



THE SUNDAY TIMES

The 50 coolest holiday cottages

Whether you need a cosy hideout or a sprawling stable block, we've the best holiday cottages - starting with the south, east and central England

Susan d'Arcy

Published: 16 January 2011



The Southwest

1 Couples' hideaway, Cornwall, sleeps 2

It's thatched and Grade II-listed. It has the original arch doorway, a slate floor, an inglenook fireplace and a window seat just big enough for two to cosy up in. It's hidden away in dreamy Gweek, and it's even called Gingerbread Cottage. If you want to sit around in your pyjamas and drink cocoa with someone special, look no further — this must be the cutest cottage in England.

Low £233 a week, high £531; 01326 240333 01326 240333 ,
cornishcottagesonline.com; ref 353

2 Surf in style, Devon, sleeps 4

The beaches around Ilfracombe are gaining a reputation as a surfers' paradise, and the town itself has a good vibe — you might spot resident artist Damien Hirst, who owns the restaurant

11 The Quay (and designed its highly nickable bar mats). Larkstone began life as the home of a Victorian sea captain, but has been given a 21st-century makeover, with leather furniture and a greige colour scheme — though the killer views of crashing waves remain timelessly mesmeric.

Low £355, high £745; 01237 459888 01237 459888 , holidaycottages.co.uk; ref LASTO

3 Horse and hounds, Cornwall, sleeps 2-6

Old Lanwarnick is a 1,000-year-old hamlet of five meticulously restored cottages set in 34 acres of meadows near Fowey. Rooms mix original oil paintings with boutique furnishings. You can bring the dog and even stable your pet pony for free — there's also a small gym for post-hack relaxation.

Low £333-£840, high £640-£2,070; 0844 704 4987 0844 704 4987 , bluechipholidays.net

4 Half hotel, half cottages, Cornwall, sleeps 2-6

The Cove is a self-catering complex that thinks it's a supercool hotel. The 16 flats are minimally sleek, with the kind of open-plan kitchen-diners where Nigella might happily drape herself over the saucepans, and there's a decent restaurant on site. The deal-maker, though, is the location, overlooking the balmy brilliance of Lamorna Cove.

Low £805-£1,365, high £1,575-£2,625; 01736 731411 01736 731411 , thecovecornwall.com

5 Sailor chic, Devon, sleeps 4-6

South Sands is a boutique hotel on the beach in the sailing fraternity's favourite spot, Salcombe. It also has five self-catering suites, offering breezy New England styling as well as a pretty flexible definition of self-catering — rates include breakfast in the hotel dining room, (overseen by the celebrity chef Mitch Tonks). You can also book the £35 “fill your fridge” service and have local delicacies ready for your arrival.

Low £2,065, high £2,765; 01548 859000 01548 859000 , southsands.com

6 Bargain bolt hole, Dorset, sleeps 6

Lulworth Cove is probably the Jurassic Coast's most photogenic stretch. Many places hereabouts hike summer prices accordingly, so Apple Tree Cottage is something of a rarity—close to the cove, yet coming in at less than a grand in peak season. It has flagstone floors, an original bread oven in its inglenook and a thatched Wendy house in the garden.

Low £490, high £960; 0800 980 4070 0800 980 4070 , dorsetcoastalcottages.com

7 Gardeners' choice, Cornwall, sleeps 6

The Lost Gardens of Heligan, near St Austell, were rediscovered by the Eden Project's Tim Smit in 1990 and have been returned to life with breathtaking success. The Clock House, in a recently refurbished part of the stable block, oozes 18th-century detail, including the original slate-hung clock tower. And from the 5ft cast-iron bed in the master bedroom, you can glimpse the foliage.

