

The Summer 100: UK & Ireland

From posh camping in Cornwall to remote stays on the shores of Loch Ness, these holidays are closer to home but still packed with adventure

Stephen Bleach Published: 23 January 2011

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No 1: There are wild walks all around at Middle Ninfa Farm (Jacques Pierre)

1 A very British blaze

£££££

Glamping? So Noughties. We're getting back to basics in the great outdoors this summer at Middle Ninfa Farm (01873 854662, www.middleninfa.co.uk), a tiny hideaway camp site on a wooded hillside in Monmouthshire, with wild walks all around and a view fit for princes down the Usk Valley. It does nothing but the essentials: there's a borehole for water, a compost toilet and — this is the crucial bit — you're welcome to make a campfire. Stare in deep, and listen to the owls. This may be the most uplifting experience you'll have all year — for £5 per person, per night. Beat that. You'll find hundreds more great sites allowing fires at campfires.co.cc and coolcamping.co.uk.

2 Cider-making in Devon

£££££

Continentalists bang on about the joys of the grape harvest, but we forget to celebrate our own booze-making bounty. Help to put that right on a working holiday in traditional orchards: at the Killerton estate, you'll be picking 50 varieties of cider apple and using a 19th-century press to start transforming them into Devon's finest scrumpy. It's hard work, but in idyllic surroundings, and there'll be a good stock of last year's cider to keep you going — as well as the knowledge that it's all helping the National Trust (0844 800 3099, nationaltrust.org.uk), which runs the farm. Cheap, too — a week in September or October at Killerton, or harvesting at nearby Parke, costs £110, including bunkhouse accommodation and all your food.

3 Muck in on the farm

£££££

Staying on a farm is a classic family holiday, but these days many farmers won't let guests get their hands dirty. (There's probably an EU regulation against it.) Here's a welcome exception: the 1450 Barn — that's when it was built — sits on a 200-acre organic Devon farm, where you're welcome to help with everyday tasks such as sheep-shearing and taking the tractor to deliver the hay. Small farmers have the pets' corner, with Shetland ponies Heather and Sugar, goats, lambs and rabbits, and there's even a hot tub to soak in after a hard day in the fields. Sleeping six, it costs £475/£845 with Farm & Cottage Holidays (01237 459889, holidaycottages.co.uk).

4 Jack's spot in Cornwall

£££££

Ha-harr, lookie here, boys: it be Charlestown Harbour, the prettiest little nook in all Cornwall. It's a sight so fine as it was used to make the new Pirates of the Caribbean, with that lubberly scoundrel Johnny Depp (coming to they cinemas in the month of May, me hearties). Aye, it's not changed a jot since your good Cap'n Sparrow sailed from here last — square-riggers at the quay and a grand beach for the buryin' of treasure and mutineers. Seagull Cottage is the place for a week's shore leave, a creaky old barn in the heart of the village, near the tavern, with a good view of the water in case the customs men come calling. Berths for six crew, and it's 625 gold doubloons (or pounds) in May, 894 in August, paid to the pirates at Cornish Traditional Cottages (01208 821666, corncott.com).

5 Heligan's all yours

£££££

The Lost Gardens of Heligan are simply Britain's best, an enchanting 200-acre hotchpotch of pleasure grounds, Italian formality, ancient woodlands, jungle and more. Anyone who's been there knows you don't want to leave. Stay at the Clock House and you won't have to. Set in a private area of the Heligan estate, a stone's throw from the manor house, it's a refurbished part of the old stable block, and the building does justice to the location: old stone, high ceilings and the original tile-hung clock tower, which still works. Mevagissey, Cornwall's cutest fishing village, is a couple of miles away, if horticulture palls — but we're pretty sure it won't. Sleeping six, it costs £495/£883 with Cornish Traditional Cottages (01208 821666, corncott.com).

6 Character in Pembrokeshire

£££££

There are good things and bad things about holiday parks. Good: you get to use all the facilities, so there's plenty to keep you and the kids busy. Bad: you're usually staying in a knocked-up chalet with all the rustic charm of a building site. Which is why we like Celtic Haven (01834 870000, celtichaven.co.uk), near Tenby. Yes, it has a pool, a spa, a hot tub, a playground, tennis courts, a golf course and a restaurant: but, this being a converted hamlet, you stay in one of 26 proper cottages (some date from the 12th century), all neat and whitewashed, with character, beams and gorgeous views over the cliffs to Caldey Island. The beaches are terrific, too. Perfect. A cottage sleeping four costs £650/£995.

