



THIS PICTURE Eagles Nest House is perched on a clifftop between Folkestone and Dover above Weir Bay, with views out to France

HIDE AND CHIC

Move over, chintzy cottages. Self-catering holiday lets are being transformed into ultra-fashionable retreats with luxury services laid on

WORDS RUTH CHANDLER

Thanks to a new wave of slick boutique hotels, weekends by the sea have never been so fashionable. But what if you want more than just a weekend? Do you have to sacrifice the crisp, white linen, super-fluffy towels and sexy, sleek bathrooms of the hotel for the humble offerings of the holiday cottage? Not any more. Dotted around the British coastline are the beginnings of a revolution – self-catering is getting a makeover.

"We call it a lair with flair," says Jean Cockerill, owner of The Northumberland House, a beautiful, new-build, sandstone and slate farmhouse with uninterrupted views over the Heritage Coast near Alnwick. The story of The Northumberland House is fit for an episode of *Grand Designs*, and its interior would sit happily in the hippest of hotels. Flagstones cover the ground floor, light from the sash windows plays on the chalk-coloured walls, and while the funky chandelier adds glamour, the under-floor heating obligingly warms your toes. White bed linen, berry-coloured cushions and throws of sumptuous fabrics, coupled with sheepskin rugs, add to the sense of luxury in the bedrooms. "We wanted to create somewhere that was spacious and light, while feeling warm and welcoming," Jean says. These qualities swayed the judges of the Enjoy England Awards for Excellence 2006, who made The Northumberland House a finalist, recognising that Jean and Mike had "spotted a gap in the market".

The Northumberland House comes with an optional in-house chef from local company Fresh Element. John Philipson, judge of last year's Excellence in England Awards, says that extra services such as this are bridging the divide between the hotel and the self-catering experience. "People enjoy the flexibility of self-catering because they can choose when and how to be served," he says. "By offering luxury services, such as shopping, an in-house chef and a DVD library, holiday lets are opening themselves up to a wider audience."

A whole spectrum of optional extras is the defining feature of Susie and Will Daniel's Breakwater Holidays company. Based in the Victorian seaside town of Bude, north Cornwall, they

**CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT**

Bedrooms in The Northumberland House are kitted out in crisp white sheets and luxurious throws; one of the two stunning bathrooms in Crooklets, a Breakwater Holidays house; the family room and garden room (right) in The Northumberland House

run six stylish and contemporary self-catering properties. Susie and Will go that bit further to ensure a 100 per cent enjoyable break both in and out of their houses. They offer to do your shopping at Bude's artisan food shops so it's ready in the fridge when you arrive, arrange activities for hen and stag parties – from yacht charters to helicopter trips – and reserve a table at their own favourite local restaurant, just in case you hadn't thought ahead. Plus, the interiors have been designed with pure relaxation and aesthetic pleasure in mind: roll-top baths take centre stage in the bathrooms, while large range cookers and chunky American-style fridges in the kitchens complete the overall opulence. And their houses are all in the most to-die-for locations: Chyvarton is a new-build in its own seven-acre grounds, just 400 yards from a private beach, while from the slick canal-side apartment of Kingfishers, you can potter down to Summerleaze beach's working sea lock and watch the boats being lifted into position ready for the fishing season. "Our guests keep the local surf school pretty busy," Susie says. "Our in-house chef will cook that-day-caught lobster for dinner, but if guests feel like exploring the local eateries, there are plenty of lovely places to choose from."

The new made-to-measure self-catering also extends to long weekends – in the past, booking a holiday cottage involved a non-negotiable Saturday-to-Saturday stint. "Out of season we're very happy to offer Thursday-to-Monday breaks," Susie says. "And if we haven't got a booking earlier in the week, we'll call the guest to see if they'd like to come a day early at no extra cost. There's no point in the houses sitting empty."

David Haycox, owner of Shoreline Cottages – a selection of stylish period properties in Whitby, North Yorkshire – also encourages long weekends. In fact, only 12 per cent of his annual bookings are for whole weeks. Shoreline's flexibility is part of David's endeavour to create a relaxing environment for his guests, which also extends to the

fact file: chic cottage rentals

■ **THE NORTHUMB-
BERLAND HOUSE**

Longhoughton,
Alnwick,
Northumberland
(07834 620669,
www.thenorthumberlandhouse.co.uk). Sleeps 12;
£1,116 for three to
four nights, from
£1,488 per week.

■ **BREAKWATER
HOLIDAYS**
Bude, Cornwall
(01288 321964;
www.breakwater-holidays.co.uk).