Low £432, high £883; 01208 821666 01208 821666 , corncott.com; ref 182

8 Smart lodges, Devon, sleeps 6

Everyone from Tony Blair to Ricky Gervais stays at Bovey Castle, in Dartmoor National Park, but the best beds are in the 14 contemporary two- and three-storey lodges dotted through its grounds. The design incorporates local granite, exposed brickwork, vaulted

English oak ceilings and a centrepiece fireplace. The hotel's kitchen offers a range of prepared meals and a lodge key also buys access to the hotel's five-star fripperies, including daily falconry displays and wine tastings.

Low £2,765, high £3,360; 0844 474 0077

0844 474 0077 , boveycastle.com

9 High-tech thrills, Cornwall, Sleeps 6

For some, beaches are for lying on. For others, they're for scaring yourself stupid. If that's you, the Extreme Academy, at Watergate Bay, offers all manner of high-octane splashy activities: kitesurfing, waveskiing, stand-up paddleboarding. Within an easy walk, 2 Whitehouse, an apartment loaded with gadgetry, from Xboxes to iPod docking stations.

Low £730, high £2,150; 01637 861005

01637 861005 , beachretreats.co.uk



3.

Old Lanwarnick Barns, Cornwall. Hob Nob (Layton Bennett) 10 Winning views, Cornwall, sleeps 7

The owners of the Star Castle Hotel, on the Isles of Scilly, won a Good Hotel Guide César in 2009, so they know a thing or two about the business. Last year, they refurbished Pedn y Ke, the family home near Helston, and have recently made it available for rent. It is light and airy, but what's unforgettable is the uninterrupted views of Mount's Bay, and the proximity of the secluded, sandy beach of Polurrian Cove.

Low £575, high £1,500; 01720 422387

01720 422387 , pedn-y-ke.co.uk

11 Modern luxury, Somerset, sleeps 8

Shell House offers a pleasing Mediterranean take on minimalism. It's in Porlock Weir, within easy reach of the beach and harbour, and the living room has fold-back doors to maximise its people-watching potential. There's a fancy kitchen for serious cooks, a couple of good restaurants nearby for serious gourmets, plus a cinema and games room in case the weather turns — although stormy skies are when the wilds of Exmoor come into their own.

Low/high £2,575; 01865 764087

01865 764087 , sheepskinlife.com

12 Medieval manor, Devon, sleeps 10

Shute Barton, not far from Axminster, is one of the most important surviving non-fortified manor houses of the Middle Ages. For anyone with a sense of history, it's hard to beat: how often are you going to stay somewhere that has a crenellated tower, 15th-century beams, 15ft medieval windows, 17th-century panelling and a kitchen fireplace so vast, you can roast two oxen side by side?

*Low £2,367, high £3,099; 0844 800 2070 0844 800 2070 ,
nationaltrustcottages.co.uk; ref 012039*

13 Family farm, Devon, sleeps 2-11

The most successful way to holiday with others is to retain your own space, so when little Jemima's recorder recitals get too much, you can always retreat. Ham Farm, near Winkleigh, has seven cottages and enough facilities to exhaust the most hyperactive kids, including indoor and outdoor pools, a trampoline, a games room, a fishing pond, tennis court and 100 acres of woodland dens.

*Low £275-£494, high £1,058-£2,107; 01805 624000 01805 624000 ,
premiercottages.com, www.hamfarm.co.uk*

14 Private beach, Devon, sleeps 12

Across the estuary from Salcombe, East Portlemouth is more seductively slow-paced. Harbour Watch is right on the waterfront, with fold-back glass doors in the living room and a cruise-ship-style veranda to maximise its feeling of shameless glamour. Tipping the one-upmanship scales yet further in your favour, the property has its own private sandy beach.

*Low £2,500, high £5,750; 01548 853089 01548 853089 ,
www.toadhallcottages.co.uk*

The South

15 Regency glamour, Bath, sleeps 2

Great Pulteney Street is the longest and grandest of Bath's thoroughfares, and your apartment forms part of that Georgian grandeur. The sitting room and bedroom both have fabulous high ceilings, vast sash windows and ornate plaster cornices. You'll feel underdressed without a bonnet, some smelling salts and a cantankerous dowager aunt.

