

Special spring breaks

Part of the pleasure of going away is about enjoying delicious, well-prepared food – but this can often be elusive for vegetarians and vegans. Olivia Greenway has hand-picked eight veggie places to stay from her travels around the UK, so that whether you are wanting to spoil yourself or are just looking for something simple, at least one of these should provide just what you're looking for.

Yewfield

Sitting on a hill with far-reaching views, Yewfield stands in 80 acres of landscaped grounds. It is always a peaceful place, even in the height of summer, when the hordes descend on this popular part of the Lake District, renowned for its wonderful scenery and good walks.

Derek Hook, a committed vegetarian, bought the magnificent early Victorian mansion with his brother in 1993. With a good eye for design, he has carefully and tastefully transformed the interior with restful neutral tones, a touch of Designers Guild wallpaper and Paul Klee modern art prints. The large lounge area – with verdant views to the distant hills – has a pair of comfy sofas, an open log fire and a Steinway grand piano that is put to good use when occasional concerts are held.

Yewfield has 14 gorgeously stylish en suite rooms situated in the main house or in an attractive annexe, many with king-size beds. The annexe rooms have their own sitting-out area with a dry-stone wall and parking space. All rooms have fluffy white towels and Lauren Hutton toiletries, plus Fairtrade tea-making facilities. Some of the newly refurbished bedrooms have local Herdwick wool carpets and accredited oak panelling, along with modern necessities such as TV and DVD. Derek has had a new eco-friendly wood-chip boiler installed in 2011 that now supplies all the heating.

The breakfast room is bright and welcoming, with individual tables and waitress service for the cooked

breakfast. Home-made bread is delicious and an excellent accompaniment to the full English. Vegans are well catered for with soya milk and spread, vegan smoothies and sausages.

If you prefer a bit of space to yourself, Swallows' Nest and Mulberry – two luxury self-catering apartments – are located a short distance from the main building in the former coaching house. Furnished to the same standards as the main house, the cottages are pet-friendly, too.

For supper, a short walk down the steep hill will get you to Hawkshead, but even better is to take the short drive to Ambleside to try Derek's own two vegetarian restaurants with in-house cinemas: Zeffirellis has a café and pizzeria with occasional live music evenings, whereas Fellinis is perfect for smart dining.

For a daytime ramble, there is a lovely level walk to Tarn Hows through the Yewfield estate which will take you across open fell and woodland, with possible glimpses of red squirrels and Herdwick sheep before you reach the large tarn.

OPEN: February to November.

GETTING THERE: By train from London Euston to Oxenholme, change for Windermere, then a 10-mile taxi ride.

TARIFF: From £49 per person, including breakfast. Single supplement £25.

www.yewfield.co.uk





The Barn

Within easy reach of London, Richard and Sandra Barnett have been running their small vegan B&B in the New Forest for seven years. It's the perfect spot if you want to use public transport for your getaway – and in fact, half of the guests do arrive without a car. Much of this is encouraged by Richard, who is keen to see his guests reduce their carbon footprint, even meeting them at the station by bicycle taxi to pick up their luggage and offering a discount on the price of their stay if they abandon the car at home. There are plenty of walks in the New Forest from the house and bikes may be hired from the pub opposite, so there's really no excuse for a car-based break at all.

The Barn is a member of the Green Leaf Tourism Scheme – New Forest establishments with eco-credentials that work together to reduce the impact of tourism – so there is very much an environmental focus here, with solar panels on the roof that produce more electricity than they use, organic cotton towels and bed linen, and vegan toiletries. The couple recycle as much as they can and also try to cut down on food waste, making good use of their wormery.

