

COUNTRY LIFE

A fishing weekend in the New Forest: ‘Visiting feels as if you have arrived in a foreign country, but it’s little more than an hour from London’



[Mark Hedges](#) December 14, 2019



Credit: Mark Watts / Undercastle Cottage

A New Forest fishing weekend at Undercastle Cottage is a slice of 'perfect escapism', as Mark Hedges found out.

What's extraordinary about the New Forest, which only became a National Park in 2005, is that it is so completely different to anywhere else in the UK. Neither is it new, having been named by William the Conqueror in 1079 as a place near the royal capital of Winchester where he could hunt. His son, William Rufus, was killed in the forest by an arrow when out hunting. Today, a stone marks the spot of the 'accident'. The haste with which his brother Henry raced to be crowned has led many to believe it was murder.

The New Forest is different from the vast majority of our other National Parks in that it is predominately flat, forming part of the Hampshire basin. It is a wonderful place to visit and geologically, is in sharp contrast to my home in the hills of Hampshire's South Downs. Visiting feels as if you have arrived in a foreign country, but it is little more than an hour's drive from London.



Credit: New Forest Destination

You enter a different world as you cross the cattle grids and motor into the National Park itself. Here, ponies, cattle, pigs and donkeys cross the road as they please. Elsewhere, under oaks and sweet chestnuts, Rachel and I watched candelabra-crowned fallow bucks swishing their tails as they built up courage for the rutting battles to come. Between the dollops of woodland, a kestrel scoured the great chequerboard patches of heather for voles.

We were staying in the north of the forest at Undercastle Cottage. Picture perfect, it appeared out of the woods sitting snugly beside the Hampshire Avon. It is as pretty as a thatched cottage can be. Life immediately slowed under the spell of birdsong and the twisting, tranquil river — it was a *Wind in The Willows* moment. Once the home of a salmon keeper, the cottage is as lonely and precious as a well-kept secret.



Perfect escapism is one thing, but it's even better when it comes with elegant interiors, logs ready to be torched in the fireplace and a welcome hamper brimming with local goodies. Leaving a kitchen to inspire the most adventurous cook, I allowed myself to be lured away from the experts and took to the water to take my chance fishing for chub and barbel.

Across the Avon lies a vast water meadow and, soon, cattle appeared to inspect my casting. A zing of electric blue shot past, the energy of the kingfisher somehow at odds with the occasion. The swans gently sculled upstream and decorum returned.

After the fishing, we walked into the broad-leaved woodland and followed paths hung on either side by curtains of old man's beard and blood-red holly berries. The oaks eclipsed the sun above us as fungi and dead leaves created a delicate autumn aroma under our feet.



Towards evening, I fished again, to the disappointment of the cows, the chefs and myself. As the sun sank downstream from the cottage, hundreds of bats, big and small, appeared over the river. It was an astonishing sight.

The cottage lies within an easy walk of the village of Woodgreen with its award-winning shop and fine pub, the [Horse and Groom](#), where we settled in for Sunday lunch. Donkeys took up a number of the car-parking spaces, but nobody seemed to mind. This is not a place for haste or worry.

Undercastle Cottage sleeps four in the main house and a further two in the Fishing Lodge; from £904 for three nights, over a long weekend, or four nights midweek — see www.undercastlecottage.co.uk, call 01428 717000 or 01872 553491, or email info@undercastlecottage.co.uk.