

20 great houses to rival Downton Abbey

Article | In pictures: Great British Houses



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For couples and families

1. Maiden's Tower, Leeds Castle, Kent
After the day visitors have gone you'll have the 500-acre estate all to yourself when you stay in the 16th-century tower next to the moated castle, once home to Henry VIII. The house has five B&B rooms with sleigh beds, throws and sleek en suite bathrooms. Full English breakfast is served in the 17th-century oak-beamed barn overlooking the moat. Don't miss exploring the castle with its 73ft Henry VIII Banqueting Hall, resplendent with its heavily beamed ceiling and unusual ebony floor. Get lost in the maze or try your hand at falconry. **Details:** B&B from £260 per night (01622 767823, leeds-castle.com)

This magnificent stately home is owned by descendants of the Tudor queen Jane Seymour; they are happy to give you a private tour. Three light and bright en suite bedrooms, some with wooden floors, period fireplaces and antiques, are in their own wing of the house. Have a full English breakfast or supper in the wood-panelled dining room, play croquet on the lawn or wander through the extensive garden and woodland. Stonehenge, Glastonbury and the National Trust's Stourhead mansion and gardens are within easy reach. **Details:** B&B for two is from £184 per night (airbnb.co.uk)

3. Tullibole Castle, Kinross-shire
Lord and Lady Moncreiff preside over this 17th-century castle approached through woodland on a 260-acre estate. Ascend a spiral staircase to the Great Hall with its enormous log fire where you can take complimentary afternoon tea. The bedroom has wooden floors, antiques, fireplaces and shuttered windows and there's a separate private bathroom (an extra double room is available but they'd have to share the same bathroom). Explore the grounds with its ruined medieval church and dovecote or head to Edinburgh or Glasgow, both within an hour's drive. **Details:** B&B doubles are from £110 per night (01577 840236, wolseylodges.com)

4. Wrackelford House, Dorchester, Dorset
Take part in traditional country pursuits such as partridge and pheasant shooting or fly fishing when you stay at this Georgian country estate. After the day's exertions, have drinks and dinner around the elm circular table in front of an inglenook fireplace at the Shooting Lodge (also available for self-catered lets for up to nine people). The main house has five rooms with marble bathrooms and is decked out with antiques, and art. **Details:** B&B doubles are from £140 per night (01305 264141, wolseylodges.com)

5. Rowton Manor, Chester, Cheshire
This bite-sized country pile is ideal for small groups wanting to experience the grandeur of an historic manor house. The grade II listed Elizabethan house marries traditional features such as English and French oak panelling with all the mod cons. Three king-size rooms come with luxury en suites with walk-in showers and contemporary bath tubs. Take afternoon tea in the rose garden, explore the lake and parterre or tinkle the ivories in the music room. Chester, with its fortified Roman wall and amphitheatre, is nearby. **Details:** Three nights for six is from £1,325, a week from £1, 625 (01637 881183, uniquehomestays.com)

6. Pentillie Castle, Saltash, Cornwall
Tuck into a locally sourced breakfast in the elegant dining room of this historic castle. The bedrooms have four-poster beds, are decked out in a modern country house style with antiques, immaculate bathrooms, crisp white bed linen and waffle bathrobes. Take afternoon tea in the drawing room with its wood floors, high ceilings and gilt mirror. Play croquet on the lawn, explore the American Garden or book a pheasant shoot, salmon or trout fishing. **Details:** B&B doubles are from £130 per night (01579 350044, pentillie.co.uk)

7. Scargill Castle, Co Durham
Order a Tudor banquet to eat in the baronial dining hall of this restored 16th-century fortification that's been converted into a delightful retreat for two. An arched entrance hall leads into the dining hall with its long oak table. A stone spiral staircase leads to the cosy oak-floored living room where a woodburning stove sits within a Tudor fireplace. A further flight leads to a romantic double bedroom adorned with Persian rugs. Bowes, Barnard and Richmond castles are nearby. **Details:** Three nights for two costs from £320.40, a week is from £600 (ruralretreats.co.uk)

