

DEVON LIFE

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Unplug & switch off



Exmoor is fast-becoming Devon's own safari destination. ANNA TURNS goes on a glamping adventure at Longlands eco-escape and enjoys a bespoke 4x4 excursion on the moors

PHOTOS BY GUY HARROP

As soon as I turn my car off the A399 to Combe Martin, down the long winding lane into the valley towards Longlands, it's clear that we've arrived somewhere truly special. My family and I are staying in a safari tent for the weekend. Now, as much as I love the idea of leaving home comforts behind and camping away from it all, I'm definitely not a natural camper. But this is extreme glamping with real beds, a bathroom and a wood-burning stove, so I think I can cope.

We leave the car at the top of the hill, out of sight, and guests are free to roam down to the lake, along the stream through farmland, out onto the coast paths and through woodlands covered in blankets of wildflowers. Longlands is a place to unwind and escape from electricity (although there is one sneaky plug socket hidden away just in case of those desperate phone-charger moments). It takes time to boil the kettle on the wood-burning stove, hand-grind the coffee beans or light the fire to warm the shower water, but it is a joy to slow your pace of life right down and enjoy the sound of birdsong in the mornings through the canvas walls.

Our beautifully styled six-person safari tent, 'Lundy', seems like one giant holiday adventure playhouse. Bella Given, owner of Longlands, discovered these 'fairly permanent' safari tents in South Africa. When she and her husband Richard sold up their home in Twickenham and moved to North Devon in September 2011, they wanted to find a way of replicating this



style of glamorous camping. "I was very excited to discover a company called Albion canvas, based down the road in Wellington, Somerset," explains Bella. "These are perfect for our high-end luxury camping experience - and it has been great to kit them out locally too."

Bella knew she wanted to create the kind of place she wanted to stay herself, and this shows in the décor and contents - everything has been carefully thought out and created with love. "I wanted to fulfil my dream of watching the sun setting over countryside from a balcony with a glass of wine in my hand," says Bella, whose strong vision became a reality when Longlands opened in July 2012. Bella previously worked in garden design, hence her strong design eye, and after designing other people's outdoor spaces, she was keen to have her own project.

"Once we started the ball rolling, I went on a shopping mission to find the best furniture, gadgets and décor for each of the three tents." Bella found vintage Chesterfield leather sofas, dressers and blanket boxes, and inherited tables and chairs from the previous owners who ran an onsite tea shop. She gave them a new lease of life with a lick of coloured paint, and "it all sort of came together".

The three tents have similar layouts but individual sets of chairs and furniture give each one its own tone and identity. "Vintage was the trend but that's not going to last forever, plus I didn't want anything too floral. Whilst looking into the interior design for the tents, I partnered up with



Did you know...?

Exmoor has been a National Park since 1954

The River Exe begins up on these moors

From Combe Martin, Exmoor spreads up to the north coast of Devon and spills over the border into Somerset, covering 267 square miles.

Exmoor has the largest concentration of red deer in England

Exmoor has the highest coastal cliffs in England - 800ft/244m - and the longest stretch of naturally wooded coastline in the British Isles.

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Pam, a local interior designer who has worked her magic on our soft furnishings. When she showed me modern country fabrics by Vanessa Arbuthonott, they seemed to fit perfectly. Plus my favourite suppliers are Garden Trading and Grace & Glory in Barnstaple or online."

Bella has taken heed of any visitor suggestions in order to make each safari tent as user-friendly as possible - so we found a welly box by the front entrance, coat stands, and a dog bed and bowl, all as a result of constructive feedback. Although

it was chilly outside, once we perfected our fire-lighting skills it was toasty warm inside with plenty of hot-water bottles and heavy tog duvets. Bella has thought of everything!

The location of Longlands is special in its own right. Bella describes finding the 17 acre site: "It's like discovering a secret valley, surrounded by private farmland, and it is ideal for providing an exclusive experience." Bella recently bought 10 chickens from South Yeo Farm in Okehampton, so she can provide her own



Longlands eggs for guests. "It really feels like a proper farm here now," she says.

Bella has created the Longlands Larder, a little shop full to the brim with fancy five-star treats and gourmet essentials (from olives to cheese truckles and artisan chocolate), plus she offers a fabulous menu of delicious dinners which she brings to the lodge. We went for the easy option and ordered breakfast which was ready to collect from Longlands Larder at 8am - warm croissants in a wicker basket - what could be better! ■



Experience Exmoor

Combe Martin on the western edge of the moors, is the perfect base to explore Exmoor, and who better to show us round than Neil Osmond, owner of Experience Exmoor. He spent his school holidays staying with family and exploring the moors, horse-riding and fly-fishing for salmon or trout. In 2012, he settled here with his own family and now enjoys showing tourists the highlights and special places he has discovered over the years.

Neil's tour goes off the beaten track in his Land Rover Discovery 4 - with special permission to drive down National Trust access routes he can show another side to Exmoor, and 4x4 transport is a great way to cover a lot of ground, especially for those with limited time or not able to walk too far.

Exmoor is full of dramatic scenery and spectacular vistas, especially where the moors meet the sea. The moors provide a beautiful backdrop for wildlife-watching which is particularly exciting at this time of year, with the red deer rut beginning in September. Look out for the red deer stags who are at their finest, ready to show off and beat off stiff competition to win their hinds. Hardier and bigger than Dartmoor ponies, Exmoor ponies graze by the roadside and on the heath - only 1000 of these rare ponies are left in the wild.

On a clear day, Dartmoor is also visible from this western edge of Exmoor. As a 'southerner', I know Dartmoor fairly well, and had naively



A 4x4 safari across Exmoor is a great opportunity for wildlife-watching

expected Exmoor to be similar. It's surprising how they both have very different personalities. Exmoor, Neil explains to me, is more 'female', with gentle, undulating terrain and coastal landscapes. Dartmoor exhibits a 'male' element, with granite tors and a vast, harsh landscape.

Highlights of the trip include Hurdle Down, Neil's favourite spot, where we find a group of hinds: "Here the atmosphere and mood changes constantly with the seasons and weather, and this is a great place to spot red deer."

The journey down to Foreland Lighthouse through National Trust-owned land is stunning and steep, but worth the drive, just to see the



pristine coastal heathland and some of the highest (and pretty treacherous) sea cliffs in England. "I love being able to show people the places they otherwise wouldn't see," says Neil as he shows us the gorgeous views East to Porlock and across the Bristol Channel. As we wind back through Lynton and Lynmouth, Neil tells us the history of Lynton's flood damage, and points out Bronze Age burial sites, which would probably have gone unnoticed had we been driving alone. Neil brings the landscape to life and makes the story of Exmoor accessible. Now that I have a better visual impression of the moors, I'm keen to return soon and explore some of my favourite places on foot, and I know where I'll put my feet up at the end of the day!

Escape to Exmoor:
Call Bella Given to book at Longlands: 01271 882004.
longlandsdevon.co.uk
Contact Neil Osmond to book a 4x4 excursion:
07854 666 800.
experienceexmoor.co.uk