

# AVALON AWAKENING

*Confined to these shores, the travel writer Catherine Fairweather reflects on the delights of Somerset, the county closest to her heart, with its mysterious mediaeval towers, far-reaching vistas and Arthurian legends*

GLASTONBURY TOR  
IN SOMERSET

PHOTOGRAPHS: GETTY IMAGES, ALAMY, HARRY CORY WRIGHT, I-IMAGES/POOL

The guinea fowl are my morning wake-up call, rattling and tapping bossily at the window, claiming attention and grain. They'll spend the day patrolling the lanes and out-lying fields of my Somerset village like comedy-sketch policemen, standing sentinel at dusk on the highest leafy branches, ready to raise the alarm. Their favourite roost is the old oak, which, like all the trees in this ancient county that stretches from Minehead on the west coast to Frome in the south-east, has been allowed to grow crooked, twisted and gnarled. It frames a pastoral patchwork of small fields – threaded through with gleaming brooks, edged with hawthorn hedges – that tucks itself around the lap of an intimate and quiet landscape beneath Creech Hill and Cadbury Castle.

Gentle and understated, this green and pleasant England, rinsed by Bristol Channel mists and rain, has none of the theatre of the distant exotic lands to which I have spent my career as a travel writer escaping over the past two decades. These hills are merely mole-mounds compared with the dreaming pinnacles of the snow-capped Himalayas, the temperate climate unchallenging when set against the electrifying sun and wind-blasted elemental beauty of my Mediterranean summer home. It seems domestic and tame beside the desert or jungly wilds of Africa, India and Indochina beyond. Somerset cannot even claim the drama and the accompanying drum roll of England's poeticised Lakeland region and fells. But the fact of being by necessity grounded here, unable to move much beyond the boundaries of my view, has opened my inherently nomadic soul to a whole English universe of small, previously unnoticed countryside things. I have learnt that the hoot of the owl is louder in winter when naked trees don't muffle the sound, that ladybirds are drawn to pale colours and that the drill of the woodpecker is a harbinger of spring.

## TRAVEL

ABOVE: THE SOMERSET  
COUNTRYSIDE. RIGHT: THE  
PANTHEON AT STOURHEAD.  
BELOW: THE RIVER BRUE



I have admired the collaborative chatter of rooks in the crafting of their elaborate rookeries, smiled at the cartoonish playfulness of a hare chase around the oak in mating season, and understood, through trial and error, that wild garlic needs to be picked before it flowers to make a less bitter soup.

The physical and geographical scope of my newly discovered, redefined world is set out by the ancient and mysterious towers that stalk the horizon and stake out my boundaries: Glastonbury Tor to the west, Bruton Dovecote straight ahead. To my rear, Cranmore Tower, rising some 900 feet, is the highest point in the Mendips – an architectural gimmick that is appealing in its very uselessness, like the other quintessential English folly at my shoulder, the 18th-century King Alfred's Tower, which stands on the furthest boundary of Somerset, believed to commemorate an important Saxon victory against the Vikings. I love to go blackberry-picking in the shadows of this building, which serves no purpose other than to enhance the beauty of the Stourhead estate.

But Stourhead proper is in Wiltshire, just across the border. Historically, there were few feudal landlords in Somerset and no tradition of big 18th-century landed estates. Since the time of the Monmouth rebellion in 1685, when the Royalists defeated the raggle-taggle 'Pitchfork' Army that threatened to topple the status quo, the aristocracy have stayed firmly out of the county. No member of the Royal family paid a visit for 500 years; in fact, Queen Victoria reportedly pulled down the blinds when her train passed Taunton. Unbelievably, it has only been in this decade that the county has been honoured with a visit: first in 2014, when Prince

HAUSER & WIRTH AT  
DURSLADE FARM. LEFT:  
THE QUEEN AT THE  
GALLERY LAST YEAR







## TRAVEL

GLASTONBURY TOR. FAR  
LEFT, FROM TOP: THE RIVER  
BRUE. BRUTON TOWN

Arthur that drew Steinbeck here and obsessed him. From the ramparts of the steep-ditched and oak-solid stronghold of Cadbury Castle, the imagined Camelot of the enlightened kingdom, you can see all

Charles commiserated, in person, with victims of the flooding on the Levels, and then last year, when the Queen visited the Hauser & Wirth gallery at Durslade Farm.

Unlike Gloucestershire and Wiltshire, its neighbouring counties, Somerset is a yeoman farmer's land of smallholdings and neatly contained fields lined with hedgerows. A spirit of egalitarianism and individualism has flourished here that, in turn, has attracted a community of writers, artists and craftsmen. The once-forgotten Saxon backwater of Bruton, my own home town, is today a stylish retreat to a roster of creatives, from the impresario Cameron Mackintosh to the fashion designer Phoebe Philo. Along with Hauser & Wirth's Roth Bar and Grill are a host of destination restaurants, including At the Chapel and Osip, the latter opened by the award-winning chef Merlin Labron-Johnson. The Newt hotel is a year old; its outlying cider orchards and extensive gardens have already attracted legions of London admirers and endless column inches. These tend to overlook the more hidden esoteric charms of the ancient town: the historic Holy Well and Pump House on Patwell Street, the various architectural nooks and crannies, the Packhorse Bridge Stepping Stones worn smooth over the River Brue in the bluebell mist of early summer. Narrow pedestrian alleys called bartons lead off from the river to the main street in the lee of the Dovecote, another mysterious 16th-century tower whose purpose is not really known. The place has barely changed since the 1950s, when the writer John Steinbeck, a Bruton resident, would buy his tools and tacks at the old ironmonger's (now Number One hotel). He was, he wrote, delighted to find a place where 'time loses all its meaning. The peace I have dreamed about is here, a real thing, thick as a stone and feelable and something for your hands.'