There are two bright guest rooms, a double and a twin, both en suite, and also a lounge for visitors and a sitting-out area if the weather is fine. The food, of course, is what attracts many guests and might explain the 50 per cent repeat business that The Barn enjoys. In the morning, Sandra will delight you with her 'Barnstormer' full cooked breakfast that includes scrambled tofu and okara croquettes, as well as mushrooms, tomatoes, beans and sausages. This is served with toasted home-made bread using flour from the local mill. The evening meal is similarly imaginative and tasty, and offers three courses with a drink to follow, such as white bean and rosemary soup; watercress, lentil and green olive paté; chestnut, fennel and shallot casserole; or enchiladas stuffed with rainbow chard.

Guests may easily venture further afield – to Lymington and the Isle of Wight – but walks in the Forest or a cycle ride are probably the best way to spend your time here. A dedicated cycle track runs from outside The Barn, where you may go on rides for half an hour or the whole day. Secure storage is provided for bikes if you want to bring your own.



Richard is keen to see his guests reduce their carbon footprint, even meeting them at the station by bicycle taxi to pick up their luggage



OPEN: Easter to November.

GETTING THERE: By train from London Waterloo to Ashurst New Forest; it's also possible to travel from Brighton via Southampton.

TARIFF: From £35 per person, including breakfast.

www.veggiebarn.net



The vegetarian catering here is inspired. Enthusiastic and personable Lisa Allen heads up the kitchen, a regular on TV food programmes such as Great British Menu

Northcote

From a first glance on the map, tucked away in open countryside just outside Blackburn in Lancashire, Northcote might not seem to have a great deal going for it. But drive up to this fine country house hotel and all your doubts will dissipate. From the minute you step inside the inviting hall with wooden panelling, a grand staircase and real fire burning in the hearth, you realise you have come somewhere quite special. With London standards but none of its pretension, it's a delightful place where you come for a real treat.

It's the only establishment in this feature which isn't wholly vegetarian, but don't let that put you off – the vegetarian catering here is inspired. Enthusiastic and personable Lisa Allen (pictured right) heads up the kitchen, a regular on TV food programmes such as *Great British Menu*. Having a shellfish allergy herself, she appreciates that guests have different dietary needs and is keen to keep vegetarian guests happy, which explains the four different vegetarian menus. So you could be enjoying young leek and spinach wellington with sweet and sour turnip purée, or baked sheep's curd with English onions and thyme. With notice, Lisa claims to cater for anyone, and vegans are regularly looked after.

Many of the vegetables come from their own cottage garden behind the hotel. In summer, they grow all their salad leaves, herbs and magnificent rhubarb; in winter, they have six varieties of potato, as well as rocket and asparagus in the spring. For breakfast, there are large grilled mushrooms with Banks tomatoes or Mrs Kirkham's Lancashire cheese soufflé, as well as Agen prune compote and organic oatmeal porridge.



Upstairs are just 14 rooms, each individually designed, sumptuous and luxurious, some in rich jewel colours. They have king-size beds, relaxing armchairs and indulgent bathrooms kitted out with Temple spa toiletries and plush towelling robes. All rooms include a Bose sound system, 200-channel TV and free Wi-Fi.

The large lounge has comfy sofas and real fires, so you might want to just curl up here with a book or newspaper, or enjoy afternoon tea after a walk around the grounds. Further afield is the famous Bury market, the largest in the UK, while much nearer is Witton Country Park, 480 acres of parkland, mixed woodland and farmland. A mile from Blackburn, the visitor centre has details of walks and cycle paths. They also have tramper vehicles for hire for less able-bodied countryside-lovers.

OPEN: All year.

GETTING THERE: By train from London Euston to Preston and then a 9-mile taxi ride; or 25 minutes by road from Manchester airport, where car hire is available.

TARIFF: From £245 for two, including newspaper and breakfast.

www.northcote.com



Fern Tor

Situated on a quiet country road just outside the small town of South Molton in Devon, part of the pleasure of visiting Fern Tor is meeting the delightful owners and their rescued friends.

