

# THE BUCOLIC BARNES

Down a single lane road leading into the heart of the Suffolk countryside sits Belle Grove Barns, a barn conversion unlike any other. Owners Jo Jordan and Nick Fisher are intrepid travellers, reflected in the many treasures that decorate these self-catering hideaways. This is a true escape from the mundane.



From the road Belle Grove Barns are well-hidden, nestled behind mature greenery that hides the oasis within. Following the grassy ruts that pass as a driveway, signs direct guests to the door of their temporary home. What a home it is.

Stepping inside any one of these gorgeous barns is like being whisked away to Aladdin's magic cave or the oriental palace of a king. Artfully scattered objects allude to an ambience, the barns bylines including *A touch of the Raj* and *Spice Archipelago*.

The door to the Gate House leads into a heavily timbered kitchen, with thick reclaimed wooden doors lending some

gravitas to the space. This is not an immaculate kitchen from the pages of a magazine. Instead it feels like home. Mugs swing from a stand on the marble countertop and a pestle and mortar sit on the counter as if abandoned just before use. A chopping board leans against the wall, and a set of fluorescent kitchen knives adds a splash of colour. Fully stocked with all of the basics, from utensils to tea bags and a thoughtfully provided packet of chocolate biscuits, the kitchen is begging for a home-cooked meal.

A bottle of wine and a box of gourmet chocolates sit on the counter with a hand-written welcome note, as if from a friend. The mismatched lamps are lit, lending a glow to the downstairs space that can only be bettered by lighting the fire that is already set in the fireplace. Books line the bookshelves waiting for a reader, and a collection of DVD's covering most genres add a contemporary touch. The room is a refuge, beckoning guests to kick off their shoes, curl up on the couch and contemplate life for a moment, before plunging in to the intricately embroidered folder of information about Belle Grove and the broader area.





Up the narrow stairs, the story continues with a cosy reading nook on the landing. A right hand turn leads to an expansive bathroom with a large free-standing bathtub, soft white towels and an overhead shower that sprinkles down



like rain. A left hand turn leads to the attic bedroom, the exposed beams hovering over the four-poster bed and whispering romance. Everywhere there are hints of home. A throw is draped casually across the lower half of the bed, a bowl of fruit sits on the kitchen table, pictures sit propped against whatever surface will hold them.

“The farm that we are on belonged to Nick’s father,” Jo explains “It is quite a small farm and it got to the point where it’s not economically viable, so we looked to diversify. We had a small holiday cottage attached to our property in





the south bank of the River Blythe. Amidst a thousand acres of coast, heath and marshland, the locale is listed as an Area of Outstanding Beauty. Romantic ruins, a picturesque village, the golden sands of the beach, and the surrounding marshes make the appeal of Walberswick irrefutable.

Halesworth which had been an unexpected success, so we thought we could convert the outbuildings and do the same thing here. We rebuilt the farmhouse and this was part of a major project.” Nick and Jo ploughed through the extensive rebuilding and refurbishment in just 18 months. These are not people who rest on their laurels. “Nick, being from a farming background, has done a bit of building here and there and he likes to do interesting conversions,” explains Jo nonchalantly, as if the Barns were knocked together in a day.

While Nick took care of the building work, Jo pieced together the interiors, with the flair of a designer. “The bulk of stuff, we went over to Rajasthan, which is the centre for exporting Indian antique pieces and so we had three solid days of buying there, filled two forty foot containers... and brought them back. But we did also source stuff from our other travels. It really is a mélange,” Jo laughs. That may be so, but it is an incredibly chic mélange. Balinese prints, Chinese furniture, and Turkish carpets mix with modern, comfortable items that can be bought regionally.”It’s a question of mixing it in, blending it, so it’s not overdone,” elucidates Jo. “It gives it some interesting character without being just a bit naff. It’s a fine line.” Naff is the last word that springs to mind at Belle Grove.

It is hard to leave the comfort of the Barns, but the area’s attractions beckon. The seaside town of Southwold sits on the North Sea, less than half an hour away. Perched over the ocean, Southwold is the town that time forgot.

Stroll along the golden sand beach admiring the rows of colourful beach huts, or walk along Southwold pier for beautiful seaside views, souvenirs, and perhaps morning tea if the fancy strikes. In summer Belle Grove Barns offer a beach hut for rental so you can make a day of it. For something a little more on the quirky side, dip into the Under the Pier Show, mid-pier. This amusement arcade features coin operated machines that belong to an era of sideshows and fair rides, every interactive machine created by one man, Tim Hunkin. Try the ‘Autofrisk’ or ‘Rent-a-Dog’ for a laugh.

From Southwold it is a short ferry ride (walk, or cycle) to Walberswick village on



Bungay, less than ten miles from Belle Grove is a quaint market town with the crumbling ruins of a Norman castle. While there is little left of the structure, Jester’s Café at the castle entrance serves the best hot chocolate in the county. From Dunwich Heath to Framlingham Castle, market towns to the wetlands of the Norfolk Broads this region offers a wealth of attractions, all within easy reach of Belle Grove Barns. The only obstacle is time.

A pleasant walk from Belle Grove, down country lanes alongside farming plots, is Halesworth, a charming market town that is the focus of a rural area of scattered villages and farmsteads. Follow the ‘Town Trail’ for a gentle walk down narrow lanes past places of historic interest. If the exercise and fresh air have piqued your appetite, let one of the cafes lure you in for toasted tea cake and a cup of refreshment.

A weekend at Belle Grove Barns is not enough. As you reluctantly watch the farm recede in your rear view mirror, take heart that it will still be there next week. You can always come back and stay longer.



P4: TOP RIGHT: The kitchen at Belle Grove TOP LEFT: the beamed bedroom P5: TOP: the reading nook MAIN: Belle Grove Barns P6: TOP: Southwold Pier RIGHT: Halesworth town centre BOTTOM: beach huts