

Weekend away

STAYING IN A SAFARI TENT IN THE EXMOOR NATIONAL PARK PROVIDES A WELCOME DOSE OF NATURE (AND A GOOD NIGHT'S SLEEP)

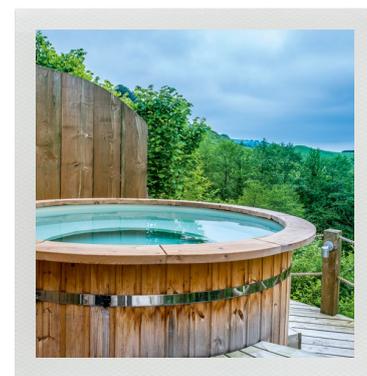
Words: **REBECCA FRANK**

Even the keenest camper has times when they yearn to spend the weekend sleeping under canvas, but real life gets in the way and they can't find the time or energy to make it happen. That's where places like Longlands come in. A peaceful haven where busy folk can retreat and get a healing dose of nature without spending a day either side packing the car, pumping up old air beds and searching for sleeping bags. Somewhere to leave stress behind and spend time outdoors building fires, toasting marshmallows, snuggling up under a blanket beneath the stars and reconnecting with family or friends. If you haven't managed a camp out yet this summer, you could simply leave your gear in the loft and do it the easy way.



Where we stayed

In one of five safari tents in a valley a few miles inland from the North Devon coast. On arrival we were greeted by Bella who lives in the farmhouse with her husband and two children. Her passion for what she's created is obvious in her attention to detail. There's no denying this is posh 'camping'; White Company bedlinen, a green leather Chesterfield with plump cushions and a bathroom with locally made body products. However, the magic of camping is not lost. If you want a hot shower, you need to light a fire in advance to heat the water, cooking is on a woodburning stove or barbecue (with a small gas camping stove for emergency cups of tea). A coolbox keeps essentials cold and there's only one (hidden) power socket so phones can remain ignored.



What we did there

We spent a happy hour relaxing in the hot tub, looking out over the rolling hills towards the sea. We took wooden rowing boats out onto the lake (below) where you can fish for rainbow trout or just float among the lily pads. We took our dog for a walk in the woods where he could run off the lead before cooling down in the stream. We swung in the hammock and planned the next day's activities using the extremely useful information book. We ate by candlelight and played Exploding Kittens and Scrabble. We tended fires (a lot), went to bed early and listened to owls and badgers as we snuggled up and rose early with the birds.



What we did elsewhere

No weekend in North Devon is complete without a day on the beach and there are several to choose from. Woolacombe is the show-stopper with miles of broad, golden sands. We liked Putsborough to the south, which is dog-friendly and less busy. Barricane to the north is a pretty cove, great for scrambling on the rocks and surfing and, if you're there early evening in summer, you can grab a delicious Sri Lankan curry from the beach café and eat it on the sand. Park in the village of Mortehoe and you can walk along

the coastal path to Woolacombe or a mile north to the Bull Point lighthouse. The connected towns of Lynton and Lynmouth are close by with spectacular scenery and a waterpowered railway up the cliff, but they do get very busy in summer. For something a little quieter, there's a lovely streamside walk from the Hunter's Inn to Heddon's Mouth, a secluded rocky bay. Finish with a pint or lunch in the Hunter's sunny garden.



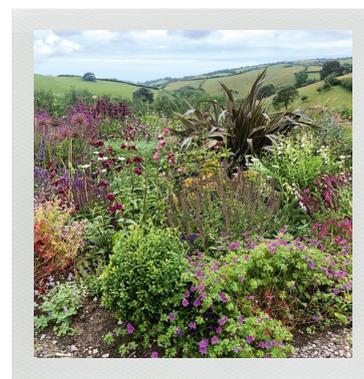
What we ate

Good pub food at the Black Venus, a few miles down the road, where locals were making the most of a sunny Friday evening sipping rosé in the garden and tucking in to generous portions of spicy homemade chilli, fish and chips and other classics. One evening we barbecued great steak and sausages from nearby Besshill Farm Shop. If you don't feel like cooking, you can order in Bella's homemade dishes, from roasted vegetable lasagne to rainbow trout (above), and warm them in your stove or on the barbecue. Freshly baked pastries were warm and ready to collect in a basket in the morning and there are cooked breakfast packs and freshly laid eggs if you fancy a full English. The honesty shop is stocked with essentials, local gifts from candles to chopping boards, tempting larder food, wine and beers and dog food.



The best bit

Everything has been thought of so you don't need to. Tents are large, handsome structures built onto a wooden deck with outdoor furniture, flowers and a pot of mixed herbs. Inside are two double bedrooms and a double cabin bed complete with hot water bottles and teddies. It's comfy and warm with a central stove, blankets and a chest of games. Kids love it, and dogs do, too (bed, towel and bowls are provided). Hire all five tents and you can use the party barn, a large beamed room with long benches for convivial gatherings. And if you aren't feeling relaxed enough, a local therapist offers a full menu of spa treatments.



Weekend breaks (Friday to Monday) cost from £625; longlandsdevon.co.uk.