Low £575, high £642; 01747 828170 01747 828170 , hideaways.co.uk; ref H496

16 Fit for royalty, Isle of Wight, sleeps 4

Pavilion Cottage, in the grounds of Osborne House, was built in the early 1900s as a cricket pavilion for the Royal Naval College, with a long, south-facing veranda for lazy sports fans. Inside, the decor gleams like cricket whites, but the main draw is access to what was once Queen Victoria's private beach.

Low £746, high £1,593; 0870 333 1187 0870 333 1187 , www.english-heritage.org.uk

17 Feather your nest, Bedfordshire, sleeps 6

Designer wellies are practically obligatory for a week at New Barn, in the North Bedfordshire Wolds, a rustic experience that could have been styled by Cath Kidston. In a kind of luxury British safari camp, the lodges have equipped kitchens, proper beds, proper sinks, but a canvas roof. As it's on a working farm, guests get to cuddle baby lambs and chicks, swerve to avoid oncoming tractors and breathe in air that... stinks of manure, to be honest.

Low £405, high £845; 01420 80804 01420 80804 , featherdown.co.uk

18 Ultra-luxury, Berkshire, sleeps 6

Cheryl Cole and self-catering are probably not words you'd expect to see in the same sentence, yet she has stayed at the Dower House, at Coworth Park, outside Ascot. Here's why: it's Grade II-listed, it has a gorgeous kitchen, complete with Aga, and a cute pond, with its own family of swans, and when guests book a private chef, it's no less than the Michelin-starred John Campbell who pulls on the pinny. So the following fact should not surprise you: it is the most expensive cottage in the UK.

Low £24,500, high £31,500; 01344 876600 01344 876600 , coworthpark.com

19 Eco-chic, Gloucestershire, sleeps 8-10

Larchwood Lodge is basically a photo shoot waiting to happen. It's on a sustainable development designed by the likes of Jade Jagger, Kelly Hoppen and Philippe Starck, set in 650 acres of clear-water lakes and ancient woodlands — yet it's within 15 minutes of the cutest of Cotswolds towns, Bourton-on-the-Water.

Low £3,047, high £4,297; 0845 268 1560 0845 268 1560 , cottages4you.co.uk; ref NJ4



22: The Watermill, Suffolk sleeps 10 and is set on a river island - a great family escape (PR)

20 The best view in the region, Norfolk, sleeps 10

Wells-next-the-Sea has the views that every other resort in East Anglia wants, looking over creeks and seductive salt marshes to the bleak beauty and crashing waves of the North Sea. Wengen is in the prime position to lap it all up, from a sitting room and bedrooms that ooze seaside sophistication.

Low £950, high £2,000; 01485 518273 01485 518273 ,
norfolkcoastalhideaway.com

21 Sweet nostalgia, Suffolk, sleeps 10

The Watermill was featured in an episode of Dad's Army (the proof is in the DVD collection), and this archetypal white weatherboarded wonder, set on a river island near

Ixworth, is just the place for a thoroughly old-fashioned holiday. Spend your days spotting kingfishers, nodding to the otters or cycling along the riverbanks.
Low £1,200, high £2,500; 020 7401 1086 020 7401 1086 , cvtravel.co.uk

Central England

22 Romantic retreat, Shropshire, sleeps 2

St Winifred was a 7th-century Welsh princess believed to have miraculous healing powers. The isolated medieval St Winifred's Well, near Oswestry, is a chapel that forms part of a shrine to her memory, and is built above three pools. As well as self-caterers, it still attracts a fair share of pilgrims to its enchanting location.

Low £267, high £722; 01628 825925 01628 825925 , landmarktrust.org.uk

23 Eco-hut, Lincolnshire, sleeps 2

For a pleasing merger of the ethical and the traditional, try the Kingthorpe Manor Shepherd's Hut in Wragby. It's brand spanking new, but modelled on the sort of shed a shepherd would have hunkered down in during lambing. This version is fully insulated and solar-powered, with Anne of Green Gables decor and a wood-fired cooker and oven.