Jane and Cliff Strehlow have two quiet retired greyhounds that live with them and a menagerie of other animals, housed up a steep field at the back of their house. There are two pot-bellied pigs, 25 rabbits, two guinea pigs, six goats, five sheep and 14 chickens. All these formerly unhappy animals have to be fed and housed, and Cliff and Jane spend an enormous amount of time and money making sure their needs are met. Because they often have animals that are sick or old and therefore unwanted, the vet's bills are very high, so the couple support the animals by running the guest house.

The area is rich with wild creatures too, particularly birds: from the dining room window, up to 40 species have been spotted by vigilant guests over the years.

On arrival, Jane will offer you tea and home-made scones. Accommodation wise, there are two double rooms with their own private lounge and a single bedsitting room, all en suite. The rooms are spotlessly clean and have tea-making facilities and fresh flowers to welcome you, as well as TV and Wi-Fi.

A big treat at Fern Tor is Jane's cooking. In the candle-lit dining room, guests are served at separate tables by Cliff, or you may opt for supper to be served in your own lounge. Your meal could feature fresh salad leaves and red pepper served with a home-made balsamic vinaigrette; a mushroom and leek croustade – enough to feed an army – with oven-cooked potatoes, baked onion and broccoli; and vegan sticky date and apricot pudding served



with ice cream. All of which set you up for the night, with just a cup of coffee to follow, before you stagger, replete, from the table.

Breakfast is equally scrumptious, with fresh fruit and home-made granola, toasted home-made bread, a full English with vegan sausage and bacon, and eggs from their rescued hens, or scrambled tofu.

Short walks may be enjoyed around the 12-acre grounds or circular walks from the front door, and Exmoor National Park is just a 20-minute drive away. There are opportunities for cycle hire nearby and several towns to visit, such as Tiverton, Barnstable and Chulmleigh.

OPEN: All year except Christmas Day and Boxing Day.

GETTING THERE: By coach from London Victoria to South Molton, then a 4-mile bus or taxi ride. By train from London Paddington to Tiverton Parkway, then a bus from Tiverton and another bus to Fern Tor; or a 19-mile taxi ride from Tiverton to Fern Tor.

TARIFF: From £64 for two, including breakfast.

www.ferntor.co.uk





Hermit Holidays

Ron and Ritsuko Zahl have been at The Hermitage, a commanding 19th-century mansion in acres of its own grounds, for 10 years, and in that time have built up a successful luxury self-catering business. With three large and elegant apartments in the main manor house and two converted cottages, it's a stylish place to come to relax.

The downstairs apartment has a fully equipped kitchen with a welcome bottle of organic Fairtrade wine, along with a pint of organic milk and Fairtrade tea and coffee. In the lounge there is a large squishy sofa, TV with DVDs and CDs, numerous books and board games, and a vase with hand-picked flowers from the garden makes it feel like home. Before long, you are lighting the log-burning stove and enjoying a relaxing drink in front of the fire. The spacious bedroom has an extremely comfortable bed, and in such a tranquil location a peaceful night is almost guaranteed. The couple renovated the stables in a nearby block a few years ago that offer two self-contained cottages for up to six people, fitted with the same comforts.

The highlight of our visit was the Japanese vegetarian three-course meal, delivered to our door. We had delicate miso soup, the lightest vegetable tempura, a rice noodle salad with mirin vinaigrette, mountain vegetable rice, aubergine cutlet, soba noodles with seaweed and braised tofu, with organic green tea ice cream and sweet aduki beans to finish. It was as good as any I've ever had in a Japanese restaurant. Not surprisingly, Ritsuko is starting Japanese vegetarian cookery classes in the spring.



You can enjoy a game of tennis in the new court, with rackets provided, or pull on your wellies and pick fresh herbs or vegetables from the organic veggie garden. There are short walks in the grounds where you can meet the tame Black Welsh Mountain sheep or you can go further afield and explore the underrated and glorious Wye Valley. Close to hand are castles and gardens to visit, plus the cathedral at the county town, Hereford, with its chained library.

