", a sweeping panorama over the medieval Devil's Bridge to the Yorkshire Dales, immortalised by Turner in one of his best-loved watercolours.

Doubles from £90, B&B; 01524 271965, www.sun-inn.info

3 THE BLACK SWAN
Helmsley, Yorkshire

The shadow of the trouser press hung over this inn on the North York Moors until last May, when the trendy hotelier Simon Rhatigan, formerly of Le Manoir Aux Quat'Saisons and owner of the nearby Feversham Arms, got hold of it. Its bars have been spruced (log fires return this autumn) and the restaurant has rocketed to three AA rosettes. Last Christmas, Rhatigan opened a lovely tearoom; next month, he launches an Elemis spa.

The rooms are quietly classic, but an upgrade begins next month (continuing into the new year), with flatscreen TVs and more luxurious bed linen the welcome additions. Service is arguably

friendlier than at the Feversham, and the Swan's rates are certainly lower. Doubles from £160, including dinner and breakfast; 01439 770466, www.blackswan-helmsley.co.uk

4 THE DEVONSHIRE ARMS
Beeley, Derbyshire

The Devonshire Arms is the sort of proper old country pub where it should be compulsory to drink Theakston's Old Peculier. To deserve its oak beams and mullioned nooks and crannies, you should really have walked for hours across the Peak District dales, arriving ruddy-cheeked, windswept and ready to collapse beside the log fire.

The bedrooms to bag are the newly opened cottage quartet. Within nodding distance of the chickens, goats and ducks that live next door, they are elegantly striped, and some have big, indulgent bathrooms.

Dinner can be eaten in the pub or the conservatory brasserie. Either way, it's reassuringly British: bangers and mash, Barnsley chop, Chatsworth Old Spot belly pork. Breakfast involves sausage sarnies, egg soldiers and kippers. Doubles from £125, B&B; 01756 718111, www.devonshirebeeley.co.uk

5 THE KINGHAM PLOUGH
Kingham, Oxfordshire

The chef-proprietor, Emily Watkins, used to be Heston Blumenthal's sous chef, so foodies will be more than satisfied with the main draw — a restaurant



with Michelin tendencies, but where three courses often come in at less than £25. The triple-cooked chips are a homage to Watkins's Fat Duck days, but the menu is more of a guide than a guarantee — dishes can change in a flash if someone stops by mid-afternoon with tempting produce.

The bar is a fine place to fold out a newspaper, rest your feet on a log and work your way through the real ales. The rooms, though, are surprisingly feminine and Frenchified, with powder-blue and pastel-pink colour schemes, and bathrooms crammed into quirky corners.

If that's not enough, Kingham has been voted England's favourite village by Country Life, and the Barnford Hay Barn Spa is just down the road. Doubles from £85, B&B; 01608 658327, www.thekinghamplough.co.uk

6 THE RAGGED COT
Minchinhampton, Gloucestershire

There's more than a whiff of designer welly about this 17th-century Cotswolds inn: the wall-mounted trowels, the Colefax fabrics, the olives on the bar. It's so wonderfully unstuffy, however,



that it's still extremely popular with the locals. Rooms are distinctly contemporary — muted mushroom decor, bespoke silk drapes and black-slate bathrooms, with cute touches such as a complimentary twist of home-made fudge.

The food will remind you of Tom Brown's School Days: jellied ham hocks and spotted dick, eaten at scrubbed-clean wooden tables and sit-up-straight church pews. And outside the door are 600 acres of National Trust loveliness, for striding and riding excursions. Doubles from £120, B&B; 01453 884643, www.theraggedcot.co.uk

7 THE OLDE BELL
Hurley, Berkshire

Hurley's stone cottages are the colour of old gold, rambling with roses and glossy with yews, and the gaps between the hedges offer glimpses of the Thames coursing regally down to Henley. Its 12th-century coaching inn has always been pretty as a picture, and this summer the designer Ilse Crawford took over, intent on bringing to it a touch of the style she introduced to Babington House.

A warning, though: the chintz is still in the process of being chucked, so ask for a revamped room (to date, they've made over numbers 2, 3, 4, 5, 9, 10 and 11). These are fuss-free and spacious, using lots of tasteful rush matting and touches such as rocking chairs softened with lambswool throws.

