

words sara d'souza

DINNERS OF CHAMPIONS

Earn your supper with a UK activity break. Whether it's walking, riding or cycling, we've got enjoyably energetic ways to sharpen your appetite – and suitably rewarding restaurants and hotels at which to satisfy it

PONY TREKKING IN MONMOUTHSHIRE

DO: Tucked away between the beguiling Black Mountains and the grassy moorlands of the Brecon Beacons National Park, right on the edge of the ancient Llanglorsse Lake, the Ellesmere Riding Centre has just celebrated 50 years of trekking. The centre has 20 horses and ponies to choose from, ranging from Welsh cobs to thoroughbred crosses, and you can get out on horseback to explore the dramatic surrounding scenery. Beginners can book in for a half-day (£30) or full-day (£50) trek, which takes a slow, circular route along quiet lanes, while more experienced riders can take a full-day moorland or forest hack in groups of three on a Welsh cob or cob cross. *Full-day hack with picnic lunch £95; ellesmereridingcentre.co.uk*

EAT: Abergavenny is home to several cracking restaurants, not least The Hardwick (*below*) on Old Raglan Road, billed by no less a judge than Michel Roux Jr as his 'favourite Welsh restaurant'. Head chef and owner Stephen Terry had an illustrious career working with chefs such as Marco Pierre White and the aforementioned Roux at Le Gavroche before he bought an old country pub, renovated it and opened it as The Hardwick in 2005. Menus change regularly, always taking advantage of great local produce – HJ Edwards beef, Pen-Y-Wyrldod lamb and Black Mountains Smokery meat – and have a strong Italian accent. Dishes may include linguine with white crabmeat and brown shrimps, and a home-made torrone served with coffee. *Mains from £14; thehardwick.co.uk*

STAY: Round up some friends (up to 17 of them) and stay in an early-Victorian manor house. Felin Newydd is set in 50 acres on the edge of the Brecon Beacons and is the last word in luxury – you can even book your own butler. *From £1,500 per night; bigcottage.com/houses/felin-newydd »*



PHOTOGRAPH ALAMY

Activity breaks

VINEYARD CYCLING IN KENT

DO: Kent has long been known as the Garden of England (it was Henry VIII who first coined the phrase, since you ask), but these days new crops are to be found alongside the traditional apple, pear and cherry orchards. The county is now home to an exceptional list of excellent vineyards – and a UK Electric Bike Tour is a fabulous way to explore them. The company offers half- and full-day tours and can tailor your route so you get to sample the famous sparkling wines at Chapel Down in Tenterden (*below*) and up-and-coming vineyard Hush Heath with its award-winning Balfour Brut Rosé. Make a stop at the Old Dairy Brewery to sip its innovative imperial Russian stouts and spicy Indian pale ales. The pace of travel is relaxed and there are plenty of grazing options along the



way, so you won't get too wobbly. *Full-day tour £60; ukelectricbiketours.co.uk*

EAT: Reward your endeavours with dinner at a hidden Michelin-starred gem, The West House, set in a 16th-century weaver's cottage in Biddenden. It's owned and run by rock-drummer-turned-chef Graham Garrett, who has published an autobiographical cookbook titled *Sex & Drugs & Sausage Rolls*. Dining here

is intimate, with low wood-beamed ceilings and a wood-burning stove, while the modern English menu is rustic, gutsy and seasonal, including main courses such as maple-glazed duck breast with braised chicory, beetroot and orange purée; and peanut parfait with toffee popcorn and chocolate sorbet for pudding. The wide-ranging wine list includes a local Sussex fruity white from the Davenport estate. *Three-course weekend menu £45; thewesthouserestaurant.co.uk*

STAY: Make the 35-minute drive to rest your head at the gorgeous Gallivant Hotel (*below*) in Camber, Rye. Just over the Camber Sands dunes, it's inspired by the coastal motels of California, with cosy interiors that are the ultimate in beach chic. Check out its new treatment room and cracking selection of Kentish wines. *Doubles from £95 b&b; thegallivant.co.uk*



'Alongside the traditional pear, apple and cherry orchards, Kent is now home to an exceptional list of excellent vineyards'



PHOTOGRAPHS: ALAMY; NINA KATHRYN/CLARIDGE; SIAN ANNA LEWIS

WILD SWIMMING IN THE LAKE DISTRICT



DO: There are few things that'll make you feel quite as alive as wild swimming. Peeling off your layers after a lengthy hike across the Lake District's craggy hilltops and rugged mountain fells for a bracing dip in one of Cumbria's cool glacial tarns is soul-restoring. Loughrigg Tarn (*above*) is a firm favourite with wild swimmers – not only is its water slightly

warmer than most (because no rivers feed into it) but also the view up to the wild beauty of the Langdale Pikes is magnificent. It's among the quietest of the tarns and in the late afternoon you might even be lucky enough to have it to yourself (and the ducks). Pre-swim, you can climb to the summit of Loughrigg Fell; it starts in the magical White Moss wood, where the bluebells may just be peeking into bloom, then winds up to the Loughrigg Terrace for breathtaking views of Grasmere.