OPEN: All year.

GETTING THERE: By train from London, Birmingham and Newport to Hereford; from Hereford, a 5-mile taxi ride to Canon Pyon is around £12.

TARIFF: Weekend break rates on application.

Occasional special off-season deals with two nights and one meal from £185 for two. Japanese three-course evening meal £24.50, using as much organic produce from the garden as possible.

www.hermitholidays.co.uk





Trericket Mill

Nicky and Alistair Legge drove past Trericket Mill 23 years ago, saw the 'For Sale' sign and did a U-turn. It's not surprising they were smitten. The old corn mill, dating from at least 1830, has its own part of the tumbling Wye in its grounds, where salmon leap upstream in winter, otter and mink patrol the banks, and woodland either side provides habitat for wren, nuthatch and woodpecker.

In the orchard over the stream, there is room for up to 12 people to pitch their tents under pear, apple or damson trees, where the four hens and five ducks wander about during the day. If baked beans every night are losing their appeal, campers may enjoy an evening meal inside the house. Nicky also cooks a mean pizza available for takeaway and provides filling breakfast baps. With a campers' shelter, indoor shower and drying room, there is not much roughing it here. Even better is River Cabin, new for 2012 and eco-built with solar panels: a one-bedroom apartment with lounge/diner, kitchen and en suite

shower room. Outside in the private fenced garden overlooking the stream, it's an ideal place for the children to pitch their tent.

Inside the main house, Nicky and Alistair have transformed the former neglected mill into a welcoming and cosy home with original flagstone floors, exposed beams, latch doors and some of the original machinery. There are three guest rooms, all en suite, one of them with twin beds. Two guest lounges with wood-burning fires are ideal for relaxing on lazy or rainy days, with hot drink-making facilities and free Wi-Fi, and there's even an old juke box with 7-inch vinyl records – Thunderclap Newman, anyone?

The couple share the cooking, which is superb. Mains could be a lentil shepherd's pie served with onion gravy; or spinach, mushroom and buckwheat bake served with sherry sauce, all accompanied by four different vegetables. There are plenty of soft drinks and their delicious own borehole water, plus

guests may bring their own wine. Breakfast is no less enticing, with home-made basil and tomato sausages and scrambled duck's eggs.

Walks may be enjoyed straight from the property. In particular, an hour-long leisurely meander upstream along the Wye will take you to the craft centre at Erwood Station, or walk downstream to Lyswen through fields and past ancient sweet chestnut trees and visit one of the two pubs for a well deserved drink. There are many longer, more challenging walks for serious hikers in this little-visited area of the Welsh Borders, and nearby Hay-on-Wye is a draw for book-lovers everywhere.

OPEN: All year except January.

GETTING THERE: By direct bus service from Cardiff (not Sundays); or train from London Paddington to Cardiff.

TARIFF: From £64 for two, including breakfast.

www.trericket.co.uk



The old corn mill, dating from at least 1830, has its own part of the tumbling Wye in its grounds, where salmon leap upstream in winter, and otter and mink patrol the banks

Michael House

Negotiating a narrow lane in the hamlet of Treknaw near Tintagel, it's then a steep climb up the steps to Michael House, but this is rewarded by magnificent views of either open fields or the sea from all the windows – and perfect peace.

Vanessa Lackford has been running the guest house for eight years, with her husband Simon, a tree surgeon, lending a hand in the evenings and at weekends. The couple have ensured the Edwardian property is tastefully furnished with neutral carpets, original iron fireplaces and old pine furniture. There are two double rooms with en suite bathrooms and a third double with its own private bathroom on the floor above. The rooms, all spacious with ample storage, have tea- and coffee-making facilities, very comfy beds and pillows, and are really quiet at night. Cruelty-free toiletries are provided, such as soap, shower gel, cotton wool and buds, as well as bathrobes. The guest lounge has a TV, books and plenty of information about the area, and there are also sitting-out areas to the front and rear, if the weather is kind.

