

INTO THE TREES

From the ultimate arboreal abodes to the latest in tree hotels and design, we explore the blossoming trend of forest living and branching out

TANGARIRE TREETOPS IS THE KIND OF PLACE EVERY child dreams about. Located on the serene edge of Tanzania's Tangarire National Park, one of the largest in Africa, it feels like a make-believe world, with spacious, luxury huts crafted into the side of ancient baobab and marula trees. From a distance, it could easily be from JRR Tolkien's Middle-earth, Peter Pan's Neverland or from a fantastical *Star Wars* universe, but it's not a work of fiction: each thatched-roof bedroom is elevated some five metres above the ground on stilts, affording an unparalleled view of the African safari landscape. These woods have a magical quality and are ripe for exploration.

Up close, the Maasai-designed rooms are no simple affair, either. There are warm, earthy pieces of vintage furniture, deep sofas and tribal art, and each has a tree as its centrepiece. The gnarled branches snake out from above the beds and the décor is a mash-up of low-key safari chic (think hand-stitched linens and polished wooden floorboards) that is in perfect harmony with the surrounding environment. Birdsong is mixed with the trumpeting of elephants below, and as the herds can reach a whopping 300 in size, it pays to hang out in the tree canopy. They really are show-stoppers: with open-fronted eco-friendly designs and private balconies that look out over the treetops, tree-huggers will definitely be in their element. Sweet dreams are certainly made of this.

Growing up, we have a deep, instinctive desire to climb evergreens and firs, to swing from their bows and branches like miniature Tarzans. But the tree house is no longer just the province of the under-10s, as architects, designers and hoteliers are starting to cash-in on the trend for spruced-up dwellings and tree house living. Now, in an age of standard hotel conglomerates, identikit villas and boutique hotels, savvy travellers want something new, yet also something that is environmentally friendly and sustainable. There is a yearning to stay in a paradise, where we are at one with nature. Cue the luxury tree house. 📌

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WIDE ANGLE
Tree houses



In England, a landscape spoilt with some of the world's great tracts of forest, including the New Forest, the Forest of Dean and Sherwood Forest (home of Robin Hood and his evergreen Merry Men), it comes as no surprise to find that tree houses are a booming industry. Hampshire's Chewton Glen, located on the edge of the New Forest, is a case in point. An award-winning luxury hotel, part of the Relais & Châteaux portfolio, its management decided to develop six tree house suites within the grounds. The theory was to offer solitude and seclusion by sleeping in nature: and it has worked like a dream. The beautifully-designed suites appear to float across the woods, like gigantic lily pads balancing between the valley and the tree canopies. Where previously you would have had breakfast at the buffet, you can now share it with a menagerie of wildlife.

"Once upon a time, tree houses were only for children," explains VisitEngland spokesperson Rebecca Holloway. "Now, though, all that has changed." Working with hundreds of hoteliers across the country, VisitEngland has seen a sharp increase in the number of tree house-themed properties. "Tree houses are increasingly in vogue, their growing popularity due in part to our increased desire to get back to basics and try something unique on holiday," she adds. "Today, more and more accommodation providers are tapping into this trend and branching out, offering travellers a home from home amongst the canopy."

One such home away from home is Fair Oak Farm, run by Ian and Penny Ledger, in rural East Sussex. Buying the property eight years ago, they instantly fell in love with the idea of building a tree house. The surrounding woods offered shelter and protection for such a project, and it seemed like the perfect tonic for a holidaying couple needing a break from the pressures of London city life. "After buying Fair Oak Farm it was the first thing I designed," recalls Ledger. "But, due to planning permissions, we had to wait until everything else at the farm was refurbished." Set amidst an ancient tree line and mature forest, Fair Oak Farm now offers two lodges with complete privacy and uninterrupted valley views across the stunning Sussex countryside. The fact that they get booked up to 12 months in advance shows the overwhelming desire to sleep high among the trees.

