

WHERE THE *wild things are*

British Travel Journal switches off at Elmley – the only National Nature Reserve in the country where you can spend the night – as it celebrates ten years of its stunning, nature-immersed cabins and unique wildlife experiences.

Text by Sophie Farrah



wildlife significance. Their daughter and son-in-law, Georgina and Gareth, moved back to the estate in 2013; captivated by its vast skies and teeming wildlife, they set about creating sensitive and stylish on-site accommodation that would allow visitors to experience both dawn and dusk in comfort, and in doing so they became early glamping pioneers.

I first visited not long after Elmley opened its gates to overnight guests. Back then, there were just three shepherd's huts. Ten years later, those same lovely huts have been joined by several custom-made cabins, as well as Elmley Cottage, which sleeps 10, and Kingshill Farmhouse, a beautifully renovated 18th-century farmhouse that sleeps 14.

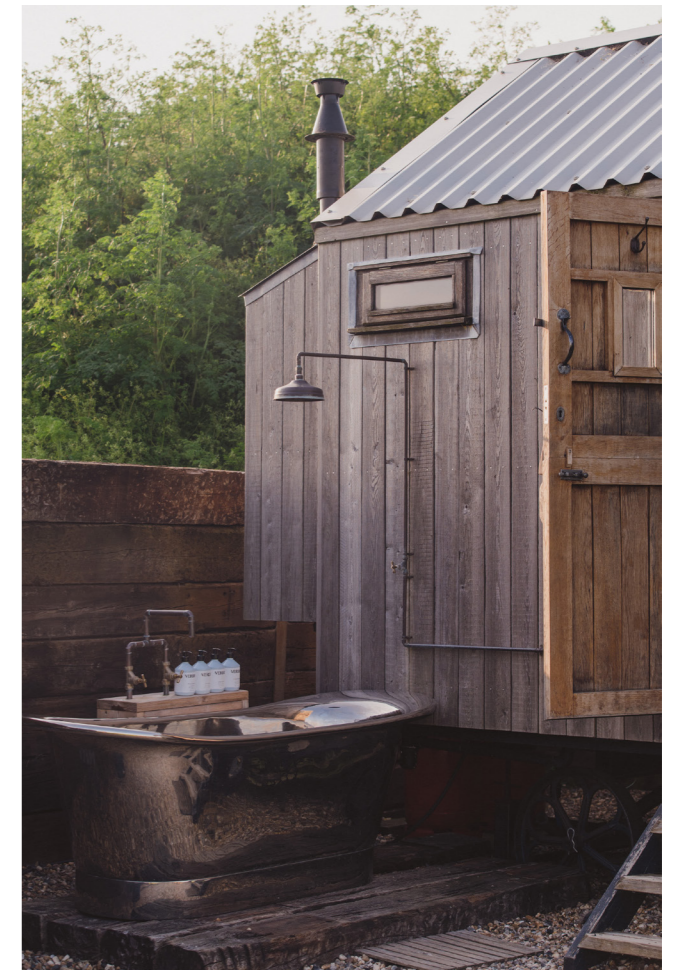
There aren't many places in the UK, let alone the world, where you can lie in bed and watch owls hunt for their supper, go on a 4x4 safari across miles of unspoilt marshland, and unwind in a huge outdoor bathtub while curious hares go hopping past. Located on the south coast of the Isle of Sheppey off the northern coast of Kent, where the Thames Estuary opens out into the North Sea, Elmley is the only National Nature Reserve in the country where you can spend the night.

This whopping 3,300-acre estate was taken on by farmers Philip and Corinne Merricks 40 years ago, and they have worked tirelessly to restore biodiversity on the marshes by transforming a once intensive farm into a site of international



Georgina and Gareth now have a small team, but they remain friendly, hands-on hosts, and all of their accommodation offers sweeping views across the reserve and a guest experience that is totally unique, peaceful, and truly immersed in nature. Better yet – once day visitors have gone home, overnight guests have private access to the entire reserve, which includes miles of nature trails, a wild swimming pond, and an idyllic private beach.

Elmley may be just 40 miles from London, yet it feels a world away. The farm itself is a two-mile drive from the main road, so there are few places more remote. There is a clear juxtaposition in the landscape here; in one direction, local industry has created a skyline dotted with factory buildings and billowing chimneys, and in the other, unspoilt beauty



as far as the eye can see. There are miles and miles of flat farmland dotted with Romney sheep, intermingled with salt marshes and glistening waterways that gently snake through the swaying grass. The sky is so huge that it's almost hard for the brain to compute, and there are birds everywhere; waders busily peck around in the shallows as huge birds of prey swoop overhead, looking for their next snack.