Food here is excellent and served in a very pretty dining room, with views over the valley, the tables set in crisp white linen and lit by an eye-catching central light with real candles. Home-made warm bread



accompanies the starter, which could be carrot and coconut soup. If you are lucky, you might get nut roast, lightly flavoured with lemon zest and served with onion gravy, roast potatoes and perfectly cooked carrots and broccoli. To follow, we enjoyed strawberry and hazelnut shortcake, the finishing touch being an excellent cup of freshly ground coffee. Michael House is licensed, so they have a good selection of vegan and vegetarian wines and beers, but do try the home-made elderflower cordial, if it's available. Vanessa has a huge repertoire of meals to persuade you off your diet – just let her know what you like.

Breakfast is equally tempting, with fresh fruit salad, home-made muesli, potato rosti and scrambled tofu with mushrooms and grilled tomatoes, all accompanied by toasted home-made bread.



A short walk across the fields is Trebarwith Strand, a lovely rocky cove from where you can walk along the coast, and dogs are welcome all year. At low tide there is a sandy beach with rock pools to explore and the café sells vegan burgers. Boscastle, Padstow and Port Isaac are all pretty harbour villages nearby.

OPEN: All year.

GETTING THERE: It is possible to get here by public transport, but it's not really feasible for just a weekend. Michael House is a 30-minute drive off the A30; but if you really want to leave your car behind, Vanessa will collect you from Bodmin Parkway or Newquay airport, at a charge of £20 each way.

TARIFF: From £36 per person, including breakfast.

www.michael-house.co.uk



Cuilodrag House

In what must be one of the most beautiful areas of Scotland – in the wilds of the Highlands and just south of Fort William – is this small late-Victorian sanctuary, where free-range hens scatter and run for cover as you drive up to the house.

Vegetarian menus are rather thin on the ground in this part of Scotland, but Lisa Glaze has been providing delicious veggie food at her friendly B&B for over 16 years. The house has two pretty double rooms to offer, both en suite, with a dining room that doubles as a guest lounge, and a cosy wood-burning fire.

For the evening meal, you could be treated to a vegetable soup with beetroot, carrot, squash and sweet potato, followed by a huge butterbean and gnocchi stew with halloumi, served with assorted organic vegetables, some from their garden. If you get a chance to sample Lisa's melt-in-the-mouth



butter shortcake with nectarines, then do, as it's one of the best desserts imaginable – and she makes a vegan version, on request. Breakfast is lovely, with full Scottish (of course!) using eggs from her hens or vegan sausages.

The scenery is spectacular, and the area is known as the outdoor capital of the UK, so you need to go walking or hiking to appreciate it, with a choice of easy climbs or the nearby Ben Nevis to challenge you. It does get its fair share of rain here, but there is a drying room if you are caught in a shower. With Loch Linnhe nearby for water activities, you can also go seal watching, or whale watching in the Sound of Sleat. If you fancy something more active, there are ribs to hire near Glen Coe, plus Lisa's son is a keen mountain biker, so they are happy to fill you in on the best trails. The town of Oban has ferries to the Isle of Mull and from Fort William you can take the



marvellous train journey to Mallaig, travelling over Harry Potter's viaduct (Glenfinnan).

Part of the fun of coming here is the journey. By rail, you can go on the overnight sleeper from London that rattles its way north through the night, but it's not really an option for a weekend. An alternative would be to fly to Edinburgh and then pick up a hire car and drive to Fort William. The drive will take you through some of the most beautiful scenery in the UK, including the site of the Glencoe Massacre.

OPEN: All year.

GETTING THERE: By direct sleeper train from London to Fort William. By plane to Edinburgh and then a 3-hour drive.

TARIFF: From £65 for two, including breakfast.

www.cuilodraghouse.com