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PREVIOUS PAGE:
The Treehotel's cabin location was based on the idea of creating a high platform on a sharp hillside overlooking the Lule River valley in Sweden.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Tangarire Treetops tree house in Tanzania is the kind of place every child dreams about; eco-friendly designs and private balconies at Tangarire Treetops; birdsong is mixed with the trumpeting of elephants below; the cosy interior of the Fair Oak Farm treehouse in rural East Sussex, UK; Fair Oak Farm tree house's spectacular location; the unique Spherical Tree house hotel.

Enlisting the help of a local company, Ledger took control of the project himself. "The circular construction for our two eco-lodge tree houses required ring beams on the platform and the eaves, enabling a balcony, integral wet room and kitchen, without wasting any space," he says of the design. "It took us two years to obtain planning permission, but only nine months to build. People love the unique ergonomic design, the privacy, and the fabulous views with all the mod cons they get in our other accommodation. Better still, they can stay knowing that the materials used are almost entirely renewable."

Another pioneer of tree-house living and design is Canadian inventor Tom Chudleigh. Last September he unveiled the world's first spherical tree house hotel, suspending guests some five metres in the air. Unlike Tangarire Treetops or Fair Oak Farm, guests at the three-room Free Spirit Spheres, located in the tall west-coast rainforest trees of Vancouver Island in British Columbia, sleep in wooden and fibreglass spheres that dangle from the branches like Christmas baubles.

"The Spherical Tree house concept borrows heavily from sailboat construction and rigging practice," explains Chudleigh. "It's a marriage of tree house and sailboat technology: wooden spheres are built much like a cedar-strip canoe or kayak. Conventional buildings separate walls, ceiling and floor with hard lines – in a sphere the walls and ceiling merge into one." Put simply, they are spectacular and need to be seen to be believed: especially as each one cost Chudleigh more than US\$150,000 to make. 📌



GUESTS AT THE THREE-ROOM FREE SPIRIT SPHERES, LOCATED IN THE TALL WEST-COAST RAINFOREST TREES OF VANCOUVER ISLAND IN BRITISH COLUMBIA, SLEEP IN WOODEN AND FIBREGLASS SPHERES THAT DANGLE FROM THE BRANCHES LIKE CHRISTMAS BAUBLES



TOGETHER WITH SOME OF SCANDINAVIA'S LEADING ARCHITECTS, THE TREEHOTEL HAS SINGLE-HANDEDLY REDEFINED THE TREE HOUSE AS AN ART FORM



NATURALLY, THE TREE HOUSE IS NOT A NEW IDEA: PEOPLE have been sleeping in trees for centuries, a way of living above inhospitable ground, in places where flooding is a potential threat, or to provide shade and shelter from humid, hot climates. The first recorded evidence of tree house design dates back to the first century AD during the Roman era, then Renaissance Italy saw a resurgence of their popularity, in part thanks to the trend set by the powerful Medici family, which incorporated them into their gardens near Fiesole and Pratolino.

Things really took off in England and France, and tree houses became popular additions to the formal gardens of the 17th century. Just outside Paris, in the suburb of Plessis-Robinson, large sweet chestnut trees, intertwined with rose vines, were used to create restaurants within the trees. At the height of their popularity, up to 200 diners were accommodated in the tree houses, with food and drink being winched up in baskets. More recently, Costa Rica pioneered the eco-holiday back in the mid-1980s and Brazil's Ariau Amazon Towers Hotel has been inviting guests to explore the jungle canopy from its rooms for years.

But why have tree houses become so fashionable in the past few years? Green architecture used to be on the fringes, but it has gone mainstream. Indeed, it has become something of an obsession for adventurous designers, with the most innovative tree houses of the last few years having been built in Sweden.

Together with some of Scandinavia's leading architects, the Treehotel has single-handedly redefined the tree house as an art form. Located in Harads, some 50 kilometres outside the city of Luleå in the country's far north, the Treehotel is made up of several innovative designs located within a forest of 100-year-old pines. The first and most basic are the treerooms: five uniquely designed rooms located up to six metres above the ground with spectacular views of the Lule River. A further 19 are due to be built in the next phase.