7 God's own cottage in Co Mayo

£££££

The west coast of Ireland was surely divinely inspired, so it's appropriate to stay in a converted church. Not just any old church, either: the property god Kevin McCloud, he of Grand Designs, called Kilgallon Chapel "the best church conversion I have ever seen" (and he's seen a few). Sure enough, it's a revelation: they've managed to convert an 1836 chapel into a seriously stylish four-bedroom home without losing an iota of the quiet grandeur or smoky drama of the place. If you can drag yourself away, the pub is a short stroll, you're near the beaches of Clew Bay and the county's cutest town, Westport, and there's excellent walking, riding and surfing round about. Sleeping eight with ease, it costs £1,270/£1,524 with Pure Holiday Homes (01753 728730, pureholidayhomes.com). The nearest airport is Knock, served by Ryanair and BMI Baby.

8 Live the dream in Herefordshire

£££££

We've all done it: stayed at a gorgeous little farm in the country; considered the rustic loveliness, the gentle bleating of the rare-breed sheep outside the window and the lack of belligerent emails from middle management; and thought, "You know, I could live like this." Now you can find out if that's a pipe dream or a life plan. Hareley Farm is running half-day Start a Smallholding courses for guests this year: grown-ups learn the theory and the finances, while the kids go out egg-collecting and feeding the lambs. Just to tempt you that bit more, you stay in a 16th-century barn conversion with slate floors, beamy ceilings and old brick. Sleeping four, it costs £600/£780 with Premier Cottages (01886 884362, premiercottages.co.uk).

9 Bring the gang to Gwynedd

£££££

It's a great plan: a big bunch of you book three or four cottages together and have a week-long house(s) party — the kids can play, adults socialise, but you've got your privacy, too. The best bit should be eating together... but few properties have a dinner table big enough. Here's one that does, and it's a cracking place, too. Beach Farm, on Wales's wonderful cliff- and cove-lined Llleyn peninsula, has three cottages, all done up a treat with smart kitchens and bathrooms. The children have five acres of grounds to run in, with a pretty stream and a path down to a private beach; adults can follow the path a little further to the pub. To cap it all, there's an ample table for 20 in the main cottage, so you can all come together at dinner. Sleeping 14, the whole place costs £1,750/£2,650 with CV Travel (020 7401 1086, www.cvtravel.co.uk).

10 Snug in Angus

£££££

We don't care what the shivering Sassenachs say, Scottish beaches are brilliant — but you do need somewhere snug to warm up afterwards. The Ice House is ideal. Okay, the name's fishy, but hear us out. It was built in the early 19th century by the local salmon fishermen to keep their catch frozen, so insulation was all — it's built into a low slope, with a grass roof. It has been thoroughly insulated now, and stylishly converted into this year's oddest but snuggest holiday home, with stone walls, high vaulted ceilings, a cosy log-burner and glass doors — which give straight onto the superb stretch of St Cyrus Sands, the best bit of beach on the east coast. Glorious. Sleeping eight, it costs £900 with Cottages and Castles (01738 451610, cottages-and-castles.co.uk).

11 Chez Kate in Anglesey

£££££

Apparently, there's a wedding this year. Haven't heard much about it, but we understand the happy couple will be setting up home in Anglesey, which is very sensible of them. It's beautiful, it's uncrowded and it has some terrific beaches — not least Lligwy, a dune-backed expanse of golden sand, bang on for swimming, crabbing, sea kayaking and castle-building. Back up the hill, with panoramic views over the sea to Snowdonia, Redshank Cottage is fit for a prince, a princess and a couple of princelets: we like the deep leather sofas, the log-burner and the hot tub. It costs £909/£1,044 with Rural Retreats (01386 701177, ruralretreats.co.uk) — book it before Wills makes an offer.

12 Kirstie's home-made holiday

£££££

We needn't tell you much about Meadowgate, in Devon. You've already seen most of it on Channel 4. Yes, this is the home that Kirstie Allsopp home-made for the TV series — packed with her crafts and done out in her favoured cosily traditional style. What we can add is that it's huge and rustic-swanky; it sits in a gorgeous National Trust-protected valley; the thatched Old Smithy Inn, up the road, does an excellent pint of Doom Bar; and it's a stroll from Welcombe Mouth beach. Think that covers it. Get 13 of your nearest and dearest together, and go: it costs £2,500/£4,083 with Classic Cottages (01326 555555, classic.co.uk).

