



As the name suggests, Tudor Farmhouse is a former working farm, converted into a stylish boutique hotel with 20 characterful rooms, cottages and suites. Set in 14 acres of ancient grassland in the Gloucestershire village of Clearwell in the Forest of Dean and Wye Valley, it's been lauded by the likes of *Conde Nast Traveller* and *Tatler* and it's easy to see why. Tudor Farmhouse is the definition of laidback luxury, with the sheep, ponies, chickens and runner ducks out in the fields throwing in a dash of personality for good measure.

It's not only the accommodation that punches above its weight, as we discover at dinner. Provenance is taken seriously here, with Head Chef Rob Cox championing local suppliers whenever possible and incorporating foraged elements into the perfectly presented plates. The spiced duck leg ragu with cep veloute and crispy duck skin is lightened with shaved rhubarb, while the light Dorset crab with apple, coriander and fennel hints at summer. The Longhorn beef sirloin and braised short rib served with carrot and onion and drizzled with red wine sauce is richly satisfying and the Old Spot pork belly with cauliflower, charred baby gem and marjoram jus is simply divine. Our repast is complete with vanilla cheesecake with rhubarb sorbet and poached rhubarb and a platter of artisan British cheeses.

"There are sheep on the curtains," Elio points out as we pull away from our window table. "It really is a farmhouse."

Despite being determined to make the most of our time in the beautiful part of the country, the sun is up well before us the next morning. After a hearty breakfast washed down with cups of suitably strong coffee, we take a short drive to the Forestry Commission's Beechenhurst picnic site, where we locate the start of the Forest of Dean Sculpture Trail. The four-mile trail meanders gently through ancient forest, punctuated by contemporary sculptures created by artists to interpret the Forest environment and the history of this unusual landscape.

Dappled sunlight filters through the trees as we make our way around the circuit, using the map we purchased at the café. Some of the artworks take more imagination than others. Several blend into the surrounds so well they are hard to recognise. Others are more obvious and more arresting, including The Iron Road, installed along a stretch of disused railway embankment deep in the Forest. Images carved into 20 evenly spaced railway sleepers bring the Forest's industrial past to life.

The penultimate work, Cathedral, is perhaps the most evocative. A single stained-glass window, 15 feet high by 10 feet across, is suspended above the path. There is no religious iconography, but rather, a pastoral scene is sketched out in the coloured glass. Despite being man-made, it seems to belong here amongst the trees, providing an ideal venue for self-reflection. We pause for a moment, silent, before we complete the last section of the trail.

THE FARMHOUSE IN THE FOREST

NESTLED IN THE VILLAGE OF CLEARWELL, TUDOR FARMHOUSE IS THE PERFECT BASE FOR EXPLORING THE FOREST OF DEAN AND THE WYE VALLEY. GISELLE WHITEAKER DISCOVERS GLOUCESTERSHIRE'S BEST-KEPT SECRET.



Beams of late afternoon sunlight stretch their fingers through the skylight-style window angled on the side of the timber-beamed A-frame ceiling. A bronze chicken stands guard on another windowsill, gazing at the comfortable lounge space. A duo of doors at the end of the room opens to reveal a claw-footed bathtub prowling by a glass panel protecting the monsoon shower. The little touches whisper of understated elegance; a curved glass coffee table, Bramely bathroom products, the Nespresso coffee machine. This is one of Tudor Farmhouse's spacious suites, where my boyfriend Elio and I are holing up for a few days reprieve from the city. We've only just arrived, and we never want to leave.

ABOVE
The atmospheric Forest of Dean.

TOP
Tudor Farmhouse is a former working farm



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:
Tudor Farmhouse is a former working farm; the spacious bathroom; breakfast at Tudor Farmhouse; The Loft suite.

Our legs well and truly stretched, we head for our next stop, Symonds Yat Rock, a limestone outcrop rising high from the banks of the River Wye, offering superb views of both the river and valley. Further on, down a treacherously winding, single-lane road, Symonds Yat East and Symonds Yat West stare at each other across the river, the only immediate means of crossing an old hand pull cable ferry. On another day, with more time to spare, we'd hire a canoe to paddle down the river, but now, the day is drawing to a close and there's a chill in the air. It's time to return home, to Tudor Farmhouse.

Feasting on a full English breakfast at Tudor Farmhouse on our final day, we have to make decisions. There's much to see in the area, but we're running out of time. We could explore the old mine system at Clearwell Caves, pair a visit to the spectacular remnants of Tintern Abbey (the best-preserved medieval abbey in Wales) with time at Chepstow Castle, or play a round of golf at one of the numerous courses on the doorstep. There are tree-top adventures, the gardens and Roman ruins at Lyndsey Park, Hopewell Colliery Museum and Cyril Hart Arboretum. As closet *Doctor Who* fans, though, we can't resist seeing where the eleventh Doctor, Matt Smith, filmed both his first and final episodes. The strange rock formations, secret caves and ancient trees of Puzzlewood, an atmospheric ancient woodland, have attracted many a film crew and wandering the pathways with their tangle of trees and rocks, we imagine goblins and fairies hiding in its nook and crannies.

We have just enough time for a stop at Goodrich Castle. Standing in open countryside above the River Wye, this is one of the best-preserved of all English medieval castles. It towers over the surrounding countryside, offering spectacular vistas.

"It's beautiful here," I sigh, gazing over green and yellow fields to the horizon.

"We have to come back," Elio states.

He won't get any argument from me.

Rooms at Tudor Farmhouse are available from £99 per night based on two sharing a double Hatchling Room on a B&B basis. Book via www.tudorfarmhousehotel.co.uk or call 01594 833046.

FROM TOP TO BOTTOM:

Cathedral on the Forest of Dean Sculpture Trail;
The Iron Road; Tintern Abbey.

