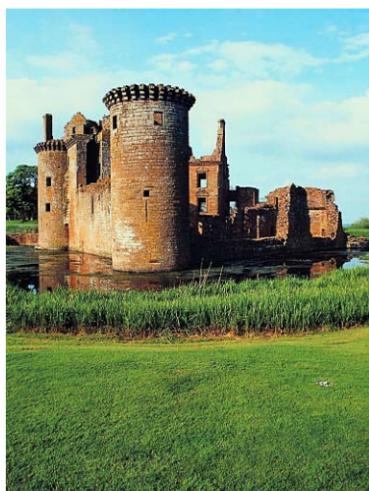




# Globejotter



as this is prime mountain-bike country. A quartet of excellent 7 Stanes mountain-biking trail centres tempt within pedalling distance (01387 702 228; 7stanesmountainbiking.com).

On site you can ramble through the property's private forest or even muck in at the farm. Previous guests have helped out with the lambing.

Further afield, Scotland's national bard, Robert Burns, spent his last years scribbling poetry in the trim market town of Dumfries. You can visit his house (01387 255297; bit.ly/BurnsDumfries), enjoy a pint of ale in "his" seat in the Globe Inn (01387 252 335; globeinndumfries.co.uk), established in 1610, and admire a sprinkling of statues dedicated to this greatest of romantic poets.

Historic castles and abbeys dot the landscape (historic-scotland.gov.uk). Caerlaverock Castle tempts with its unusual triangular design and still existent moat, while Threave Castle is a delight as you have to catch a wee boat over. Sweetheart Abbey meanwhile is almost unbearably romantic. Lady Devorgilla built it as a testament to her late husband and spent the last two decades of her life with a casket around her neck containing his embalmed heart. She was buried here still clasping it. More information: visitscotland.com.

#### THE FOOD AND DRINK

Julie likes to leave seriously fresh free-range eggs from the farm for

new arrivals, as well as a few home-baked goods and a couple of ales from the local Sulwath Brewers. For supermarket supplies stop off in Dumfries en route. For something more interesting, try one of the many farm shops and small producers. The creamery and farm shop at Loch Arthur Camphill Community (01387 259669; locharthur.org.uk) not only offers a swathe of local produce (including the superb eponymous cheese), but there is now a café too. Alternatively, try Marrbury Smokehouse's café (01671 820476; visit marrbury.co.uk) before retreating to your treehouse with some of their award-winning smoked salmon.

For your very own Burns Supper head for Hullabaloo (01387 259679; hullabaloorestaurant.co.uk), housed in the same building as the Robert Burns Film Theatre (the smallest in Scotland). Or if you prefer seafood the artists' town of Kirkcudbright is home to an active fishing fleet. Posh nosh is available at the Selkirk Arms (01557 330402; selkirkarmshotel.co.uk), while Polarbites (01557 339050; polarbites.co.uk) is an award-winning chippie and runs a fishmonger next door.

#### THE ESSENTIALS

Brockloch Eco Retreat, Brockloch Farm, Kirkpatrick Durham, Dumfries and Galloway DG7 3HU (07812 357 824; brockloch.co.uk). Treehouse from £150 per night.

Blackface lamb is similarly sought-after. Visitors to Kilnford Farm (01387 253 087; kilnford.co.uk), in Dumfries, can sample meat from its Blackface flock at the farm's restaurant or buy some to take home from its shop.

White flowers of wild garlic should soon be pushing their way into hedgerows. Sign up for Gooddayout's (good dayout.co.uk) Spring Forage and Wild Garlic Bake in aid of Slow Food Cymru on 19 April. Chef Margaret Rees will take participants on a forage through the Towy Valley, followed by a class making soups, sauces and pesto. The trip lasts five hours and costs £55.

Langoustines are at their best at

this time of year. At Doune Knoydart, near Mallaig in Scotland (01687 462 667; doune-knoydart.co.uk; from £77 per person per night), they are served virtually out of the boats straight on to the dining table of this remote lodge.

The unique growing conditions and seaweed fertiliser for Jersey Royals are what make them special. To sample them in situ, visit the Jersey Food Festival (jersey.com/food) from 21-25 May, an annual celebration of the island's famous potato.

