

Rewilding IN THE COTSWOLDS

From the nature-inspired interior to the surrounding wildflower meadows, the beautiful Calcot & Spa in Tetbury is a country hotel that's wild at heart...

Text by Amy Bonifas



Country manor hotels in the Cotswolds aren't hard to find. But, few have the charm and warmth of the Calcot & Spa. Near the pretty town of Tetbury, the Calcot is an idyllic place for families, couples and solo travellers alike – a sprawling grand manor on the outside, and a stylishly cosy haven on the inside. Arriving here from the heat and stress of London is quite literally a breath of fresh air, and I feel instantly soothed by the sounds of the birds and the honey-hued Cotswold stone.

Calcot first opened its doors as a luxury hotel in the 1980s, but the building has a history that dates back over 700 years. You can still see the original stone in The Barn (the hotel's event space) and the 16th-century manor house stands proudly.

Respectful of its heritage, the team at Calcot have sensitively restored the original outbuildings into a collection of sumptuous timber-beamed bedrooms. But, not one to stand still, the hotel has also led the way with regular updates and renovations to keep guests surprised and delighted. Now, it's home to vast family suites and cottages, a destination restaurant, an outdoor courtyard

pool and a very well-appointed spa – with even bigger plans to improve their health and fitness offering early next year.



However, it's the hotel's passion for rewilding that makes this place so unique. Over the last 25 years, a handful of the team's staff – including the excellent Groundsman Steve – have taken on a thoughtful rewilding project. They've worked to restore the 240 acres of →



Cotswolds' countryside from farmland back to a mosaic of natural wildflower and grass meadows, including a new woodland area with nearly 22,000 native trees.

And all the hard work is paying off. Several rare species of birds, animals and flowers have returned to the estate, and the grounds are alive with skylarks, hares, roe deer, marbled butterflies and gorgeous spotted orchids. There's even a barn owl with three owlets nesting in the trees above the nature trail.

To help hotel guests connect more with all this glorious nature, you can now book their special rewilding package. This includes an early morning wildlife walk and talk with Ed Drewitt – a passionate and inspiring local naturalist. The walk begins at 6am and I can confirm this is totally worth it for the chance to step into a real-life Calm morning meditation.

Think gentle morning birdsong, a peaceful wander across wildflower meadows, and the chance to spot rare birds like corn buntings and the pleasingly named, willow warblers. Both have been in decline since the 1960s, so a sighting through Ed's binoculars is a real treat. So far, so wholesome.

Then, there are the resident honeybees. Perhaps my favourite part of the rewilding experience, guests have the chance to suit up and get up close and personal with a busy hive, all under the watchful eye of beekeeper, Martin Knight. Having swapped the daily grind for country life, you can tell he's in his element, lifting each tiered frame of the hive to show us the glistening wells of honey and newly laid eggs. Watching them buzz happily about their business is good for the soul.

If you fancy a taste of the local honey, you need only venture as far as the hotel's newly launched bar and café, The Hive. With plush sofas, botanical prints and stylish Pooky lighting, the space is pulled together with a nature-inspired colour palette of sage and forest greens.

Serving afternoon tea by day – including the most buttery-soft scones – and stiff cocktails by night, the atmosphere is like a cool members' club, except less pretentious and more relaxed. Order the Beehive Martini, made with sticky marmalade vodka, lemon juice and Calcot's own honey.

Dinner is an even bigger treat, served in the recently renovated, Brasserie. The dining room hums with

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contented families, couples and friends. There's a huge skylight flooding the room with natural light during the lighter evenings and the terrace doors are flung open to offer views of the rolling countryside.

Executive Chef Richard Davies is a former Great British Menu winner and ex-chef de partie for Gordon Ramsay. He favours modern British dishes with a dose of French influence and the menu is overflowing with classics with a twist. I'd strongly advise ordering the cheese soufflé to start – it's been on the menu for years and comes perfectly puffed and golden, with a rich truffle sauce.

Other highlights include the Orkney scallops, served in their shell and coloured with baked apple and tangy yuzu butter; and the indulgent Chateaubriand, bred at nearby Stokes Marsh Farm, accompanied with bubbling, cheesy cauliflower and broccoli.

