Mid-week wonders

Samantha Whitaker looks at the advent of 'slow travel' and discovers an eco haven at Milden Hall in Suffolk

An eco-break needn't be a 'worthy' affair. It is all about getting out of the city and deep into the country. No tipis, treehouses or swimming with dolphins required; just nature, walking and breathing fresh air – without leaving a dirty footprint on the British countryside.

That's what the 'slow travel' movement is all about: becoming part of local life, connecting with a place and its people and its culture. It's the opposite of a whirlwind tour: it's about going with the flow and exploring an area thoroughly, ideally by foot or bicycle.

Milden Hall, near Lavenham in Suffolk, is a Georgianised 16th-century hall farmhouse bed and breakfast. There is also self-catering accommodation in a restored Tudor barn. Run by Christopher and Juliet Hawkins, Milden Hall is all about slowing down. "We try to get people to use their feet and bikes", says Juliet. During the day, they also encourage their B&B guests to keep out of the house. They are busy people. Christopher is a farmer and Juliet is an ecologist, who advises farmers on the environment. They are both committed to sustainable farming, integrating conservation where they can, and encouraging environmental awareness. In 2002, they were awarded the Gold award for Green Tourism.

And they practice what they preach. At Milden Hall, a wood burner heats the farmhouse, fuelled by wood coppiced from the farm hedgerows. Guests are encouraged to put on a jumper rather than leaving the heaters on. They use biodegradable products and there is a comprehensive compost and recycling programme. But, as Milden Hall is a listed building, any serious restructuring, even for environmental purposes, is prohibited. The three bedrooms share a bathroom – there are no en suites – and each boasts handsome period furniture and a view over the wildflower meadow and walled garden. Room rates range from £60-£90 per night for a double or twin. It's generally quieter mid-week than on weekends, making it an ideal mid-week wonder for the eco-inclined, or just for those who enjoy peace, quiet and countryside.

Milden Hall isn't trying to be a hotel, it is a home, and that is what people love about it. "I think people are gradually realising that they don't have to have a brand new sparkly bleached-white towel every day", says Juliet, and there is a growing movement for lowering food-miles and using local produce. Juliet and Christopher provide sumptuous breakfasts using mostly their own produce: homemade jams, free-range eggs, bacon and sausages from their own Tamworths and Gloucester Old Spots, and plenty of seasonal fruit. Over breakfast, they often find themselves waxing lyrical about ecological subjects, and the various reading materials available in the house are on a similar theme.

After breakfast, there is plenty to do. Around the farm, there are various tracks to explore and keen readers can find peace in the walled garden. For barn self-catering families, Juliet organises activities, which can be booked in advance – including leaf rubbing, pond dipping, basket weaving and feeding the pigs.

If you want to go further afield, Christopher and Juliet provide planned routes for longer circular walks, which take in nature reserves, churches and medieval villages such as Lavenham, Chelsworth and Bildeston. Here you can find cafes and welcoming pubs, such as the Bell Inn at Kersey, the Angel in Lavenham and The White Horse at Edwardstone, an 'eco' pub serving local food and beer brewed in their own green microbrewery. If you want to go further, or faster, borrow a bike and perhaps even try the 'cryptic clue bike treasure hunt'.

The pretty medieval villages and churches, such as Kersey and Monks Eleigh, are also popular with historians, painters, artists and antique and junk shop hunters. The coast is about an hour away, and there are several National Trust properties nearby, including Sutton Hoo and Flatford Mill, where you can hire a boat and row down the River Stour.

Alongside the farmhouse, there is self-catering accommodation in an open-plan restored Tudor barn for groups of friends, families, artists, walkers, cyclists and re-enactors, who recreate historical periods or events through roeplay. The barn confortably accommodates up to 22 guests, plus space for campers in the meadow with shower and toilet facilities. With Tudor style furniture, a large oak table which can seat 30-50, and plenty of room to dance or sing, the barn offers a unique venue in a glorious rural setting. "At Milden", says Juliet, "you can walk, run, hug trees, pond dip, read, lie about, write, draw, paint, sing, eat and be merry."



© John Foley

ON YOUR BIKE: Guests at Milden Hall are encouraged to explore by bicycle

Milden Hall is run by Juliet and Christopher Hawkins.
The Hall, Milden, Lavenham, Sudbury, Suffolk CO10 9NY
Tel: 01787 247235
Email: hawkins@thehall-milden.co.uk
Web: www.thehall-milden.co.uk

At a snail's pace...

For more information about slow travel, green places to stay and eco days out all over the UK, purchase a copy of *Ecoescape UK* by Laura Burgess (£8.99, ISBN: 978-1905731404, Markham Publishing, 2008) or visit www.ecoescape.org