

Carry on GLAMPING



In north Devon, Tammy and Jeremy Smith have finally re-opened their pitch-perfect glamping site. But running this holiday business has been a rollercoaster ride

WORDS BY SARAH BARRATT
PHOTOGRAPHS BY ALUN CALLENDER



It is early morning on the western edge of Exmoor and most of the residents in this sleepy corner of England are enjoying a slow start. However, for Tammy and Jeremy Smith, the working day is already in full swing. Carrying baskets of freshly baked bread, local sausages and eggs from their own brood of hens, they march up the path from their home to the five canvas lodges that make up their 17-acre glamping site known as Longlands. Roused by the scent of warm bread, visitors begin to unzip doors and are greeted with breakfast and a spectacular view of the Bristol Channel. A sense of collective relief hangs in the air: it's been a tough winter but now the sun is shining.

Surrounded by wild-flower meadows and ancient woodland, Longlands is – in the words of a recent visitor – “the perfect place to recover from lockdown”. Tammy and Jeremy find this description particularly apt. “We can see our visitors’ shoulders loosen as soon as they arrive,” Jeremy says. “It’s an amazing time to be involved in an industry that provides that comfort.” The Smiths are relieved, too. Multiple shutdowns across the hospitality sector have cost the domestic tourism industry an estimated £57.2 billion* over the past year. Longlands itself lost three months of business. So, the current surge in people opting for self-catering holidays in the UK couldn’t be more welcome.

This summer, Longlands hopes to host hundreds of families, all seeking to combine the adventures of camping with the comforts of home. They will stay in one of five lodges, with proper beds (no roll mats here), a fully equipped kitchen, dining area, bathroom and wood-fired oven. There’s a front deck from which they can watch the sun set while enjoying a glass of gin or cider from the on-site honesty shop, which also sells everything from Devon ice cream to emergency toothbrushes: “We want guests to feel that they don’t have to leave Longlands: everything they could possibly need is here.”

CONVERTING TO CANVAS

Tammy and Jeremy have been in the tourism industry for most of their working lives but ▶

THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE Longlands’ luxurious lodges feature proper beds, a fully equipped kitchen and decking where you can watch the

sun set. The Devon ‘glampsite’ is perched on the western edge of Exmoor, with sweeping views across ancient woodland and wild-flower meadows

*VISIT BRITAIN (VISITBRITAIN.ORG)



“We can see our visitors’ shoulders loosen as soon as they arrive”



THIS PAGE Visitors can explore the 17-acre site on foot or take to the lake in one of Longlands' rowing boats. Joshua and twins Charlie and Rosie Smith are seasoned sailors



glamping was never part of the grand plan. The Smiths moved here from Dorset in 2019, after selling their holiday rental business Dorset Coastal Cottages. It had been in the family since it was founded by Jeremy's father in 1992 but the advent of digital competitors such as Airbnb had changed the agenda. The market was squeezed, and Jeremy's role became increasingly screen-centric. "Computers are my phobia," he says. "I love delivering a face-to-face service. It was time for a change."

Tammy was also ready for something new. She had worked as an equine sports massage therapist before becoming a mum to Joshua, now ten, and twins Charlie and Rosie, eight. "My job required a lot of travel and that just wasn't compatible with three children," she says. The couple wanted a joint project and began the search for a farm they could convert into a collection of holiday cottages. "Having always dealt in bricks and mortar, we didn't want to invest in something made from canvas," Jeremy laughs. But viewing Longlands at the behest of a pushy estate agent, they instantly changed their minds. "As soon as we came over the brow of the hill, our mouths hit the floor," Tammy recalls. "We knew we wanted it right away."

When they arrived in September 2019, they had two days to acclimatise before the first guests arrived. To say it was a baptism of fire would be an understatement. "The learning curve was steep," Tammy says. "We were hosting up to 12 families a week while living on site." The couple were kept busy checking in guests, maintaining the lodges and organising cleaning and bed-changing – all chores for which their team of five housekeepers, handymen and gardeners proved an invaluable support. Tammy also found time to cook crumbles, roulades and cheesecakes, which she'd hand-deliver to guests in the evenings. In November, when their first season drew to a close, they had entertained 54 families over six weeks. It had been a successful start.

TROUBLE IN PARADISE

In the new year, the team decided to capitalise on the quiet time to begin site improvements. The cedarwood hot tub – three tonnes of water held up by an ageing wooden platform – was first on their to-do list. They hired a crane to lift the tub and a group of men to dismantle the deck. What they hadn't clocked was that it was acting as a retaining wall for the hill it sat on. With the deck gone, there was nothing to stop the earth tumbling downwards in a dramatic landslide. Where once there was a hot tub, there was now a mud bath.

Undeterred, they kept going, ordering a crate of cobbles to set in concrete to replace the rotten wood. But in early March 2020, disaster struck ▶



again. One tonne's worth of stones "flew off the delivery lorry like a jet-rocket", hitting Tammy on the head, fracturing her skull and triggering a bleed on the brain. She was rushed to hospital, where she spent several days before returning home to recover. Three weeks later, Britain went into lockdown.

Longlands remained closed for the next three months. While this would throw most business owners into a panic, the Smiths decided to embark on further renovations – no mean feat with Tammy still recuperating from the accident while also supervising the children's home schooling: "I just kept going. There was so much to do." They began to convert an old barn into a holiday cottage, install a pétanque terrace, put wet rooms in the lodges and construct a lakeside yoga platform (using the now infamous cobbles).

By the time guests could legally return in July 2020, the hill had been rebuilt and Tammy was well and truly

on the mend. Covid precautions had to be put in place, of course, including Jeremy donning a boiler suit and gas mask ("like something out of *Ghostbusters*") to disinfect each lodge using a hand-held misting machine. But the guests kept coming. Despite the wobbly start, they welcomed 158 families during 2020, and were fully booked from early July until early November.

Today, seven months on and with another lockdown under their belt, Tammy and Jeremy are open for business again. The misting machine has been dusted off, the hot tub cranked up and the shop stocked to the rafters. There are plans afoot to start a flock of sheep – the Smiths adopted three pet lambs last year – and maybe even plant an orchard. In the meantime, there are eggs to collect, loaves to bake and breakfast baskets to prepare...

FOR MORE INFORMATION about Longlands, visit longlandsdevon.co.uk.

