



NIGHT ON THE RAILS

► The Hawdon family face fried cockroaches for breakfast on the Chiang Mai sleeper

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Look where we're staying

We pick the most spectacular self-catering properties around, with added history, helipads and general wow factor

Alessia Horwich Published: 27 November 2011

1 House with a (big) hearth, Devon

Shute Barton is one of our most important medieval manor houses, and a stay gives you exclusive access to the great hall, battlements, turrets and, in the kitchen, what is thought to be the largest fireplace in England, built for roasting two oxen. Don't like ox? Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall's River Cottage Canteen is five minutes down the road.

2 Converted fish factory, Cornwall

A former pilchard-packing factory in the sleepy fishing village of Mousehole, within a stone's throw of the beach, the Fish Store scrubs up well. Its chunky beams have been restored, its wooden floors polished and a steam room, a home cinema and a log-burner installed. The harbour views remain unchanged.

Details: *Sleeps 10; four nights from £995 (or £550 for four); 01637 881942, uniquehomestays.com*

3 House with help, Exmoor

Oare Manor, nestled in an Exmoor valley, opened to guests this year, having been restored to its full 19th-century opulence, with copper baths, chaises longues and (the best bit) a butler and a housekeeper. It has Bose gadgets, wi-fi and plasma TVs — and, if you bag the master suite, you can slumber in a replica of a 7ft gilded bed designed by Napoleon for Josephine.

4 Floating fort, Hampshire

Spitbank, a 19th-century fort in the Solent, is being converted into an eight-bedroom luxury bolt hole, its concrete casing giving way to an outdoor hot tub, a sauna, a champagne bar, a wine cellar, a spa, a gym and sun decks. Accessible by chopper or boat, it will suit hedonists in search of privacy.

5 Period gatehouse, Surrey

Fifteen minutes outside Godalming, the gothic-revival Oxenford Gatehouse was designed in the 1840s

by Augustus “Westminster” Pugin. It has a stone spiral staircase, open fires and Victorian furnishings, some designed by the master architect himself. The views across the Surrey countryside are unsullied by modernity (apart from the occasional tractor).

6 Castle lookout, Kent

The spick-and-span farmhouse interior of Peverell’s Tower would never let on that it is the oldest property in the English Heritage portfolio, or that you’re right next door to sprawling, 12th-century Dover Castle. Scale the stairs to the private roof terrace, however, and views roll out across the Channel, with the battlements looming over you — then you’ll realise how special this location is. A stay here also grants you out-of-hours access to the castle and its spooky passages.

7 Minimalist barn, Essex

Resembling a modern-art gallery as much as a cosy weekend getaway, Tilty Hill Barn is a collection of glass, white walls and polished concrete assembled into a machine for open-plan living — all within the restored shell of a 17th-century barn. Designed by John Pawson, it has cinema-screen-sized windows in every room, giving views of the nice bits of Essex. Each comes with a remote-controlled blind for when you don’t want the outside looking enviously in.

8 Waterside tower, Suffolk

A looker on the outside and in, 16th-century Freston Tower peers over the broad expanse of the Orwell estuary, near Ipswich. Rooms are on the cosy side, and the spiral staircase is steep, but there are spectacular views from the rooftop (or from the top-floor sitting room if it’s chilly). Get further snapshots of the property’s bucolic backdrop through the 26 windows peppered about all six of its storeys.

9 Cottage With A Beach, North Wales

Beach Farm, on the Llyn peninsula, comprises three Scandi-modern properties, but it’s what’s outside that really counts: a 200yd slice of shingle and sand where only guests may paddle. You get five acres of grounds to tumble around in, and a fire pit for late-night marshmallows.

10 Cottage with a helipad, North Wales

After Simon Nixon made millions selling Moneysupermarket.com, he moved into the luxury holiday-rental business. And his definition of luxury includes a helipad. The rooms at Borth Cottage, on the east side of the Llyn peninsula, ooze class, with bespoke furniture, light installations, a cinema, a sauna, a hot tub and a garden that rolls straight out onto the beach. The views over Abersoch Bay are special, made more so when enjoyed from the egg-shaped freestanding bath behind the huge half-moon window in the master bedroom.

11 Romantic tower, Scottish Borders

From the ramparts of Aikwood Tower — built near Selkirk in the 1540s — you look out across the spectacular wildness of the Ettrick Valley. Newly done up, the property has a weaving spiral staircase, medieval nooks to creep into, open fires to toast toes in front of, and a great hall for boozy banquets.

12 Lighthouse lodge Highlands

Journey to what feels like the edge of the world. Teetering on the shores of Loch Linnhe, with Glen Coe mountains in front and West Highland hills behind, the still functioning (minus foghorn) Corran lighthouse was built by Robert Louis Stevenson's father in 1857. The keepers' cottages have been polished up into a luxury lodge with country-comfortable interiors and wood-burning stoves. Make friends with the keeper and he'll take you to the top.

