

Take a walk – or ride – on the wild side

Maria Bagnall has an accomplished feeling during her Lake District visit

Sty Head, Borg-er Dalr and Friar's crag may not mean much to some people.

But for walkers who love bagging a few peaks in the midst of dramatic Lake District crags, the names of these fells mean escapism, knock-out scenery and if you're lucky a sense of accomplishment.

Extra challenges were in tow with this jaunt based at the head of Lake Windermere in Ambleside.

Little people in search of big adventures tagged along to explore and test self catering accommodation that surpassed our family-orientated expectations. Nestled at the foot of Wansfell, 50 metres off the high street and walking distance to an indoor climbing wall, park, restaurants and supermarket, Gale Lodge had everything going for it in terms of location.

Homely touches showed consideration for the interior too. Extensively equipped the farmhouse-style kitchen with range cooker was perfect for whipping up family feasts and the large fireplace, cosy lounge, comfy beds and powerful showers meant everyone felt

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right at home. Determined not to be grounded by bodies smaller than half a kissing gate we headed for the hills. As keen cyclists, Grizedale Forest would be Oliver (five) and Jake's (three) first introduction to the lofty hills and dramatic views just three hours drive from the Midlands.

Quickly the children understood how tarns and waterfalls are created due to a downpour that accompanied the three-hour cycle through mountain forestry.

Our outdoor clothing was tested to its limit as the children sat snugly – Jake even dozed off – in a tag along carriage or rode on a trail-gater when howling winds subsided.

Reward for the monster calorie-consuming effort was a hot bath and slap-up roast back at the cottage where the well-equipped drying room dealt with now sodden gear and a roaring fire melted

away the cold. Adverse weather conditions for the rest of the week meant peaks would have been tough going for the most seasoned of walkers but we found no shortage of activities at ground level.

Nearby, Waterhead Pier is a great place to hop on a steam cruiser and take a leisurely view of the fells, castles and bustling towns along the water front. Reachable by ferry and a must for younger children is the adventure playground at the National Trust's Fell Foot Park.

The Victorian park is at the head of Windermere and ideal for a run around after the



Dramatic Lake Windermere is as popular today as it was when the Victorian era popularised holidaying in the United Kingdom



Picturesque Gale Lodge, nestled at the foot of Wansfell



Jake and Oliver were happy for father Sam Bagnall to tow them

confines of a ferry with zip wire, cafe on the water's edge and level walks.

Wackier fun can be had at Brockhole Visitor Centre with Treetop Nets where 1,500 sq meters of giant trampolines, walkways, slide and tunnels made of netting are suspended nine metres up in the forest canopy, adding a new dimension to adventure play.

Springy areas meant the children could leap and climb around and test their daring with net slides and tunnels. It proved a bit bizarre for me but the children certainly burnt off some energy.

Thoughts soon turned to food and dining out with children can be a testing time. A perfect recipe includes top-notch food for adults and patient staff for children who are prone to spillages and fidgeting. We found the Lamplighter Dining Rooms in Windermere hard to beat.

Owned by the Tasker family, son and chef Alistair draws together local producers in a diverse menu of seasonal and typical Lakeland recipes while James does an exceptional job at the front of house.

Aside from first-rate meals the passion for

quality ingredients really comes through and with children of his own, James had first-hand experience of dining with little ones.

For the children, fish goujons in mini baskets and for the adults starters of drunken duck – a pate, infused with homemade damson gin and Westmorland chutney to potted shrimps and mains of Lakeland rump, haggis mash and seasonal fish which happened to be haddock.

Every bite was cooked to perfection, presented impeccably and served by genial and gracious staff.

The icing on the cake came when the children started to get bored; James provided a box of colouring pens, toys and books while we savoured (in peace) trou Normand – apple sorbet with calvados and crème brulee, damson gin and shortbread biscuit.

The last days included an 'attempt' at Loughrigg Fell, a visit to Rothay Park with its rocky outcrops, perfect for bouldering, plus a cinema trip and dinner at Zeffirellis vegetarian restaurant which has one of the best views of Ambleside high street from its balcony.

As weary walkers streamed into town from

the mountains I longed for the inspiring views. However the feeling soon subsided as a tough trudge up a bleak mountainside was ditched in favour of a warm fire and beautiful sunset over Loughrigg Fell enjoyed from the comfort of the conservatory at Gable Lodge. Much to everyone's relief Scafell Pike was put on the backburner, at least until the boys' legs are long enough to carry themselves.

