



ABOVE LEFT The beautifully maintained gardens at Horsington Grange. **ABOVE RIGHT** There are plenty of apples in the store room to feed the horses.

Luxury within reach

YOU DON'T HAVE TO TRAVEL THE GLOBE TO FIND A HOLIDAY THAT LIVES UP TO YOUR LUXURY EXPECTATIONS...

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When you think of hiring a holiday home within the UK, what images spring to mind? Memories of fraying bath towels, second-hand three-piece-suites and the discovery that your ‘peaceful rural retreat’ is actually yards from a motorway service station?

The attractions of holidaying within the UK are obvious – no stressful airport ordeal, overpriced plane ticket, or hours and sometimes days spent travelling to and from your chosen destination. But the reality has often been a let down. Holiday homes have always been hit or miss, and usually with nobody on hand to help you if you feel you’ve been misled. But, in these times when purse strings are tightening and staying in the country for our holidays is growing in popularity, one UK-based company is offering the antidote to all your holiday-at-home fears.

Unique Home Stays, founded in 2001, is on a mission to provide luxury, hotel-standard accommodation within the UK, and has acquired an impressive selection of stunning, quirky properties, from castles to cottages, available to rent. Country manors big enough to comfortably accommodate your extended family, eco-friendly farmhouses, and fully staffed stately homes make up their tempting collection of hideaways, in places all over the country, from Crieff in Scotland to the Cornish coastline.

We decided to find out whether the company can live up to such high expectations and decamped to a misty Somerset, choosing to stay at Georgian former rectory, Horsington Grange – a recent addition to their portfolio. Friday night’s quick hop down the M3 was the first delight – and our group of thirteen was settled, unpacked and enjoying the first glass of wine in front of a roaring open fire within hours of leaving work. Sleeping up to 20 in the Grange and its adjacent converted Dovecote, there is more than enough space for a large party, or extended family, to spread out and not feel hemmed-in. >>

THERE IS MORE THAN ENOUGH SPACE FOR A LARGE PARTY, OR EXTENDED FAMILY, TO SPREAD OUT AND NOT FEEL HEMMED-IN



LEFT the heated outdoor pool, perfect for summer days.



BELOW A cosy bedroom in the dovecote.

ABOVE RIGHT The perfect duck egg blue country kitchen, complete with aga. BELOW LEFT The games room which includes pool and table tennis. BELOW RIGHT the dovecote lounge.

Floor-to-ceiling sash windows, a warming Aga and no less than three reception rooms to curl up with a book in, all gave the property an immediate sense of luxury, but it was in the finer details that this house really shone. The fluffy white bath towels and crisp bed sheets sourced from The White Company, the 3D TV, the hamper of goodies inclusive in the rental, iPod docking stations, an endless library of books, stand-alone bath tubs – the whole feel of the house was of a high-spec country hotel, without the threat of other guests ruining your break away. The house was close to perfect for our likening, but improvements are soon to be in place – an Orangery extension is planned for the kitchen this year.

It's easy to forget that there's so much of the UK to discover, and Horsington was a perfect launch pad from which to explore. Some of our party preferred to stay within the acres of land surrounding the Grange. Though it was too frosty for such efforts, tennis courts and a heated swimming pool looked perfect for summer stays. Meanwhile, others went off exploring the nearby countryside. Little more than an hour away from the Jurassic Coast, some enjoyed a breathtaking coastal walk. Another group delved into neighbouring Dorset to visit the birthplace and home of Thomas Hardy, a thatched cottage owned by National Heritage where, appropriately 'Far From The Madding Crowd' was penned.

Back in the peaceful village of Horsington, the local amenities were as unassuming as you would wish for. The Half Moon Inn, is a perfect traditional country pub offering local ales, and the Sunday lunch went down a treat after an appetite-building walk.

It's not just holidays that Unique Home Stays are now focussing their attentions on. So many of the properties they manage are able to handle corporate escapes or adventure seekers. Want a team-building week of outdoor activities? Saddlewood Manor in the Brecon Beacons sleeps up to 17, and via their fantastically user-friendly website you can arrange all your requests. The company is also handling weddings and civil ceremonies at their homes, from small-scale bohemian nuptials to marquees and fireworks on the lawn of a Yorkshire castle.

You can't guarantee the weather and we know that nothing will replace the excitement of exploring new exotic territories, but companies like UHS are certainly challenging the long-held belief that holidaying in the UK has to be a disappointing second-choice. Places like Horsington provide a glamour and a chance to relax previously hard to come by in the world of UK rentals. /Après

Details

Unique Home Stays
www.uniquehomestays.com
01637881942

We stayed...

Horsington Grange, Somerset

- Sleeps up to 20 guests
- Prices range from £2050 for four nights

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