



## ARTS MUSIC

## Winging it

Duetting with nightingales is all in an evening's work for this folk music visionary, writes **Jane Cornwell**.



It's a quarter to midnight in a field in Sussex and around 30 of us are being serenaded from deep inside a patch of blossoming hawthorn. The invisible bird's song is astoundingly complex, and all the more dramatic for the verdant setting.

After several minutes, the silvery torrent stops and another voice fills the silence – the rich baritone of folk singer Sam Lee. "One morning in May I spied a young couple; they were making their way ..." he sings, reprising a traditional tune from 1905 called *The Nightingale*.

Our bird joins in, duetting with Lee before taking up with a chorus of other nightingales perched elsewhere in the woods.

The encounter is otherworldly. Most birds don't sing after dark but, over seven weeks in April and May, some 5000 nightingales migrate to southeast England after wintering in sub-Saharan Africa.

Intent on attracting a mate, the males find their spot, throw back their tiny brown heads and release a tumble of nocturnal song.

"I'm there as a sort of agent, bringing people into the nightingales' thickets to pay their respects," says Lee, a folk singer, author, conservationist and song collector (*Ground of Its Own*, his 2012 debut album made after years of collecting forgotten songs from the British Isles, was nominated for a Mercury Award). He has hosted *Singing with Nightingales* for the past 12 years.



Left: Sam Lee in the woods at Broughton Hall in Yorkshire. Above: Guests head into the woods during a 2025 performance of *Singing with Nightingales*.

PHOTOS: INDIA HOBSON, ALAMY



## Need to know

**About** *Singing with Nightingales* runs April 9 to May 24, 2026.

**Tickets** £130 (\$254) each, first release.

**Getting there** The exact location and directions will be sent to ticketholders before the event, but it's held at a secret Sussex location near Barcombe, Lewes.

"It's a reminder that we are part of nature and that nature is part of us," he tells *Life & Leisure*, sitting on the sun-lit doorstep of his home, a converted vicarage with a patch of wild garden in Dalston, east London. "We want to inspire love, care, action and a sense of community. People go away changed."

Critical praise has been fulsome. "A live music experience unlike any other," reported the London newspaper *The Standard*. "This will bring magic into your life," declared BBC Radio 3.

Each performance is strictly limited to an audience of 35, and *Singing With Nightingales* is now so popular, most nights in the season sell out well in advance. Everyone from aristocrats and actors to MPs and hedge fund managers vies for a ticket to sit around a campfire and share in food, drink, stories and music from Lee before making a pilgrimage into the woods. Each night, he's joined by different special guest musicians. This year's line-up includes singer Charlotte Church, saxophonist Soweto Kinch and instrumentalist Stornaway.

The event origins were accidental, says

Lee. "I was watching a documentary about British cellist Beatrice Harrison, who in 1924 pioneered the BBC's live outdoor broadcasts by duetting with a nightingale in her garden, captivating millions of listeners. When I realised that a collaboration between nightingales and humans was possible, I tried it. It felt like a profound, sacred thing."

He smiles. "What began with a few little gatherings has grown into 1600 people coming through the woods each spring. We now have a fitted kitchen for catering, and a woodland camp with glamping. We get big-name musicians offering to play for a lot less than they'd usually command, which is amazing, also because they then use their mainstream platforms to speak about what's going on."

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*Singing with Nightingales* is more than just a heart-opening excursion into nature's concert hall. With the nightingale – beloved muse of poetry and myth – on the UK's Red List of Threatened Species, it is also a reminder that extinction is a part of the broader ecological crisis facing the world.

"These iconic birds will be gone in England within 30 years," says Lee, whose 2021 book, *The Nightingale*, compares their disappearance with the passing of the traditional folk singers whose tunes Lee has collected during repeat visits to Ireland and Scotland's beleaguered Traveller communities. There, he recorded the last people, many of them octogenarians, to know the words and music to songs passed down orally, generation to generation.

"Both [birds and traditional folk singers] face the same issues of assimilation, functionality and loss of habitat," he says. "Folk music isn't dead but the old singers, the ones who learnt from their ancestors, are gone now. And

after I've sung with a nightingale in the woods, I know the chance of it being here the next year is unlikely."

