

OUR HOLIDAYS Enchanting forests: Forest of Dean

For spectacular scenery, rare wildlife and a warm welcome visit the Forest of Dean...

The forest has always been a place of magic and mystery, where strange things might happen and even stranger creatures might live — but there are very few woodlands that are as enchanted as the ancient Forest of Dean in deepest, darkest Gloucestershire.

'It is a strange and beautiful place,' said the Dean's most famous son, the playwright Dennis Potter. 'A heart-shaped land between two rivers, somehow slightly cut off.'

Isolated by those two great rivers — the Severn on the southeast and the Wye on the southwest — the Forest of Dean might be slightly cut off from both England and Wales, but it has never been ignored.

Once a royal hunting ground, in 1938 it became England's first National Forest Park. It is now a delightful haven of 35 square miles of ancient woodland, lush countryside, pretty villages and the four historic market towns of Newent, Cinderford, Lydney and Coleford, which respectively stand in the north, east, south and west of the forest.

Cinderford proudly proclaims itself the 'Heart of The Forest' and its people are fiercely protective of their land.

Hands Off Our Forest, says a large banner around the town's clock tower, a reference to the

Bracelands (below) is a gateway to the Forest for cyclists (right)



A strange & beautiful place

government's recent proposal to sell off all Forestry Commission land in England. This sparked such big protests from locals, ramblers and environmentalists — 'The green heart of Britain is not for sale,' said conservationist David Bellamy — that the government was forced to do a U-turn.

We decided to explore the Forest of Dean from its western edge, staying at Eurocamp's Bracelands Parc, in Christchurch near Coleford, which is a Forestry Commission estate. Set in beautiful woodlands, with rabbits hopping along its rolling fields, Bracelands was just perfect for a spot of

autumnal camping. We stayed in a Eurocamp Classic tent, which accommodates up to six people (maximum four adults) and can be divided into three bedrooms, with beds, mattresses, pillows and blankets all provided. The living area has a table, chairs, a gas hob and grill, saucepans, crockery and cutlery and, should the weather be kind, there is also outdoor furniture and a charcoal barbecue grill. None of the tents are far from a toilet and shower block, or a running water tap, and there are also washing and drying facilities and a dishwashing area. But because Bracelands is a back-to-nature experience — more about camping than glamping — you won't find electricity or a fridge, although you will be provided with lanterns with rechargeable batteries and a cool box with replaceable icepacks. There are no children's clubs, but there is a playground in the grounds of a former hunting

lodge where you can also get a full English breakfast, lunches and afternoon tea at very reasonable prices. Part of Bracelands' appeal is that it is a gateway to the entire forest, with mile after mile of marked paths for both walkers and cyclists. One of the nicest walking trails starts at Bracelands and takes about two hours at a leisurely pace. It winds through pretty Mailscot Wood up to the Iron Age fort and the cliff top at Symonds Yat Rock. Sometimes referred to as 'the birthplace of British Tourism', the Wye Valley and Yat Rock have been used as a travel destination since the 18th century after they were popularised by the Reverend William Gilpin, the pioneer of the Picturesque movement. Like Gilpin, whose writings influenced the popularity of English landscape painting and inspired the Romantic poets, you will be mesmerised by the stunning

views of the Wye Valley from Yat Rock. And it wasn't just Gilpin and William Wordsworth who were drawn to the place. JK Rowling, who lived in the Forest of Dean during her childhood, took inspiration from the beauty and mystery of the landscape, and the viewpoint at Symonds Yat, which stands 400 feet above the Wye Valley, is the spot where Harry and Hermione camped in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 1*.

The dense woodlands and dramatic valleys of Symonds Yat have also conspired to create a peaceful habitat for some of the forest's most diverse wildlife: fallow deer, wild boar and peregrine falcons. Indeed, the cliff top offers a genuine bird's eye view of the peregrine falcons that nest in the limestone cliffs of nearby Coldwell Rocks. The falcons are not the only attraction, however. On the

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Wild boar are among the locals



Above: the Forest floor blanketed with bluebells. Right: the 13th-century Church of All Saints in delightful Newland



Ann's tips

- Bring some creature comforts, like your own duvet and sheets, to make camping more luxurious.
- Avoid walking through dense woodland or other thick cover, as these are the places where you are most likely to encounter wild boar.
- Remember cycling is restricted to the hard-stoned forest roads. By keeping to these routes you will be helping protect the natural heritage.
- Visit The Forest Bookshop in Coleford, excellent on local interest and Dennis Potter rarities.

Here we go!

For tourist information on the Forest of Dean call 0845 838 8799 or visit www.visitforestofdean.co.uk

Eurocamp offers UK Escapes at Bracelands Campsite, call 0844 406 0402 or visit www.eurocamp.co.uk for more information. Only one car is allowed per pitch (extra vehicles must be left in the site car park and a £5 per night charge may apply). Eurocamp bookings will not be taken after 11 September 2011, although the campsite is open until 3 November, call 01594 837165 for details.

Left: the view from Symonds Yat is stunning. Right and far right: Merlin was partly filmed at Puzzlewood



morning we were there, 22 different types of birds had been

sighted before noon, including a spotted flycatcher, a hobby and a kingfisher.

Another place of particular note is Puzzlewood, an enchanted forest within the Forest. Here you can explore a mile of meandering pathways, taking you through eerie ravines, moss-covered rocks, wooden bridges, strange rock formations and gnarled branches, all set in 14 acres of ancient woodland.

JRR Tolkien was a frequent visitor to the Dean and it is believed that Puzzlewood was the inspiration for the fairy-tale forests of Middle Earth in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Its gothic feel has made it a popular film location in more recent years — the BBC has shot scenes for *Merlin* and *Doctor Who* here, and on the day we visited a crew was preparing to shoot a big production movie called *Jack the Giant Killer*.

Puzzlewood also has a café, playground area, willow maze and an array of friendly faces, including pygmy goats, soay sheep (who shed their own

wool), Shetland ponies, donkeys and a 32-stone pig called Lulu.

Children will equally enjoy a visit to Perrygrove Railway over the road, where they can ride on one of Mr Chuffity's Friendly Engines — a genuine steam train complete with smoke and whistle — and take part in a treasure hunt.

On the way back to Bracelands, step back in time in the lovely village of Newland, with its rows of almshouses, the magnificent 13th-century All Saints Church — known as the 'Cathedral of the Forest' — and The Ostrich Inn, where you can get good food and real ales.

For one lasting memory, drive up to the Kymin and Beaulieu Wood, which is one of the Wye Valley's Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty. The Kymin is a naval temple, built in 1800 as a tribute to the British navy, and when Admiral Nelson visited it two years later, he remarked that it was one of the most beautiful places he had ever seen.

He was right. The view is breathtaking: stretching from Raglan Castle in the west to Golden Valley in the east, you can also pick out various local sites, most notably the big white house of Rockfield Studios (where some of the biggest names in rock music have recorded) and the vibrant green fields of the Ancre Hill Vineyard, which is definitely worth a visit.

Ann Scanlon