



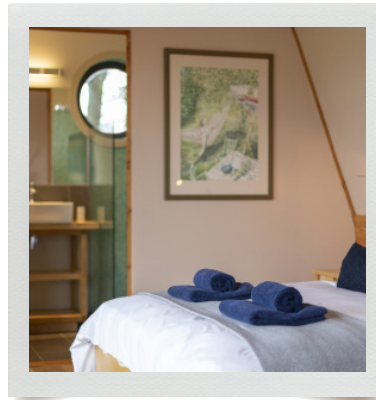
## Weekend away

GOOD BOOKS, GOOD FOOD AND A GOOD WALK;  
IT'S ALL ON TAP IN THIS RETREAT OUTSIDE  
BRITAIN'S BOOKSHOP CAPITAL

Words and photography: **IONA BOWER**

I have always maintained that there is no better way to spend a weekend than pottering around bookshops, stopping occasionally for coffee and tasty morsels, and that is exactly how I was intending to spend a weekend in Hay-on-Wye. It turned out I was wrong. The *very* best way to spend a weekend is pottering around bookshops, stopping occasionally for coffee and tasty snacks and *then* taking your books haul back to a beautiful retreat to spend a few hours walking, eating and then finishing with a soak in a hot tub and an evening reading in a cosy armchair.

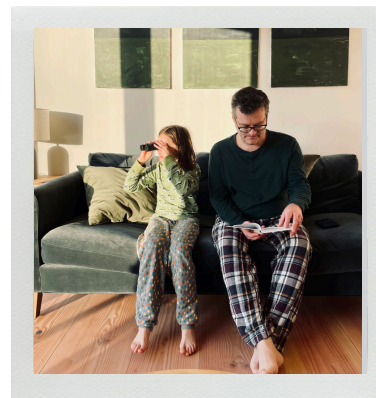
Cynefin Retreats is a small collection of lodges, set in the Welsh borders, just outside the bookish town of Hay-on-Wye and bordering the Brecon Beacons National Park. The lodges sit among meadow and woodland, with long views over to rolling hills and wonderful walks from your front door.



### Where we stayed

We arrived late at Cynefin Retreats, just outside Hay-on-Wye, so it wasn't until we woke the following morning that we could properly explore the fabulous location. From our terrace with hot tub, the grassy hill – with a fire pit area cut into it – runs down into a meadow and then into woodland, with rolling hills peeking over trees.

The luxe lodge we stayed in was equally lovely inside. A large, open-plan space downstairs, pared-back enough that you relax the moment you walk in but with enough little details in the way of books, games and thoughtful comestibles to keep you busy. Upstairs, two supremely comfortable bedrooms have Egyptian cotton linens and Welsh blankets, as well as a bathroom with shower and a bath big enough to swim in. Big tick.



PHOTOGRAPHY: CYNEFIN RETREATS; HAY CASTLE CAFE; IONA BOWER

### What we did

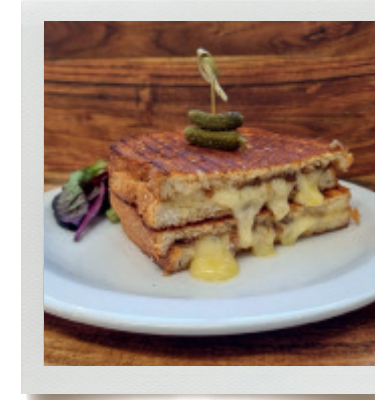
We walked in Cynefin's woodland and on the footpaths beyond. Offa's Dyke trail and the Hay Bluff offer fabulous views a little further afield. The children loved the hand-carved swings, wildlife boxes and den-building spots around the grounds.

Mainly though, we explored the plethora of bookshops in Hay itself. Favourites included Murder and Mayhem (murder mysteries and detective novels), The Poetry Bookshop (speaks for itself) and the delightfully old-fashioned children's bookshop on the road between Hay and Cynefin, which is packed with Rupert annuals, Chalet School novels and everything in between. We ducked in and out of bookshops, stopping regularly to refuel in cafes, and then took home our spoils and settled down in the lodge to read.



### What we ate

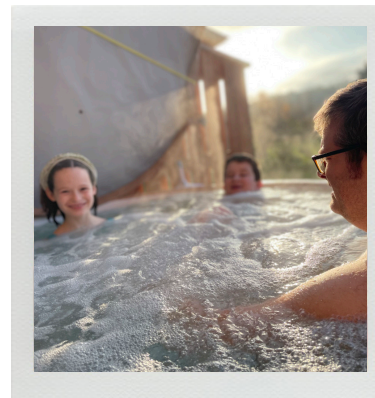
Cynefin can organise 'finish at home' meals and grocery boxes from the Hay Deli, which come recommended for your first dinner and breakfast. But we wanted to explore the deli ourselves, so headed there to pick up local treats and an array of other delicacies to feast on in the lodge. The local meats (including homemade sausages) at CJ Gibbons in Hay are worth stopping for, but the town is packed with independent bakeries, market stalls and the like. We ate well.



We stopped for plenty of coffees – our favourite being crepes and hot chocolates at The Cosy Café. Then, as lunchtime approached and clouds gathered, we dashed into Hay Castle. It has an honesty bookshop as well as a café with splendid views and an enticing menu of local and seasonal dishes. You can't go to Wales and *not* have a Welsh Rarebit so we ordered a selection of those and milk loaf toasties with various fillings to share among us while the rain cleared, and then emerged into the sunshine.

### We also liked

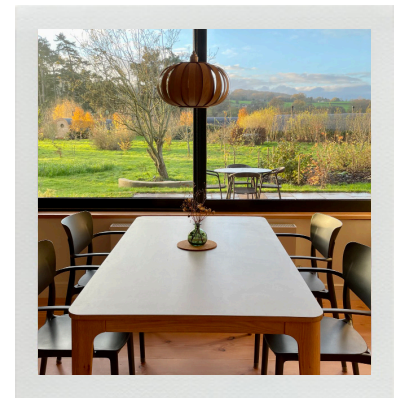
Making the most of the natural world just outside our window at all times of day. We had early morning dips in the hot tub, looking out at the hills, and then came in to dry off over mugs of Welsh tea and a spot of bird watching. Cynefin supplies excellent



bird-watching gear and guides. The birds toing and froing from feeders outside the windows is like having your own private ornithological cinema. Cynefin is in a dark skies reserve, so the children took a telescope to do a bit of stargazing at night, too. Sitting on the terrace, wrapped in blankets, staring up at the silent skies, was just lovely.

### The best thing

That wonderful mixture of wildness and home comforts. Cynefin is a retreat in the true sense of the word. Nature is more than just on your doorstep here; it's all around you, and the lodges are designed to make the most of that, with huge windows and doors that fold right back. It would be a shame to close the curtains at the end of each day but for the fact that inside, every last detail has been thought about, from the atmospheric lighting, to the beautifully scented local bath products, to the handmade blankets and cushions. As I drove away I was mentally considering a total renovation of my own home... as well as planning a new bookshelf or three to house my Hay spoils. 📖



*A stay in a luxe lodge at Cynefin Retreats costs from £295 per night. Smaller luxe 'pods' are available from £191 per night.*