Low/high £150; 01673 857290 01673 857290 , kingthorpemanorfarm.com

24 Wild on the moors, Derbyshire, sleeps 6

North Lees Hall is an impossibly romantic 16th-century tower house, near the pretty Peak District village of Hathersage, with a spiral staircase, 6ft-wide stone fireplaces, four-poster beds hung with authentic Elizabethan drapery, mullioned windows and views onto the rust-red drama of Stanage Edge. It is rumoured to have been the inspiration for Thornfield Hall, Mr Rochester's home in Jane Eyre. Fortunately, it comes minus a mad woman in the attic.

Low £816, high £1,440; 0845 090 0194 0845 090 0194 , www.vivat-trust.org

25 Tycoon's pile, Gloucestershire, sleeps 10

Four years ago, Simon Nixon floated his internet business (which included travelsupermarket.com) for £850m. Two years ago, he decided that he needed a new interest. He chose self-catering — well, it takes all sorts. The result is Elkstones, a stunning Cotswolds house outside Chipping Campden, with five bedrooms that would fit right in at a trendy country-house hotel. It has a home cinema, an indoor pool with current control — and even a Halle & Voight baby grand, with a professional pianist on call to serenade you.

Low £4,900, high £6,300; 01244 784152 01244 784152 , simonescapes.com



48. Thatchers Rest Cottage, The Cottages Bettystown, Ireland

Wales

26 Romany caravan, Cardiganshire, sleeps 2

Shrug off 21st-century stress at this authentic 1920s caravan, tucked away in a wild-flower meadow. It's compact and cosy — the sort of cosy that means a bed 6in narrower than the standard, and unsuitable for anyone over 6ft 2in unless they have consumed two flagons of cider. But picnic opportunities and the pastoral idyll surrounding it provide all the space you need, and for bucolic calm, can't be beaten.

Low £336, high £610; 01239 851410 01239 851410 , underthethatch.co.uk

27 Dog-friendly barn, Carmarthenshire, sleeps 2-4

It's safe to say the owners of Brechfa Barn, in the Cothi Valley, love their four-legged friends — the place takes as many dogs as you can shake a stick at for no extra charge. Bowls, blankets, beds and toys are also provided, and there are designated doggie walks in the surrounding countryside.

Low £295, high £450; 01267 202440 01267 202440 , holidayinthebarn.co.uk

28 Back to nature, Pembrokeshire, sleeps 4

Cowslip Cottage has been scrubbed up to a shiny finish and is part of a trio that occupies 23 acres just outside Saundersfoot, one of Wales's most popular seaside resorts. The pretty whitewashed hideaway is decorated with fresh white linen and has everything from wifi to a children's play area. Guests have free access to rolling fields, fishing lakes and streamside walks, filled with wildlife.

*Low £350, high £750; 01437 772760 01437 772760 , www.coastalcottages.co.uk;
ref 43082*

29 Bookish townhouse, Powys, sleeps 5

Hay-on-Wye is one big bookshop, with more variety and depth than anywhere else in Britain — and, in between leafing through pages, there's little to do but sip Fairtrade coffee. Perfect. Hay Riverside Retreats, a trio of stylish, three-storey townhouses, have balconies and decks that overlook the Wye and are adorned with paintings by local artists, many of them for sale. *Low £595, high £910; 01497 821080 01497 821080* , hayriversideretreats.com

30 Modern on the marina, Gwynedd, sleeps 7

Few vistas are more soporific than boats bobbing on Conwy Marina, a favourite weekend escape for the Cheshire set. The stylishly contemporary Orielfa overlooks the historic harbour, and its enclosed patio is a premium perch for letting the day drift by.

