

Back to the land

Take the rough with the very smooth on these relaxed rustic getaways. Learn to forage, farm, or just snooze in a tree...



7

Go wild camping in Scotland

The purist camping ideal is to fall asleep with little coming between you and Mother Nature. The reality at most sites means being woken by the rowdy kids (or uninhibited couple) in the tent next door. For something approaching the former, choose exclusive wild camping at Ruberslaw in the Scottish Borders. Here you're promised an isolated pitch, separated from others by hundreds of metres of trees, gorse and heather (from £29 per two people, not including tent; ruberslaw.co.uk). A firebowl to cook over lets you satisfy your inner Bear Grylls – though Bear would probably consider it cheating given that the supply of logs is topped up daily. Make the most of your weekend of quiet by spotting wildlife including deer and hawks, or get active and hike up the 424m-high Rubers Law for views across the English border. There are also opportunities to explore – on foot, by bike, or on horseback – the forest trails that lead to abbey ruins and pubs liberally decorated in tartan. **ARRIVE** Roughly halfway between Edinburgh and Newcastle, Ruberslaw is an hour-and-a-half's drive from either.

8

Be a farmer for the day in Wales

Centuries ago most people worked and lived on the land. To get back to these agrarian roots, start by booking into Humble by Nature, a rural skills school named after its founder, BBC *Countryfile* presenter Kate Humble. On this working farm in Monmouthshire, choose your course depending on the season (from £105; humblebynature.com). You might spend a Saturday shearing sheep, caring for pregnant ewes and newborn lambs, or getting suited and veiled to learn beekeeping. Alternatively, pick up a new craft, from basket-weaving to cider-making with an award-winning local producer. You can also stay at the farm, with accommodation ranging from a studio in an 18th-century barn to a family-friendly cottage called The Piggery (from £288 for three nights). The next day, ramble through the surrounding fields, working up an appetite for a proper Sunday roast at one of the pubs in the nearby village of Penallt. **ARRIVE** Humble by Nature Farm is between Cardiff and Gloucester, about an hour's drive from either, off the A40.



9

Hole up in a treehouse near Paris

Jean-Jacques Rousseau thought man would be happy if he lived in nature, wandering the forests. Test his theory by nestling in a treehouse near where the philosopher lived his final days. On the grounds of the 17th-century Château de Raray, Coucoco Grands Chênes' 17 cabins are perched in an old-growth oak forest (from £160; cabanesdesgrandschenes.com). Accessible by spiral staircases or wooden gangways, the houses have large windows onto the foliage, and very un-Rousseauian heating and showers; some have Nordic-style open-air baths. The châteaux of Ermenonville (where Rousseau died) and Chantilly are a short drive, but walks through the rabbit-filled woods, and meals delivered to your terrace via a basket on a pulley, might make you prefer to stick to the trees. **ARRIVE** If the Eurostar isn't an option (from £58; eurostar.com), there are various flights from UK cities to Paris Charles de Gaulle (from £130; airfrance.com). It's a 30-minute drive from there.

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52 BEST WEEKENDS AWAY

10

Work wood like a pro in Sussex

If you'd like to add real woodsman skills to match that plaid shirt you've got lurking in the cupboard, join a two-day Sussex Green Woodworking course. Master carpenter and forester Danny Harling teaches you how to whittle a stool in his private wood on a 20-acre plot near Lewes, carpeted with primroses and bluebells in spring and frequented by bats and owls all year-round (from £175; sussexgreenwoodworking.co.uk). Powered by endless flapjacks and hearty soups, you'll learn old-school techniques, including how to cleave with an axe and use a shaving horse, and come away with your own piece of furniture or future family heirloom. **ARRIVE** Participants are collected from Lewes station, just over an hour's train journey from London Victoria (from £10 return). **STAY** Camping in the wood is free but you'll need your own tent. Alternatively, book a room at the Roebuck Inn in Loughton (from £110; therobuck-loughton.com). →



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11

Forage your own feast in Gloucestershire

The success of Copenhagen restaurant Noma has prompted a revival of interest in a skill in which our hunter-gatherer ancestors were well-versed: foraging. There are equally rich food-finding opportunities closer to home, and it pays to know your black bryony from your blackberries. Tudor Farmhouse Hotel, in the peaceful village of Clearwell, offers outings to the surrounding Forest of Dean with their in-house forager Raoul van Den Broucke. Depending on the season, guests will hunt the hedgerows for edible mushrooms and flowers, wild garlic, strawberries

or sorrel, bittercress, pennywort and marsh samphire. Then it's back to the hotel's exposed-brick dining room for an exceptionally good lunch – head chef Rob Cox's '20 mile menu' features foraged foods and other fine local ingredients in dishes such as pan-fried cod served with samphire, mussels, new potatoes and bourride sauce. Stroll up into the hills for a post-prandial walk among grazing ponies (*foraging £60pp with lunch, double rooms from £130; tudorfarmhousehotel.co.uk*). Next morning, beat the crowds and arrive early at Puzzlewood to explore the extraordinary landscape – a magical shaded woodland of mossy sunken paths and vine-strewn bridges that's featured in several TV shows and films (*puzzlewood.net*). Finish up with a proper pub lunch at the cosy Ostrich Inn in nearby Newland (*theostrichinn.com*).

ARRIVE The Tudor Farmhouse Hotel is an hour's drive from Bristol and 45 minutes' drive from Gloucester.



FARMSTAYS
Feather Down is a family-friendly network of more than 65 farms in the UK and five other countries, where guests sleep (farmyard noises permitting) in canvas-roofed lodges (*featherdown.co.uk*).

12

Try a British wilderness weekend

Virtually free of dangerous animals, the UK is perhaps one of the world's best places to try out wild camping and swimming – no risk of a hippo taking you by surprise here. But if a jaunt into the Great British outdoors still seems daunting, consider joining one of Wilderness Weekends' courses (*from £125; wildernessweekends.com*). Perfect for those of us who don't own camping equipment and never got round to joining the Scouts or Guides, these two-day mini adventures come with expert guides, tents, sleeping bags and Therm-a-Rests (that's a fancy blow-up, heat-giving mattresses). Opt for the Jurassic Coast weekend, where you'll take a dip in Dorset's most enticing lagoons, coves and caves; the Essex bushcraft trip, where you'll be taught to make your own fire and cook simple dishes, such as beer-can chicken, on it; or, head to the Peak District to hone your navigation and climbing skills.

ARRIVE Weekends depart from various UK train stations, depending on the itinerary.



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