



TAKE WALK

ON THE *Wild Side*

There are few places in the world where you can sleep safely next to a leopard or sip your morning coffee eye to eye with a tiger... *British Travel Journal* heads to Port Lympne and Howletts in Kent for a truly wild weekend

Text by Sophie Farrah

Sitting in the back in the safari truck, we watched as two leathery rhinos grazed and a group of camels slowly lolloped across the landscape. A family of giraffes sat snoozing under a tree, set against a vast backdrop of blue sky and the sea twinkling on the horizon, the peace only momentarily disturbed by the sound of a lion's roar in the distance. This may well sound like Kenya, but we were in fact in Kent.

Spanning over 600 acres of picturesque countryside near Folkestone and home to over 900 animals, Port Lympne Reserve is a breeding →

sanctuary for rare and endangered species. Unlike a traditional zoo, the animals born here are sent to protected areas of their natural habitat wherever possible, so that they can live freely.

Port Lymgne works in conjunction with The Aspinall Foundation, who have rescued, relocated or rewilded more than 1,000 animals to date. The foundation has transported black rhinos to Tanzania, western lowland gorillas to Congo, African painted dogs to Gabon, cheetahs to South Africa, and more.

This dedication to conservation is evident at Port Lymgne and at its nearby sister park, Howletts. At both, visitors can upgrade their visit to include immersive animal experiences, while the offer of short breaks at Port Lymgne allows guests to get even closer to the wildlife by spending the night on the reserve in an array of accommodation.

One option is the 4-star Port Lymgne Mansion Hotel, which is housed in a characterful early 20th-century

Grade-II-listed country house steeped in history, but beyond its plush walls, things get a little wilder... Dotted around the park, there are several high-spec lodges that offer direct views into some enclosures, including those of the park's big cats, rhino, wolves and more. There are also several stylish shepherd's huts overlooking fields of grazing animals, treehouses with far-reaching views, and even transparent 'bubbles' tucked away in the reserve's secluded woodland, but we were here to experience Port Lymgne's latest addition; a luxurious wigwam at the recently unveiled Leopard Creek.

Each short break includes access to the park from 9.30am on the day of arrival, so we pitched up early, left our bags with the dedicated concierge and set off to explore. First up was the aforementioned safari, also included when staying. A fantastic open-sided vintage truck set several metres off the floor took us on an hour-long authentic safari experience, minus the air miles. We saw rhino, giraffe, antelope and more, and the views from



the top of the reserve, all the way across Romney Marsh and to the Kentish coastline beyond, were astounding.

Back on foot, we set off in search of some of the other Big Five. At Port Lymgne and Howletts, animal habitats are replicated as closely as possible and each enclosure has plenty of foliage and shelter; animals are never locked into a viewing area, instead they are allowed to choose where and if they want to be seen. Luckily, we didn't have to wait long to spot rare Amur tigers (Amba and Amura) and Hunter, one of the reserve's impressive male lions. We also saw lemurs, gibbons, baboons, cheetahs, tapirs, meerkats, monkeys and more, and before long it was time to check in.

One incredibly fun perk of staying at Port Lymgne is that several accommodation types include use of a private golf buggy for exploring the reserve, which is exclusively yours for the duration of your stay. After winding our way past rhino and red pandas as we whizzed through the park, we saw the unmistakable triangular silhouette of our wigwam approaching. Sitting next to the reserve's leopard enclosure, Leopard Creek is home to several individually designed cabins and two stunning wigwams, all of which are open all year round and allow guests to sleep just metres away from Port Lymgne's rarest and most elegant cats.

Beautifully designed, our wigwam was incredibly luxurious and had huge windows overlooking grazing antelope, swaying →

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grasses, stunning countryside, and the sea beyond. Inside was a pleasing mix of natural materials; soft leather, weathered wood, patterned hide, cosy wool and more, combined with modern design furniture and chic uplighting. There were lots of lovely touches: organic Bamford toiletries in the cool, contemporary bathroom; a bottle of Gusbourne’s delicious Kentish sparkling wine on ice; and a complimentary minibar filled with local apple juice, a selection of snacks and a bag of marshmallows for toasting on the firepit outside. In the tapered ceiling high above the huge (and very comfortable) bed, more windows provided a rather magical stargazing opportunity, but eye masks had also been thoughtfully provided in case the morning light might disturb our lie-in.