Low £445, high £1,195; 01753 728730 01753 728730 , pureholidayhomes.com; ref 19079

31 Living history, Gwynedd, sleeps 7-9

The Snowdonia massif looms imperiously over Gilar Farm's 500 acres. Indoors, it's loaded with drama, thanks to historical features such as the vast studded front door, armorial shields, oak panelling, four-posters and fireplaces bigger than London flats. The great outdoors isn't bad, either, with an estate encompassing ancient woodlands, fishing lakes and its own mountain.

Low £505, high £1,195; 01492 582492 01492 582492 , northwalesholidaycottages.co.uk; ref M11/10

32 Child-friendly, Denbighshire, sleeps 14

Small children should be seen but not charged, according to the owners of Trevor Hall. Under-10s stay free, providing an excellent incentive for a family get-together at this Grade I-listed stately home. It mixes the traditional (a very non-PC smoking room) with the modern (the Regency drawing room doubles as a cinema), keeping all the generations happy.

Low £3,175, high £6,250; 01638 674756 01638 674756 , statelyholidaycottages.co.uk

The North

33 Natural assets, Cumbria, sleeps 2

Don't we all want to be Ray Mears? Steal his wonderfully tempting back-to-basics lifestyle? Shank Wood Log Cabin is the answer, if a week is enough of a fix for you. Hidden in 140 acres of countryside near Carlisle, this rural retreat's electricity comes courtesy of solar panels, and you can hook dinner direct from its two-mile beat of the River Lyne — and who needs a fridge when you have cool river water to store food?

Low/high £630; thelittledomain.com

34 Herriot heaven, North Yorkshire, sleeps 4

Our favourite fictional vet described West Burton, in Wensleydale, as the most beautiful village in England, and Craggley Cottage snuggles down into its centre, beaming you directly into Dales life. It is a bolt hole that befits the surrounding beauty, with flagstone floors, exposed beams and an open fire.

Low £395, high £675; 01969 662766 01969 662766 , cottageinthedaes.co.uk

35 A bit of posh, North Yorkshire, sleeps 1-6

Harrogate is a surprisingly swanky spa town, and the Lawrance is a collection of slick apartments spread over three locations. Bedrooms have hand-printed wallpapers and 400-thread-count Egyptian cotton sheets, the Philippe Starck bathrooms are stocked with trendy Ren products, and the kitchens have Siemens appliances, which all adds up to five-star facilities at three-star prices.

Low £355-£1,500, high £555-£2,500; 01423 503226 01423 503226 ,
thelawrance.co.uk

36 Canvas cottage, Lancashire, sleeps 8

You might think that if it's canvas, it's a tent, but not at Wyresdale Park. In fact, you get your own hamlet of boutique wood-panelled bivouacs dedicated to sleeping, lounging, cooking and discovery (you're kitted out with microscopes, telescopes and field telephones). There are four sites across the country, including one tucked into a wild corner of Wyresdale, a Lancashire country estate that's 100% Swallows and Amazons.

Low £595, high £995; 01420 549150 01420 549150 , countryhousehideout.co.uk

37 Part-time cooks, Cumbria, sleeps 10

Winster View, just outside Windermere, is a postcard-perfect whitewashed farmhouse that's big enough for family gatherings — even the dog gets an invitation. It has wood-burning stoves, open fires and a state-of-the-art kitchen, but there's no need to cook when you're within staggering distance of a great gastropub, The Brown Horse, where renters get a 10% discount on food.

Low £1,290, high £2,940; 01228 599960 01228 599960 , cumbriancottages.co.uk;
ref 128216

38 A fresh angle, Northumberland, sleeps 10

St Cuthbert's Farmhouse, just outside Berwick-on-Tweed, is a prime perch for your fishing expert. It's almost within casting distance of the River Tweed, one of the world's top locations for salmon, but non-angling folk won't mind lazing amid the Victorian splendour of the farmhouse or ticking off days out at places such as Alnwick Castle and Lindisfarne.

