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A hyper-bespoke breed of private holiday homes is fuelling our appetite for the unique, finds *Evie Calver*

PHOTOS: ALEXANDER BAXTER



Step into the vaulted entrance hall of Cowdray House and you'll immediately be greeted by numerous members of the noble Pearson family. While strictly speaking you won't be able to talk to them, these oil paintings – of which more than 20 adorn the walls of this 24-bedroom, Victorian turreted manor in Sussex's South Downs – say a lot about why people travel from all over the world to stay here.

'Most of our guests are looking to really get under the covers and understand the historic side of Cowdray,' says Neil Georges, managing director of events and hospitality. Built in the 1870s on the site of an old hunting lodge, the house and its 16,000-acre estate later became the family home of Weetman Pearson, 1st Viscount Cowdray, passing through four generations before opening for exclusive use in 2015. 'What we're trying to do when people stay here is make them feel that they're part of a journey of that history.'

The key to this is Cowdray's concierge service, which allows guests to enjoy personalised, hotel-style hospitality coupled with the freedom and seclusion of a private house. In addition to a host, chefs, bartenders and housekeeping staff, a four-strong operations team works with guests to understand what they want from their stay and organises activities accordingly: estate tours with head gardener Tony, talks on the history of the house and its family, polo tournaments

featuring professional players from the estate's internationally renowned club. 'It's all about making lasting memories,' says Georges. He cites a family from the US who dreamt of experiencing an English pub – while they were out on a crawl in the town, Cowdray's main hall was transformed into their own private pub, complete with a quintessentially British menu using local ingredients.

Cowdray House ([cowdray.co.uk](http://cowdray.co.uk)) is one among a growing number of properties to offer a bespoke concierge service, representing an evolution in the world of luxury travel. Simon Jeffries, product director at tailor-made travel company Elegant Resorts, agrees: 'It used to be all about white-glove hotel service and first class on the cruise, but time has moved on. Luxury today means exclusivity, space, hyper-personalisation.' And while hotels are curated for guests, he adds that 'there is something quite special and exciting about stepping into someone's home and family history'.

Penicuik House, an 18th-century, Palladian-style mansion ten miles south of Edinburgh, opened for exclusive use in August 2025 following a two-year restoration. The principle behind the project was to 'restore a historic estate through hospitality', explains Ed Clerk, the 12th generation of his family to own Penicuik Estate ([penicuikestate.com](http://penicuikestate.com)) since 1654. 'What we're doing is going back to a time before hotels existed and giving people an experience of what it was like to stay in a very highly

staffed country house.' The 16-bedroom property and the five cottages dotted around the estate all have the 'operational grunt' of a hotel, he explains, with kitchen, housekeeping and hosting teams on hand to make guests' personalised experience feel 'effortless'.

'We like our guests to have control and choice over how they spend their time,' Clerk adds. 'If someone wants to go stargazing with a guide one night, we make it happen. We try to give the idea that nothing is too much trouble.' But he assures that Penicuik's polished service stays behind the scenes. 'We've got all the operational equipment you'd expect from a hotel, but you cannot feel that. It has the soul of a family home.' →

**FROM LEFT:** Cowdray House can arrange a whole host of experiences; Penicuik House operates like a hotel behind the scenes



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Simon Jeffries, Elegant Resorts

The traditional hotel is far from dead – 2025 saw the largest influx of five-star rooms in London in over a decade. But 30 years after enjoying an initial big boom with the launch of Vrbo, an Airbnb predecessor, private holiday homes are relishing another moment in the sun. Between July 2024 and June 2025, guests from all over the world spent almost 94 million nights in UK short-term rentals, an increase of ten percent on the year before (ONS). This shows no signs of slowing down – and according to analysis by Savills, there is a particular appetite for unique places where guests can connect with local culture and history. Simon Foster, director of the Savills tourism, leisure and events consultancy, adds that this is particularly true among Gen Z: '[Their] daily lives are heavily digitised, [so] the desire for immersive and organic experiences is stronger than ever.'

Melinda Stevens finds this unsurprising. As former editor of *Condé Nast Traveller* and founder of creative agency Salt Lick, she knows what makes tourists tick – and points out that current generations have become all too aware of the inauthentic. 'It's made us crave a sense of discovery, which comes with unique places. There's an honesty about these private houses. They have the capacity for it to feel like you're just a small part of their history, but that history is something you can really bite into, and taste has real meaning.'

Located in the flower-filled village of St Florence in Pembrokeshire, Elm Grove ([elmgrovecountryhouse.co.uk](http://elmgrovecountryhouse.co.uk)) is a magnet for those eager to get their teeth into Welsh culture and history. 'More and more guests really want to get hands-on and do things that are very Pembrokeshire, very Wales,' says Jane Rees-Baynes, the third generation of the Rees family to run the 11-bedroom, 15-acre estate. After finding out what has drawn each group to the county and what would make their stay special, she and her husband Alan offer personalised recommendations such as cookery classes with local produce, coastal foraging, ghost trails and history walks. The couple also take care of cooking and bartending so guests deal with as few staff as possible.

'The personal touch is what people say they love about staying with us, and often say it's like staying with family,' Rees-Baynes adds. 'No two guests are the same, and neither are the experiences in our lovely county. Pembrokeshire has so much to offer; we do everything we can to help guests enjoy that in an authentic way.'

Meanwhile, those who stay at 300-year-old, exclusive-use Aldourie Castle ([wildland.scot](http://wildland.scot); book via [perfecthideaways.co.za](http://perfecthideaways.co.za)) are drawn in by its fairytale turrets and location on the shores of Loch Ness. 'Particularly for a special occasion, guests love experiencing Scottish traditions, whether that's a

bagpiper pre-dinner or learning how to Ceilidh in the castle steadings,' says Chris Kennedy, director of marketing at WildLand, which owns the property. The in-house staff play a huge part in organising these experiences and taking care of guests, as well as inspiring interest in local culture and the history of the castle. 'Our team is fascinated by Aldourie's past and is empowered to tell those stories,' he adds.

Most Aldourie Castle guests regularly stay in hotels, Kennedy says; the tailored service that comes with such properties isn't necessarily something they will choose every time. 'When they come to us, they might just be looking for something different. We see people combining a stay with us with a hotel stay, for example exploring Edinburgh and then ending their journey at Aldourie to celebrate a special moment all together before heading back to the stresses of everyday life.'

After all, the flourishing popularity of private holiday homes – with or without hyper-personalised bolt-ons – simply gives us all more freedom when it comes to how, and where, we travel. 'We are all really lucky to live in a time where there is so much choice,' Kennedy says. ■



FROM LEFT: Aldourie Castle's location on Loch Ness is a huge draw; Elm Grove in Pembrokeshire offers immersion in Welsh ways