We immediately popped the bottle, kicked back on the two comfortable steamer chairs outside in our beautifully planted seating area, and watched the wildlife graze as the sun went down. We went for an evening stroll and found Zuku the southern white rhino just metres from our wigwam, and we also managed to spot Milena and Sayan, our elusive and incredibly rare Amur leopard neighbours, as they emerged from an afternoon snooze.

All this excitement and suddenly I was as hungry as a wolf (more on them later). A 10-minute buggy ride brought

us to The Garden Room; what was once the stable yard of the historic hotel is now a serene, glass-ceilinged restaurant filled with faux floral walls, plump patterned cushions and some lovely original features. Open to both hotel guests and non residents, this stylish space is open all day and has a rather glamorous cocktail bar too.

The food menu is based on seasonal ingredients, all locally sourced and used to create sophisticated dishes such as grilled sea bass with brown crab cake, cider, leek and mussel chowder, and slow-cooked beef short ribs with a parsnip and potato rosti and pecorino cream. The freshly baked focaccia was incredibly moreish, especially when slathered in the delicious seaweed butter that it came with, and the chocolate and orange baked Alaska also slipped down a treat.

Overnight guests are free to roam until 10pm, long after the day-visitors have left, so after dinner we strolled through the park as night began to fall, listening to the noises of the animals. The grey wolves were at their busiest, as was a male lion, prowling the perimeter of his enclosure. Back at the wigwam, we lit the firepit, sunken and carefully sheltered from the wind. The stars were some of the brightest I have ever seen and, as the moon rose, the nearby wolves burst into a spine-tingling chorus. →

The following morning, one click of a button from bed and the blinds that very effectively covered the wigwam's huge windows automatically lowered, revealing a herd of sunlit antelope and a vast expanse of rolling green fields beyond. Was I still dreaming? We leapt out of bed, keen to catch the animals enjoying their breakfast. There are three groups of western lowland gorillas at Port Lymgne, and to watch them quietly tucking into their first meal of the day was a very special sight. The younger members of the family played and tussled over bits of veg, while the wise older silverback looked on.

Our breakfast was similarly covetable; back at The Garden Room, buttermilk pancakes with crispy bacon, avocado on toasted focaccia, eggs Benedict and more were all on offer. Fully fuelled, it was time for our next adventure...

All short breaks include access to Port Lymgne's sister park, Howletts, which is around a 30-minute drive from Port Lymgne. It is home to over 390 animals across 90 acres, including giant anteaters, big cats, gorillas, monkeys and the largest herd of African elephants in the UK, but not for long.

Incredibly, working with The Aspinall Foundation, Howletts is preparing to transport these 13 beautiful animals from Kent back to their ancestral homeland of Kenya. It will be the first time an entire herd has ever been

returned to Africa from Europe, and hopes to not only prove that rewilding on such a scale can be done, but that it *should* be done.

Both reserves offer a plethora of animal experiences, and at Howlett's we were lucky enough to have a wonderful 'Rhino Encounter'. This involved a behind-the-scenes peek inside the rhino house (much cleaner than expected...) with an incredibly knowledgeable ranger called Dom, before we got to meet and handfeed Sammy, a 23-year-old black rhino with a penchant for carrots.

Looking back on our time at Port Lymgne and Howletts, it all felt slightly surreal. Had we really been on safari and hand-fed a rhino? Watched a group of gorillas eating breakfast? Slept in a luxurious wigwam next to leopards and admired grazing antelope from bed? And then there was the golf buggy and exploring the park after-hours... listening to the wolves howl at the moon by a crackling firepit... the whole thing seemed like a dream.

A wonderful, unforgettable dream, set not in Africa, but in the Kentish savanna. ♦

Overnight accommodation at Port Lymgne starts at £159 per night. Leopard Creek Wigwams from £509, Cabins from £439 and Cubs from £339 per night → aspinallfoundation.org/port-lymgne



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The House of Bruar by Blair Atholl, Perthshire, PH18 5TW. Telephone: 01796 483 236 Email: office@houseofbruar.com

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