Low £1,950, high £2,450; 020 7223 0233 020 7223 0233 ,
www.stcuthbertsfarmhouse.co.uk

39 Walkers' wonder, Cumbria, sleeps 20

Pack your muddy boots for Oakdene, a grand Victorian former mill owner's house. It's within the Yorkshire Dales National Park, with an embarrassment of footpaths on your doorstep and Sedbergh, England's answer to bookcentric Hay-on-Wye, just a mile away via leafy lanes.

Low £1,695, high £3,010; 0844 847 1100 0844 847 1100 , hoseasons.co.uk; ref
DC5333

40 Medieval manners, Cumbria, sleeps 24

Giant Blencowe Hall has the oldest indoor toilet in Cumbria... Okay, moving on swiftly, the 13th-century fortified manor also has two defensive peel towers, lots of balconies, spiral staircases and ancient garderobes, and has won a clutch of awards for its meticulous restoration.

Low £4,922, high £9,253; 01386 701177 01386 701177 , ruralretreats.co.uk; ref
CU037

Scotland

41 Island retreat, Skye, sleeps 2

Timber-clad both inside and out, Black Shed is like an upmarket Ikea, and the location is ideal for the lazy self-caterer, as its owners will supply home-baked bread, vegetables from their garden and fresh eggs. The Three Chimneys restaurant, regularly voted one of the world's best dining rooms, is just about far enough of a walk away to work up an appetite.

Low £400, high £675; 01456 486358 01456 486358 , wildernesscottages.co.uk

42 Highland zing, Inverness, sleeps 2-6

Colin and Isabella Cawdor have featured on Vanity Fair's list of "best dressed couples" in the past, so the five cottages available for rent on their estate are, naturally, a cut above the average. Their appealing country-casual decor is skilfully accessorised with 60,000 acres of mist-covered grouse moors — as well as the promise of sunsets over the Moray Firth.

Low £525, high £720; 01667 402402 01667 402402 , www.cawdor.com

43 Capital gains, Edinburgh, sleeps 4

Campbell's Close is part of a classy conversion of a former brewery surrounded by lush landscaped gardens yet tucked into the Old Town, with Holyrood Palace, Princes Street and Edinburgh Castle all within 10 minutes' walk.

Low £404, high £639; 0845 268 0801 0845 268 0801 , scottish-country-cottages.co.uk; ref UGF

44 Deep in the forest, Argyll, sleeps 4-6

Old-fashioned pursuits on offer for Forest Holidays residents include wild-flower and bat walks, and deer-, badger- and even moth-watching. The accommodation is more modern than quaint, however — in fact, these stylish timber and glass cabins over Loch Long are tricked out with everything from outdoor spa baths to TVs with films on demand and Wii consoles.

Low £273-£332, high £883-£1,071; 0845 130 8223 0845 130 8223 , forestholidays.co.uk

45 Hot Scots, West Highland, sleeps 4-8

Natural Retreats runs some of the best luxury self-catering complexes in the UK and Ireland — but, until now, a Scottish outpost was conspicuous by its absence. This has been rectified with the opening of a base at Tulloch, in the West Highlands. It has the same high-quality, creamy decor and state-of-the-art technology (iPod connectivity, PlayStations, flatscreen TVs). For alfresco highs, there's hill-walking, rock-climbing and plenty of hunting, shooting and fishing opportunities.

Low £550-£1,100, high £900-£1,600; 0161 242 2970 0161 242 2970 , www.naturalretreats.com

46 Bridge party, Argyll, sleeps 8

The sea loch of Sunart is home to seals and otters; buzzards and eagles soar overhead. Bunallt Eachain Cottage is surrounded on three sides by its hazy waters, which sometimes even lap up to the private access bridge. As this place is all about the to-die-for scenery, the cottage never knowingly misses an opportunity for a picture window.