Lee's fascination with nature and music began early. One of three children born to a graphic designer and an educationalist, he was sent on school holiday trips with Forest School Camps (an organic, uniform-free version of the Scouts), honing his wilderness survival skills with TV bushman Ray Mears before falling, hard, for folk music. His first mentor was Pete Kennedy, who collected songs alongside David Attenborough in the 1950s.

After Lee's 2012 album, *Ground of Its Own*, was nominated for the UK's Mercury Music Prize, he became the face of the British folk revival, at the vanguard of a movement committed to taking folk forward by reworking centuries-old tunes with contemporary lyrics and moody instrumental arrangements. (His 2024 album, *Songdreaming*, produced by Bernard Butler, former guitarist for Britpop legends Suede, is a case in point.)

"All the songs I sing have to do with relationships to the land," Lee says. "They're expressions of a time when we as people were as in tune with the environment as any owl, fox or badger."

Or indeed, nightingale. Whenever he can, Lee likes to sing outdoors, including for environmental campaigns such as Music Declares Emergency (where he campaigns alongside the likes of Radiohead and Billie Eilish for a carbon-zero music industry) and, in springtime, in the bluebell woods of Sussex.

He's mindful of keeping the spotlight on the real star, the nightingale, while encouraging those present to "rewild" themselves and cherish the natural world. "For one night, people come together to sit around a fire and appreciate what we have now, finding magic in the surroundings, the music, the nightingale's song."

Still, is the bird really singing with him? Another smile. "It feels like a conversation, yes. I just think this idea that we are separate is something we should leave behind. There's a bit of nightingale in all of us." **L&L**

## TRAVEL LONDON

## Uncommon sense

The first London outpost of this revered hotel brand meets the mark, writes **Maria Shollenbarger**.

**After eight years' development** and an estimated £1.5 billion (\$2.9 billion) spend, Six Senses has finally opened its debut London property at The Whiteley, a venerated Edwardian landmark in Bayswater. The hotel, members' club and wellness complex is a bold entrance for the Bangkok-based hospitality brand, which is still making inroads into Europe, and an even bolder choice location-wise in a city where the true luxury hotels are almost without exception concentrated in Mayfair and Knightsbridge.

## Setting

Six Senses has made enormous efforts to own the intersection of sustainability and luxury. Here in London, the design, finishes, service and food and beverage ambitions all reflect a resolutely five-star approach, but the whole is leavened by the brand's youthful positioning, its emphasis on circularity and its pronounced wellness slant.

There were naysayers who questioned the Bayswater address – specifically the Queensway co-ordinates. Effectively the neighbourhood's high street, Queensway has always been known for its slightly down-at-heel mix of shops and takeaways. But last year English restaurant impresario

Jeremy King (of The Wolseley fame) opened a buzzy new venue, The Park, at Queensway's southern end. With Six Senses now anchoring its northern one, things are looking up – and upscaling all along the road.

Notting Hill's wildly popular cafe- and boutique-lined Westbourne Grove is a 10-minute walk to the west; Hyde Park, just five minutes to the south.

## Check-in

The arrival is all Edwardian splendour: the soaring porte cochère has been fitted with The Whiteley's original doors, most restored. On the ground floor, it's all about the building's monumental iron-and-brass staircase, which spirals up from ground level to the first-floor premises of Six Senses Place, the members' club. Restored offsite in Devon by master metalworkers before being reassembled on site precisely as it was, its authoritative curves are offset by a monochrome marble floor and softened by a preponderance of greenery. Potted plants, hanging plants, displays of ferns and moss line the stairs. The vast space is divided into various sitting and working areas. A counter with kombucha on tap dominates the wall across from the check-in desks.

Six Senses entrusted the design of the



whole hotel to New York-based AvroKO.

The palette in the public spaces is deep greens, grassy yellows and pale jewel tones, with profusions of rattan. In the 109 rooms and suites, moss greens and soothing grey-blue dominate, with hits of burnt orange. The styling throughout is convincingly residential, with hand-woven rugs on plank floors, lots of Crittal windows, and pretty tile splashbacks and chunky matte-brass hardware in the bathrooms. About two dozen rooms have terraces, which in London feels almost outrageously indulgent.

