

A little Shangri-La in Norfolk

Brian Claridge and his family check out the new Forest Holidays site



FROM THE moment you enter Thorpe Forest, the peaceful atmosphere of the pine forest with its scenic landscape of heathland and wild flowers is a welcome retreat from the hustle and bustle of everyday life.

I travelled with my wife and two sons (aged 19 and 26) for a weekend break at one of Forest Holidays' latest sites, on the Norfolk and Suffolk borders on the banks of the River Thet. Taking just six months to build at a cost of £10.6m, this latest development has all the attractions for which Forest Holidays is renowned.

Each of its nine UK sites is located in beautiful Forestry Commission woodland, with accommodation to suit all tastes and requirements. There's lots of leafy woodland to explore with trails for walkers and cyclists and, when you're in need of refreshment, you can drop in at the Forest Retreat, the hub of all activities, with a café and bar serving hot and cold food and drinks.

You can also pick up groceries in the Forest Retreat which sells fresh milk, local food produce, beers and ciders. There's also a bakery producing freshly baked bread and pizzas which you can order in the Forest Retreat, or from the TV in your room, with a personal delivery service. We've used this facility on previous Forest Holidays and the pizza is always delivered piping hot and at the time you request it.

On arrival at Thorpe Forest, we checked in at the Forest Retreat and collected our room key. The reception staff were helpful and gave us all the information we needed about the site, as well as the local area.

General manager Laura Grant told me they had 63 cabins at Thorpe Forest (Golden Oak, Silver Birch and Copper Beech) as well as three Treehouses and four Hideaways. They had full occupancy when we were there, which, considering it only opened in May, proved how popular it was. Dog lovers are catered for with pet-friendly

© DENISE CLARIDGE



cabins; for £10 extra per night you can include your dog and make the most of the miles of woodland walks.

The Treehouse is popular with families. It's referred to in the brochure as the 'ultimate forest experience' and is connected by a wooden bridge to a Golden Oak cabin (which sleeps up to eight), while the Treehouse sleeps two, with en suite facilities. The Hideaway is a cosy haven and designed for newlyweds and couples celebrating a wedding anniversary, birthday or special occasion, where extras include a huge sunken bath.

All cabins are eco-friendly, with low-cost heating systems and gutters that allow water to flow back into the forest, with a recycling scheme at each site.

Each Forest Holiday site is set in an eco-friendly environment and the company goes to great lengths to continually improve their eco-friendliness and reduce their carbon footprint. The company is part owned by the Forestry Commission and shares a responsibility for sustaining and conserving the forests.

All its sites are independently monitored on aspects such as recycling, energy usage and biodiversity and have



© DENISE CLARIDGE

all attained Silver or Gold awards. Operations manager Andy Dack is responsible for the smooth running of Thorpe Forest, including bike hire. At £28 per bike for the weekend (including helmet and padlock) it's excellent value and saves bringing your own. Shortly after unpacking, we went to collect the bikes we had pre-booked, then cycled off to explore our new surroundings. All the bikes are designed for forest terrain and are excellently maintained.

Our accommodation was a stylish two-bed Golden Oak cabin which was more than adequate for our needs. It included a spacious open-plan living room with panoramic floor-to ceiling windows, large sofa, modern wood-burning stove and a flat-screen TV (with optional entertainment package including films and games). The fully fitted kitchen is equipped with cooker, microwave, dishwasher and fridge/freezer, as well as cutlery, glasses, cups, plates and bowls.

We had two bedrooms (one master double and one twin), each with its own bathroom. The kitchen opens on to a large veranda which is equipped with outdoor table and chairs for al fresco dining and a barbeque area. The pièce de résistance was a luxury outdoor hot tub that our sons wasted no time in getting into shortly after we arrived. Later, when they had gone for a bike ride, Denise and I relaxed in the swirling bubbles and enjoyed the peace and beauty of the forest from our private retreat.

