

Searching for Robin Hood

*Sherwood Forest is a place of legends, where characters like Robin Hood and his band of Merry Men sweep through the forest. **Giselle Whiteaker** goes on the hunt*

“That’s part of Sherwood Forest,” says my cab driver as I peer out of the windscreen at a small patch of trees. I’m expecting to see men in tights with bows and arrows, so the thicket leaves me mildly disappointed. “Are you going to Robin Hood’s tree?” he asks. “I went there as a boy. You used to be able to climb inside,” he adds nostalgically. “Can you get there by bicycle?” I ask optimistically. The driver gives me the once over before nodding unconvincingly. I’m already mentally playing hide and seek with the Merry Men at Robin’s tree so I shrug off his skepticism, grinning happily.

After a hectic month at work, I have booked a weekend away, just me, myself and I. I’ve never been to this part of the country and I’m keen to explore. I wheel my bag into the Clumber Park Hotel and Spa to a warm welcome. Sitting in the heart of Sherwood Forest right opposite Clumber Park, this seems like the perfect place to start my adventure.

Checked in to my clean, comfortable room, I wend my way back to the hotel’s Normanton Inn for a light bite. The pub-style fare is tantalising. I take my time over the menu, watching dishes arrive at nearby tables to see what looks good. The room is busy but not rowdy, with two large groups chatting cheerfully and couples hiding in the subdued lighting in the corners. I opt for the soup de jour; a deliciously creamy broccoli concoction, not too heavy, and follow it up with a smoked chicken salad. “Because the chicken is smoked, it will be light pink, but it is cooked,” explains the friendly waitress. The tender chicken morsels with mixed greens and mango salsa topped with crunchy wontons have a peppery edge, flashes of spice putting my

tastebuds on alert. I assuage them with a smooth glass of South African Chenin Blanc, which is enough to make my eyes droop.

In the morning I consume an enormous breakfast to compensate for my healthy dinner, then go directly to the spa for an indulgence – I have booked a Kamatan treatment, designed to help me “pacify the mind and touch serenity with a complete de-stressing treatment.” While I fill in the forms I book a bicycle post-spa.

Therapist Harriet leads me past the swimming pool and into the treatment room. She indicates for me to sit down, and gently rinses my feet. “This is a Thai ritual, westernised,” she explains. “We start with the feet because the Thai belief is that toxins leave the body through the feet.” All I know is that it feels good. I clamber onto the massage table and Harriet prods, rubs, and soothes my aches and pains, starting with the pressure points. She pushes deeper into the muscles with a warm herbal poultice as I sink into spa-bliss. Completing each section of my body with a deep oil massage and some gentle stretching, I sink closer and closer to unconsciousness.

85 minutes later Harriet gently nudges me into a waking state and hands me the poultice. “You can’t heat it again, but you can put it in your bath,” she explains. She takes me to the relaxation room where sun-lounge-style recliners hug the edges of the room, invitingly covered in plush duvets. I sip on tea as I convince myself not to nod off in the quiet, calming space.

It’s time to work off my breakfast excesses. I collect my bicycle from the spa reception and source precise directions to Robin Hood’s tree. “Turn left out of the hotel. At



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the first roundabout, turn right. It’s all sign-posted. Take the next left, and at the bottom of that road is Sherwood Forest,” they say. It isn’t until I cycle out of the driveway that I realise I’ve forgotten to ask how far it is.

Cycling along trying to read the directions scrawled on the back of a map that covers only a fraction of the local area, I start to wonder whether this was such a good idea. The first roundabout is an interminably long way away. When I finally get there, there are no signs. I follow the directions but it doesn’t feel right, so I turn back and phone a friend.

“Again?” Ian mutters as I explain that I am semi-lost. He muffles a sigh of exasperation as he consults Google. My instincts have served me well. The directions I have are correct, apart from one tiny detail: there are two roundabouts and I need to continue to the second one. On the right track, I whistle my way through the countryside, free-wheeling past paddocks of sheep. I still have no idea how far I’m going, but at least I am going the right way. As it turns out, it’s a good six miles, a solid yet pleasant cycle.

