Handle with Care

Meeting the makers of **North Norfolk** on a road trip fuelled by cinnamon buns and craft beer

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Issy and I have stopped by at a friend's house for a much-needed cup of tea. She lives in the coastal town of Wells-next-the-Sea, where perfumed pine forests open out onto a sprawling, sandy beach lined with pastel huts. Something hot and fortifying is welcome after an uncharacteristically early morning walk along the sand, and we settle back on the creaky kitchen chairs to tell her all about our last two days exploring the North Norfolk coast. She grew up in the area, and raised her family here in Wells. Yet after we tell her about our visits to a microbrewery in an old priory, to a bakery that's run out of a renovated family home and the kitchen of a London chef-turned-fishmonger, she frowns. "It's funny," she says. "I'd just never know any of this was going on."

That's the thing about North Norfolk. Beneath its flat, open-book landscape, giant skies, heathery marshes and sea-skimming villages, ingenuity is quietly at play. People build, cook and create here, informed by the area's dramatic landscapes and ample natural resources. Which makes it the perfect place to dig beneath the surface and explore – so long as you know who to ask. ►►





SIDING

DAY ONE

We leave London on Thursday morning, feeling our shoulders soften as we puncture the Norfolk border. We hadn't really noticed the change of season in the city, but here autumn has turned every leaf amber and filled the trees with crab apples. We check into the Pig Shed Motel, an eco-friendly bolthole not far from the coast in King's Lynn. This wood-clad row of simple, cosy rooms has underfloor heating and big, fluffy beds, and down a gravel path there's a toasty pub that begs you to sip local beer beside its crackling fireplace.

After resisting the lure of a midday nap, we bundle ourselves into the car and head to Stiffkey. Here, the pristine salt marshes twist towards the horizon, awaiting their daily flooding by the tide. We stand alone on a raised path, inhaling the salty sea air with nothing but a couple of elderly birdwatchers interrupting the empty landscape. We walk aimlessly (the best kind, we agree) along the muddy, samphire-filled paths of nearby Morston Quay. Breaking away from the path to take a look at the flaky boats lying belly-up along the banks, I squelch calf-deep into the soaking marshes and squawk louder than the redshanks circling overhead.

Jeans and boots fully caked, we head back to the car and drive to Blakeney. Filled with flint cottages, glowing pubs and a bustling harbour, this little village is also home to some of the best oysters in the country. We slurp a few from a seafood van parked on the water's edge. They're ice-cold and mineral rich, scooped fresh from the North Sea this morning. The couple behind us excitedly place their order as we eat: fish-finger sandwiches, hot cups of Bovril and a couple of rollmops ("pickled herring fillets wrapped around a gherkin," they explain).

Siding is an artisan bakery housed in a former railway station in Melton Constable, not far from the Swanton Novers Nature Reserve. This bright, soaring space is all concrete floors, whitewashed brick walls and metal rafters. After living "all over the place" for a few years,



BLAKENEY





WELLS-NEXT-THE-SEA





including a stint at a bakery just outside of Toulouse, owner Polly Quick returned to Norfolk to open Siding early this year. Her partner Harry makes fresh pasta and soups from local, organic veg in the open kitchen, while Polly rises at 4am each morning to bake sourdough and crumbly pastries using “100-per-cent traceable” Norfolk wheat. We bed down at one of the tables for a bubbly cheese toastie and flat whites served in weighty earthenware mugs, while the shelves slowly empty behind the counter. Always on the hunt to fill our kitchens with more ceramics than necessary, we demand that Polly immediately tell us where she found them.

After several hasty phone calls, we soon find ourselves pulling into the gravelly front of Kat Wheeler’s home. This Cornwall-born ceramicist works out of a small studio in her garden. Every inch of it is filled with clay and air-drying pots, with a paint-splattered radio on the shelf and a wheel beneath the window where she works. “A whole day can just disappear in here,” she tells us, as I settle into a chair and scoop up her russet-coloured dachshund, who remains snuggled into me until we leave.

Kat’s pieces are sturdy and earthy, thrown in small batches and inspired by the coast. “I think a lot of artists around here get their inspiration from the beaches and woodland. I definitely do,” she says. “It’s my good place. If I can bring those landscapes into my work, that’s a lovely starting point.” She sits to begin work on a new pot, deftly spinning the wet clay on the wheel as sun streams through the window. After making ourselves at home in the studio for far too long, we finally wave goodbye to Kat and her dogs, a brown paper bag stacked with pebble-coloured bowls and mugs under our arms. ►►



