

# SUSTAINABILITY IN THE NEW FOREST

**THE NEW FOREST MAY BE BRITAIN'S SMALLEST NATIONAL PARK, BUT IT ATTRACTS ITS FAIR SHARE OF VISITORS. THE SAME CAN BE SAID OF COTTAGE LODGE HOTEL. GISELLE WHITEAKER STAYS AT THIS BOUTIQUE, ECO-CHIC BOLTHOLE.**



It's a chilly old evening when my boyfriend Elio and I alight at Brockenhurst station. Our breath creates clouds around our faces as we stroll the short distance to Cottage Lodge Hotel, moments from the centre of the largest village within the New Forest. The hotel was originally built in 1650 as a forester's cottage and was constructed using reclaimed timber from a ship and handmade bricks. From the outside, it looks like a cosy inn, and entering through the distinctive yellow door, the inside lives up to these expectations.

Cottage Lodge Hotel is far from a formal, large-lobbied hotel. In the compact entrance hall, there is a desk with a bell. A doorway on the left leads to the restaurant, the doorway on the right leads to the snug, where Elio and I



Top: Free-roaming ponies are a highlight of the New Forest. Bottom: The hues of the New Forest.



Ponies, donkeys and sometimes cows can be seen grazing.

are directed and offered tea, coffee and cake while we wait. There's a dresser holding an honesty bar and a bookshelf loaded with board games.

Warmed by our cuppas, we are guided through higgledy piggledy hallways to our room. The original building forms the heart of the hotel, which has been sympathetically extended over the years. Now, there are 16 rooms, all individually designed with an eco-chic ethos. Our room features a king-sized four-poster bed, handcrafted from New Forest timber by a local tree surgeon. The bedside tables are chunks of solid timber and there are double doors that open onto a Juliet balcony. We won't be opening those doors with the current temperature, but they keep the room flooded with light during those precious few sunlight hours. It's one of those rooms that feels like home as soon as you step inside.

After an indulgent full English – and largely New Forest – breakfast the next morning, we meet with Maurizio and Francesca, who took over Cottage Lodge Hotel a mere six months ago. Their goal is to make the hotel as sustainable as possible, with this ethos extending to local produce, refillable toiletries and upcycled furniture. The toilet paper is by a company that ploughs the profits into building toilets in communities that are without; the dining tables are made from the trunk of a single Redwood tree and contain the scars of its life, smoothed over with resin; the art on the walls is all local; and in the long term, the pair are looking into renewable energy options. They're not

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Maurizio and Francesca aim to make the hotel as sustainable as possible.



The beds are crafted by a local tree surgeon.



doing it to say they're doing it, either. It's something they both clearly believe in and subscribe to. They're walking the walk.

Now, it's our turn to walk. No visit to the New Forest is complete without admiring the landscape and catching sight of the free-roaming ponies that graze at will. Bundled up in warm winter clothing, we stroll through the village, past the independent stores that grace the main street, and on to Rhinefield Road, which leads us to Whitefield Moor.

The New Forest has more than 140 miles of tracks and footpaths, traversing ancient woodland, beautiful heathland, pretty villages and a 40-mile 'secret' coast. Today, our plan is to cover a mere six miles. We follow the edge of the moor, admiring the autumnal colours – green and russet red – and the numerous ponies, all of which ignore our passage. The overcast sky adds to the moody ambience.

When we reach Whitefield Moor car park, we follow the short route around Ober Water, passing along gravel tracks through a variety of habitats, including heathland with gorse and bog, grassland, natural and formerly enclosed woodland, and Ober Water stream itself. Even in winter, this area

attracts visitation. There are people walking their pooches, small family groups, a photographer, and couples walking hand in hand, many pausing to admire the ponies clustered around the bushes.

Returning to Cottage Lodge Hotel, we feel we have earned a slice of lemon drizzle cake. We warm up in the snug, playing board games and chatting with other patrons. It's a lovely, social way to end the day.

We are booked in to White Tails restaurant within the hotel for dinner. White Tails is run independently from the hotel by Ramsey Hammad, alongside Chef Matthew Spencer, with the pair often working alone. They make a formidably efficient team, with Ramsey meeting, greeting and managing diners and Matthew dishing up delicious fare.

We start with a beautifully crunchy king prawn tempura, paired with home-made sweet chilli dipping sauce, and salmon cannelloni. This surprising dish plays with the concept of cannelloni, with smoked salmon wrapped around a light mousse, resting on a mound of tomato, chilli and avocado salsa.



The New Forest landscape is arresting year-round.



A forested area near Ober Water.

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Salmon cannelloni.



Tender lamb shank.



Crispy pork belly.



Salted caramel cheesecake.

With the arrival of winter, we lean towards the hearty dishes for our mains, choosing the locally sourced lamb shank, served with chive mash, red cabbage and rich gravy. The lamb has been slow-cooked and is so tender it melts away from the bone. The crispy pork belly also delivers, living up to its name, with spectacularly crunchy crackling topping off the soft pork meat, which is stacked on black pudding, gratin potatoes and creamy savoy cabbage.

The dessert choices scream comfort food, and we're listening. We share a piping hot apple and berry crumble with custard and a wedge of salted caramel cheesecake, served with crushed chocolate and honeycomb pieces, that avoids being too much by the slight bitterness in the chocolate crumbs.

Departing Cottage Lodge Hotel the next morning, headed for the station, we come across four donkeys standing in a queue formation along the street, as if waiting for a bus – or for a helping of that cheesecake. It's a delightful reminder of where we are and one of the many reasons to visit this unique part of the country. ■



Trees in the New Forest.

**INFO**  
 Double rooms at Cottage Lodge Hotel start from £80 per night, including a full English breakfast. Call 01590 622 296 or visit [www.cottagelodge.co.uk](http://www.cottagelodge.co.uk).  
 For general information about the New Forest visit [www.thenewforest.co.uk](http://www.thenewforest.co.uk)

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New Forest pony.