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Riding holiday blog: the delightful Forest of Dean

Ben Scott

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The problem with being male and riding horses is due to clash in anatomical shape. This is why I'm currently not only walking like John Wayne, but also fearing for the future dynasty of little Scotts I had vague aspirations of producing sometime in the future.



When I heard the words 'free hacking holiday', all I focused on was the word 'free'. I had forgotten that I had not sat on a horse for about six months. An office chair and a commuter train doesn't keep your seat used to the peculiar comfort (and I use that term loosely) of a saddle.

The reason for my current discomfort is a two-day hacking holiday in the labyrinth known as the Forest of Dean. Church Farm Holidays had been kind enough to offer this impoverished reporter a horse to borrow — they do not normally offer this service — for two days.

'He looks about 12!'

Once I had met my host Lucy Verity, who reportedly exclaimed to her friends "he looks about 12!" (which in fairness I do), she admitted difficulties in terms of a mount. The horses she owns had been losing shoes at a rate Cinderella would have been proud of, however her friend Carole Broad, vice-chairman of the BHS, was kind enough to lend me her impeccably-schooled dressage horse.



Mr Deuce (pictured top right) was truly a lifesaver. I am used to unruly horses so being able to use a half-halt and get a response was a god-send. Especially as there were plenty of low branches to

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Mr Deuce (pictured top right) was truly a lifesaver. I am used to unruly horses so being able to use a half-halt and get a response was a god-send. Especially as there were plenty of low branches to negotiate. On a 17.3hh horse. Whilst out hacking I saw many paths that had been cleared of low branches perfectly designed for a partnership of our size. However a giggling Lucy insisted that they did not go in the correct direction — I remain unconvinced by this claim!

Our first day's 4hr hack was a real surprise to me. I am used to hacking being a chore, pounding the roads for fitness work, rather than a pleasure. Within 20min we were into the forest heading upwards on a trail that was as rambling as our conversations that filled the day. Lucy was constantly entertaining, though I think our combined laughter ruined any hope we might have

had of seeing wild boar.

Once the mild surprise at my age (not to mention the shininess of my boots which had had their first clean in four years) had subsided, she entertained me with snippets of history about the working forest before agreeing with me that 11.30am was not too soon for a quick stop at a pub. The few locals that we met on our travels were all full of character.

Peace and tranquility

What I found most surprising though was the constant feeling of peacefulness that pervades every aspect of the riding. Moments of pure tranquillity, only once interrupted by my phone blaring out The Strangler's 'Peaches', were commonplace. Lucy told me that those who come on sharp horses are often surprised by the calming effect the forest has on them. I find that easy to believe.

She also took me up to Welshbury Hill Fort, thought to date back to 1600 BC, which is reputed to be the place where the Celtic Dobunni tribe staged its last resistance against the Romans. Now, I am a two pints of larger and a packet of crisps kind of bloke, but even I found it atmospheric.

When we arrived home, I was introduced to my upstairs apartment in a converted granary. Exposed timbers, Sky TV and a bath made me a very happy man. The apartment also has an impressively detailed information pack full of rides and things to do in the local area. A nice touch



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granary. Exposed timbers, Sky TV and a bath made me a very happy man. The apartment also has an impressively detailed information pack full of rides and things to do in the local area. A nice touch was being able to see your horses in their stable, or indeed when they are turned out, from your room. The 50-acre farm also boasts an all-weather gallop, another gallop, arena and some cross-country fences.



Good food and great company

Lucy and John sometimes invite guests to join them for an evening meal and Lucy's cooking is one of the many reasons that their diary is booked full of repeat visitors. In keeping with the holiday as a whole, we spent a relaxed and fun evening swapping stories and getting to know each other. Indeed their other guests, who are also family friends, Althaea Berthon and Hope Gosse, two ladies of later years, had a wealth of experience and storytelling to impart. Never before had I met someone who had escaped from finishing school by taking a coach across war-torn Germany.

The second day's riding was equally entertaining, although I spent as much time out of the saddle as I could to protect my posterior. Although there is no space for long gallops in the forest, cantering uphill is always an option and the proximity of the trees gives an exhilarating feeling.



Throughout my time at the farm I had heard mutterings about 'Dosey' the cow and how she is more than happy to have people sitting on her back. After agreeing enthusiastically on arrival, and being held to my word, my appointment for her was booked for my last afternoon. I did have half a moment's concern when I realised that she was to remain loose in a large open field, but I reminded myself that I am a 'fearless' H&H reporter and decided to man-up.

An 'athletic' vault later, another moment's fleeting concern when she started to shuffle off sideways and I was happily perched on her back giggling like a child. She was a slightly rounder mount than I was used to, but also a better trained one — a perfect square halt was achieved for possibly the first time in my life!



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I left Church Farm happy for the experiences and friends I had made, not least the enthusiastic canine committee who are dedicated to your entertainment, but sad to be leaving. If only the Icelandic volcano, which had been causing flight chaos, could also affect trains.

About Church Farm Holidays

Price: £260-£382 a week for two people. Horses: stable, turnout (ground dependent), hay and straw, £14 per night. For more information please visit: www.churchfarm.uk.net. Tel: 01594 541211

Don't miss H&H's riding holiday special, on sale 30 June, for details of other excellent forest-based riding holidays in the UK, plus details of how you could enjoy riding with the French cowboys in the Camargue

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