

# Free Roaming in the New Forest

Once a royal hunting ground for William the Conqueror, the New Forest covers an area of 220 square miles and is made up of vast tracts of unspoilt woodland, heathland and river valleys. Giselle Whiteaker spots deer, ponies and cattle roaming free on its ancient heaths.





Balmer Lawn Hotel

A few ponies graze contentedly on the grass in front of Balmer Lawn Hotel and several wispy white clouds drift overhead in the cobalt-blue sky. It's a glorious day in the New Forest and away from the hustle and bustle of everyday life, I can already feel myself relaxing.

"Ready to go?" asks my friend Lizzie, interrupting my reverie. We've checked in to our comfortable suite at Balmer Lawn – originally built as a hunting lodge in the mid-1800s, it is now a classic country house hotel, set in the heart of the New Forest National Park. The 54 rooms are individually decorated, ranging from traditional country house to contemporary, and ours lies somewhere in the middle. But now, we're ready to get active.

A short drive away, past more foraging ponies and the occasional free-roaming cow, we pull off the main road onto a forested track, dappled with sunlight. We soon arrive at the parking lot of New Forest Activities' water sports centre at Buckler's Hard, where our guide, Callum, and trainee guide, Meghan, are waiting for us. Kitted up for an afternoon of kayaking on the Beaulieu River, we amble down to the shore line for a briefing, before pushing away under Callum's watchful gaze. A few paddle-strokes later, he deems us competent and paddles up beside us, to guide the way.

It's peaceful on the river, with the dip of our paddles and the occasional bird call providing the soundtrack as we glide. Callum points out things of interest; a grey mullet

just under the water's surface; a heron wading by the bank; a jellyfish that he gently scoops from the depths to allow us a closer look. He also gives us the history of the Beaulieu mill and abbey as we approach to admire the exteriors. It's a lovely way to spend an afternoon.

Several hours later, we drift ashore, smiles on our faces. We have just enough time and sunshine to make use of Balmer Lawn's outdoor heated pool. It's glorious soaking up the last of the sun's rays poolside, and it's only our stomachs rumbling that guides us inside. We've worked up an appetite and are looking forward to sampling Executive Chef Chris Wheeldon's dishes at the Balmer Lawn restaurant.

After freshening up, we make our way into the light-filled dining space. The menu is a treat, ranging from bites from the garden, forest and sea, to starters, large plates, grilled dishes, and of course, desserts. The descriptions alone make us salivate in anticipation and we settle on sharing the home-smoked local trout and shoulder of pork starters, followed by ash-rolled beef for Lizzie and Creedy Carver duck breast for me. We have no regrets. Each of the dishes are beautifully presented and packed with flavour and texture combinations so mouth-watering that we begin to plan our selections for the next night.

Our desserts are also a delight. The passion fruit cheesecake with orange curd and maple ice cream is light and tangy, refreshing the palate, while the warm

chocolate fondant with blood orange sorbet is simply perfection on a plate. "I feel like a cat about to purr," says Lizzie, as we lope back to our suite to relax.

The sun makes another welcome appearance the next day, ready for our post-breakfast cycle. We trade four wheels for two at the New Forest Activities' centre in Beaulieu and pick up route maps for a moderate cycle of seven miles or so, which winds through forest and farmland, following bicycle paths and roads. The diversity of the landscape is impressive, with ancient woodlands, forest, open moors, picturesque villages and a pause on the New Forest's 40-mile 'secret' coast all part of the course.

When we prise our bottoms from our bikes seats back in Beaulieu, it's early afternoon and we have just enough time for toasted teacake at The Old Bakehouse Tearooms on the High Street before we return our trusty steeds and zip off for a spot of archery. It's unlikely I'll master the bow and arrow any time soon – in an impromptu competition against other beginners, where we aim at objects including a small boar and Homer Simpson, I struggle with my aim, but it's fun trying. Our New Forest Activities' instructor has the patience of a saint, smiling good-naturedly as our arrows fly over and under the targets to hide in the long grass.

As daylight fades, we lounge in the outdoor space attached to Balmer Lawn's bar, toasting the New Forest with glasses of chilled Prosecco. "This is delicious," sighs Lizzie, and I know she's not talking about her aperitif. It's the weekend, from the gorgeous landscapes to the delectable meals – most ingredients sourced locally; superb activities; and the relaxed ambience at the hotel. We have another meal here and a few hours in the morning to laze in the sauna at the in-house Saltus Spa, but we already know it's not going to be enough.

Driving away the next day, we start planning our next visit. "Wait. There," I say, directing Lizzie to turn in to Setley Ridge Vineyard and Farm Shop. The oak-framed store is bursting with wines from Setley Ridge itself, and produce from The New Forest, Hampshire, and the Isle of Wight. We quickly load up with exotic black garlic, spice mixes, ginger ale, Loosehanger Blue Nanny cheese and scrumptious home-made pork pies. We may have to leave the New Forest, but we'll take part of it home with us. ■



Alongside the Beaulieu River



An archery target



Canoes by the Beaulieu River



Home-smoked trout



Setley Ridge wines

For more information on Balmer Lawn Hotel see [www.balmerlawnhotel.com](http://www.balmerlawnhotel.com).

New Forest Cottages also have 130 properties in the area, ranging from budget to luxury. See [www.newforestcottages.co.uk](http://www.newforestcottages.co.uk).

For activities in the New Forest, from canoeing to cycling and rope courses, see [www.newforestactivities.co.uk](http://www.newforestactivities.co.uk).