

SUSSEX STAYCATIONING

STAYCATIONS ARE THE NEW VACATIONS THIS YEAR, BUT THERE ARE SOME PLACES TO ESCAPE THE STAYCATION SCRAMBLE. GISELLE WHITEAKER FINDS A HOME AWAY FROM HOME IN WEST SUSSEX.

Hotel booking sites across the UK have been reporting record sales since the government urged Brits to holiday at home this summer. Short-notice changes to quarantine regulations are fuelling the fire and, if you haven't booked a month in advance, it's becoming harder to find available rooms, especially on weekends. This is all great news for the beleaguered British tourism industry, but for those of us needing a break, it means one of two things: more forward-planning or more extensive searching.

The trick, it seems, is to move away from the known names and popular hotspots and focus on discovery. There is something to like about every place on Earth; it's just a matter of finding that thing. Now is the perfect

time to seek out a new favourite bolthole and explore its surrounds. That's how my boyfriend Elio and I end up on the outskirts of Partridge Green, a village buried in the countryside, midway between Horsham and the south coast. We're booked in to stay at Lancasters Cottage, a boutique bed and breakfast with three en suite rooms, secure parking and a magnificent panoramic view of the South Downs.

Sarah Brewer greets us at the door, along with Cookie and Dotty, the family's beagles. All three are enthusiastic, making us feel welcome as they guide us to our room. What a room it is. We're in Woodpecker, the super-king-size suite, which is decked out in country home décor. The bed is the focal point, but the feature wall behind the headboard takes





all the attention with its plethora of woodland birds. This is replicated on the cushions, curtains and a wall in the bathroom. On either side of the bed there are bronze rabbit lamps, another sitting on a small table in the corner nook, with two comfortable armchairs. The room has that cosy feel that instantly makes us feel comfortable, so we flop across the bed and order our breakfast for tomorrow.

The Brewers have adapted to COVID regulations by replacing their family-style breakfast service with personalised breakfast deliveries to each room. Each morning of our stay, Sarah wheels in a trolley at our requested time, groaning with breakfast goodies. We start every day with fresh fruit, muesli, yoghurt, orange juice, eggs done to our liking – omelettes one day, boiled eggs the next – toast, pastries and hot beverages. We're tempted to stay in bed for this repast, but it's more practical to sit at the table by the window, looking out over the garden and the fields beyond.

There's a surprising amount to discover in the area, too. There are six golf clubs within 20 minutes' drive and a plethora of walking and cycling routes. Nine vineyards are in the immediate vicinity, the majority of which can be visited, and there is a host of gardens. Leonardslee Lakes and Gardens, recognised as the finest woodland gardens in England, is a mere 10-minute drive away and sprawls over 240 acres. Knepp Castle Estate, Arundel Castle, the remains of Bramber Castle and stately homes such as Petworth House are also within striking distance.

We make our way to Chichester, a short drive away, taking in the city's impressive 12th-century cathedral and Chichester Cross, an elaborate Perpendicular market cross in the centre of the city. The 12,000-acre Goodwood Estate is in the area and well worth visiting, even though this is not a festival weekend.

Goodwood is England's greatest sporting estate. Seat of the Dukes of Richmond for over three centuries, the family has always welcomed friends and guests to share in their love of sport and the hospitality that comes with it. In normal times, Goodwood hosts three of the largest events in the social and sporting calendar: the Festival of Speed, the Goodwood Festival and Goodwood Revival.



On our return journey, we stop at Boxgrove Priory. This small Benedictine priory was founded in about 1107, originally for just three monks. The priory church became Boxgrove's parish church after the Suppression of the Monasteries and is still in use, with the ruin of a two-storey guest house, roofless but standing to its full height at the gable ends, sitting behind the church.

When we depart Lancasters Cottage, fondly farewelled in much the same way we were greeted, we swing by The Sculpture Park near Farnham. Little do we know we'll wind up spending the majority of our day here – and still not see everything. This is the world's largest all-year sculpture exhibition, with 300 sculptors showcasing around 650 sculptures. The majority of the sculpture are for sale, so the exhibits evolve over time across the 10-acre arboretum and wildlife-inhabited water gardens.

Paths meander past the majority of artworks with a one-way system in place. There are four circuits to follow that cover the artworks in their entirety. It's easy to be overwhelmed with so much creativity assailing the senses. When we start out, we carefully examine each piece of work and discuss its merits. By the end, we skip to the ones that draw our attention.





As a subjective discipline, it's hard to pick a favourite; there are dozens that stand out. In a little hollow, a pair of life-sized rutting stags made of metal and driftwood are duking it out; skeletons by Wilfred Pritchard are scattered across the site, entertaining with their quirky, animated poses; there's an abstract wire and metal piece called Portal that beckons to the imagination. A hippo hides in the bullrushes and an enormous spider towers overhead in a clearing. No matter what your taste in art may be, there will be something here to amuse, evoke or inspire.

After a day well spent, as we make our way home, Elio says, "It's a shame we have to leave. I could easily have stayed a few more days."

It seems the secret of a perfect staycation is more than finding a comfortable place to lay your head. It's about unleashing the inner curiosity that is so often stifled and embarking on a journey of discovery. You never know what you might find.



INFO
To book a room in the lovely Lancasters Cottage, see westsussexbedandbreakfast.co.uk.