The Exeter Festival of South West Food & Drink (exeterfoodanddrink festival.co.uk), founded by the chef Michael Caines, takes place this year

## GREAT GETAWAYS

### MAKE A BREAK FOR MALLORCA

Spend an all-inclusive week in Mallorca for £228pp. The Travel Republic deal includes flights from Gatwick to Palma, departing on 9 May, plus accommodation at the three-star Marina Skorpios Hotel in Cala D'Or on the island's east coast. The hotel's swimming pool backs on to an idyllic sandy cove (travelrepublic.co.uk).

### BEACH AND CITY IN PORTUGAL

Make Porto your next port of call with a three-night Bank holiday trip from lastminute.com, costing £277pp. Depart from Stansted on 1 May and stay in the five-star Crowne Plaza Porto on a room-only basis. The modern hotel is well placed for exploring both the historic city centre and the beaches of Foz (lastminute.com).

### HONEYMOON IN MAURITIUS

For those who may have left their honeymoon planning rather late (or couples simply looking for a romantic retreat), Kuoni is offering a seven-night stay for two at the romantic Solana Beach resort on Mauritius's north-east coast for £816pp, departing on 27 June. The offer includes half-board accommodation, as well as BA flights from Gatwick (kuoni.co.uk).

### CUBA CALLING

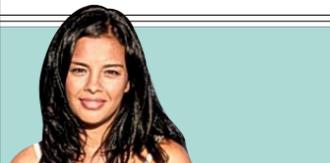
Plan ahead to soak up some early autumn sunshine in Cuba. Virgin Holidays is offering a two-week holiday on the white sand beaches of Playa Jibacoa, 60km east of Havana, for £1,163pp. The price includes all-inclusive accommodation at the Breezes resort, return flights from Gatwick, departing 1 October, and airport transfers. The seductive sights and sounds of the capital, Havana, are an easy day trip from the resort (virginholidays.co.uk).

## SOMETHING TO DECLARE



**BIRD'S EYE VIEW**  
Great Indian hornbills closely protect their offspring in the spring ALAMY

## Time to remember the power and beauty of nature



**Liz Bonnin**

The Western Ghats of India are home to one of the world's greatest tropical rainforests and a staggering number of floral and faunal species, which is somewhat confounding when you consider the 400 million people who also live here. Somehow, some of the most biodiverse wildlife on the planet manages to survive among a fragmented landscape of forests, plantations and villages.

Of the 508 bird species in these mountains, perhaps the most bizarre and spectacular is the great Indian hornbill - an oversized explosion of colours and shapes that shouldn't work but does. Spotting this extraordinary bird is not easy, but with spring comes the nesting season, and an opportunity not only to observe the male hornbill for extended periods, but also to witness a fascinating part of this bird's behaviour.

On a recent visit, I set off at 5am for an hour-long drive through mosaic-patterned tea plantations towards a coffee plantation to the west of the village of Valparai. Because coffee needs shade, native trees and scrub are encouraged to grow among the coffee bushes, which in turn encourage wildlife. So, the scene when I arrived was reminiscent of a wild forest, its dusky pallet turning pink in the morning light.

An enormous, disinterested gaur - an Indian bison - was grazing amid the coffee as I

walked quietly to a tall tree with a tell-tale hollow at the fork of its main branches. There was a small opening, impossible for a hornbill to fit through, but for eight weeks a female hornbill had been incubating an egg inside. With the help of her mate, she had gradually barricaded herself in using her droppings, with the remaining gap small enough to discourage any hungry cobras or lizards. Incidentally, she would remain crammed inside this hollow for another eight weeks, with the male responsible for feeding his family.

I waited patiently, nibbling the green peppercorns that grow on the vines entwining tall Umbrella Trees - quite a fiery kick at 6am on an empty stomach. A pair of Malabar grey hornbills, which mustn't yet have found their hollow, flew above as if to herald what I'd come for. The otherworldly sound of enormous feathered paddles beating through the air sent a shiver down my spine.

Finally, a male hornbill appeared and landed at the nest opening, his claws somehow allowing his formidable mass to perch almost daintily on his vertical landing strip. He opened his beak and, with an awkward stretch of his neck, began to regurgitate a fig. Only then did I see a flash of the female's yellow bill appear at the entrance to the nest. The male gently lowered his gift into the hole and she disappeared. He regurgitated and presented a beetle, and finally a bat. Fifteen minutes passed, and with an impressive take-off he swept through the trees. I gawped, speechless, at this splendid display in a man-made landscape - a striking reminder of nature's resilience and ability to adapt.

Liz Bonnin presents BBC2's 'Stargazing Live', which is available on iPlayer