8. The Tower, Abergavenny, Powys
Stay in your own castellated Elizabethan tower, a wing of a 16th-century manor house set in a mature walled garden. On the top floor is the bedroom with a hand-carved four-poster bed, wood floors and oriental rugs. Descend the hand-carved oak staircase to an elegantly tiled bathroom with a roll-top bath, original black marble wash stand and power shower. The octagonal sitting room has stone-mullioned lead windows, oak beams, chandelier and an open fire. Go walking in the Black Mountains or along the Offa's Dyke footpath, fish the River Usk and have a drink at the ancient Skirrid Inn. **Details:** Three nights' self-catering for two costs from £388, a week is from £479 (01874 676446, breconcottages.com)

9. Chilverbridge House, Arlington, East Sussex
Have breakfast delivered to your room at this stylish manor house in the picturesque Cuckmere Valley. Co-owner Nina has decked out the bedrooms in boutique hotel style with sleek en suites, goose down duvets and 400-thread count linens. Breakfast is a lavish affair with eggs benedict or scrambled egg and smoked salmon. Play croquet in the seven-acre grounds, also home to a heated outdoor pool. Glyndebourne, the Bloomsbury set's Charleston farmhouse and Brighton are all at hand. **Details:** Double B&Bs cost from £130 (07748 395 327, chilverbridgehouse.com)

10. Harptree Court, East Harptree, Somerset
Play croquet on the lawn or knock a ball about on the tennis court when you stay at this elegant Georgian manor house reached via a offer high ceilings, picture windows and deep roll-top baths. Breakfast is a thoroughly English affair; you can even have boiled Harptree eggs and soldiers. Cheddar Gorge, Bath and Wells cathedral are within easy reach. **Details:** B&B doubles are from £130 per night (01761 221729, harptreecourt.co.uk)

11. The Gatehouse, Bridgnorth, Shropshire
Prince Rupert, a nephew of Charles I and commander of the royalist troops, took refuge in this twin-turreted Elizabethan gatehouse. Marvel at the thick brick Tudor walls, carved oak spiral staircase, two panelled bedrooms and rare 16th-century ornamental plasterwork. Recently refurbished, it now comes with designer bathrooms, a sleek kitchen, underfloor heating and satellite TV. If you can't bear cleaning, cooking — or even opening the front door — a maid, cook and butler can be arranged. **Details:** Two nights' self-catering for four is from £495 (01746 714616, www.uptoncressethall.co.uk)

12. Hellifield Peel Castle, near Skipton, North Yorkshire
Francis and Karen Shaw lovingly restored this magnificent ruined castle located in a picturesque setting between Skipton and Settle. There are five boutique hotel-style bedrooms including Chapel, with its stained glass and stone mullioned windows, 17th-century four-poster bed and turret bathroom with deep volcanic-red bath. **Details:** One night's B&B is from £170 (01729 850248, peelcastle.co.uk)

For big groups

13. Felin Newydd Manor House, Powys
Fancy hiring a Mr Carson for your own weekend house party? This Georgian manor on a 50-acre estate near Hay-on-Wye can arrange everything from butlers and chefs to chauffeurs and jazz singers. The nine boutique hotel-style rooms feature white linen, featherdown duvets and Vi-Spring beds. There's also a baby grand piano, pre-laid fires and fresh flowers from the garden in the elegant reception rooms. All the usual country pursuits such as hunting and fishing can be arranged, as well as canoeing and guided walks. **Details:** Three nights for 18 is from £3,400 and a week is £5,250 (01874 754216, countrypad.co.uk)

14. Dairsie Castle, Cupar, Fife
Even the children get four-poster beds at this six-bedroom, self-catering castle, ruined in the 19th century and rebuilt in the early 1990s in a medieval style. The sprawling family bedroom has a king-size and two large single four-posters plus en suite bathroom with a great view, with a stone fireplace, stone tiled bath and a dining table seating 12, overlooked by a minstrel's gallery. There are six acres of grounds to explore, with lovely woodland walks to the River Eden and a walled herb garden. St Andrews, with its world-famous golf courses and long sandy beaches, is within easy reach. **Details:** Self-catering for 13 is from £600 per night (airbnb.co.uk)

