

SOUTH-WESTERN SHOWPIECE

Secret Somerset

For equestrians, the south-west's hidden gem has it all, discovers *Catherine Welton*. But keep that to yourselves or it won't stay hidden for long...

SOMERSET is known for its cider, its cheese and for being the county you drive through to get to its perennially popular neighbour, Devon. What's perhaps less well known is that Somerset also boasts some of the UK's most spectacular countryside, including four National Landscapes, the Levels, parts of Exmoor National Park and a dramatic coastline.

As Geoffrey Jones, head of rural agency in the south at Savills, points out, all that countryside means miles of off-road riding options. "The wonderful network of bridleways and restricted byways that run across Somerset offer equestrian enthusiasts some excellent riding, with little or no roadwork at all," he

says. "In the north-east of the county, you have the Mendip Hills National Landscape, in the middle you have the Quantock Hills and in the west, you have Exmoor National Park, not forgetting the coastline.

"In fact, Somerset's Breen Beach is one of Europe's longest stretches of sand - and horse riding on the beach is allowed all year round."

DESPITE being largely rural, Somerset also has Glastonbury, Wells, Bath and Taunton, and the M5 offers easy access to the rest of the country. It was this combination of countryside and connectivity that attracted Shanti Roos and her family when they were looking to move from Hertfordshire.

"We tried to find a place in beautiful nature that we could do up ourselves, with train connections to London," she says.

They found Triscombe Barns in the Quantocks, which they converted into a home for them and a holiday let for income. Shanti is now an endurance rider and says her surroundings are perfect for training.

"We have superb hill work straight from our farm and a 1.2km uphill grass gallop, which is great for fitting in."

The location has benefits for Shanti's holiday let business, too.

"Guests love admiring the wild ponies that roam the hills and of course the deer, especially in the autumn when the rut is on. You can hear the stags call around our farm."

Despite having all this to offer, Shanti thinks the area has maintained its undiscovered feel, saying, "People often haven't heard of the Quantocks."

AS well as excellent hacking and hunting country, Somerset also has plenty to offer equestrians who compete.

Kings Sedgemoor Equestrian Centre, Chard Equestrian and Mendip Plains Equestrian Centre all host affiliated and unaffiliated showjumping and dressage. Pontispool runs Cotswold Cup qualifiers and other unaffiliated one-day events throughout the season. Bicton, Prestige and Hartpury are within a reasonable distance, too.

"Those considering the commercial potential of a property will factor in proximity to competitions and events," says Chris Johnson, senior associate director at Strutt & Parker. "This is one reason why Somerset is home to some of the region's most sought-after equestrian properties."

BUT whether you're a professional or an amateur, there's one thing that Chris says is non-negotiable - the quality of the land.

"Light loam and chalk-based soils are preferred, as they offer good drainage and year-round usability," he says. "Heavy clay can become waterlogged in winter and harden in summer, while sandy soil can pose health risks such as colic if horses

ingest too much of it. Well-established, free-draining grass is essential."

The quality of the land was a key factor in Katie and Robin Dumas's decision to base themselves near Shepton Mallet some 30 years ago.

"My husband wanted to build a quality cross-country course, so it had to be very free-draining," says Katie.

They bought a 30-acre former dairy farm in 1991 for just £120,000 and it's now home to Team Dumas, an eventing and sales yard that they run with their daughter, international event rider Millie Dumas.

Katie says the location is perfect.

"We're at the foot of the Mendip Hills, so we don't have to box our horses anywhere to get them fit. It's under an hour from Badminton and if you have a novice eventer, you don't have to travel more than an hour to get to lots of events."

And when it comes to sales, nearby Bristol airport has helped attract clients from overseas.

"They can fly in for the day, try a few horses and fly home," says Katie. Their cross-country course is aimed at professionals - Tom McEwen and Laura Collett trained there before the Olympics - and now has more than 350 fences.

"We've got tricky lines, two water fences, one of which was specifically built for the British team to practise for London, and we're building a third," says Katie. "The ground is superb, there's a lovely cushion of Somerset grass - we don't graze it, so it's always pristine for the precious event horses."

While it might not be the first thing that equestrians consider, Katie highlights Somerset schools like Millfield and King's Bruton as another plus.

"Every autumn, we get calls from estate agents with families who want to buy our property!" she says.

"Everyone who comes here says it's so friendly"

KATIE DUMAS

The Dumas have no plans to leave Somerset, though.

"It's a horse county and everyone who comes here says it's so friendly," Katie adds. "Somerset is the best-kept secret, but there are more and more event riders here now."

