



The remains of Trentham Hall. Pictures: Julie Hosking

Serenity and magical charm

JULIE HOSKING falls under the spell of the wonderland of natural attractions at Trentham Estate in Staffordshire

The tiny princess is holding her ground. “You can’t come up here,” she shouts, as soon as she spies the approaching invaders. Her advisers try gentle persuasion but she’s having none of their diplomacy. “No, this is MY castle,” she declares.

But everyone has their tipping point. When our guide suggests there might be something special at the entrance, the moppet bolts, grandparents following in her wake, castle abandoned for a few stickers.

Mind you, as we climb the wooden steps of the viewing platform to get a better picture of Trentham Estate, there’s no doubt she was on to something. I wouldn’t mind lording over this lot. The hall behind us might have seen better days, but the gardens are majestic — formal Italian terraces lead out to the lake, an imposing statue of Perseus holding Medusa’s head stands guard at the water’s edge. Fanning off in all directions, as far as the eye can see, is a wonderland of natural attractions. Lose yourself

in meadows, wander through wildflowers, stop and smell the roses, or simply lie under a magnificent yew tree and let your worries fly away with the heron flitting across the lake.

For a little bit extra, the adventurous can try their hand on the high-rope challenge Aerial Extreme or wander through the Monkey Forest with 140 Barbary macaques. But I’ve been reliably informed there are fairies at the bottom of the garden — all around them actually — so I’m ditching the Italianate formality for a little bit of magic.

The 120ha Trentham Estate is an oasis of calm in an area better known for the industry that has left its black mark across red-brick buildings, an industry that might have earned the region its place as World Capital of Ceramics but one that almost claimed this patch of paradise for ever.

The first record of Trentham is in the Domesday Book of 1086, where it is described as a royal manor. A sheep farm and royal deer park among other things, the



The Estate’s gardens are a haven for tourists and locals alike.

estate changed hands regularly until the mid-16th century when it was bought by a wool merchant. James Leveson and his successors would constantly modify the mansion but it was the gardens that would receive the most attention — and be their biggest legacy.

Lose yourself in meadows, wander through wildflowers ... smell the roses.



UNIWORLD
BOUTIQUE RIVER CRUISE COLLECTION

YOU DESERVE THE BEST.
Let us treat you to an upgrade.

You deserve the best onboard and in the air and wherever you travel. Book by 15 April 2017 and we’ll treat you to a stateroom upgrade on select 2017 voyages*.

FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT
CATHIE RICE TRAVEL ON 1800 177 788



AVAILABLE ON SELECT 2017
ITINERARIES IN EUROPE*

Complimentary
stateroom upgrade

— + —

Fly from \$499pp[^] Economy

— or —

Fly from \$4,599pp[^] Business Class

*CONDITIONS APPLY. Based on double occupancy. One category upgrade on select 2017 sailings (excluding suites) in Europe, Vietnam & India. The promotion is capacity controlled, offer may not be combined with any other offer, except for past guest savings. Availability of all categories of accommodation cannot be guaranteed. [^] Airfares are priced per person and represent adult fares including any applicable taxes and surcharges. Air offers are valid for new bookings only created from 1 Mar - 15 Apr 2017, for travel on selected 2017 Europe until sold out. A non-refundable deposit of \$1,500 per person, per trip is due within 7 days of booking. Full payment for the airfare is due by 15 Apr 2017. Offers may be withdrawn or amended at any time. Further conditions will apply. Please contact Cathie Rice Travel for more information. UW 144402341



Fairy sculpture by artist Robin Wight.



The Italian gardens foreground the lake at Trentham Estate.



A placid lakeside scene.



Pretty wildflowers in bloom.



Hunting down the garden's fairies.

In 1759, the family commissioned the now legendary landscape designer Lancelot "Capability" Brown, so nicknamed because he was always telling his clients their gardens had "great capabilities". They obviously also had great bank accounts — he spent 21 years remodelling the grounds, expanding the lake and parkland. The Italian Gardens, though, came much later, the work of architect Charles Heathcote Tatham and gardener George Fleming.

By the mid-19th century, Trentham Estate was one of the country's most celebrated gardens but the ever-increasing tempo of the Potteries was casting a pall over the area, the pollution belching from the kilns choking waterways and killing flora and fauna.

One journalist described the River Trent, which fed into the lake, as a "foul, slimy sewer, brimful of the impurities of every dirty town that hugs its banks".

Things were so bad that when the owners abandoned the house in 1905, the council didn't even want to take it off their hands.

It's hard to believe as I wander through the wildflowers, watching butterflies at work, that this stunning sanctuary was not so long ago drowning in the stench of sewage. While most of the buildings fell into disrepair, the grounds were still used for

anything and everything, from military training in World War II to entertainment venue. The Beatles even played there in 1963.

Redevelopment began in earnest in the late 1990s, with new owners declaring their intention to spend £100 million to create "a premier tourist and leisure destination of national significance, providing an incomparable facility for the residents of North Staffordshire".

It's a cool but clear day and while far from crowded, it's obvious to the casual observer that this is as much a haven for locals as tourists. If I lived in the area, I'd definitely pay \$100 for an annual ticket to make the most of this gem.

There are families picnicking under trees, people walking their dogs (they're very welcome), kids running up to the maze to get lost (hopefully only temporarily), groups scoffing scones and sandwiches in the tearooms, old couples sitting on park benches having a natter, joggers pounding the 3.2km track around the lake, and the odd Australian journalist looking for fairies.

And sure enough, there they are. Nestled amid plants, hiding in trees and hanging off trellis. The work of local artist Robin Wight, the fairies are handcrafted with galvanised and stainless steel wire.

As luck would have it, their creator — who became an overnight sensation when a visitor

posted one of his fairies on social media — just happens to be under the Giant Dandelions today. His daughter Amy made the 5m-tall beauties that tower over the wildflower meadow, their seed-heads spreading out over a metre each. Robin is here to remove Anahi, a fairy who flew among the dandelions, but fear not, sprite lovers, there will be more to take her place. This is a magical garden.

Trentham Estate gardens, at Stoke-on-Trent.

Julie Hosking was a guest of VisitBritain and Qatar Airways.

fact file

Trentham Estate is in Trentham, Stoke-on-Trent, Staffordshire, about 75km north of Birmingham. Open every day apart from Christmas Day, hours vary according to the seasons. A family ticket costs \$58, see trentham.co.uk.

Trentham Village, just outside the garden gates, offers a great array of shopping, including the celebrated local ceramics, and places to eat. David's Brasserie is highly recommended.

Stay at Stoke-on-Trent Hanley Moathouse, next door to Etruria Hall, the home of potter and philanthropist Josiah Wedgwood, see bw-stokeontrentmoathouse.co.uk.

Qatar Airways flies to Birmingham via Doha, see qatarairways.com.au.

For more on the area, see visitbritain.com.

ASK MR AFRICA
WE SPECIALISE IN EVERYTHING THAT IS AFRICA

- Flights • Accommodation
- Car Hire • Safaris • Overland Adventure Holidays • Trekking
- Luxury Tailor Made Holidays
- Specialised Tour Planning
- Rail • Game Parks

Everything from Budget to Luxury

AFRICA TRAVEL CO.
Crossways Shopping Centre, Cnr Rokeby Rd & Bagot Rd, Subiaco
Tel: **9381 5797**
www.amazingafricantours.com
travel@africantours.com.au