

# LIFE REFINED

living life well

summer 2017





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Loop through the glorious gardens in England and Wales

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# RAINDROPS ON ROSES

*A British Garden Party*

*By Hilary Nangle*

Wander through woodlands, surround yourself with roses, laugh over follies and explore historical ruins. Experience it all on a journey looping through gardens in England and Wales, and don't worry about showers—they make the colors really pop.





Great Fosters



Aberglasney Gardens. Photo by Jason Ingram



Photo by Annie Spratt



Aberglasney Gardens. Photo by Jason Ingram

#### APPRENTICE IN LONDON

This journey promises a chance to weave through formal beds, sip tea amid a riot of color and scent, and marvel over great glassed observatories. It all begins in London at The Milestone, a five-star Red Carnation Hotel Collection property overlooking Kensington Palace and Gardens. For the best views, check into the aptly named Kensington Gardens suite, with floor-to-ceiling bay windows. Plan ahead for a private picnic or afternoon tea in Kensington Gardens, a gentle way to ease into your vacation.

Arrange for transport by the hotel's chauffeur-driven Bentley to the Chelsea Physic Garden, London's oldest botanical garden. Roughly 5,000 different edible, medicinal and historical plants grow within this pocket-sized gem along the Thames, founded by the Worshipful Society of Apothecaries in 1673 as a training center for apprentices. The microclimate allows rare British species to flourish, such as the largest outdoor fruiting olive tree in Britain and the world's most northerly outdoor grapefruit tree. Paths wind through formal gardens, woodlands and Europe's oldest manmade rock garden. Tropical and sub-tropical plants and a Victorian Cool Fernery fill the greenhouses. The Garden of Medicinal Plants displays the medicinal use of plants from around the globe dating back thousands of years. Enjoy a light lunch at the garden's Tangerine Dream Cafe, but save room for a traditional late afternoon tea in the glass-domed Thames Foyer at The Savoy.

#### JACOBEOAN DELIGHTS AT HATFIELD HOUSE

Depart London after breakfast for the 75-minute drive to Hatfield House, the Hertfordshire childhood home of Elizabeth I, current home of the seventh Marquess and Marchioness of Salisbury and family, and centerpiece of an agricultural estate and parkland. Three walks—ranging from 30 to 90 minutes—show off the park's highlights, including a vineyard dating from 1611, an 18th-century castle folly and veteran trees; a few oaks

are more than seven centuries old.

The house, prized for its exquisite Jacobean architecture and interior design, is one of the few remaining homes of Elizabeth I. Don't miss the 1585 portrait of her hanging in the King James Drawing Room. The Jacobean garden, designed by Thomas Chaudler, Salomon de Caus and John Tradescant, dates from the early 17th century and includes many European plants, trees, bulbs and fruit trees introduced to England. Since a restoration in the Victorian era, when terraces and parterres were added, the gardens have kept evolving and now include the Sundial Garden, with box tunnels and raised rose beds; look for the Lady Salisbury rose, the Old Palace Garden—a stunning knot garden and foot maze—and a woodland garden with mature oak. Sculptures sprinkled throughout the gardens, including a stone frieze of Queen Elizabeth I, enrich the experience.

After lunch, depart for the approximately three-and-a-half-hour drive to Wood Hall Hotel & Spa, a gentle country house in an especially peaceful, park-like setting in Wetherby.

#### YORKSHIRE'S R.H.S. HARLOW CARR

Fans of James Herriot, the country veterinarian of book and TV fame, may want to while away a few hours exploring the nearby hills and dales of Yorkshire's Herriot Country, but the main attraction for garden fans is the Royal Horticultural Society's Harlow Carr, 30 minutes from the hotel.

Sited in a valley and distinguished by woodlands, water and rock, 68-acre Harlow Carr invites lingering and wandering. In the 1950s, Harlow Carr's then-curator, Geoffrey Smith, recognizing one of the young garden's strengths, began opening up the forest floor for bluebells and planting hundreds of rhododendrons. "Without the Woodland, Harlow Carr wouldn't be Harlow Carr; you just have to lean against a tree and feel history pulsing through its sap," he says.

The paths coursing through the woodlands are





irresistible, but the acknowledged jewel of Harlow Carr is Streamside, which runs the garden's length, waltzes colorfully with the woodland and features gurgling cascades, stone steps and bridges. "The rare, blue poppy is the garden's holy grail," says Russell Watkins, an ornamental gardener on the garden's floral team.

Stroll Gardens Through Time, six historical gardens from 1804 to contemporary times reflecting the influence of various British landscape architects. Harlow Carr's collection of more than 2,000 specimens representing the history of alpinists in Yorkshire is showcased in the Alpine Zone, another treat.