Low £595, high £1,350; 01835 822277 01835 822277 , unique-cottages.co.uk; ref DC8

47 Martial majesty, Aberdeenshire, sleeps 14

Parts of Lickleyhead Castle, just north of Inverurie, date from 1499. It has impressive corbelled turrets, grand scrolled dormers and rumours of a resident ghost, a tick list that means it is generally regarded as one of the country's finest castles. It's all as traditional as tartan.

Low £1,950, high £5,800; 01573 229797 01573 229797 , www.ltr.co.uk

Ireland

48 Dublin up, Co Meath, sleeps 2-6

If you want a town-and-country combo, the six whitewashed 300-year-old cottages at Bettystown are a stylish solution. They have vaulted, beamed ceilings and wood-burning stoves, and open onto six miles of brilliant beach, complete with wind-whipped sand dunes. They're also only a 40-minute drive from Dublin (or 20 minutes from the airport), for a regular urban fix.

Low/high £650-£1,850; 00 353 41 982 8104 00 353 41 982 8104 , cottages-ireland.com

49 Heaven sent, Co Galway, sleeps 10

The Sky Road trail is to Connemara what the Ring of Kerry is to the southwest — but, fortunately, narrow roads prevent bus tours from wrecking what Oscar Wilde described as its “savage beauty”. This cool contemporary mansion has been designed to celebrate those wide-open Galway panoramas, though you could always just raise a pint to them in the lively pubs of the nearby boho town of Clifden.

Low £2,285, high £2,900; 00 353 1 288 9355 00 353 1 288 9355 , adamsandbutler.com

50 Island life, Mayo, Sleeps 2-17

Inish Turk Beg is a private island off the coast of Westport, in Co Mayo, renowned for its hand-filletted, hand-smoked organic salmon, streaky bacon and single-malt Irish whiskey... sounds like a perfectly balanced diet to us. The cottage on the mainland and the five houses on the island were designed by Andrew Wright, a former European Young Architect of the Year, and have infinity pools, inside-outside fireplaces and oversized windows, maximising the views of Clew Bay.

Low £332-£499, high £2,160-£3,240; 00 353 98 36957 00 353 98 36957 , inishturkbeg.com

39 Walkers' wonder, Cumbria, sleeps 20

Pack your muddy boots for Oakdene, a grand Victorian former mill owner's house. It's within the Yorkshire Dales National Park, with an embarrassment of footpaths on your doorstep and Sedbergh, England's answer to bookcentric Hay-on-Wye, just a mile away via leafy lanes.

Low £1,695, high £3,010; 0844 847 1100 0844 847 1100 , hoseasons.co.uk; ref DC5333

40 Medieval manners, Cumbria, sleeps 24

Giant Blencowe Hall has the oldest indoor toilet in Cumbria... Okay, moving on swiftly, the 13th-century fortified manor also has two defensive peel towers, lots of balconies, spiral staircases and ancient garderobes, and has won a clutch of awards for its meticulous restoration.

Low £4,922, high £9,253; 01386 701177 01386 701177 , ruralretreats.co.uk; ref CU037

Scotland

41 Island retreat, Skye, sleeps 2

Timber-clad both inside and out, Black Shed is like an upmarket Ikea, and the location is ideal for the lazy self-caterer, as its owners will supply home-baked bread, vegetables from their garden and fresh eggs. The Three Chimneys restaurant, regularly voted one of the world's best dining rooms, is just about far enough of a walk away to work up an appetite.

Low £400, high £675; 01456 486358 01456 486358 , wildernesscottages.co.uk

42 Highland zing, Inverness, sleeps 2-6

Colin and Isabella Cawdor have featured on Vanity Fair's list of "best dressed couples" in the past, so the five cottages available for rent on their estate are, naturally, a cut above the average. Their appealing country-casual decor is skilfully accessorised with 60,000 acres of mist-covered grouse moors — as well as the promise of sunsets over the Moray Firth.

Low £525, high £720; 01667 402402 01667 402402 , www.cawdor.com

43 Capital gains, Edinburgh, sleeps 4

Campbell's Close is part of a classy conversion of a former brewery surrounded by lush landscaped gardens yet tucked into the Old Town, with Holyrood Palace, Princes Street and Edinburgh Castle all within 10 minutes' walk.

