



THE MOOR THE MERRIER



To open our special section on the best boltholes in Britain for a beautiful break, **Lizzie Rivera** was sent to the middle of a moor. Once she stopped crying, she happened upon **Oare Manor** – and was utterly entranced

E

xmoor. The very name conjures up romance, wilderness, natural beauty – it is no accident that RD Blackmore set his 17th-century tragic tale of love and murder, *Lorna Doone*, around this enchanting landscape.

The church where the heroine is dramatically shot (don't panic, it is only a fable despite what the locals would have you believe) can still be found in Oare. Just behind, beyond the iron gates and up the garden path, sits the newly refurbished Oare Manor on 30 acres of land. Fret not, claustrophobes – it's surrounded by 267 square miles of national park. One of the smallest in the UK, but this is one example where size really doesn't count – it is still possible to walk for hours and not see a soul.

Which is why, when visiting, you should really consider hiring out all eight of the double-bedroom suites for friends, family and the dog. Talking of dogs, they even have a doggy shower and coat-drying room for when Fido has finished plashing about in the streams and

**How to get there:**

First Great Western from London Paddington to Taunton. From £11.50 each way for standard tickets, and £29.50 for First Class. www.firstgreatwestern.co.uk, 08457 000 125

Regal Cars:

Ask for Mac – if he's good enough for Deborah 'Dragon' Meaden, he's good enough for us. www.regalcarstaunton.co.uk, 01823 333 654.

What to do:**Exmoor guided Safari with Richard**

Ex-army Sergeant-Major, Richard, spent a month living on – and off – the moor when he joined Civvy Street. He barks his way through the safari in his 4WD, telling you all you could want to know and more about the lie of the land. The bumpy ride is fun, getting up close with the deer and stag is magnificent, and the bum-slapping is thrown in for free for all butt – sorry, but – the luckiest of riders...

£20pp www.discoverysafaris.com

Hawk Walk with Nigel Penfold

Watching these wild birds of prey fly at your face but land on your arm is exhilarating for some and terrifying for others. Learning about the history of falconry is fascinating (honestly). Finding out for yourself that Lady Macbeth will only play until she is full of raw rabbit and then she will naff off to roam the moors (very possibly until the next morning) is a valuable reminder that nature's wildest be bribed but not tamed.

£30 for an hour for three people, or £10pp www.northdevonhawkwalks.co.uk

Eating Tarr FarmriversideInn

Great for Devon Ruby ribeye, Exmoor venison, and roasted partridge. Book the Oak Room, a private dining area for up to 19 people, with a private bar and sofas.

Mains start at £12.95 www.tarrfarm.co.uk

puddles on Exmoor. The Manor is an eclectic mix of individually and elaborately decorated rooms, featuring original pencil drawings by John Lennon, richly-coloured silk wallpaper and free-standing Victorian baths. The master bedroom hosts a replica of the bed designed by Napoleon for Josephine (one of only three known to exist in the UK). But without doubt the best thing about it is its size. At least 8ft wide there's comfortably room for three... if not four.

After a weekend of rising to morning tea, papers delivered directly to your bed, wandering downstairs to an open fire, freshly-brewed coffee and eggs fresh from the garden, you will wonder why every morning can't start in this way. Or afternoon...the beds are so comfy you will find it hard to get up. But the country air is so fresh and landscape so inviting that you won't want to waste the day either. You snooze, you lose. Decisions, decisions.

No one would blame you for being reluctant to leave the oh-so-comfy confines of the leather sofa, or the deep recesses of the tub, but Exmoor has a lot to offer should you wish to get out and about (see 'What to do' for recommendations on how best to

do so). And each time you return the house welcomes you like a faithful dog, full of yelps of delight and kisses on your neck... oh, sorry, I mean homemade scones and a fresh pot of coffee in front of the cackling log fire.

The wonderful butler and housekeeper, Rod and Karen, are on hand to tend to your every whim and if you give them advance notice can organise a local cook for you; the food is hearty, but most importantly fresh. If you prefer to cook for yourselves, you have free rein to dig up whatever takes your fancy in the full vegetable garden, and fresh lobster can be delivered direct from the morning's catch at Lynmouth Bay.

Access is not easy (unless you're landing directly in the helicopter field). Once you leave the motorway or closest train station (Taunton) you have a good hour of narrow country lanes to meander through. (If driving, make sure you have enough petrol in the tank – the nearest garage is a good 15 minutes' drive away and shuts for the weekend early on a Friday afternoon. One of those charming quirks of the countryside, that is only charming up until the point that it becomes hideously inconvenient).

That said, the manor is more than geared up to provide for your every caprice, from

its amply stocked bar, to the Bose surround-sound system, and hot tub in the garden (complete with disco lights). It's the perfect party weekend retreat. Once home to the Exmoor Hunt, it's also great for business.

A soon-to-be completed two-storey barn will be the perfect retro games room and have a huge plasma TV, pool table, darts and a bar. It will provide the perfect space to chill out with mates (or occupy the kids), while separate apartments will give you and the family ample space to be alone together. So take the family, take colleagues, take mates. But definitely take the dog... **M.**

Full occupancy (14 guests) starts from £3,000 per night including services of the housekeeper and butler.

