



Who holidays in a house like this? Well, you could

Forget foreign climes and take a break at home. You could spend some of the savings upgrading your choice of accommodation. Kate Simon reports

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I am living in an episode of *Grand Designs*. I am staying in a glass and stone box on the banks of the Camel Estuary, just outside Padstow in Cornwall.

The house has a rugged base of slate, which yields to an ethereal crown of glass, a reflection of the surrounding quarried earth and the water that laps at its edges. The garden is an elemental sculpture, where swirls of stone capture grass and sea thrift, spiralling down into a fire pit, rising to a hump topped with a cedar hot tub. Kevin McCloud would be impressed.

But this audacious structure isn't the product of my toil, it is the work of its owners, the Abdy-Collins family. They commissioned the architects McLean Quinlan and the Chelsea Flower Show gold medal-winning garden designer Mary Reynold to observe the industrial heritage of the slate quarry that once occupied this site, and the relationship of the river, land and sky, and capture it all in a building. I am only living this dream for a few days on a short break with CV Travel – Estuary House is one of a group of 30 stellar properties selected by the villa and hotel specialist to feature in its brand new UK portfolio.

CV Travel specialises in the wow factor, which is why it is one of the preferred tour operators of Britain's middle classes – an eminently droppable name in a crowd that expects matching cutlery as an absolute minimum. The company began seeking out places with character and high-quality facilities in the Greek Islands in 1972, eventually expanding across the Mediterranean and more recently into the Caribbean and other exotic long-haul destinations.

Now CV Travel features 800-plus properties worldwide in its aspirational glossy brochures. It can accommodate parties as small as two and as large as 50 guests, with prices from £1,000 to £25,000 for a week abroad in high season, and from £495 to £6,000 for a week in the UK during the same period.

Estuary House, my superior Cornish holiday home, which sleeps up to 16, has a price tag of £4,000 a week in summer. A villa in Tuscany of a similar standard and capacity would cost more than £7,000 at the same time of year. Crucially, these prices exclude travel costs.

The potential savings that can be made by staying on home territory won't be lost on cash-strapped British travellers, even at this level of expenditure. Visit England, the official tourist board, recently reported that one in five of those who took an overseas holiday last year said they would consider switching destination to the UK in 2009 to cut costs. And with the financial services sector at the sharp end of the meltdown, even CV Travel's high-rolling clientele isn't immune to having to address difficult financial

questions this year, not least whether it is still affordable to ship out the whole family to a villa in Italy for a fortnight at the height of summer.

CV Travel's managing director, Debbie Marshall, insists that a move into the British market was always on the cards, but confirms it became compelling with "the weakening pound and an instinctive feeling that the timing was right as people look to holiday closer to home".

She won't be drawn on figures, but reports a "steady increase" in bookings for UK properties since the portfolio was launched at the start of the year "with sales in line with our expectations", adding that many of the inquiries they've received have converted into bookings.

The experience of increased interest in holidays at home is borne out by other rental companies. Growth of 20 per cent in bookings so far this year has been reported for some of the 430 properties offered across the country by Rural Retreats, one of CV Travel's competitors for the quality accommodation pound in the UK. While Best of Suffolk, a collection of around 50 upmarket properties in eastern England, last week announced the addition of 10 more cottages to its books in the teeth of the recession.

Naomi Tarry, who launched Best of Suffolk in 2006, says: "We are finding demand is more than double that of last year. There's definitely fatigue for travelling on low-cost airlines and [our guests] are very aware that it's around 25 per cent more expensive to visit countries in the eurozone than at this time last year. But they don't want to compromise on style and quality. We have found that people are seeking out the highest quality properties and they are the ones that are booking up quickest."

These developments suggest that despite current economic woes many of us are not only determined to take some kind of holiday this year, we're also considering our options carefully - it's not just the camping and caravanning markets reporting an increased desire, or necessity, to explore home turf.

We might settle to stay in Britain this year, but some of us are raising our expectations as the quid pro quo. CV Travel's entrance into the UK marketplace has brought the company's brand of luxury holiday closer to home for its loyal clients, but it has also put it within reach of those who may have previously balked at the cost of the full package once flights and car hire were added to the final bill.

Ms Marshall, of CV Travel, believes the company's priority is to spread the word about the new British collection to their existing clients, but she sees that there is more potential to explore. "We would hope those who do not usually consider an overseas villa rental, but who are aware of CV Travel as a name associated with quality and service, would see CV now associated with British houses and be confident to book with us," she says.

It may cost a few grand to hole up on the banks of the river Camel at Estuary House for a week, but with five double bedrooms, all en-suite, and two further rooms furnished with single beds, also with their own bathing options, this glorious building could be shared by up to 16 people at a cost of just £250 per head.

And it wouldn't be too much of a squash. The glass-walled living area that provides the focus for the property is huge and leads to a vast terrace. There's a big room on the ground floor - equipped with a gigantic surround-sound television and piles of games, books and DVDs - which lends itself to being used as a children's playroom, and the basement houses a gym.

There are even two washing machines - conveniently tucked away in a laundry and dry room - two dishwashers, and two dining tables big enough to seat everyone around (the fridge will be able to hold all the food you'll need because it is really more of an industrial-sized cold store).

But it's the outside space as much as the careful planning of the house and its facilities

that gives guests room to breath. You must negotiate your way along a track that crosses four fields to reach the front door of Estuary House, and that remoteness ensures you are alone, right on the estuary, with grandstand views of the adjacent body of water, the abandoned hillocks of slate, the gentle pastures climbing away from the riverbanks, and the huddle of Padstow in the distance – a landscape that changes its mood at the whim of the weather.

The view is only interrupted by the occasional walkers, joggers and cyclists who pass along the bottom of the property, between the garden and the shore, on the Camel Trail – a track that traces the route of an old riverside railway line, from Padstow to Bodmin. Most will stop for a moment to look up, captivated by the sight of the house, wondering who's lucky enough to be inside. If only for the week, that's you.

Compact facts

How to get there

Estuary House is available to rent from CV Travel (020-7401 1086; cvtravel.co.uk) for £4,000 per week, for up to 16 sharing. that includes daily cleaning, all heating, electricity and wood, use of the hot tub and the boat mooring. Long weekends or bookings from Friday to Monday are available at a cost of £3,000. First Great Western (08547 000 125; firstgreatwestern.co.uk) offers return fares from London to Bodmin from £29.

Further information

Cornwall Tourist Board (visitcornwall.co.uk).