EAT: Post-swim, head to The Samling, which is a 15-minute drive away. Set within 67 acres overlooking Lake Windermere, its Michelin-starred restaurant has been revamped and expanded; it has its own wine cellar and development kitchen, with former head chef of Le Manoir aux Quat'Saisons Nick Edgar now at the helm. Bjorn Abraham heads up the impeccable, innovative kitchen garden. With an abundance of home-grown ingredients, the team creates modern seasonal dishes such as hay-smoked scallops with a smoked bone marrow mayonnaise and confit cod with leek purée, mushrooms and truffled goats' cheese. *Six-course tasting menu £80; thesamlinghotel.co.uk*

STAY: With just three sumptuous bedrooms, converted gentleman's hunting lodge Randy Pike is a real romantic hideaway. Throw open the patio doors for views of the spring countryside or soothe your wild-swim-weary limbs in a luxurious, double-ended slipper bath. *Doubles from £200 b&b; randypike.co.uk »*

TREETOP WALKING NEAR BRISTOL

DO: As cities go, Bristol is as leafy and activity-friendly as they come, with walking in the lush Mendip Hills and paddleboarding and sailing on the River Avon all on the agenda. When spring blooms, head for the Stihl Treetop Walkway (*right*) in Westonbirt Arboretum, which is just about to celebrate its first anniversary. Breathe in lungfuls of fresh air and get a bird's-eye view of the rhododendrons, bluebells and blossom-laden cherry trees before they give way to summer's carpets of grassland flowers. The 13m-high walkway snakes 300 metres through the ancient Silk Wood and is held up by beautiful criss-crossing wooden stilts. *Arboretum admission (includes Treetop Walkway) £10; forestry.gov.uk/westonbirt*



EAT: The Ethicurean, co-owned by a brilliant team of brothers, Matthew and Iain Pennington, sits just outside Bristol. It's set in the leafy idyll of Wrington in the Victorian-built Barley Wood Walled Gardens and stepping inside the former orangery is like instantly slipping down a gear. There are views over the Mendip Hills, a hearty wood-burning stove, Ocho the long-haired whippet, a seasonal menu

featuring imaginative dishes such as smoked halibut with beetroot fermented egg (*below right*) and food sourced from the kitchen garden and nearby forests and fields. Preserving and fermenting is an interest, the gardens are filled with

wonderful produce, and there are more than 80 varieties of apple in the orchards. Desserts are sublime. Sink your teeth into a thick wedge of rich, sticky toffee apple cake with toffee apple syrup – it will render you speechless. *Two-course lunch from £26; theethicurean.com*

STAY: A Grade II-listed pair of former banks has been painstakingly restored into the new Bristol Harbour Hotel (*left*). Don't miss the candlelit subterranean spa in the banks' vaults. *Doubles from £125 b&b; bristol-harbour-hotel.co.uk »*



PHOTOGRAPHS: ALAMY, MARK BOLTON, JASON INGRAM



Everything you wanted, nothing you expected.

As the pioneer of luxury ocean travel, Cunard delights in going beyond your wishes. From talks by astronauts to bedtime stories by RADA and spectacular Gala evenings, the only thing to expect is to be surprised.



QUEEN ELIZABETH

QUEEN MARY 2

QUEEN VICTORIA

Discover more, visit cunard.co.uk, contact your travel agent or call 0843 373 4090



'Your dinner will be dependent on your hunter-gatherer skills – come sundown chefs translate the spoils of the day into a well-deserved feast'



HUNTING, FORAGING AND FISHING IN DEVON

DO: If you prefer to get your hands dirty and feel like you've really earned your meal, then road-test Hunstham Court's brand new Feast project. Standing for 'Finding Excellence Around a Shared Table', it's been described as 'Bear Grylls meets Downton Abbey'. Guests set out into the rolling Devonshire countryside in their wellies and are divided into teams with local experts to fish, forage and hunt for their supper within a 20-mile radius of the Court. The angling team will learn to fly-fish and clean and prepare rainbow trout, and foragers will be let loose on the Exmoor National Park. Meanwhile, a shooting team will earn their quarry based on their performance in clay-shooting, and a butchery team will spend the day on a working farm dissecting a side of beef, lamb or deer.

EAT: Your dinner will be dependent on your hunter-gathering skills and come sundown you'll head back to the Grade II-listed Victorian house to dress for dinner (and cocktails and canapés in the Great Hall). It's then down to chefs Peter Mundy and Miguel Tenreiro to translate the spoils of your day into a well-deserved feast for the group, with dishes such as Pipers Farm lamb rack with Exmoor herb crust, wild garlic potato purée, foraged morel mushrooms and nettle pesto; and smoked Exebridge trout mousse, foraged laverbread and wood sorrel salad, all followed by a nightcap in the snug.

STAY: You won't have far to roll after dinner: Hunstham Court (*below*) has 35 individually designed bedrooms, some with four-poster beds and roll-top baths. Prices start from £1,175 per person for a one-night stay inclusive of the day's foraging experience, all food and ground transportation (including travel from London). huntshamcourt.co.uk/feastproject



PHOTOGRAPHS ALAMY, GETTY IMAGES