

## Travel Best Places to Camp 2019



# HIT THE HAY

A brand-new collection of rustic 'pods' near the Welsh market town combine the great outdoors with all the comforts of home (plus a hot tub). Perfect, says tent-shy Jenny Coad



**T**here's a hootie blowing when I arrive at the Cynefin Retreats eco-pods, 3½ miles northeast of bookish Hay-on-Wye, in Powys. I'm not a camper, but I love the great outdoors and, on a wet weekend, this is the best way to enjoy it – from inside. The four brand-new cabins, set amid Corsican pines, have views over the surrounding fields and hills. Clad in corrugated steel and locally grown red cedar, with sinuously curving backs, they complement the nearby farm buildings.

I'm staying in Holly (they're all named after trees) and it's nicely kitted out, with the feel of a cosy lodge. I light the woodburner and spend the afternoon on the sofa watching the squally sky and listening to the wind whoosh and rattle. Now and then, a portly pheasant pokes its head up in the long grass. I begin to think I should try to go for a walk. A sniff outside my door and the wind feels like it could lift my hair off. Even the cows are huddling by the hedge like penguins in a storm. Perhaps not...

So, what makes an eco-pod eco? Well, first of all, the Felgate family, who are behind the project, have form. They set up, and run, Castara Retreats, in Tobago, and sustainability is their ethos. For the Cynefin project, they worked alongside Woodknowledge Wales, used locally grown timber, including Japanese larch, and employed local builders and craftsmen. The shelving is made by Jacob Dauksta, a designer who lives nearby. Instead of air conditioning, there's passive climate control – vents that push the air

**CABIN IN THE WOODS** One of the four pods; and, below, the view from the bedroom



in and out, keeping things fresh. I like the rustic coffee table by a carpenter who has a stall on Portobello Road, and the little wooden bird hooks. Not, sadly, whitened in a nearby glade, but found on eBay.

This is several rungs up from glamping. There's a hot tub on the deck, underfloor heating, one of those frying pan-sized shower heads, a smooth, handleless kitchen in matte charcoal and crockery from Sophie Conran's range for Portmeirion. Of course there's a corkscrew, a tin opener, a cheese grater and a dishwasher. Civilisation.

Best of all is the great big cinema screen that is the wall of windows. You might struggle to get out of bed in the morning, when you can just lie there and count the clouds. There are even views from the shower via a large porthole.

At night, you can wallow in the hot tub, which is like a sturdy paddling pool with spongy sides, and look at the stars. Come in summer and you could burn sausages

“Best of all is the great big cinema screen that is the wall of windows”



in the firepit. Romantic? Yes. The pods are designed with couples in mind: city escapees desperate for some green, some peace. I'm delighted to have a weekend without being woken up by my drunken 20-year-old neighbours.

Cynefin can provide a cot or set the sofa up as a bed for a child, but I would suggest leaving the kids or grandchildren behind.

When the weather calms, I go for a run on the ridge above. The footpaths lead me through hedged tunnels, across streams, down into ditches, up the other side, via open fields with horse-hoof-hole puddles. I pass banks of daffodils and, the highlight, a magnificent Welsh dragon carved from a tree trunk, a sort of Celtic totem pole. No one else is about. There's a boot room at the end of each pod where you can dump mud-caked trainers or wellies at the end of a yomp. Yes, you can bring the dog – two of the pods, Rowan and Hazel, are dog friendly, and there will be a warm tap for washing dirty paws.

Hay-on-Wye is only a 10-minute drive away, and, one evening, we go for supper at St John's Place (or Julia's, as the locals call it, after the owner). The cocktails are imaginative: hot buttered brandy, and hibiscus, lime and chilli sour (£6.50 and £2.80; stjohnsplacehay.tumblr.com). The menu changes weekly. We try the aubergine fritters, mushroom croquettes and fried chicken and chilli slaw (£5, £4.50 and £5.50). If you're sheltering from the rain, the hot chocolate at the eclectic Old Electric Shop is rich, and you can buy the mug it's served in, or perhaps some linen dungarees (£3, £14, £130; oldelectric.co.uk).

I could have spent hours in Richard Booth's Bookshop, once the largest second-hand book store in the world (boothbooks.co.uk). One lady is so comfortable on the sofas, she's nodded off. New books sit alongside second-hand on freestanding shelves. I find a second edition of Dick King-Smith's *The Sheep-pig* for £95 and a neatly written note in the front of a copy of Nancy Mitford's *Madame de Pompadour*: "Too many names. Too disorganised. A jumble. Did not finish."

Once you have stocked up, there's a perfect reading corner by the fire in the pod, where you can lie against the sloping wall, toast your toes and turn the pages.

Jenny Coad was a guest of Cynefin Retreats, which has eco-pods from £150 a night (cynefinretreats.com)