DURATION BREWING

DAY TWO

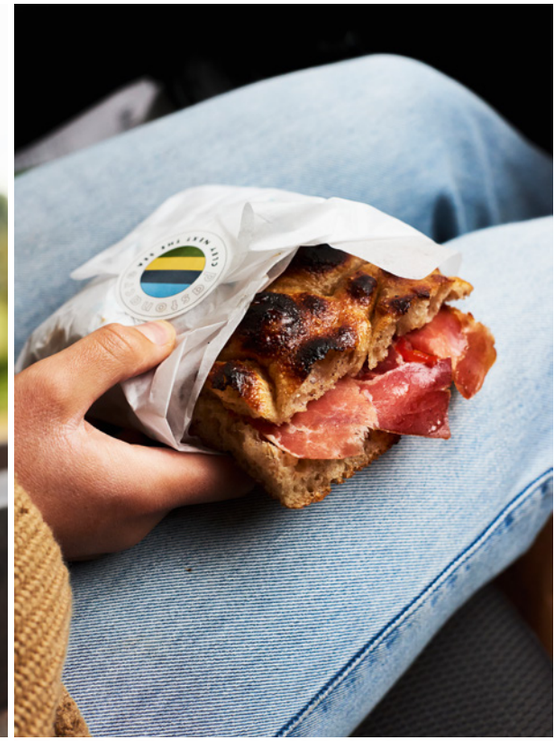
We wake up to the sound of footsteps on the gravel outside and open the curtains to a shockingly blue sky. We'd been expecting rain today and the appearance of the sun lifted us out of the warmth of our beds with a sudden burst of energy. We both agree that the only way to fuel the day ahead is with fresh pastry.

Over in Cley-next-the-Sea, Pastonacre is a small bakery run out of the renovated family home of Ed and Harriet Clark. Formerly an art dealer in London, Ed is the self-taught baker, while Harriet is front of house, serving flaky croissants, sourdough loaves and bursting sandwiches to the long queues that form each morning along their driveway. We visit just before opening time on Friday morning, when trays of sticky cinnamon buns and sugary doughnuts are just filling the shelves. We inhale our Spanish jamon, juicy tomato and salty focaccia sandwiches in a matter of seconds, and agree it's probably the most delicious thing we've eaten all month.

Following Harriet's directions, we make our way around the corner to the beach, just as the skies turn to lead and the rain starts hammering down. Most know better than to be outside in these conditions, but we zip up our raincoats and push on along the shingle anyway. We watch the huge waves push their froth onto the shore, while flocks of seagulls flap against the wind. Behind us, the village, marshes and 19th-century windmill are blanketed in mist. It's the kind of weather you'd hide away from in the city, but here it feels worth braving the outdoors – waterlogged boots and all.

Norwich once laid claim to having as many watering holes as days of the year, and while that's no longer the case, it's no surprise that plenty of brewers have flocked to Norfolk to make use of its endless miles of crops. Duration Brewing is the brainchild of Miranda Hudson and her husband, head brewer Derek Bates, who moved to the UK from South Carolina and brought with him 20 years of brewing skills. Its gleaming tanks and bottling machine stands in a renovated medieval barn spread across the ruins of a 11th-century priory. It has just opened a tasting room next door, where we sit and sip Duration's award-winning brews with names such as Turtles All the Way Down, Little Fanfare and Quiet Song. "We're in our first year, so we're trying to show a breadth of style right now," Miranda tells us, pouring the golden liquid into tasting glasses. "Norfolk is pretty traditional when it comes to beer. We're a lot more progressive, I'd say." Later that day, we bump into Miranda, Bates, their daughter and labrador puppy in the pub and join them for a drink. A pint of Duration American Pale, naturally. ►►









HARRIET AND ED CLARK





DAY THREE

The next day, after a slow start punctuated by yet more pastries, we make our way to Gurneys in nearby Thornham, and stop by Abbey Farm Dairy on the way. This working farm is in the flint-walled village of Binham, and is home to a herd of pedigree Friesian cows. A small shop beside the field sells creamy milk in traditional glass bottles, dispensed through a vending machine. We buy locally churned ice cream and yoghurt, leaving our money on the table – a moment of trust that seems a million miles from the city we left behind.

Surrounded by fruit and vegetable shops, orchards and gelato makers, this celebrated fish shop is run by Mungo Gurney and his father Mike, who set it up around 40 years ago, moving from a hole-in-the-wall shop to a fishmongers in Burnham Market. Mungo was once a chef at Hackney's much-lauded Rawduck, and now serves fresh lobster, oysters, mussels and smoked fish from a kitchen not far from Brancaster Beach. He ushers us behind the counter and into the kitchen, where he lays down fillets of pearly haddock onto a rack over a ceramic bath "the old-fashioned way". He'll be opening up a crab shack on this very site next year, serving up just-caught sushi-grade fish and local beer.

"The best way to eat in Norfolk is by tasting what local producers have to offer," Mungo tells us, stepping outside while a queue steadily forms by the door. "There's so much beautiful stuff here, we just need to make sure people discover it." And it's true. Whether it's a sign of the times or something that simply marks North Norfolk out from the rest of the country, this is a place to be explored through its makers. Be it beer made from green-gold local hops, art inspired by the wild coastline or fish plucked straight from the waters, Norfolk is a place to slow down and let the land do the talking.