It was the landscape's historic association with King



LEFT: OSIP. BOTTOM,  
FROM LEFT: THE  
COTTAGE GARDEN  
AT THE NEWT.  
HAUSER & WIRTH

the way to Glastonbury Tor – the defining icon of the Somerset landscape, a symbol of the Arthurian age of chivalry and its idealised past. As the legendary Isle of Avalon, it seems to float above the flatlands of the Levels, above the mist, a healing place whose energies were said to have restored the King after battle. It is also the major intersection of the Earth's magnetic channels of energy, ley lines, which have turned Glastonbury into the arcane centre of the world.

My husband, the landscape and former war photographer Don McCullin, came to live in Somerset even before Steinbeck was enthralled. 'There is definitely a magic here, in the layered history, and the storied past,' he says to me. 'The past is all around us here – a breathing, stirring, sighing presence.' His desire to peel back historical layers once had him ranging the hills with a metal detector – only last year, a vast hoard of coins dating back to William the Conqueror, worth some £5 million, was unearthed in the nearby Chew Valley. Today, Don is content with a Mamiya camera alone, shooting the cloud-scape over the rolling sheep hills that are washed by brooklets and a mystical dew that never runs dry. In the circumstances that have compelled me to be grounded, he asks me, haven't I discovered that being rooted to a place is no bad thing at all? □

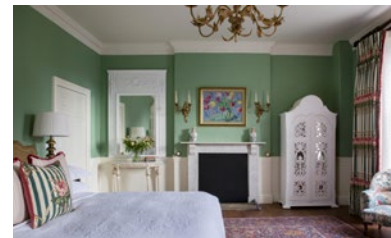


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## SET THE SCENE...

*Ancient sites, exquisite artworks and gastronomical delights await*



### NUMBER ONE BRUTON

Inhabited since the 16th century and once Steinbeck's favourite hardware shop, this building has been beautifully converted into a 12-room hotel with a Michelin-starred chef overseeing its restaurant, Osip. It is also a collaborative decorative project filled with artworks donated by locals: photos and prints by Don McCullin, sculptures by Candace Bahouth, riotous armchairs by Bill Amberg and a curving staircase mural by the colourist Kaffe Fassett. [www.numberonebruton.com](http://www.numberonebruton.com)



### I AM PILGRIM

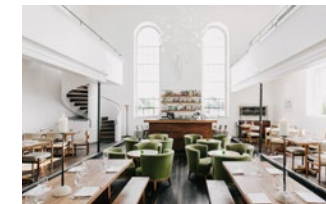
Dr Guy Hayward, the co-author of *Britain's Pilgrim Places: The First Complete Guide to Every Spiritual Treasure*, leads modern

worshippers on a day-long walk from the sacred sites of Glastonbury to the cathedral city of Wells, accompanied by songs and blessings. You'll follow pathways that track migration routes in a land that has been continuously inhabited for 12,000 years. [www.britishpilgrimage.org](http://www.britishpilgrimage.org)



### THE NEWT

The South African owners of the acclaimed Babylonstoren hotel have channelled the same energy, vision and funds into creating a multifaceted estate with a vegetable plot, cider orchards, woodland and 'garden-rooms' themed around colours and fragrances. The treetop Viper walkway gives you a woodpecker's view over the grounds and you can take courses on beekeeping and honey. Book the stable-rooms, named after King Arthur's horses, Hengroen and Llamrei. [www.thenewtinsomerset.com](http://www.thenewtinsomerset.com)



### AT THE CHAPEL

This is the restaurant that turned Bruton from a backwater into a buzzy cultural hub. It hosts regular author talks and a Friday-night DJ set, and is home to a wood-fired pizza oven, bakery, wine shop, terrace and eight sleek, dog-friendly rooms. [www.atthechapel.co.uk](http://www.atthechapel.co.uk)



DURSLADE FARMHOUSE  
The Grade II-listed farm complex was salvaged and restored from rack and ruin in

2007 by the gallery Hauser & Wirth, which turned it into headquarters that include an education centre, a restaurant and six bedrooms decorated with works by artists including Paul McCarthy and Pipilotti Rist. The venue was used as the location for the 2000 film *Chocolat*, starring Juliette Binoche and Johnny Depp, and the neon artwork on its mediaeval façade, Martin Creed's *Everything is Going to be Alright*, provides a morale booster in these straitened times. □ [www.dursladefarmhouse.co.uk](http://www.dursladefarmhouse.co.uk)