15. Silverholme, Lake Windermere, Cumbria
It's hard to beat the location of this eight-bedroom Georgian manor house on the shores of Lake Windermere. Ascend the grand staircase to country house-style bedrooms with antiques and floral fabrics. Downstairs is a thoroughly modern kitchen/diner with floor-to-ceiling windows and sleek units plus a more formal dining room with deep-red walls, candelabras, a marble fireplace and oil paintings. Take a Segway tour of the 5,000-acre Graythwaite Hall estate or fish for trout in the well-stocked private lake. Children will love the high-wire adventure course Go Ape at nearby Grizedale Forest. **Details:** Three nights' self-catering for 16 is from £3,000 (oneoffplaces.co.uk)

16. Blencowe Hall, Penrith, Cumbria
Go brown trout fishing or clay pigeon shooting in the grounds of this grade I listed fortified twin-towered manor dating back to the 1400s. Inside the oak-panelled interior are 12 rooms, ten en suite, some with cast-iron roll-top baths and four-posters. Play billiards or cook on the Aga in the well-equipped kitchen with its American-style fridge freezers. On the edge of the Lake District, Blencowe Hall is close to Greystoke village, with its ancient castle and 6th-century coaching inn. **Details:** Three nights' self catering for 24 is from £2,893, a week from £8,241 (01386 701177, ruralretreats.co.uk)

17. Middleton Hall, Belford, Northumberland
This grade II listed manor house near the spectacular Northumbrian coast has a jaw-dropping Grand Hall complete with an ornate ceiling, huge log fire and plenty of comfy sofas. A carved wooden staircase leads to ten contemporary rooms with mullioned windows. If you don't fancy cooking in the well-equipped kitchen a chef can be arranged to rustle up a three-course dinner worthy of Mrs Patmore, served in the dining room with its panelled walls, marble fireplace and chandeliers. Fish in the lake or play a game of snooker in the games room. Bamburgh, with its spectacular castle, is only five miles away. **Details:** Three nights' self catering for 24 is from £2,885, a week from £3,785 (01244 352300, sykescottages.co.uk)

18. The Parsonage, Ombersley, Worcestershire
You can't miss the unusual topiary animals as you arrive along the sweeping drive of this wisteria-clad grade II listed manor house, with its 12-acre gardens complete with arboretum, manicured lawns and orchards. Inside it's super stylish with cowhide rugs, faux fur throws, heavy draped curtains and a sleek kitchen. The pièce de résistance is the light-filled orangery with floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the garden. Upstairs are six bedrooms, three en suite, one with a contemporary bath under the eaves. Visit Harvington Hall, an Elizabethan moated manor house, or explore Ombersley with its Tudor and Georgian architecture. **Details:** Three nights' self-catering for 12 is from £2,325, a week from £2,960 (01637 881183, uniquehomestays.com)

19. Wortham Manor, Lifton, Devon
Experience the life of a prosperous Tudor gentleman when you stay at this 15th-century manor house. The magnificent dining hall is ideal for a special occasion with its gothic oak-beamed ceiling, huge stone fireplace and flagstone floor (some guests host medieval banquets replete with pigs roasting on a spit, jugglers and minstrels). There are eight simply furnished bedrooms, some with wood panelling and lofty ceilings, and a well-equipped kitchen. A cosy wood-panelled sitting room has an open fire and lots of books (but no TV). **Details:** Four nights' self-catering for 15 is from £886 (01628 825925, landmarktrust.org.uk)

20. Felmingham Hall, near Aylsham, Norfolk
If you really want to feel like the Lord or Lady of the Manor at this immaculate Elizabethan house you can hire your own butler, cook and even childcare. Inside, the seven-bedroom property oozes character, with oak panelling, ornate ceilings, stained glass, tapestries and antique oak furniture. Most of the suites have four-posters and all have sleek modern en suites with roll-top baths or showers. **Details:** Two nights' self catering for 14 is from £2,950, a week from £10,000 (01263 822222, felminghamhall.co.uk)



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