Over the weekend, our sons cooked a barbecue, having bought a disposable one from the Forest Retreat, along with



“What’s nice about Forest Holidays is that you can chill out and do as little as you want, or be adventurous and do anything from archery, canoeing and tree trekking, to mountain biking and zip wire”



sausages, burgers and chicken. The tantalising smell of food being cooked made us all hungry and we were soon being summoned by our sons to the table while they proudly served up the food. Now I don't wish to criticise our sons' cooking but the sausages and chicken on my plate were, let's just say, on the burnt side, but we were too hungry to complain and it was all gone before you knew it.

Each location has its own Forest Ranger, who plans a programme of activities that guests can take part in if they wish. Activities vary, depending on which site you stay at, and include everything from Forest Survival – where you can learn how to survive in the wild by foraging for food, building a camp and lighting a fire – to Twilight Walk and Night Vision where you can spy on nocturnal creatures such as bats and owls.

We joined Forest Ranger Charlie Holder and a small group of guests on a Twilight Walk, as we went in search of nocturnal creatures. Charlie told us that within Thorpe Forest there are five types

of deer, as well as squirrels, hares, rabbits, badgers, tawny and barn owls. “We never know what we're going to see on any given day,” he said.

The activities are designed for all ages, and prices include the use of special equipment like bat detectors and night-vision goggles... well recommended, if you fancy something a little different.

What's nice about Forest Holidays is that you can chill out and do as little as you want, or be adventurous and do anything from archery, canoeing and tree trekking, to mountain biking and zip wire.

Unique to Thorpe Forest and only a few minutes away is the Thorpe Woodland Adventure Centre in Thetford Forest where guests can take part in various leisure activities, subject to availability. Prices vary, depending on the activity. Our sons took part in archery and thoroughly enjoyed the experience. Other off-site activities can also be arranged via the Forest Retreat, subject to availability.

During our weekend visit to Norfolk we visited St George's Distillery, England's only traditional whisky distillery, which can be found between Thetford and Attleborough. We pre-booked a one hour guided tour round the distillery to see how whisky is made the traditional way in beautiful copper stills. The tour ended with several tastings of the distillery's own whisky, which increased our knowledge of the product – that was our excuse anyway.

The distillery has its own gift shop which sells single malt whiskies from all over the world. Other items in the shop included liqueurs and creams, as well as glassware, branded clothing and whisky-related gift sets. The tour is fascinating, whether you're a whisky connoisseur or not, and is well recommended. For more information about the English Whisky Company and bookings, tel: 01953 717939, e-mail: (info@englishwhisky.co.uk).

The following day we drove to Southwold, famous for its sandy beach,



the Lighthouse, the Common Pier, pubs and restaurants. After wandering round the bustling High Street with its upmarket designer shops and restaurants, we dropped into a pub for some fish and chips. Afterwards, we bought ice creams and took a stroll along the sandy beach with its colourful beach huts. This delightful seaside town certainly lives up to its upmarket image and, with so much to see, it's definitely worth a return visit.

Our trip to Norfolk would not have been complete without a visit to the Broads, where we had booked a river cruise with Broads Tours. We joined passengers on the *Belle of the Broads* with live commentary from the captain as we glided slowly along one of Britain's most scenic waterways with its beautiful riverside houses, yachts and motorboats of every description.

If you prefer to see the Broads at your own pace and take the helm, Broads Tours hires out boats for the day. For more information, tel: 01603 782207, website: (www.broadstours.co.uk).

Back at Thorpe Forest, our weekend break was virtually over. Before returning our hire bikes, we took a final ride through the woods, then went back to our cabin to pack. It had been a memorable and enjoyable weekend in an idyllic setting.



Local attractions include Southwold, with its distinctive beach huts, and, above, St George's Distillery



Find out more

For more information about Forest Holidays, tel: 03330 110 495, website: (www.forestholidays.co.uk).