Fellow event rider Alex Bragg and his wife Simmone both grew up in Somerset and, for them, there was no question of setting up anywhere else.

"We had started a family before we became professional event riders and Somerset was home," Alex explains. "It was where the children went to school, where their friends lived and it was where we were happy."

"We live very near the M5 so it's very convenient for travel. We can easily access big roads in our lorry to get to events and training."

SOMERSET has a particular appeal for those seeking a better quality of life.

"Generally, buyers have made a lifestyle decision to move to the south-west, to work from home or commute two or three days per week," says Justin Lowe, partner at Greenslade Taylor Hunt.

The county's laid-back attitude was something that Samantha Osborn

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appreciated when she moved there from Surrey, where she ran equestrian centres and competition yards. "I love the slower pace of life, it's a very friendly county and people have a real willingness to help," she says. "Even the vets seem to be more time."

Samantha and her husband moved to a house in North Curry during Covid and spent the next few years doing it up.

"The house hadn't been touched since the 1960s, but obviously the yard was done first," she says. "We used as many local people as we could and found brilliant tradespeople. They really take due care and attention and like a quality finish."

Samantha didn't rush to make big changes to her equestrian set-up.

"You learn as you go through the seasons; I didn't go crazy until I'd lived there a while," she says.

She now has an American barn, arena and is in the process of putting in a track system. As her property is on clay, "the grass can either be like rocket fuel or the ground is like concrete".

Living among the farming community has its perks, too.

"The horses are all tractor-proof now and the farmers let me have a canter around the edge of their fields," she says.

"Prices are 5-10% cheaper than Dorset and Wiltshire"

JUSTIN LOWE, GREENSLADE TAYLOR HUNT

Samantha has maintained much of her client base from Surrey, with some of them coming to stay with her for training breaks.

"It's a nice way for me to work and they like experiencing something else," she says.

The only downsides - phone reception and internet speeds - are more than made up for, in Samantha's opinion.

"The food! I've never eaten so much good food," she says. "Honestly, moving here is the best thing I ever did."

WITH all this on offer, it might come as a surprise that Somerset's equestrian

property prices can be at the more affordable end. Greenslade

Taylor Hunt's Justin Lowe estimates that prices are around 5-10% cheaper than Dorset and Wiltshire.

"At the lower end, a three-bed house with stables and three acres will start at around £600,000,

while a farmhouse with five to 10 acres and outbuildings will be in the region of £900,000 to £1.2m," he says.

For the best value for money, he advises looking at east Somerset.

"The Blackdown Hills still offer good value for money, as the majority of buyers favour west Somerset," he explains.

"That said, buyers need to be patient. "Generally, people have made a lifestyle

decision to move to this part of the world and we have a lower turnover of property than in other areas," Justin adds.

And the competition is set to get even more fierce.

"More and more buyers are relocating to our part of the world owing to the beauty and enjoyment of the area, with the opportunity to secure an equestrian property in a more affordable environment," he says.

The secret is out. **H&H**

What's on the market?

IN THE QUANTOCK HILLS Pepperhill Lodge, Over Stowey



Located on a bridleway in the Quantocks, a Grade II listed mid-19th century converted stone barn, arranged around a central courtyard. There are five bedrooms.

Equestrian facilities include a Dutch barn plus larger barn with two stables, and grooms flat. Set in 24.16 acres.

£1,425m
GTH, 01823 277121

17TH-CENTURY FARMHOUSE Street Farm, Alveston



A six-bed home with original features, plus a cottage converted from the old bakehouse. There is an arena, four stables, three cow byres and a large tarmacked

yard. The 4.16-acre plot includes two generous paddocks, a walled garden and small apple orchard.

£1.5m
Hamptons, 01179 111455

CONVERTED MILL The Old Mill, Ilminster



A four-bed former mill, with original wheel and cog. Features flagstone flooring, exposed beams and exposed stone. River Isle frontage in a small hamlet. An ideal

smallholding, with three stables, a tack room, stores and paddocks, within 4.8 acres.

£875,000
Fox Grant, 01722 782727

TWO EXCEPTIONAL HOMES Oatfield Farm and The Olde Piggy



Oatfield Farm is a five-bed farmhouse steeped in history dating back to the Domesday Book, while The Olde Piggy is a two-/three-bed home. Set in 4.5 acres in

north Somerset. With three stables, two barns, a manage and easy access to bridleways.

£1.5m
Fine and Country, 01275 859000