At Sherwood Forest I lock the bicycle and walk to the Major Oak. Families stroll the forest grounds, dappled shadows dancing across the well-maintained walkways. Young boys wear Robin Hood hats, and I see one adult fully decked out in the latest in forest-wear, getting into the spirit. The Major Oak spreads its limbs across a large space, the area fenced off to preserve the root system. I sit on the grass opposite, seeking glimpses of forest nymphs, using my imagination to fill the gaps. The vast tree is propped up with crutches, its estimated age (up to 1,000 years old) catching up with it. It dawns on me that I’ve ridden six miles just to see a tree.

Reluctantly re-mounting my bicycle I trace my path back to the hotel, ducking into Clumber Park. Once the country estates of the Dukes of Newcastle, the park covers a whopping 3,800 acres. The parklands are so picturesque that I continue cycling, taking a six-mile detour around the

central lake, stopping at the café, the walled kitchen garden, and numerous picture-perfect viewpoints. It is with some relief that I complete the loop, and hours after I left the hotel, glide slowly into the carpark.

I have earned dinner, choosing the Courtyard Restaurant, which serves a range of locally-sourced foods and traditional cuisine with a modern twist. The duo of smoked salmon terrine is a generous slab wrapped in smoked salmon, served with crunchy crouton-style bread fingers. It is surprisingly light and tangy, and I quickly consume the plateful. For my main course I can’t decide between the Cajun salmon or the sea bass. “This one,” says the waitress pointing at the sea bass description, “...is posh fish and chips.” That’s the one then.

She’s right. The delicately crumbed fish is presented beautifully, accompanied by a mushy-pea fritter, crusty on the outside and satisfyingly smooth on the inside. Chunky chips complete the dish. It’s fish and chips with an extreme makeover that resisted the urge to upsize. It’s perfection.

I think about skipping dessert until I see the deconstructed banana and toffee cheesecake. My curiosity urges me to order. The light mousse-style cheesecake comes surrounded by dabs of decadently sweet toffee, interspersed with tangy, fresh raspberries and topped with banana chips. I hesitantly lift a small spoonful to my mouth. Then another. And another. It is with a rueful glance that I swipe the final toffee splotch into my mouth, smacking my lips together in satisfaction.

The next morning I spend hours floating contentedly in the pool, making my way to the sauna when I feel waterlogged. I had considered joining the Segway rally, held on a track on the hotel grounds, but instead I cosset my lethargy. I may not have seen Robin Hood this weekend, but the spa, the dining, and the picturesque location have more than made up for it. ■



Robin Hood may also have enjoyed these forested properties:



The charming Clumber Park Hotel & Spa

Clumber Park Hotel & Spa

offers great value short break packages year-round. This Autumn, guests have the choice of an invigorating "Walk on the Wild Side" walking break, costing just £79pp, including dinner, bed, breakfast, free entry into Clumber Park (National Trust) and the Walled Gardens, and use of the hotel's Pathfinder Guides. Also on offer are an Anytime Treat Spa Break, a Family Getaway, and the hotel's popular "Friday Freebie" or "Lazy Sunday Afternoons".

Full details can be seen at www.clumberparkhotel.com or call the hotel on 01623 835333.



Bourne Place, Horsell Common Road, Horsell, Surrey

Guide price £2,950,000

Agent: Seymours Tel: 01483 755222

This 5-bedroom property enjoys a 13-acre rural estate tucked out of sight within the secluded surroundings of Horsell Common.



Lyefield Lodge, Forest Green, Dorking, Surrey

Guide price £979,950

Agent: Lancasters Tel: 01737 371700

Nestling on the edge of Forest Green this quintessential stone lodge, is a gem, full of charm and character, beautifully situated within a 7.2 acre estate, together with paddock, stables and separate gated access.



Buck Street Cottage, Meekswell Lane, Symonds Yat West

Guide price £495,000

Agent: Roscoe Rogers & Knight Tel: 01600 772929

This tastefully restored and extended character 4-bedroom country cottage is located high on the slopes of the Wye Valley with the benefit of 3.8 acres of wooded and landscaped grounds with terracing and a meandering driveway and garage.



Row Hill Cottage, Bramshaw, Hampshire

Guide price £495,000

Agent: Stratford & Stratford Tel: 023 8028 3828

Row Hill Cottage is approached by a 5-bar-gate directly from the area of the New Forest where the ponies roam free. The property has a lovely mature garden with shingled driveway and parking area.