



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: NORTON HOUSE EXTERIOR AND ITS USHERS DINING ROOM; THE QUEEN'S ARMS AT NIGHT, AND THE HOTEL RESTAURANT; THE WISTERIA-CLAD MONTAGU ARMS AND RESTAURANT COMBINING FRENCH AND LOCAL INFLUENCES

where to stay



GOURMET BOLTHOLES

Alicia Miller, Lucy Land and Helen Alexander enjoy countryside pursuits and hearty winter cooking in these UK getaways

THE MONTAGU ARMS BEAULIEU, NEW FOREST

A beautifully restored 17th-century stop-off with a Michelin-starred chef, The Montagu Arms is a great find. Chef Matthew Tomkinson's locally sourced menu puts a delicate twist on classic French dining: sea scallops with pork belly are deliciously tender, and veal is cooked to perfection. Save room for a light banana soufflé, served with hot and gooey, salted butterscotch sauce. Afterwards head upstairs to one of the 22 rooms. Each has its own particular character and the large beds are heavenly after a day of outdoor activities. But don't sleep past breakfast. The resident hens aren't just for show: you can eat their eggs in the morning. The garden has also been turned into an organic allotment. Then post-breakfast you can pop out for a stroll in the New Forest, or snuggle up by the fire.

Foodie diversion The Beaulieu Chocolate Studio (beaulieuchocolatestudio.co.uk) specialises in cocoa with New Forest honey.

Come here for a cosy home from home, with fantastic food.

Details Double from £180. Palace Lane, Beaulieu, Hants SO42 7ZL (01590 612324; montaguarmshotel.co.uk).

NORTON HOUSE HOTEL EDINBURGH, SCOTLAND

A long tree-lined drive, flanked by fields, leads to this award-winning Scottish retreat. Built in 1840, the 83-room hotel has retained its historic charm, from marble pillars and an oak-panelled staircase, to the intricate Renaissance-style porch. Stylish rooms have more modern touches such as large, two-person showers and TVs in the bathroom, and there's a newly installed spa to enjoy on the premises. Ushers, the three-AA Rosette restaurant, steals the show with an intimate, candle-lit dining room that boasts just eight tables. Head chef Graeme Shaw has created a tasty seasonal menu. Start with wild mushroom ravioli, butternut squash purée and thyme foam, then move on to Scottish halibut, tarragon mash and oyster beignets, followed by Valrhona chocolate fondue for dessert, served with gingerbread ice cream. It's all deliciously decadent.

Foodie diversion Michelin-starred Champany Inn is close by (01506 834532).

Come here for a pampering break in chic surroundings.

Details Double from £100, including breakfast. Ingliston, Edinburgh, EH28 8LX (0131 333 1275; handpickedhotels.co.uk/hotels/Norton-House).

THE QUEEN'S ARMS EAST GARSTON, BERKSHIRE

Black-and-white photographs of dogs eager to join the hunt, a stuffed pheasant staring enigmatically into the distance and a row of muddy wellies lined up at the front door are the first clues that the Queen's Arms Hotel in East Garston is a dedicated follower of outdoor, country pursuits. Head here for an activity-packed weekend of fly fishing, horse riding and stalking – the hotel will help with organising activities. Or arm yourself with a map, don your walking boots and explore the highs and lows of Berkshire's sprawling Lambourn Valley. However you choose to spend your day, a warm welcome is guaranteed back at the hotel; fires crackle in the bar while thick woollen rugs are draped over chairs in the dining room. A pitstop at the bar is a must after a day spent outdoors. Refuel with a local ale, West Berkshire Brewery supply a fine selection, or order a glass of wine – there's an excellent range picked by wine merchant William Mason – and catch up with other guests. Then enjoy chef Matt Green-Armytage's menu (served in both spaces, and the large beer garden when weather permits). This features game from local shoots, meat from neighbouring farmers and nearby butchers Bastable Brothers, giving a real flavour of the area. Deliciously generous starters include chicken liver and foie gras parfait with red onion marmalade and wedges of granary toast. These pave the way for a feast full of rustic flavours and textures, from braised pigs' cheeks with white pudding mash and a tangy scrumpy sauce, to a perfectly cooked rib-eye steak with unashamedly thick-cut chips. Desserts are a triumph. Lemon posset, mixed berries and shortbread offering a refreshing burst of citrus to cleanse the palate. Upstairs, bedrooms exude country house chic – vintage posters advertising field sport outfitters meet rich colour schemes, dark wooden furniture and spacious bathrooms, complete with huge showers or stand-alone baths, a great place to revive weary legs.

Foodie diversion Support Berkshire's local producers and drop into the East Garston Community Shop on Back Street (01488 648241).

Come here for an authentic escape to the country, a welly's throw away from central London.

Details Double from £70, including breakfast. East Garston, Berkshire RG17 7ET (01488 648757; queensarmshotel.co.uk). □