



Weekend away

GET OUTDOORS AND BACK TO NATURE IN AN OFF-GRID CONVERTED RAILWAY CARRIAGE

Words: **JO MATTOCK**

The itch to escape it all is hard to resist, and what better way to switch off than somewhere with no electricity? No screens to watch, no news updates... and no running water. A chance to get back to basics and practise some self-sufficiency in a peaceful, isolated spot.

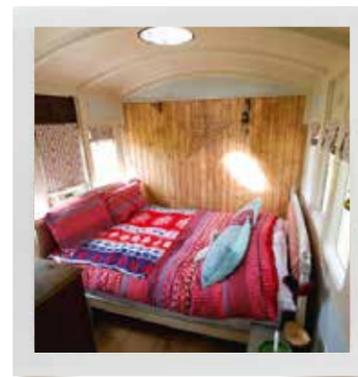
Ashdown Forest is one of the few places in southeast England that feels 'wild'. Situated in the High Weald, East Sussex – designated an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty – its hilltop heathland and wooded valleys were originally a deer park, and these noble beasts are still numerous in the forest. Harder-to-spot inhabitants include nightjars, Dartford warblers, lizards and adders. The forest is also famous for a fictional resident: Winnie-the-Pooh. Author A.A. Milne lived here and based 100 Acre Wood on the landscape.

We packed our sense of adventure (and a box of matches), turned off our phones and stepped off the grid.



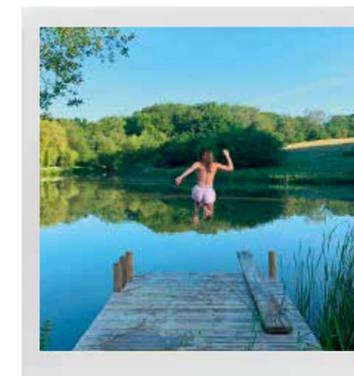
Where we stayed

An off-grid railway carriage on the edge of Ashdown Forest. Built in 1880, it was given a new lease of life when owner Tim Reeves brought it to its current lakeside position about five years ago. Inside, it's cosy with a wood-burning stove, copper kitchen accessories and comfy armchairs. It sleeps two and, come evening, with all the candles, paraffin lamps and (battery-powered) fairy lights lit, it's undeniably romantic. Outside, the deck catches the evening sun, and there are firepits, a wood-fired pizza oven, kooky outdoor bar... and the necessities: a Thunderbox (toilet) and a fire-warmed hot-water tank, which feeds an outdoor shower, bath and washing-up area. Tim has built all this himself using upcycled materials and more than a little inventiveness. Just don't let that fire go out.



What we did

We spent a lot of time lighting, poking and discussing fires, which we used for heating water, for the pizza oven and for the pleasure of staying outdoors late and listening to owls hooting around the lake. The lake itself, which looked very inviting, turned out to be very cold when we went for a quick dip. Still, we had a hot shower to warm ourselves up afterwards. We didn't have the lake to ourselves, though. It's populated by carp ("They don't have teeth," Tim reassures us. "They'll just suck your toes.") Feeding the fish bread in the morning became a little ritual. We went for a walk on the South Downs, from a postcard-pretty village called Firle. We climbed Firle Beacon for an outstanding view of the surrounding countryside and wandered along the South Downs Way. The Ram Inn back in Firle provided a welcome drink afterwards.



What we ate

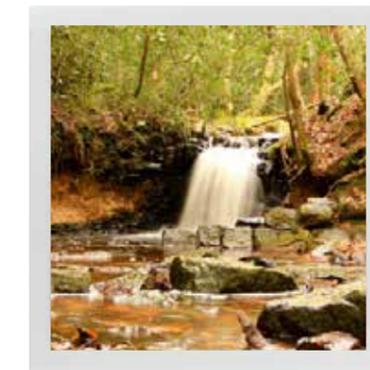
Faced with a large pile of wood and a campfire grill, we decided to cook on an open fire. A visit to nearby Denniker Farm Shop in Fletching furnished us with steaks, and a five-minute walk up to the village shop provided us with veg. It was definitely slow food – it took an hour and a half for the fire to die down to embers suitable for cooking on. But

it meant we could stay outdoors, toasting marshmallows and stargazing. We also found a truly excellent pub, The Griffin Inn in Fletching, which served generous portions of free-range chicken and ham hock pie with buttery mash, and a roasted pork rib chop with chorizo, chickpeas and salsa verde. It had a cosy bar with live music.



We also liked

Exploring Ashdown Forest, with its spectacular views over the High Weald to the North and South Downs. We took meandering strolls through wooded valleys, losing the path, following the river, finding unexpected waterfalls and paddling in the frigid water. We also played an obligatory game of Pooh sticks at Pooh Sticks Bridge – it's not the prettiest walk down from the car park, but it is popular with families.



The best bit

The carriage's peaceful and idyllic setting meant there was a great feeling of space and we could really get away from it all. We spent quite some time sitting on the deck outside the carriage, looking over the lake, drinking a glass of white wine (chilled in an ice box – no electric fridge here) and watching the wildlife. We saw a heron, deer and buzzards, and were woken each morning by the honking of geese. The weekend was a breath of fresh air – from which we returned home with our hair and clothes pungent with woodsmoke.



The Quirky Sussex Carriage is available to book through Kip Hideaways from £150–£175 per night. Kiphideaways.com.