

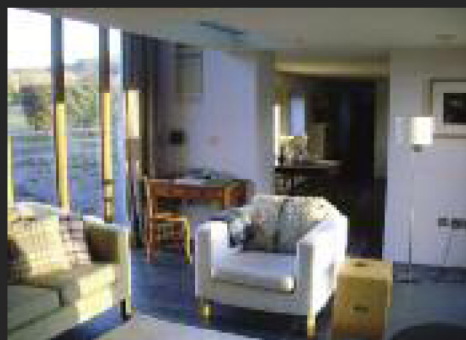
GOING FURTHER AFIELD

Roger Wheeler visits Hay-On-Wye



SIMON & ANDREW

About ten years ago, partners **Simon Forrester** and **Andrew Craven** fell in love with the country around **Hay-On-Wye** on the Welsh border and decided to leave their glamorous high-flying life in London and relocate. This brave decision meant a lot of hard work, but resulted in what can now only be described as an idyllic lifestyle. They bought a lovely old house with five acres and a dilapidated 18th Century barn just two miles from Hay. Without any help from Kevin McCloud and Channel 4 they embarked on their very own grand design with spectacular success.



The idea was to make their barn available for self catering holiday lets. I've had very little experience of self catering holiday cottages but this has to be the gold standard. The barn is called **The Peren**, the Welsh for pear as there is an ancient pear tree in the grounds. They've spared no expense on comfort: two large bedrooms, two bathrooms, large lounge with flat screen TV and wi-fi, and a well equipped kitchen. Their philosophy is to make it as homely as possible and within minutes of arriving you do feel immediately at home.

There's a very large garden with patio and barbecue, and due to it being in the heart of the country the only sound is the birds.

They're as eco friendly as possible with ground source hot water and a wood burning stove, fully stocked with logs. This place has style in spades with Royal Doulton china and John Lewis linen. We stayed in late March, the weekend of the 'super moon' with spring flowers, the trees in bud and a clear blue sky. The river Wye runs along the bottom of the land and a stroll along the bank is a great way to relax. In spring and summer it's all obviously beautiful but even in the depths of winter this place would be cosy and welcoming. This is five star country living and it's doing remarkably good business.

The countryside is known as the **Welsh Marches**, a medieval term used to describe the border country between England and Wales. By any standards this has to be the greenest and most pleasant of any part of the UK. The town of Hay is now famous for the annual literary festival which attracts over 200,000 visitors and untold numbers of famous authors talking about their latest publications. This year it's from May 26 to June 5. The town itself is very attractive, with 30 book shops selling, they say, over one million books although it's unlikely that anyone has ever counted. The original and largest of the bookshops is **Richard Booth's Bookshop**, which is well worth visiting even if books aren't your thing as they have a really excellent café. There are many unusual little shops, not all selling books and plenty of places to eat well at surprisingly



RICHARD BOOTH'S BOOKSHOP

reasonable prices. Writer and broadcaster Jonathan Meades once described Hay as like being trapped in a railway compartment full of escaped lunatics; very harsh and unfair but it must be said that Hay is a little like Glastonbury, as in not being quite of this world.

This is serious walking country with the spectacular **Black Mountains**, part of the **Brecon Beacons National Park**, which are neither mountains or black but are a range of serious flat topped hills. The Brecon Beacons, on the doorstep, are also beautiful. However, you do need a car in this part of the world even before you start walking. From Hay a short steep drive takes you up to the base of **Hay Bluff**, which you do have to walk up or even climb as the path can reach 45 degrees. Once at the top the views are fantastic. The next, higher hill is picturesque, and known as Twmpa in Welsh and as **Lord Herefords Knob** in English. We just admired it from the car park.



HAY BLUFF

Back to The Peren for a chat with Simon and Andrew to find how life is in the depths of the, albeit beautiful, country. They told us how once they had finished the barn conversion they looked around to see how to best market the property. They couldn't find a site which they wanted to use so started their own. Sadly there's still a problem for same sex couples looking for friendly and stylish accommodation - only recently we had the case of a couple in Cornwall who refused to allow two men to share the same bed and this is not that unusual. So Simon and Andrew set out to track down all the small hotels and guest houses that were either gay owned or at the very least gay friendly.

They launched **furtherafield.com**, and in a very short time have nearly 90 properties on their books. Ranging from simple but stylish guest houses in north Wales and Cornwall to very elegant country hotels across France, Spain, Portugal and as far as Mykonos. They have visited most personally, so visitors can have every confidence in booking through them. I was very impressed by just about everything we saw and have no hesitation in recommending their services. They are featured in the Alastair Sawday 'Go Slow England' guide so it's not just me that was impressed.

www.theperen.com
www.furtherafield.com
www.breconbeacons.org
www.hay-on-wye.co.uk
www.hayfestival.com