



A barn with a twist

DOWN A NARROW COUNTRY LANE IN SUFFOLK, ENGLAND, SITS THE MOST EXTRAORDINARY BARN CONVERSION. BELLE GROVE BARN MARRIES ETHNIC CHIC WITH COMFORTABLE LUXURY

WORDS | GISELLE WHITEAKER

"Are you sure we are going the right way?" I ask as my friend Lizzie peers bemusedly at the GPS directing us down a single-lane track into the Suffolk countryside. "Pull over," she says, pointing to a passing place as a tractor lumbers towards us.

It's hard to believe we are less than three hours' drive from Heathrow. Agricultural fields stretch to the horizon and time seems to be moving at the same languid pace as the tractor.

Another mile along the road we find Belle Grove Barns and bump gently along the dirt driveway to the Gate House. We let ourselves in wearily and our mouths drop open.

Our self-catering apartment is breathtaking – it has a Levant-meets-north Africa feel despite the original-looking exposed wooden beams. Carved wooden objets d'art pose haphazardly on gorgeous heavy timber furnishings and plush brightly-coloured cushions are thrown carelessly on the sofa. The room glows with the warm light of mismatched lamps and a hand-drawn welcome card is propped against a box of wafer-thin chocolates.

"Kick off your shoes and make yourselves at home," says the note from owners Jo Jordan and Nick Fisher. We do not hesitate. Lizzie is

itching to explore the apartment's hidden treasures. There is little rhyme nor reason to the objects littered across the room but they somehow create a coherent whole. Mixed in with the decorative elements are useful resources – brochures about local attractions, small stacks of books and magazines, and a selection of DVDs covering every genre.

The kitchen is full of treats – from the complimentary packet of biscuits to the coffee and tea supplies. A cappuccino machine graces one corner of the marble countertop and Lizzie flicks through an intricately embroidered folder of information she found next to a small bowl of fresh fruit.

We bounce up the narrow staircase where a reading nook beckons on the landing. An exceptionally deep bathtub waits alluringly in the generously-proportioned bathroom, competing with the oversized bed for attention.

"The farm that we are on belonged to Nick's father, and Nick also farms," explains Jo the next day. "He still does but, although it is quite a small farm, it got to the point where it was not economically viable so we looked to diversify... we thought we could convert the outbuildings and rebuild the farmhouse."

This they did over an intense eighteen-month period and the results are phenomenal. Amazingly, the couple did most of the renovation work themselves. Nick is the master of reconstruction, while Jo's impeccable flair created the atmosphere.

Lizzie and I follow Nick through the other barns. Each has a distinctive character, some leaning towards an Oriental style, others combining Middle Eastern, African and Asian elements. Jo and Nick have had adventures all over the world, and their travel experience is reflected in the barns in inventive ways. As an example Nick points out the heavy timber doors on the kitchen cabinets, reclaimed from cabinets found in Rajasthan.

Eventually Lizzie and I drag ourselves away from our hidey-hole to explore the area. Southwold, with its pier and beach cottages is lovely, as are the crumbling castles and historic properties dotted around the countryside.

We take a pleasant walk through the fields to the market town of Halesworth with its paved centre, and along rural paths running through other village communities. Locals everywhere offer a friendly greeting. The best views, however, are back at Belle Grove Barns. ☺