Low £404, high £639; 0845 268 0801 0845 268 0801 , scottish-country-cottages.co.uk; ref UGF

44 Deep in the forest, Argyll, sleeps 4-6

Old-fashioned pursuits on offer for Forest Holidays residents include wild-flower and bat walks, and deer-, badger- and even moth-watching. The accommodation is more modern than quaint, however — in fact, these stylish timber and glass cabins over Loch Long are tricked out with everything from outdoor spa baths to TVs with films on demand and Wii consoles.

Low £273-£332, high £883-£1,071; 0845 130 8223 0845 130 8223 , forestholidays.co.uk

45 Hot Scots, West Highland, sleeps 4-8

Natural Retreats runs some of the best luxury self-catering complexes in the UK and Ireland — but, until now, a Scottish outpost was conspicuous by its absence. This has been rectified with the opening of a base at Tulloch, in the West Highlands. It has the same high-quality, creamy decor and state-of-the-art technology (iPod connectivity, PlayStations, flatscreen TVs). For alfresco highs, there's hill-walking, rock-climbing and plenty of hunting, shooting and fishing opportunities.

Low £550-£1,100, high £900-£1,600; 0161 242 2970 0161 242 2970 , www.naturalretreats.com

46 Bridge party, Argyll, sleeps 8

The sea loch of Sunart is home to seals and otters; buzzards and eagles soar overhead. Bunallt Eachain Cottage is surrounded on three sides by its hazy waters, which sometimes even lap up to the private access bridge. As this place is all about the to-die-for scenery, the cottage never knowingly misses an opportunity for a picture window.

Low £595, high £1,350; 01835 822277 01835 822277 , unique-cottages.co.uk; ref DC8

47 Martial majesty, Aberdeenshire, sleeps 14

Parts of Lickleyhead Castle, just north of Inverurie, date from 1499. It has impressive corbelled turrets, grand scrolled dormers and rumours of a resident ghost, a tick list that means it is generally regarded as one of the country's finest castles. It's all as traditional as tartan.

Low £1,950, high £5,800; 01573 229797 01573 229797 , www.ltr.co.uk

Ireland

48 Dublin up, Co Meath, sleeps 2-6

If you want a town-and-country combo, the six whitewashed 300-year-old cottages at Bettystown are a stylish solution. They have vaulted, beamed ceilings and wood-burning stoves, and open onto six miles of brilliant beach, complete with wind-whipped sand dunes. They're also only a 40-minute drive from Dublin (or 20 minutes from the airport), for a regular urban fix.

Low/high £650-£1,850; 00 353 41 982 8104 00 353 41 982 8104 , cottages-ireland.com

49 Heaven sent, Co Galway, sleeps 10

The Sky Road trail is to Connemara what the Ring of Kerry is to the southwest — but, fortunately, narrow roads prevent bus tours from wrecking what Oscar Wilde described as its “savage beauty”. This cool contemporary mansion has been designed to celebrate those wide-open Galway panoramas, though you could always just raise a pint to them in the lively pubs of the nearby boho town of Clifden.

Low £2,285, high £2,900; 00 353 1 288 9355 00 353 1 288 9355 , adamsandbutler.com

50 Island life, Mayo, Sleeps 2-17

Inish Turk Beg is a private island off the coast of Westport, in Co Mayo, renowned for its hand-filleted, hand-smoked organic salmon, streaky bacon and single-malt Irish whiskey... sounds like a perfectly balanced diet to us. The cottage on the mainland and the five houses on the island were designed by Andrew Wright, a former European Young Architect of the Year, and have infinity pools, inside-outside fireplaces and oversized windows, maximising the views of Clew Bay.

Low £332-£499, high £2,160-£3,240; 00 353 98 36957 00 353 98 36957 , inishturkbeg.com