The restaurant, presided over by the exuberant Rosie Sykes and Tony Abarno, formerly chef at the award-winning Anchor & Hope in central London, has stable-style banquettes and a pig's-head starter. Scrummy.

Doubles from £125, B&B; 01628 825881, www.theoldebells.co.uk

8 THE BATH ARMS
Horningsham, Wiltshire

The hotelier Christoph Brooke and the designer Miv Watts — mother of the Hollywood actress Naomi — make a formidable duo. Together, they have given an impressively modern twist to this quintessentially English inn.

The emphasis is on quirky rather than quaint, as the names of the 15 shabby-chic bedrooms (Geisha, English Eccentric, Peacock) suggest. The public bar now has a zinc counter and wrought-iron tables — but you can still have a game of skittles. And the restaurant is commendably down-to-earth. The Bath Arms happily declares: "It's not our ambition to get Michelin stars." Instead, it concentrates on game, fish and offal, with a pledge that the main ingredients come from within a 50-mile radius.

Doubles from £80, B&B; 01985 844308, www.batharms.co.uk

9 THE PEAT SPADE INN
Longstock, Hampshire

The gorgeous green folds of the Test Valley, sidling between Winchester and Salisbury, harbour one of the world's best fly-fishing rivers and one of its loveliest village inns. The Peat Spade revels in traditional country pursuits: its walls are weighed down with more stuffed wildlife than the average taxidermist's shop, and the pub has resident shooting and fishing guides.

The owners, Andrew Clark and Lucy Townsend, are ex-Hotel du Vin, as you can tell from the quality of the furnishings and the confident styling in the six bedrooms, which feature warm colours, tartan throws and smart shower rooms. The couple recently opened the Anchor Inn in Lower Froyle, Hampshire, another bastion of bygone Englishness,

and their revamp of the Queen's Arms in East Garston, Berkshire, should be unveiled this month. Doubles from £120, B&B; 01264 810612, www.peatspadeinn.co.uk

10 THE FOX & ANCHOR
Smithfield, London

A "country pub" weekend in London? The Fox & Anchor is the closest you'll get. In one of the capital's trendiest districts, this Dickensian drinking den has been reworked by the city-slicker hotel chain Malmaison, and it's full of character. The mahogany and brass bar serves real ales in pewter tankards, and the menu is pub grub all the way — pickled eggs on the counter, potted beef with piccalilli on the blackboard.

The rooms, however, are anything but plain and simple. All six have king-size beds, plasma TVs, Bose surround-sound and bathrooms with drench showers or freestanding baths. Doubles from £95, B&B; 0845 347 0100, www.foxandanchor.com

11 THE GURNARD'S HEAD
Zennor, Cornwall

The location is irresistible — craggy coves with secret beaches, towering cliffs that topple into the crashing Atlantic — and the Gurnard's Head provides an excellent accompaniment.

The rooms are small and homely, but the Vi-Spring mattresses ensure a good night's sleep, and there are rows of books rather than plasma TVs. There's



Ye picturesque Olde Bell, main picture; the dandy rooms at the Bull, in Bridport, above; and the freestanding paddling pools at Smithfield's Fox & Anchor, below
Mark Dyball/Alamy, Ray Lissom/De, Richard Walte



modern art in the bar, but the beer is priced for the locals rather than the tourist trade, and the food (sourced from within a 10-mile radius) is outstanding. The Sunday rib of beef is slow-cooked overnight for maximum flavour, and you'll remember the fish stew for years. Doubles from £72.50, B&B; 01736 796928, www.gurnardshead.co.uk

12 THE BULL
Bridport, Dorset

Given its Regency roots, the Bull is entitled to have something of the dandy about it — and, like Beau Brummell, it rates prettiness over practicality every time. Rooms are decorated in Fitzrovia reds and Hunter-welly greens, with oversize rococo mirrors and flamboyant wrought-iron beds.

The restaurant serves just-caught scallops from Lyme Bay and the tenderest lamb from the rolling fields of the Jurassic Coast, with bits and bobs from the market that sets up on the doorstep every Wednesday and Saturday. If you're a light sleeper, ask for a room at the back; Bridport high street is noisy. Doubles from £70, B&B; 01308 422878, www.thebullhotel.co.uk

WEEKEND WARRIORS
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