Propos London, though, there's not a great deal here that locates you in the city. Indeed, there's a mild but pervasive sense you could as easily be in New York or Sydney. (Chalk that up in part to Six Senses' ambition to be something of



## Need to know

**Rates** From \$1508 a night in a 30 sqm Superior room, without breakfast.

**Final touches** The indoor pool and thermal suite are not yet open.

Above: The facade of The Whiteley, now the entrance to Six Senses London.

a world unto itself. "Come for the energy, stay for the stillness," is its opening gambit. But the many comforts and wholly tasteful execution is incontestable – down to the interior drawers that hold the glassware in my suite's minibar and the charming brass doorhandles shaped like tiny Victorian hands.

## Food and drink

'Eat with six senses' is another brand mantra, and at both the bar and the hotel's ground-floor restaurant, Whitley's Kitchen, there's not an ingredient that comes from more than about 100 kilometres away. The menu is best-of-British as prepared by a talented Italian (Eliano Crespi, a member of the Royal Academy of Culinary Arts) who also knows his trans fats, glycaemic indices and botanical diuretics. And his

fermenting: every meal comes with the option of an amuse bouche of fermented vegetables. Don't expect your mother's pickles: here, daikon is dressed in a silky tahini-like sauce, or else cubed and tossed with a smoky, spicy vinaigrette. A small cup of similarly delicious vegetable broth accompanies them. The sourdough is heritage; the carrots are too (served as a vegan entrée, with a coconut sauce).

Every member of the waitstaff can parse the nutritional profile of the dishes they serve, and you can read the footnotes on sustainable sourcing at the bottom of the menu. Which isn't to say you will leave feeling deprived – there's a very moreish beef feather blade at dinner, and the hispi cabbage with a burnt-leek dressing is as rich and satisfying as a pudding.

## Wellness

This, as they say, is what you come for. The 2300 square metres of integrated wellness at Six Senses are probably unmatched by any London hotel. Body and facial therapies are only a fraction of what's on offer, which runs the gamut from state-of-the-art longevity tech to healing traditions that date back centuries. There are magnesium and cold-plunge pools; a cryotherapy chamber and a flotation room (essentially a zero-gravity pod in which you semi-submerge, with surround sound and light baths); Finnish, bio and infrared saunas; and a steam room. In the Biohack Recovery Lounge are various impressive pieces of kit: a Vasper (a stationary bicycle that purports to achieve, in 21 minutes, the same effect as a two-hour workout), an inversion table, a lymphatic suit (excellent for water retention) and more.

As at the Six Senses hotels in Ibiza and Rome, guests are encouraged to undergo

an Integrated Wellness Assessment, which analyses 40 biomarkers in about 20 minutes. You can use what you find out to tweak your gym routine (the gym is a full 325 square metres) or tailor your minibar (which is already stocked with adaptogenic coffees, healthy snacks and, oh, more kombucha).

But I was most impressed by Charlotte Pulver and her team of certified herbal doctors at The Alchemy Bar, a real apothecary of the old school. I was (charmingly) interrogated for 45 minutes on my health, habits and history, had my pulse taken and my eyes and tongue fairly extensively examined. That afternoon I collected a bespoke powder blend of seven mushrooms (for calm and focus), as well as a tincture to stimulate my liver, pancreas and kidneys and alleviate water retention. A week on, I'm slightly flabbergasted by how well both are working.

## Clientele

What you'd expect from a next-generation luxury property with self-reverential wellness rhetoric permeating the experience: a lot of Alo- and cashmere-wearing 30- and 40-somethings from the US, Europe and Asia talking about Series A rounds and Strava, most of them absorbed in at least one device over breakfast. Not a tie and barely a jacket in the whole place during my stay.

## Verdict, 7/10 (spa: 10/10)

A lovely restoration of a great building, with exceptional service. But if you prefer to leave the wellness-speak in the spa, the built-in Six Senses ubiquity of it might grate. And if a prerequisite of your London visit is getting real London feels from your hotel – stay at Claridge's instead. **L&L**

The writer stayed as a guest of Six Senses.