

CONTENTS

Introduction	6
Woodland	10
Gardens	18
Buildings	28
Parks	36
Secret Sanctuaries	46
Wildlife and Nature Reserves	56
Farms	66
Shops and Markets	76
The Good Life	84
Sports and Activities	92
Pubs	100
Villages	108
Wild Water	116
Walks	124
Events	132
Picture Credits	140
Acknowledgements	143

*The path and gateway leading to the walled garden
at Osterley Park and House.*



INTRODUCTION

London might be the largest urban sprawl in Britain, but that doesn't mean its residents, workers and visitors don't occasionally feel the pull of the land. Whether you're a transplanted country mouse missing your green fix, a born-and-bred Londoner craving peace, or a visitor looking to explore the city's more natural side, you will find something in these pages to inspire you to pull on your boots and get outside.

The longing to get back to the countryside, to reconnect with the natural world, is deep within many of us – even if we live in Zone 1. Choosing to be near world-class art galleries and cutting-edge music venues doesn't render you insensitive to the feeling of grass beneath your toes, the excitement of spotting the orange-and-blue flash of a diving kingfisher or the kick you get from cooking soup using ingredients you've grown yourself. Arm yourself with an emergency list of places to retreat to. Even in



the most concrete of jungles there are hidden arbours, ruined churches covered in moss, nature reserves filled with dragonflies, frogs and rare birds, or atmospheric, misty graveyards, where the noise of the city fades within seconds of stepping in and you can grab a few moments of calm and contemplation.

It may come as a surprise that London is one of the greenest cities in the world. It might not be apparent when you're walking down a smog-choked high road, strolling over concreted squares or watching new developments shoot up, but a survey by Greenspace Information for Greater London has found that an impressive 47 per cent of the capital is verdant land – nearly half of the city is made up of parks, gardens,

The stunning view across London from the Horniman Museum garden.





allotments, conservation sites and much more.

However, it's not always easy to find those rural idylls. City farms with horses, chickens and goats are wedged between railway tracks; little parks full of character are hidden away in urban canyons; and tranquil green oases are concealed behind high walls. By exploring behind the places you see every day or making a trip slightly further afield, you'll be rewarded with peaceful green spaces, secret leafy retreats and people-free walks. Discover London's wild water – where you can paddle in rivers, spot rare birds on reservoirs, or walk through history along a centuries-old canal – then settle down to a pint in a cosy village-style pub that will instantly transport you to the depths of the countryside. Visit windmills, gothic castles, grand country houses and quirky cottages, where you'll find secret walled gardens or unexpected collections of modernist paintings. You'll know some

of these sights well – the big parks and large nature reserves are popular places to visit – but we've teased out the secret corners of the largest spaces and found other, more obscure, treats for you too.

Perhaps you'd like to get more hands-on? Let us help you. Take a foraging or weaving course, learn how to make cheese, volunteer in a community garden, or even take the first steps towards learning how to set up an urban smallholding. Or if you're after something a little more hedonistic, try paddleboarding, play cricket or learn what the jiggins London skittles is all about. Celebrate change and discover what exciting, multicultural London can bring to British traditions. It's also about discovering the rural pursuits of our neighbours' countries, bonding over weeding an overgrown border in the street and creating communities dedicated to improving the shared environment.



This book is not about escaping London. Rather, it's about rediscovering another side to the city, a side that's always been here, hanging on by its feral claws among the luxury apartments and work/play piazzas. It's about catching a little respite from the rat race while staying within the M25 and getting some peace without having to take a two-hour train trip. It's about finding beauty in a place that might seem unforgiving and harsh, about building relationships in a place that might seem unwelcoming, about finding solace in tradition and about wondering at the resilience of nature and its primal, restorative powers.

