



# RIVER ISLAND

# RETREAT

SITUATED ON A PRIVATE ISLAND IN THE RIVER THAMES BETWEEN WINDSOR AND MAIDENHEAD, THE REJUVENATED MONKEY ISLAND ESTATE HAS BEEN DESIGNED TO BALANCE GLAMOUR AND A RELAXED COUNTRYSIDE VIBE. GISELLE WHITEAKER CROSSES THE BRIDGE IN BRAY FOR SOME ISLAND IDLING.



Standing on lush green lawn, looking at beautifully manicured garden beds where bumblebees drift from petal to petal, it's hard to believe I'm resting on the rubble of London. I'm admiring the landscaping on Monkey Island in Bray, Berkshire, which wraps around two fetching Palladian structures, known as the Temple and the Pavilion. Set across seven acres, the recently restored Monkey Island Estate has an intriguing history, packed with monarchs, aristocrats, artists and monks - and after the Great London Fire, some city rubble too.

Rumour has it that the spit of land sitting in the midst of the Thames may have scored its rather exotic name by association with a band of monks from Merton Priory, rather than any resident primates. The truth is lost in time, but what is known, is that the barges shipping Oxfordshire stone down the river to rebuild London after the

**MAIN**  
A view of the Pavilion from the bridge to Monkey Island.

**ABOVE**  
The Temple.

1666 Great Fire dumped much of the rubble they returned with onto the Thames' islands, including Monkey Island, providing it with a solid base and lifting it well above the flood line, unwittingly enhancing its real-estate appeal.

In 1723, Charles Spencer, the 3rd Duke of Marlborough, purchased the island for an angling retreat and the Fishing Pavilion and Fishing Temple he commissioned are the basis of the Estate's offering today. The ceiling paintings in The Monkey Room in the Pavilion - now a comfortable lounge area - are also a legacy from the Duke. Depicting monkeys aping human behaviour, the paintings are the work of Andie de Clermont, whose creations also reside in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.

By 1840, the Pavilion had become a riverside inn and the island saw such illustrious visitors as Queen Victoria and Edward VII, operatic singer Dame Nellie Melba, composer Sir Edward Elgar and poet Siegfried Sassoon. Writer Rebecca West and lover H.G. Wells spent time here, and much later, after a change of hands and architectural expansion, it became a popular social haunt, with Princess Margaret visiting, along with numerous socialites and stars. With such popularity, it's difficult to understand its decline and disrepair at the end of the last century, but Malaysian hospitality group YTL Hotels has breathed new life into the chimp, with extensive repair and refurbishment work taking place over the past three years. Now, Monkey Island has once again opened its doors, ready to add to its list of distinguished guests.

There's certainly a lot going on. There are chickens in a coop at one end of the island, and beehives a little further down, past the smokehouse where the Estate smokes its own salmon. A Victorian potting shed is down that way as well, where some experimental tea-growing is planned; the herb garden has recently been planted; and during our visit, the property is hosting its first wedding. The appeal goes beyond that, though; everything is done that little bit differently on Monkey Island, turning a visit into a journey of discovery.

Naturally, the rooms are stylish - think contemporary English country house. Our corner room has a private balcony overlooking the river. Should we tire of that view, there's a lounge on the ground floor of the Temple, where coffee and cake is served in the afternoons. There are also two shepherd's huts on the island, set up for stargazing and marshmallow toasting on clear nights, and a secret staircase in the Pavilion leads to an intimate whisky snug above The Monkey Room. Firepits outside The Monkey Bar burn as the evenings cool, creating another hotspot, the perfect place for a boozy hot chocolate.

There's a spa at Monkey Island too, on a custom-made narrow boat. And it's not just the spa setting that's unusual - the tinctures are all home-made and treatments like The Monk's Elixir combine booze, botany and beauty. What could be more relaxing than sipping on monk-brewed ancient herbal tonics pre-massage, as the river swirls along the side of the vessel?



**TOP TO BOTTOM**  
The elaborately painted Monkey Room; a terrace room in the Temple; the spa narrowboat.



**TOP LEFT TO RIGHT**

Firepits crackle outside The Monkey Bar; The Monkey Island Brasserie features an open kitchen.

**ABOVE**

Creedy Carver duck breast, duck leg sausage roll, scorched kale, wild mushrooms, potato dumpling, red wine jus.

Should the water prove alluring, private boat hires are available for a sundowner circumnavigation of the island or waterborne exploration further afield. We cruise around the island and some way upriver on *Dragonfly*, a 31' Frolic manned by the charming Captain Tom, who points out the island's features and educates us on the wildlife in the area. The boats are a popular transport choice for guests venturing forth to dine on Michelin meals in star-studded Bray, home of Heston Blumenthal's The Fat Duck and The Hind's Head, along with the Roux brothers' Waterside Inn. Blumenthal also has a more relaxed eatery in Bray at The Crown. A total of seven Michelin stars reside within the village.

Closer to home, The Monkey Island Brasserie, with its vaulted ceilings, classic French doors leading out to the terrace, and open kitchen, is also becoming a favoured food choice. The restaurant's visual appeal is matched by the quality of the produce on the menu, dished up by the team of chefs visible in the open kitchen, as they purposefully work their culinary magic. The English heritage tomato starter with trio of Nutbourne tomatoes, Bloody Mary dressing, celery salt, Yorkshire fettle cheese and honey-pickled red onion has incredible depth of flavour, as does the wood-smoked pepper risotto, which incorporates a pleasing crunch courtesy of butter crumble. Each and every ingredient, whether it's Creedy Carver duck and scorched kale or freshly caught hake and fennel veloute, is given the attention it deserves to make it shine - and is presented with panache. The Brasserie may not be aiming for a star, but it is a worthy addition to Bray's gourmand offering.

Like the moon, Monkey Island's fortunes over the years have waxed and waned, but under the guiding hand of General Manager Lee Kelly, there's little doubt the Estate is again on the up and up. With more enhancements in the pipeline - there's a pool on the way for private use by guests and there's talk of cookery demonstrations in the recently opened, four-bedroom Long White Cloud for a start - Monkey Island Estate is one to add to the bucket list of beautiful British boltholes.

For more information on Monkey Island Estate, see [www.monkeyislandestate.co.uk](http://www.monkeyislandestate.co.uk)