

This week's dream: Savoring a culinary awakening in 'Hardy country'

Stonehenge used to get me down, said Kate Maxwell in *Condé Nast Traveler*. To a London teenager being hauled unwillingly to the country each weekend, those ancient monoliths marked the beginning of the West Country, a nowhereland of rolling green hills where a big night out was “a bag of potato chips and a pint of Strongbow cider” at a dark village pub. But miracles happen. I’ve grown older and wiser since the 1990s, and South West England’s embrace of the Slow Food movement, of all things, has transformed the region into a place where it’s no surprise to find oneself dining beside Madonna’s ex or random members of England’s “fashion royalty.” What’s unchanged is the landscape—a world so intensely green that “you can feel drunk” on the color alone.

Meals weren’t the only highlights on my itinerary when I ventured back to Somerset and Dorset for a recent recharge. I’m a sucker for the melodrama in *Tess of the*



Thomas Hardy's picture-perfect birthplace
D'Urbervilles, so I made time to visit “the epicenter of Hardy country,” the author’s cottage in Higher Bockhampton. “If you were to ask a Hollywood location scout to find an English country cottage, this would be what you’d get—salmon pink walls and a thick thatched roof, framed by holly, yew, and cherry trees.” The bigger house Hardy later built nearby is much less pretty, but

its dining room features a portrait of the beauty who inspired *Tess*. Dorset is “littered with stately homes.” Two that I visited—Kingston Lacy and Montacute House—featured “astounding” portrait collections.

In Lyme Regis, on the Dorset coast, chef Mark Hix welcomed us to the epicenter of the locavore movement that’s invigorated dining across the whole region. Hix Oyster & Fish House is located in a wonderfully unspoiled town, and “jolly bunting spanned the narrow streets” near its shaley but lively beach. Hix is an amicable wizard of offal, educating foodies about the delights of monkfish cheeks, for instance. But he also connected us to a cider master, who led us to a cheddar maker, who steered us toward yet more unforgettable meals. At last, life in the West Country matches its “magical and grave” soul. *Launceston Farm* (launcestonfarm.co.uk), an elegant B&B in Blandford Forum, Dorset, offers doubles from \$128 a night.

Hotel of the week



La Pila's converted farmhouse

Tenuta La Pila

Veneto, Italy
“Things are done big” at Alberto Sartori’s 108-acre holiday estate, said *Travel + Leisure*. Its small compound of historic buildings has only seven apartments and five guest rooms, but a spirit of abundance abides. It starts with the “ebullient welcome” Sartori and his wife extend as a visitor takes in the converted 1733 rice mill, its “pebbled courtyard,” and the surrounding fields of corn. The 50-foot pool can be a welcome sight after a day trip to Verona or Padua. Two nights a week, the Sartoris make dinner themselves: Think a rustic goose stew and “plenty of fluffy polenta.” www.tenutalapila.it; doubles from \$118

Getting the flavor of...

Amtrak's sleeping cars

Never let it be said that Amtrak has to start offering 21st-century service, said David Netto in *The Wall Street Journal*. The “quasi-national” railroad may deny its public fast trains, warm food, and consistently attentive service, but my family has discovered that we’d rather take an overnight Amtrak than travel this country any other way. This isn’t about saving money: “There’s no point in doing trains on the cheap.” When I travel with my wife and two young daughters, we get adjoining private suites, entitling us to four bunks, two fold-down tables, and “an incomparable feeling of coziness and well-being.” The *Coast Starlight*, which rattles north from Los Angeles to Seattle, is one of our favorite lines. Don’t expect luxury—not unless your definition includes “hours of endless quiet, talking to your children, and the blissful monotony that comes with staring at the unfolding American landscape.”

Dallas's lake country

You actually can get outdoors during a Texas summer, said Andrea Sachs in *The Washington Post*. The Dallas-Fort Worth area can feel like a “giant fire pit” every time you venture outside an air-conditioned zone, but “Texas is big on water,” and the two sister cities are ringed by seven lakes that welcome swimmers. Though none are natural lakes, they’re fed by natural springs, creeks, or rivers, and every one can lower your “internal mercury.” At Grapevine Lake, I managed to score a secluded cove with my own covered picnic table. At playground-like Burger’s Lake, I watched braver bathers frolicking on five diving boards and three giant slides. As for real wildlife sightings, nothing topped my near run-in with a swimming beaver at Cedar Hill State Park. Mostly, I had to settle for trying to identify large birds flying overhead. “American—whoosh. Delta—whoosh.” For sure, there aren’t many egrets this close to an airport.

Last-minute travel deals

Royal freebie

A California hotel near Disneyland is offering up to three nights free through Aug. 28 for any couple who are namesakes of royal newlyweds William and Kate. Book rooms at the Red Lion Hotel Anaheim by July 31—and have proof of ID ready. redlion.com

Elephant games

Catch Thailand’s 10th annual King’s Cup Elephant Polo Tournament Sept. 3–12 while staying for just \$297 a night at the Anantara Hua Hin Resort & Spa. The resort’s Elephant Polo Package includes daily breakfast and transport to the pitch. huahin.anantara.com

Hawaii for peanuts

Aston Hotels is offering rooms in Hawaii for as little as \$89. Book by Aug. 29 for travel between Aug. 1 and Dec. 21 to get the lowest rates of the year. There are Aston properties on four of the Hawaiian Islands. astonhotels.com