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.

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 outlying 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.

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...
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 its idealised past. As the legendary Isle of Avalon, it seems to float above the flatslands 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.

Arthur that drew Steinbeck here and obsessed him. From the ramparts of the steep-pitched and oak-sold stronghold of Cadbury Castle, the imagined Camelot of the enlightened kingdom, you can see all 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 Sir John Dunnisho, it seems to float above the flatslands 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.

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 by Don McCullin, sculptures by Candace Bahouth, riotous armchairs by Bill Amberg and a curling staircase mural by the colourist Kaffe Fassett.

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Dr Guy Hayward, the co-author of Britain’s Pilgrim Places: The First Complete Guide to Every Spiritual Town, 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

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

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 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 medieval facade, Martina Creed’s Everything is Going to be Alright, provides a morale booster in these straitened times. www.dursladefarmhouse.co.uk

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 teetotop 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.thenewtsomerset.com

The Newt

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THE NEWT

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