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13 Kings of the canal

£££££

Even someone immune to the charm of birds (that'll be me) can't help but love a kingfisher — the pensive pose, the sudden iridescent blue-green flash, the splash, the re-emergence with squirming prey in beak. No? How about otters, herons, even toads? They're all booming along our restored, rejuvenated canals — kingfisher sightings doubled last year — which are now arteries of wildlife between the agri-business prairies. A narrowboat holiday is the way to appreciate them, and to soak up Britain's best scenery at walking pace: a week on the Pennine canals, from Sowerby Bridge (dozens of kingfishers around), costs £1,055/£1,510 on Worcester, a five-star barge sleeping four, through Waterways Holidays (0845 127 1020, waterwaysholidays.com).

14 Paddle to Loch Ness

£££££

Show us a 10-year-old who doesn't get excited about this one and we'll show you a 10-year-old who doesn't get out enough: a family canoeing trip down the Great Glen, through lochs and locks, rivers and canals, from Neptune's Staircase to Urquhart Castle, on the spooky shores of Loch Ness. With one or two other families (the maximum group size is 10), you're exploring by day and wild camping by night, at remote spots on the shoreline. Now that's a proper adventure. The four-day trip costs £445pp, including expert guiding, most meals and all your kit, departing in July or August, with Wilderness Scotland (0131 625 6635, wildernessscotland.com).

15 Hang with the kids

£££££

I'm a fan of PGL's camps for over-7s: kids thrive on the activities and the company is well organised, safety-conscious and caring. But why should the sprogs have all the fun? This year, we're tempted by their July and August family weeks: at Caythorpe Court, in Lincolnshire, you all get to try abseiling, kayaking, high-rope courses, trapeze, zip wires and more, for £365 (children £305), full-board. If you'd prefer France, PGL's Château du Tertre centre, in Normandy, has a similar offer for £355/£319. Call 0844 371 2424 or visit www.pgl.co.uk.

16 Designer Iron Age in Cornwall

£££££

"Escape the cares of the 21st century..." How many times have you read that? And it's rubbish, mostly. Here, though, is somewhere you can: a meticulous replica of a roundhouse, circa 600BC. When it was opened by the Time Team crew 10 years ago, Bodrifty would have been just like home to the original Celtic inhabitants of the scheduled ancient monument next door, with its low granite walls, conical thatched roof and clay oven. Now the owners have worked a bit of Arthurian magic by adding a four-poster bed, fluffy dressing gowns and uplighting, and, hey presto — it's prehistory gone luxe. Well, you can take authenticity too far, you know. In a lovely spot on the Penwith moors (buckets of beaches nearby, plus the excellent Gurnard's Head pub), it's just for two, so you can give full vent to your primeval urges: four nights cost £600 and a week is £980; canopyandstars.co.uk.

17 Junior survival in Sussex

£££££

There comes an age in every child's life when they need to learn to fend for themselves. About 11, we reckon. That's the minimum age for signing up to a five-day junior course at the Ray Mears Bushcraft school (run by the telly survival chappie). At a camp in East Sussex — well, they're probably not quite ready for the Amazon — they'll learn to make fire, build shelters, track, use medicinal plants and much more. Meanwhile, you can scarper for a romantic break at a posh hotel — no point in everyone roughing it. It costs £450 in July and August. Call 01580 819668 or visit raymears.com.

18 Cottage with a cook

£££££

We love cottage holidays. We just hate the cooking. And the washing-up. Oh, and the cleaning, too. The way round it is a catered cottage such as the Riverside, at Helford: the French chef nips in to provide breakfast and a three-course dinner, Mary the housekeeper does the cleaning and lays the fire, leaving you to enjoy the comfy cottage, the lovely little village (good pub) and, best of all, the three boats that come with the place: take the motorboat downstream to cute river beaches or sail up to Frenchman's Creek (yes, the Daphne du Maurier one) for a bit of modern-day piracy. It costs £430pp/£560pp, for a minimum of six people. Call 01865 400825 or visit theriverside-helford.co.uk.

19 Devon's finest

££

The sin of envy is a terrible thing, and I committed it two years ago when admiring the Georgian Bathing House, on the Sharpham Estate, in Ashprington, South Devon. You've dreamt of locations like this: totally secluded under thick woods, on a bend of the River Dart (the TV signal doesn't make it out here, let alone passers-by), it's a Grade II*-listed fairy-tale fancy of a place, with the original octagonal bathing house and a balcony over the water. Sleeping just two, it's got to be the most romantic house in England — this glorious landscape is all yours, apart from the occasional pleasure boat, canoe and seal meandering up from the estuary. Back then, I had to covet it from afar — the owners wouldn't let it — but this year they've relented, and it is available for £451/£1,119 through Helpful Holidays (01647 434063, www.helpfulholidays.com). The first week in June is mine, I tell you — all mine.

