



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 Brean 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 fittering."

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.