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Ten off-the-beaten-track UK destinations to help you avoid the crowds this summer

Discover some of the best hikes, road trips, and beaches that can be enjoyed in accordance with social distancing.

Casting off, the idyllic Lough Erne in County Fermanagh, Northern Ireland



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Now that travel is back on the agenda in the UK, most of us can plan to spend some time doing what we love. Social distancing remains crucial, though. Along with the expected swell in visitor numbers at popular attractions and beauty spots this will lead many to seek out places to escape the crowds. These gorgeous off-the-radar locations have plenty of space in which to spread out, but before you go check the latest advice from the UK government at visitbritain.com/know-before-you-go to ensure they are currently safe to travel to.

Safer Summer Days Out



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PHOTOGRAPHY: J. LAMPT

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got. The feedback from visitors is that they're pleased to be back here. Because it is very peaceful and close to large populations, that outdoors space, the wellbeing that it gives, is really important."

Head gardener Glyn Smith maintained the grounds and historic plant collections, while Stanbridge helped with tree maintenance and even the venue's shire horses and donkeys. "I've helped to pleach the lime trees, I've really enjoyed it," says Stanbridge. "We've got two shire horses and donkeys - I've been looking after those as well. It's been beautiful. It's always quiet on the estate, but during lockdown there hasn't been the traffic and pollution, so it's been peaceful."

'We've got 2-metre pawprints everywhere'

Owen Craft, chief operating officer, ZSL Whipsnade zoo

For ZSL Whipsnade zoo chief operating officer Owen Craft, it wasn't just about the staff and grounds - there were some very specific large animals (and small ones, too) to think about. The park has reopened in phases, of which they are now in the second of four.

"Our proposition is about authenticity and adventure, with vast open spaces and large herds of animals from elephants to rhinos, lions, tigers and bears," he says.

"We have smaller immersive up-close experiences such as

Below: sunset over Erddig, just outside of Wrexham

'Lots of us are doing jobs we might not normally do, but our priority is to get folk in'

a butterfly house, so it's a nice blend. The key thing when organising this was to control the numbers when coming in. And the best way of doing that is pre-booking, only with morning and afternoon slots to stagger flow."

But some areas of the zoo remain closed off. For humans to go near the primates, for instance, visitors would need PPE because primates are more susceptible to Covid-19 transmission.

"On arrival and in and around the site, we've got 2-metre pawprints everywhere," says Craft. "The queueing system starts from the car park. Anywhere you funnel into a smaller viewing area we have to control queues, so we have pawprints for those as well."

Each of the zoo's first two phases of reopening was in line with UK government advice and the next two stages will be as well. "Phase three is about indoor play," adds Craft. "Certain experiences we'd look to bring back as well as looking at how we can do an indoor restaurant

offering. Phase four is about our overnight accommodation lodges, they're seasonal and not open at the minute. We have nine glamping pods up on the downs and we run that from March to October ... so we will reconvene those in 2021. But the core day-visitor experience is open and running."

Again, it's about the wellbeing element of what the venue offers, he says. "As we're easing out of lockdown, people want that connection with nature - and I think Whipsnade being reopened is not to be underestimated, really."

'People have come back to a wilderness and they're loving it'

Tammi Peek, partnerships manager, Mount Stewart - National Trust

With large manicured gardens and its own lake, Mount Stewart is a neoclassical home and National Trust property in County Down, Northern Ireland.

For partnership manager Tammi Peek and the team, the focus so far has been on installing low-key signage and one-way systems, as well as setting up a pre-booking system. Above all, their aim is to ensure that people would feel safe bringing their loved ones.

"The first challenge was to think through how we get people on site," says Peek. "People tell us when and what time they're coming. Members are free and non-members can pay online. We get a list and print that off each day and know the surname and arrival time. When they arrive, we give them a brief description of how the property is now working. And we've found that while at first there was frustration, because you can't be spontaneous anymore, once people arrive, they are loving the security of us knowing how many people are on site."

The venue has slowly increased daily visitors and reopened its tearoom. Being measured and cautious has helped, says Peek.

"We've found people have respected each other's space. On site, we've got one-way systems in operation, which we've tried to make as intuitive as possible."

The property now runs with what Peek describes as a "skeleton staff", with 20 workers brought



Above: the world-class gardens at Mount Stewart

back from furlough, but not all on a full-time basis. "Lots of us are doing jobs we might not normally do, but our priority is get folk in," she says. She adds that they've tried not to be "overly covid signposted", but that visitors do want to know which routes around the property will help them best adhere to social distancing. And there have been some lovely surprises for return visitors, too. "They've come back to see a wilderness in some places and they're loving seeing the long grass and the way the breeze goes through it and the increased numbers of butterflies."

By Jenny Stallard



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