Speaking of treats, famed Betty's operates a café and teahouse in the garden, perfect for refueling before the three-hour drive to Llandudno, Wales, and Bodysgallen Hall & Spa, a historic house hotel owned by the National Trust of Wales.

#### WHILST IN WALES

Built over a period of 600 years, Bodysgallen Hall wears its history well. It's surrounded by 200 acres of parkland and gardens with fairytale views over the walled city of Conwy's 13th-century castle. The oldest section of this imposing stone manse is a five-story tower likely constructed as a castle watch in the late 13th century.

"Bodysgallen is still one of the best, most ambitious, characterful and delightful hotel gardens one could find anywhere. It is alive," wrote Stephen Anderton and Charles Hawes in *Discovering Welsh Gardens*. The 20-acre garden is best known for its rare 17th-century parterre comprising geometric box hedges filled with scented herbs. While that's best viewed from above, allow time to enjoy the walled rose garden with a lily pond and the rockery with waterfall.

Nearby Bodnant Garden, an 80-acre hillside garden, is equally intimate and expansive with cozy nooks, dramatic vistas, towering trees and showy plants. Established in 1874 and now owned by the National

Trust, Bodnant's attractions can be divided between the upper terraces and the Dell and woodlands. Wander through the 180-foot-long Laburnum Arch, with its dangling yellow pendants, and peruse the terraces, rose garden, Old Mill and water lily pond. Ebb and flow through the Dell and woodlands, crossing bridges spanning waterfalls and streams and discovering buildings like The Poem, Boathouse and rare rhododendrons from around the globe. Bodnant also houses five national collections—Magnolia, Embotrium, Eucryphia, Rhododendron forrestii and Bodnant Rhododendron Hybrids—as well as the country's largest collection of champion trees.

When hunger strikes, choose between lunch or afternoon tea in the garden, at the Welsh Food Center on the Bodnant Estate or at Plas Maenan Country House, James and Caroline Burts' masterfully restored Edwardian manor house overlooking Snowdonia National Park and the Conwy River. If the service seems a bit royal, that may be because James is retired from service to the Queen.

Plas Maenan has an interesting history, but perhaps most intriguing is that it is home to one of the largest colonies of endangered lesser horseshoe bats in the British Isles. At dusk, as many as 500 emerge from an old tunnel complex under the hotel's terrace.

Another Welsh treasure, the masterfully restored Aberglasney, awaits in Llangathen, three-and-a-half hours south of Conwy. This 10-acre treasure box, considered one of Wales' finest gardens, dates from medieval times, was rescued from abandonment and reopened in the 1990s. Prowl through the Cloister garden, Elizabethan and Jacobean in design; the Ninfarium, inspired by the tropical gardens of Ninfa outside Rome; and the Asiatic, Alpine, Sunken, Stream and Upper Walled Gardens. Follow Bishop Rudd's Walk in the woodlands, and don't miss the Yew Tunnel. Plan lunch in the cafe, which overlooks the Pool Garden and draws ingredients from the walled Kitchen Garden.



Call it a night at Llangoed Hall, a Relais & Chateaux and Johansen's-member hotel with 17 acres of gardens in the captivating Wye Valley, a designated Area of Outstanding Beauty just over an hour from Aberglasney. From here, it's three hours to Great Fosters in Egham, England, but allow time to enjoy the sights, as the road cuts southeastward through Brecon Beacons National Park.

#### GREAT FOSTERS AND R.H.S. GARDEN WISLEY

The royal connections for Great Fosters' mid-16th-century main house (converted to Elizabethan design in the early 20th century) are deep—witness the original royal crest of Queen Elizabeth I inscribed above the main porch and dated 1598. It served as a hunting lodge for King Henry VIII, so there's some irony in taking tea in the Anne Boleyn Room, where the magnificent 16th-century ceiling includes Boleyn's personal crests. Plan dinner in the Michelin-starred Tudor Room.

While the interior is reason enough to stay, the 50-acre gardens are the real calling card. A moat, likely of sixth-century Saxon origin, now forms a border for the gardens, including yew hedges and a knot garden created in the 1920s Arts and Crafts style. Cross the wisteria-dressed Japanese bridge over the moat, and arrive in the circular sunken rose garden, a masterpiece that, when in full bloom, is an especially sensual treat. Keep wandering and you'll find hedges with secret rooms.

Only 25 minutes from the hotel is Wisley, the Royal Horticultural Society's flagship garden. One of the world's largest, it sprawls more than 200 acres with about 90 mature gardens, along with woodlands, an arboretum, lakes, a library and a stunning glass house, opened by the queen in 2007. It's laid out aesthetically, rather than geographically, with arid, moist temperate and tropic zones. It's magical, enthralling, educational and a fitting grand finale for a garden tour to remember. 🌹