Travel facts

Lakelovers has over 430 holiday homes throughout the south and central areas of the Lake District sleeping two to 20 guests. Gale Lodge Cottage in Ambleside, part of a former 17th century gentleman's residence, sleeps six and is dog friendly. A week's stay is priced from £499; to book call Lakelovers on 015394 88855 or visit www.lakelovers.co.uk. For information on things to see and do in the region visit www.golakes.go.uk

Traditional British holiday that the weather cannot dis-

With its rolling hills, scenic lakes and tranquil settings, the Lake District is the perfect place to unwind and get away from the pressures of everyday life.

However, those wanting to venture out and explore its many walking or cycling routes might want to pack their waterproofs.

You can never be too sure about the unpredictable British weather, as we experienced.

Rain clouds seemed to hang overhead from the start of the weekend to the end, but we discovered there was also much to do indoors.

And with activities lined up at Low Wood Bay Watersports Centre, in Windermere, the bad weather wasn't too much of a concern anyway.

Our home for the weekend was the Waterhead Hotel, near Ambleside, which is based on the north east side of Lake Windermere, and boasted glorious views of England's largest natural lake.

The tales of Beatrix Potter boomed out of speakers in the car park as we arrived – a sign we had reached at our beautiful destination which had inspired the author to write her much-loved children's stories.

After climbing stairs and venturing down winding corridors, we found our way to reception and claimed the keys to our luxury lake view room.

The room itself was spacious and nicely decorated, with a super king-size comfortable bed, wall fire, iPod docking station, flat screen TV, DVD player, coffee machine, bathrobes and slippers.

The complimentary gingerbread, gin and



Waterhead Hotel, near Ambleside, viewed from Lake Windermere. Attractions nearby include Low Wood Bay Watersports Centre.

tonics, snacks, fruit bowl and Molton Brown toiletries were also nice little touches, as was the chocolate mints left on the pillow in the evenings.

The hotel, which is one of a chain owned by English Lakes Hotels Ltd, reopened in 2004 following a £3m revamp to become the Lakes' first luxury four-star townhouse hotel.

It boasts 41 bedrooms and has picked up a number of awards, including the Cumbria Small Hotel of the Year title in the Enjoy England Tourism Awards in 2005 and in 2010, it was awarded its first AA rosette for the restaurant which has tables overlooking the lake.

It wasn't hard to see why with the top quality food on offer, with a range of traditional English dishes to choose from and there was also an extensive wine list and speciality gin menu.

The beef and oxtail wellington was particu-

larly succulent and definitely a winner on the menu.

The strawberry and white chocolate cheesecake was also to die for and the eggs benedict at breakfast left me wanting more.

Staff offered excellent service and couldn't do enough for the guests.

Guests can also use the leisure complex at its sister hotel, Low Wood Bay, just a mile down the road.

It features a swimming pool, steam room, sauna, solarium, gym, squash court, hair and beauty salon, as well as indoor and outdoor hot tubs.

It seemed very popular with families when we visited, but there was still a relaxing atmosphere and the outdoor hot tub was the perfect place to relax while taking in glimpses of the lake through the trees.

There is not a lot directly around the hotel, other than a few shops and a pub, but it is only half a mile away from the delightful town of Ambleside.

It is well worth exploring and offers a variety of restaurants, pubs, shops and a quaint little cinema.

Attractions nearby include Low Wood Bay Watersports Centre, which caters for a wide range of sports including canoeing, kayaking, sailing, waterskiing, powerboating and wakeboarding.

Tuition is offered in many of the activities and we decided to venture out with instructors to have a go at sailing and waterskiing for the first time.

Our sailing instructor Gary, who had more than 50 years of experience, made the experience fascinating and enjoyable, even in the

rain. By the end of a two-hour session on a Laser Bahia, we had learned some of the basics and how to successfully turn the boat.

Although the waterskiing proved to be a bit trickier and ended with being dunked in the lake more times than I care to remember, the instructor was very helpful in offering tips on ways to improve.

Staff in the watersports centre also offered a friendly and faultless service, making us feel very welcome.

Although only in the Lake District for a couple of days, we sampled amazing food, took in breathtaking views and have developed a whole new appreciation for the great outdoors.

The hotel provided a luxurious escape and will not be forgotten any time soon.

By Lisa O'Brien

Travel facts

The Waterhead hotel has 41 bedrooms with en-suite facilities, a restaurant, bar and grill, free parking and use of the leisure club at Low Wood Bay.

Rooms start from £135 per night. For more information visit englishlakes.co.uk/hotels/lake-district-hotels/ambleside-hotels/waterhead-hotel

For information on Low Wood Bay Watersports Centre call 01539 439441 or to download a brochure of the activities on offer visit englishlakes.co.uk/watersports