20 Cooking with Bareham

£££££

Any foodie knows Lindsey Bareham, author of a dozen recipe books and cookery writer for our daily sister paper. You can get to know her a bit better by staying at the Fish Store, a converted (you guessed it) fish store in the classic Cornish (got it again) fishing village of Mousehole. Over four days, she'll show you how to make the perfect pasty and whip up killer crab dishes, and take you to see how the professionals fillet at Newlyn fish market. (She's big on fish.) It's all-round delicious, and the house is pretty tasty, too, especially the 10ft cinema screen downstairs. The course, which includes three lunches and dinners, all ingredients and four nights' accommodation, costs £600 each for six sharing, with Unique Home Stays (01637 881942, uniquehomestays.com). Keeping the cottage to make a week of it adds £150pp or so.

21 Bargain links in Ireland

£££££

Every golfer with any spirit wants to play the classic links courses of southwest Ireland, the likes of Ballybunion and Tralee. That's why they got so expensive — tee times were booked six months in advance, and if you could get on, you'd be paying up to £210 a round (hence all those helipads by the clubhouses). Happily for us non-tycoons, the recession has sent prices tumbling. Ireland Golf (00 353 66 718 1708, irelandgolf.com) has six-day trips, playing both Ballybunion courses, Tralee twice and Dooks once, for just £793, based on a party of four — and that includes green fees, a four-star hotel and car rental. Fly to Shannon with Aer Arann or Ryanair.

22 Titchmarsh at sea

£££££

Weren't the greenfly a menace last year? Still, our nasturtiums came up lovely. There — all the non-gardeners have stopped reading, so we can let you in on a secret. The Gardeners' World magazine's 20th-anniversary cruise to the best gardens in the British Isles (Bodnant, Mount Usher, Beth Chatto) comes with some rather special additions, namely the estimable Pippa Greenwood and Matthew Biggs, of Radio 4's Gardeners' Question Time, and a certain Alan Titchmarsh. Yes, really. They'll be giving visitors and sharing tips on the Balmoral, which sails from Southampton on August 8 to Guernsey, Dublin and the Isle of Mull. Ten nights of green-fingered bliss start at £1,099, full-board (0800 091 4324, cruise.co.uk). Don't forget your dibber.

23 Ride of your life

£££££

Cycling from Land's End to John o'Groats sounds like the sort of Iron Man challenge most of us would run a mile from. If you can run that mile, though, you might surprise yourself: Discover Adventure (01722 718444, discoveradventure.com) reckons most fit adults are up to it, if they put in the training beforehand. It's worth it — a classic trip of 1,000 miles in 13 days, on quiet roads through some of the best landscapes England and Scotland have to offer, taking in Dartmoor, Shropshire, Cumbria and the Highlands. Departing on May 3 or August 30, it's not cheap at £1,519 — but the price includes hotels, almost all your meals and a support crew of cooks and mechanics all the way.

NEED TO KNOW

The small print

Unless stated, prices are for a week; where two are given, the first is for May, the second for August. Prices for package holidays are per person; prices for cottages and villas are per property. All were accurate at the time of going to press, but what your holiday finally costs depends on many factors — when you go, how many are in your party, the cost of flights (if not included in your package) and so on. As a guide, we've given each trip a £ symbol rating, showing the average all-in cost per person.

Cost

£ Less than £300pp

££ £300-£600

£££ £600-£900

££££ £900-£1,200

£££££ More than £1,200

Essential websites

For a more complete list of which low-cost airlines fly to where from your local airport, go to jumblefly.com. For traditional airlines, try kayak.co.uk and opodo.co.uk. Good sites for finding out which ferry companies cross the Channel from which ports include directferries.co.uk and ferryoffers.co.uk.

Airline contacts

British Airways (0844 493 0787, ba.com); British Midland International (0844 848 8888, flybmi.com); EasyJet (easyjet.com); Flybe (0871 700 2000, flybe.com); Jet2 (0871 226 1737, jet2.com); Ryanair (0871 246 0000, ryanair.com); Thomson Airways (0871 231 4787, flights.thomson.co.uk); Virgin Atlantic (0844 874 7747, virgin-atlantic.com).

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