From £500 per
week.

■ **SHORELINE
COTTAGES**

PO Box 135, Leeds
(0113 244 8410;
www.shoreline-cottages.com).
From £340 for
three nights.

■ **SHORE CROFT**

Mellon Charles,
Wester Ross,
Scotland (0151
494 1488; www.shorecroft.co.uk)
Sleeps eight; from
£480 per week.



ABOVE AND RIGHT The sleekly contemporary kitchen of Eagles Nest house looks out towards Folkestone; the entrance hall, dayroom and dining room is open plan with a laid-back feel



properties' uncluttered but cosy interiors. The neat, two-person apartment of Quayside cottage is furnished in a palette of cool blues and neutrals, reflecting the shades of the sea, while earthy colours add warmth. It perches on the edge of the sandy beach in a secluded pocket of the town, where you can watch the throng of the harbour from its windows. An entry from the Shoreline visitors' book reads: "It makes a refreshing change to see such tasteful décor and attention to detail," and a repeat booking rate of 43 per cent shows that this is a winning combination.

David believes that the market for high-quality interior design in holiday lets tallies with the nation's current interest in home improvement and property. Whereas owners used to fill their holiday cottages with chipped crockery, dodgy cookers and off-cuts of carpet, they're now fitting them with bespoke kitchens, state-of-the-art sound systems and designer bed linen – things that their guests would like to have in their own homes. Websites are playing a vital role in this new trend, too. A web page has the capacity to celebrate a stylish property with myriad images. Alastair Sawday's Special Places to Stay has recently set up a website dedicated purely to holiday lets (www.special-escapes.co.uk). "Customers increasingly want to see more pictures of the cottages' interiors," marketing manager Sarah Bolton says. "The only way we were able to provide enough images was through our new website, with five pictures per entry. We recently received 892,374 hits in a single month."

Hilary and Peter Cowan rely solely on the internet to showcase the stunning interior and location of Shore Croft in Wester Ross. Daunted by the second-rate fittings and furniture of countless holiday cottages – "We'd booked too many holiday lets that leave you itching to get back to your own home," Hilary says – they built their own retreat, which they let for around 45 weeks of the year, to a luxurious standard. It is about as remote as they come, boldly positioned on a platform at the head of Loch Ewe, fully exposed to the Scottish elements, with views of the Torridon Mountains and even the Outer Hebrides on a clear day. But, with details such as specially insulated floor-to-ceiling windows, Peter and Hilary ensure that the brisk sea air remains where it belongs. From the sitting room's hot-red sofa there are cinematic views of the seascape that ebbs and flows just 40 metres away. Next door, a long, elegant dining table is perfectly positioned, so while guests breakfast they can take in the pebble beach and creatures that cluster around the rocks near the house, including sea otters, seals and cormorants. "The first thing we do when we arrive is drop everything and rush to the window to take it all in," Hilary says. She leaves locally made soaps tied up with raffia, a bottle of Champagne, chocolates and a welcome card for her guests – the basic ingredients for romance. Hilary knows of at least one couple upon whom the views and beauty of Shore Croft worked their magic. They recorded the event of their engagement in the visitors' book and have booked the house for their honeymoon next year, too. **COAST**

more chic and unique properties

■ THE WOOD, SALCOMBE, DEVON

A 1950s house with a contemporary interior and views of South Sands Bay. It sleeps 18 people and costs from £1,500 per week (01548 843485, www.salcombe.com).

■ EAGLES NEST HOUSE, CAPLE-FERNE, NEAR FOLKESTONE, KENT

A chic clifftop house, sleeping six to eight, it costs from £850 per week (01303 240905, www.eaglesnesthouse.co.uk).

■ BLUE REEF COTTAGES, ISLE OF HARRIS, OUTER HEBRIDES

Two luxury turf-roofed retreats with saunas and Jacuzzis. Each sleeps two and costs from £680 per week (01859 550370, www.stay-hebrides.com).

■ CALDEY VIEW AND CHURCH VIEW, ETHAN HOUSE, TENBY, PEMBROKESHIRE

Two sleek maisonettes in the heart of this Welsh fishing town, near the beach. They sleep four and five respectively and cost from £400 per week (01834 844565, www.fbmholidays.co.uk).

■ THE PENTHOUSE, FALMOUTH, CORNWALL

A sophisticated apartment at the top of a three-storey roundhouse with a roof-top patio and views out to sea. Sleeping two, it costs from £222 for a week (01326 573808, www.cornishcottage-holidays.co.uk). For a further selection, see our classified ads from page 130.