

# Great ESCAPES

THE SWAN

## Suffolk

AMY BONIFAS FEELS THE STRESS MELT AWAY ON A SEASIDE TRIP TO SOUTHWOLD

It's Saturday morning and my boyfriend and I are kayaking down the River Alde. The golden reeds and countryside seem to roll on for miles and the only sound is our paddles casually splashing against the tide.

Rounding the corner, I let out a cry as we spot two blubbery seals chilling on the bank. They gaze at us, unfazed, as we drift by.

Recharging is what this weekend is all about and The Swan hotel in Southwold is made for it. Newly refurbished and a stone's throw from the beach, the rooms are fresh and airy. Ours is brightened with pops of lime and fuchsia against sultry navy walls.

For those who like their mini breaks to be more get-up-and-go, The Swan offers a set of Great British Breaks packed full of experiences including beer tasting, stand-up paddleboarding and bespoke walks.

We opted for Coastal Contemplation, which features early morning yoga on the beach. Thanks to a sudden downpour we swapped the sand for the hotel's Reading Room – settling into our own private yoga studio. There's also the promise of a 'head



The hotel bedrooms feature pops of bright colour; enjoy a delicious picnic 'delivered to your deckchair', below left

in the clouds' head massage and a delicious picnic delivered to our deckchairs when the rain stopped. So far, so blissful.

On Friday evening, we order stiff vodka martinis before dining in The Still Room. To start, I have cured loin of beef with pickled prune and Parmesan, salty-sweet and delicious. My partner chooses the mackerel tartare, pepped up with kimchi and soy gel. Our mains are equally hearty and refined. The torched sea trout – juicy-pink and flaking beautifully – with courgette and saffron-infused clams for me. The aged ribeye beef with bone marrow,

melted onions and triple-cooked chips for him. Well, one of us had to!

In the morning, breakfast is designed with active days in mind. And it's just as well, as we explore the winding streets. Don't miss the Two Magpies Bakery for fresh sourdough and Slate for local cheese.

On our last night, after a lively brewery tour and a peek inside the pastel-coloured beach huts, we toast our stay with a glass of fizz in The Tap Room – the hotel's answer to pub-style dining. We feel a satisfying combination of relaxed and energised. Oh, how it's good to be by the seaside.

PHOTOGRAPH: ADNAMS

### HOW TO BOOK

The Swan's Great British Breaks start from £360, based on two sharing. Rooms start from £200 per night on a B&B basis. Visit [theswansouthwold.co.uk](http://theswansouthwold.co.uk)

STARGAZY INN

## Cornwall

THE QUAIN CORNISH VILLAGE OF PORT ISAAC, HOME OF TV'S *DOC MARTIN*, SEES NICOLA SMITH CHECK INTO THE NEWLY REFURBISHED STARGAZY INN...

Up the stairs of this recently refurbished Victorian building, our superior double sea-facing room with its far-reaching views across the sea to Tintagel draws us straight to the balcony. Look a little closer and bang opposite sits Restaurant Nathan Outlaw, a two Michelin-star eatery hiding in an understated building akin to a house. This village is full of surprises.

Whites, creams and muted nautical tones adorn our room, with the exception of a vividly coloured chandelier, suspended like an exclamation mark. Despite the sea views, complimentary biscuits and coffee, we were keen to explore...

Spotting *Doc Martin* landmarks on the way – the TV series was filmed around Port Isaac's vertiginous, twisting streets – we descended on foot into the village, marvelling at the narrow roads peeling away up hidden alleys (or 'opes', as the Cornish say). We nosed in small shops and paused at The Platt, a small area on the harbour, before being lured into the Port Isaac Pottery and Chapel Café, a charming mezzanine space with a wealth of artisan goods. Eventually we wended our way back to the welcome arms of the Stargazy Inn.