More spectacular is the Mirrorcube by Tham & Videgård architects, a hiding place among the trees, camouflaged by

mirrored walls and reflective glass. If that wasn't high-tech enough, to avoid birds flying into the mirrored walls, they have been clad with infrared film, designed in a colour that's invisible to humans but highly visible to birds. Also spectacular is the Treehotel's Bird Nest, designed by Bertil Harström of the architecture firm Inredningsgruppen. Like a concept from a modern art museum, the exterior of the Bird's Nest is made almost entirely from a network of branches, with guests entering via a retractable staircase.

The Treehotel's latest project, The Dragonfly, opened in November, and is perhaps the most astonishing tree house ever built. Designed by Rintala Eggertsson Architects, and weighing some 20 tonnes, it is almost three times the weight of the Treehotel's second-heaviest room – The Cabin – and is now the world's largest tree house. It has six beds divided between two bedrooms and is attached to eight pine trees around six metres above the ground.

"We are going where no one else has gone before," says Treehotel CEO and co-founder Britta Jonsson Lindvall. "We always strive to push limits with our environmental work, architecture and engineering," adds co-founder Kent Lindvall. "The Dragonfly is clear evidence of this, as nothing remotely similar has ever been done before."

The fashion for using locally sourced materials, along with technological advances means that more complex structures like these are possible, with the only barrier in the construction of these unusual structures being imagination. Should you want to live out a fantasy and build your own tree house, there are a couple of key considerations. Depending on the country, new-build tree houses require planning permission, which can take years to be rubber-stamped by the authorities, and it's important to consider the impact the building will have on the host tree's health. The only other thing is your prospective new neighbours: it's probably not a good idea to invite them around for tea. They may decide to nest in your bedroom. 🐦

WORDS DAVID PARRY



WIDE ANGLE
Tree houses

THREE TREE HOUSE HOTELS TO TRY

SOUTH AFRICA: KRUGER NATIONAL PARK

It's not difficult to be tempted to sleep out under the stars when on safari: the chatter of hyenas, the late-night chuckle of hippos and the harmony of insect noises is enough to make any night within the Lion Sands Game Reserve an unforgettable experience. But to really enjoy the park's splendour, book a stay at the Chalkley Treehouse, where guests are taken to the ultimate bush bedroom – an open-air platform high above the centuries-old Leadwood Trees with a four-poster bed and all the mod-cons.

WWW.LIONSANDS.COM/TREEHOUSE

SRI LANKA: KURULUBEDDA, GALLE

With two rooms built into the treetops above a paddy field, Jetwing Hotels' first and only tree house hotel is an effortlessly romantic hideaway that's perfect for couples on honeymoon. The outdoor decking lets you have breakfast in the company of tree squirrels and monkeys, while the downstairs private plunge pool is a welcome respite from the tropical heat.

WWW.JETWINGHOTELS.COM/JETWINGKURULUBEDDA

FRANCE: CHÂTEAUX DANS LES ARBRES, DORDOGNE

Trust the French to go one better and create a castle in the trees. While it's no Versailles Palace, the exquisite tree houses are the height of luxury and are perfect for living out your very own fairy tale. Some come with extravagant sky-high Jacuzzis, while others feature antiques and turrets – the perfect vantage point to check out the idyllic countryside views.

WWW.CHATEAUX-DANS-LES-ARBRES.COM

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: The Mirrorcube is camouflaged by mirrored walls that reflect their surroundings; the interior of the Mirrorcube is made from plywood with a birch surface; the Bird Nest's exterior is nothing but a gigantic tangle of branches; The Dragonfly's panoramic windows give a magnificent view of the valley; The Dragonfly's subtle interior; the Bird Nest's walls are clad with wood panels and the windows almost disappear in the exterior's network of branches.

IMAGES: ELEWANCOLLECTION.COM, FAIR OAK FARM BY IAN LEDGER, FREDRIK BROMAN, HUMAN SPECTRA AND WWW.FREESPIRITSHERES.COM / ERYN & EVE / PHOTO BY PAT RYAN, PETER LUNDBSTROM, WDO – WWW.TREEHOTEL.SE