Back in my room, the nature theme continues – the soft furnishings are adorned with delicate leaf prints and →



two sets of French doors open out onto miles and miles of green. My family suite has a huge king bed, perfect for midday naps, and a bathroom designed with self-care in mind – a claw-foot tub takes centre stage and the shelves are stocked with Aromatherapy Associates products.

The extra twin room and bathroom are great if you have kids in tow, and there's a sweet wooden play area just beyond the patio. Parents will be pleased to know that the hotel offers four hours of free childcare in the Play Barn crèche, and there's also the Mez for older children aged eight and over. But, this isn't just any children's club, this is a Calcot children's club complete with games consoles, crafty activities and even a 12-seater cinema. In the pipeline for early next year, the family offering gets even better with plans for five more family suites and three treehouses overlooking the grounds.

Though quite uniquely, there's plenty that makes Calcot feel just for grown-ups too. On my last day, the luxurious spa is calling, so I follow my full Cotswold English breakfast with a quick stroll over – soaking up the smell of the flowers and the earth after the morning rain (we are in England after all).

More active types might take one of the hotel's complimentary bikes for a spin, run the 3km nature trail or play a round of tennis on one of the tennis courts, but the premise of a Forest Therapy massage is too tempting. I half fall asleep as my therapist uses a blend of natural cypress oils to ease my muscles and melt away any residual stress. She suggests pairing it with another mindful walk through the grounds for the ultimate meditative experience.



Early next year, the hotel plans to launch a brand-new gym and fitness studio, complete with its own workspace and a regular programme of classes and wellbeing talks – plenty enough to draw the work-from-home crowd. I leave feeling re-energised and keen to return soon, it's not often that you find a hotel that manages to balance all the best mod-cons with such a wild and down-to-earth philosophy. ♦



→ *Rewilding at Calcot & Spa includes an early morning wildlife walk and talk with expert Ed Drewitt, a beekeeper talk with Martin from Knights Beekeeping, Calcot Spa and bikes access, full Cotswold breakfast each morning and a jar of Calcot honey on departure. From £850 for 2 nights based on 2 sharing. (Without the package – during summer, rooms cost from £389 per night B&B. During winter, rooms cost from £264 per night B&B.) calcot.co*



Naturalist Ed Drewitt's top tips for rewilding at home

1. Let things grow a little wild

If you have a lawn, give some of it back to local wildlife by letting a small section of it grow. Encouraging a diversity of longer grasses is great for insects like butterflies and grasshoppers, and the perfect excuse to spend a little less time mowing...

2. Plant native wildflowers

We tend to plant a lot of non-native plants in our gardens, so dedicate some space to some local wildflowers like cornflowers, poppies and yellow rattle. Wildflower.co.uk offers British seed mixes that bees and birds love. Or opt for plug plants (rooted seedlings that have started to grow) to save time.

3. Feed the birds

Nearly 30% of birds in the UK are declining, so providing a little extra food could help your local birds flourish, especially during dry or colder spells. Put out a variety of bird food like sunflower seeds, flaked maize and millet, and you'll draw a whole variety of birds to your garden. Win-win.

4. Create a woodpile and leave some fallen leaves

Animals like wasps, slow worms and frogs use piles of wood to hide and shelter through the colder months. Try piling a few large logs with the bark still attached in a quiet area of your garden. Fallen leaves are also a great spot for hedgehogs to hibernate, and when the leaves start to decay, the mulch can protect against frost in winter.

Three local must-visit places when staying at Calcot & Spa

1. Sip local rosé at Woodchester Valley Vineyard

You can try Woodchester's rosé or sparkling rosé in Calcot's restaurant. But, if you want to taste more, this beautiful vineyard is only a 10-minute drive away. Offering winery tours and guided tastings, it's the perfect place for topping up your English wine knowledge.

2. Explore Westonbirt Arboretum

Westonbirt is home to 2,500 species of trees from around the world and 5 national tree collections. Book into one of the daily guided walks or take the kids and try out the canopy walkway and activity trails, before a pitstop lunch in the café – serving up seasonal fare with views across the treetops.

3. Take a tour of Highgrove Gardens

Home of King Charles III and Queen Camilla, visitors are free to explore the stunning collection of interlinked gardens, designed by the King himself. From the traditional Cottage Garden to the Kitchen Garden overflowing with fruits and vegetables, this is the ideal spot for nature lovers, with highlights during every season. ♦