After a cup of tea and a leisurely soak in the large statement bath, raised up on a platform in the roomy en-suite, we relaxed on the balcony before spotting the familiar face of resident chef, Andrew Sheridan on the terrace below. He appeared on the



*Great British Menu* in 2018 and 2019, moving here from South Wales in May and bringing many of his team with him, including our waitress, Jess. As we took our window table in the cosy dining room, Andrew urged us to try one of his tasting menus – a riot of local produce. We cracked open a bottle of the house red – a French blend of Duras and Cabernet Sauvignon – and kicked off with mouthwatering Marmite-infused butter on rye bread made from a local beer. A pickled oyster – harvested in Port Isaac – and a delectable crab tart followed. Next up was a fusion of tomato and basil – a dish inspired by Andrew's children that featured a memorable basil ice cream. A tantalising taste of sea trout arrived next, before succulent lamb loin and belly. We just about had room for the strawberries (fresh from nearby Mora Farm) with wood sorrel sorbet – the perfect palate cleanser.

The stairs certainly creaked as we made our way to bed but we slept like babies, the Cornish sea air gently drifting through the open window as we slumbered. ➤



From top: the deluxe room with its 'muted nautical tones'; enjoy Port Isaac's pretty sea views; the locally sourced pickled oyster

### HOW TO BOOK

B&B in one of the Stargazy Inn's nine rooms starts from £110 per night, based on two people sharing. The five-course tasting menu is £55 per person or £85 for seven courses. Visit [stargazyinn.co.uk](http://stargazyinn.co.uk).





Clockwise from top: the hotel's grand exterior; the dining room; the glass cellar - 'visible from reception'; the pool in the on-site spa

THE VINEYARD HOTEL

# Berkshire

THE AWARD-WINNING VINEYARD HOTEL AT STOCKCROSS WAS PERFECT FOR AN INDULGENT NIGHT AWAY FROM LONDON FOR WINE-LOVERS KIRSTEN AND STEVE PRICE

Although The Vineyard doesn't actually sit *within* a vineyard, the importance of grapes is clear as soon as you walk in. There are around 30,000 bottles of fantastic wine stored in the hotel's glass cellar – visible from reception. We are definitely the right people in the right place.

The purpose of our jaunt was to experience the hotel's tasting menu, the Judgement of Paris. In 1976 in a small hotel room in Paris, Steven Spurrier (a British wine merchant) challenged wine aficionados to a blind tasting of both Californian and French wines. The event was named the 'Judgement of Paris' and unexpectedly (and as a shock to many at the time) both the white and red wines preferred by the critics were from California.

The Vineyard hotel recreates this experience for guests with their seven-course tasting menu, which is served alongside both French and Californian wines. Complete with tasting notes, diners experience their own blind tasting. Ours was hosted by a charming and knowledgeable sommelier, Diego. He gave us tips and hints on how to get the most from the different varietals, all the while encouraging us to cast our own verdicts on our personal favourites. I admit, the evening did become a little competitive between the two of us, especially when Diego served a couple of the wines in black glasses, pushing our sommelier skills to their limits as we were asked to identify the grape *and* country of origin. To be honest neither



of us were particularly skilled (I believe I won...) but we certainly gave it our best shot.

The food mustn't be forgotten in the experience; it was flawless. For me, the stand-out course was the delicate Gigha halibut with Porthilly mussels, leeks and cauliflower, while Steve's was the fresh ChalkStream trout, cucumber, caviar and fiery horseradish. It was a gastronomic delight of balanced flavours paired to perfection with (a lot of) good wines.

Needless to say, we rolled back to our suite, named the Stag's Leap (each of the hotel's 49 rooms are aptly named after a wine), which had its own lounge area and balcony with countryside views. Just the ticket to unwind. And with an on-site spa and several more wines to sample, there are countless reasons to return... ■



## HOW TO BOOK

A luxury double room with breakfast at The Vineyard is £250 per night. The seven-course Judgement of Paris tasting menu costs £89 per head and the wine flight costs £95 per person. This includes two glasses of wine per course. Visit [the-vineyard.co.uk](http://the-vineyard.co.uk)