I checked in and set off to find my lodgings for the night. Named after the ferryman's hut that used to sit in the same spot for staff to watch over the Elmley ferry crossing (when there was one), The Ferryman's is a stunning custom-built 'hut' that has everything one might need, and more. Following a recent refresh, the stylish interiors are a pleasing mix of soft, serene yellows, reclaimed wood, elegant patterns, and cosy natural fabrics. Among the vintage bird-watching books and bijoux hot-water bottles, there's a small kitchenette and bijoux bathroom complete with flushing toilet, shower, fluffy towels, bathrobes, and luxurious nature-powered products. An eye-height window in the shower ensures nature connection, even while washing, and



although Elmley is off-grid it generates its own power using solar panels, biofuel and huge batteries, so there's plenty of hot water and electricity.

But the cosy cabin's most impressive feature is found at the foot of the king-size bed; a floor-to-ceiling glass wall that can be folded back to offer full immersion in the great outdoors. From here, I watched two majestic short-eared owls soaring through the sky hunting for their supper at dusk; and in the morning, I was awoken by the most spectacular sunrise that turned the sky a marshmallow-y pink.



Speaking of marshmallows – a healthy supply is provided for toasting over the firepit on the cabin's private terrace, which is also home to a huge roll-top bathtub and an outdoor



shower. What better way to start the day? From both inside and out, the far-reaching views across the reserve are staggering, as is the peace and quiet.



There are several ways to explore the estate; you can set off on foot, armed with a map and a picnic, which Elmley can provide, or join an expert-led walking tour or wildlife experience. I plumped for an off-road adventure in the estate's open-top Land Rover. I clambered into the back and was given a pair of binoculars and a woollen blanket, just in case. The reserve is home to over 80 species of bird, as well as water voles, frogs, butterflies, dragonflies, hares and more. Over the next two hours, reserve warden and tour leader, Simon, drove us miles across the big-sky estate, pointing



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out various things along the way, and sharing just a few of Elmley’s conservation success stories.

Now, I wouldn’t describe myself as a bird-watcher, but armed with my borrowed ‘bins’ (twitcher lingo for binoculars), I quickly became both fascinated and thrilled by Elmley’s array of beautiful birdlife. From the back of the truck, we spotted flocks of wigeon, lapwing and starlings, oystercatchers, redshank, brent geese, and more, as well as several huge marsh harriers, out hunting for prey.

With my feet back on solid ground, I passed Elmley’s beautifully converted Victorian barn (used for weddings and events) and made my way to The Linhay – a cosy, communal space and small honesty shop for guests, where I helped myself to a cup of tea and curled up on a sofa by the crackling wood burner. There’s more seating dotted around outside, interspersed with flower-filled planters, firepits and pretty festoon lighting. Much like the huts, it’s

all very tastefully designed, but not overly so. Thanks to a careful level of laid-back luxury, it’s less campsite and more glampsite, authentically shaped by nature.

As a busy working farm and National Nature Reserve, the offering at Elmley is one of peace and relaxation, and perhaps not for those who would prefer the full concierge services of a hotel. There is no restaurant; instead, hot, home-cooked meals can be delivered to your hut, which is a treat in itself. I had a delicious roast vegetable cassoulet with salad, crusty bread, and a big glass of organic red wine, all in the comfort of my cosy cabin. For pudding, there was a silky slice of burnt Basque cheesecake with fresh fruit. I quickly drifted off to the sound of owls hooting in the night, with the curtains left wide open, ready for sunrise...

The following day started with a long hot soak in the alfresco tub, completely immersed in beautiful birdsong and the occasional ‘baa’ of the nearby sheep. From the bath, I

watched as two small hares chased each other through the grass, and marvelled as silvery flashes of dunlins swooped overhead. Just when I thought the morning couldn't get much better, breakfast arrived; a bountiful bag filled with homemade granola, warm croissants, Kentish apple juice, smashed peas on toast, and more.



Before re-entering the real world, I had one more uniquely 'Elmley' experience to enjoy. Past reed-filled ponds and preening ducks, I found Swale Studio; a small cottage recently transformed into Elmley's new wellbeing space. Here, in partnership with award-winning natural brands Votary and Verden, there's a selection of blissful treatments on offer.



The Elmley Signature is a deeply grounding combination of deep-tissue massage and a nourishing facial. I floated out two hours later and spent the rest of the day strolling around the reserve, absorbed in the wildlife. Just before I left, I spotted two more short-eared owls swooping in the breeze.

In the ten years since Georgina and Gareth opened their very first shepherd's huts, the world may have changed exponentially, but I am pleased to say that this incredibly special place hasn't. There may be a few more cabins, cottages, and carefully curated experiences to enjoy, but Elmley is just as peaceful and beautiful as it ever was, if not even more so. ✦

→ Accommodation at Elmley includes eight huts/cabins, a small number of bell tents in the warmer months (May–September), Elmley Cottage (sleeps 10) and Kingshill Farmhouse (sleeps 12). Prices start at £155 per night, room only; elmleynaturereserve.co.uk



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