

Britain

Confessions of a Center Parcs virgin

Everyone knows it's a bit like camping, but with better sanitation, right? Wrong, as an activity-filled break at the new resort in Woburn shows

**Judith
Woods**



It's a well-known fact that unsophisticated types, who have never stayed at Center Parcs, typically think the entire place is covered in a big retractable glass dome. Pah - what stupidity!

"So," I inquired on arriving at the new Woburn Forest Center Parcs, which opens officially next Friday. "Where's the big glass dome? Has it been retracted?"

Dear reader, two days on, I blush at my newbie gaucheness. But in fairness, all I knew about the place was that it was a bit like camping but with a better loo block. How wrong I was.

My husband, who also thought Center Parcs was a fully glazed resort and a bit like camping but in a greenhouse, actually refused to come. Instead, I brought my two daughters, aged 12 and five, and my friend and her two sons, aged 12 and nine. This was

partly because I thought it would be more fun for the children - but mostly because only a madwoman would take her children off for a half-term trip alone, without so much as a drinking companion.

When we phoned Daddy on the first evening to tell him the "tent" was a spacious waterfront lodge with four deluxe en suite bedrooms, wall-mounted plasma screen televisions and a games room with a snooker table, I could hear his immensely satisfying grumble of regret. As I casually dropped in the fact that we had our very own sauna out the back, bikes to ride where we pleased, boat trips planned and an all-day subtropical swimming experience, with snacks, I distinctly heard him hastily Googling train times. So obviously, being a loving wife, I hung up. It's not just children who have to learn life's hard lessons.

Never having been to any of the four other Center Parcs in the country - in Whinell Forest in Cumbria, Sherwood Forest in Nottinghamshire, Longleat

Forest in Wiltshire and Elveden Forest in Suffolk - I had nothing to judge Woburn by. But from the moment I engaged in merry chit-chat with the woman at the check-in by the front gate, I was bowled over. Everything had been thought of; so much so that Woburn had the other-worldly atmosphere of a place designed according to some sort of finely honed middle-class leisure algorithm. And I mean that as a compliment.

It offered space, greenery, a Strada restaurant, a small lake with an obliging pair of mallards and a dozen entertaining ducklings, worthy conservation values, electric vehicles, a smattering of upmarket retail opportunities and enough activities to exhaust a pack of springer spaniels, never mind four children. And the children adored every exhilarating moment; treasure hunts and climbing, archery and badminton.

Even my five-year-old, who wasn't big enough to do gung-ho activities such as Laser Quest or riding a Segway, was in seventh heaven. She made new

friends in the wave pool, she tried moules marinière in Café Rouge and the good-humoured chap at the roller skating rink kindly let her have a very quick go, without charging, for the three minutes she was upright.

Actually, the staff smiled so much it was quite unnerving at first. I must confess that at one point I even shrieked: "What's all this happiness about? This is Britain and it's just started raining, for heaven's sake!"

And you know, they only smiled more broadly than before. Rain rarely disrupts play; grown-ups might scurry indoors to the on-site Starbucks, but children, we tend to forget, aren't overly bothered about showers if there's fun to be had.

My fun was relearning how to ride a bike; the last time I rode one I ended up unconscious on a French roadside. When I fell off my bike this time, something metallic crunched disagreeably. Unbidden, a pleasant young man came to my aid, sorted my gears, righted me and released me back into the wild.

His can-do helpfulness was prevalent; when we wanted to swap one activity for another there was little fuss. When we painted pottery and a frog bumped into my five-year-old's kitten, a member of staff whisked it away, repainted the offending chip and sent it back for reglazing before my daughter could even open her mouth and howl in outrage.

For lads and dads there was a Sports Bar, to watch football, albeit with a play area, so fathers could be, nominally at least, left to mind babies and toddlers while mothers made a pilgrimage to the spa.

I was booked into the spa for the first morning, but kept deferring it as it was actually quite pleasant to spend my downtime drinking coffee on the balcony and watching the children hurtling about on bikes below. When eventually I dragged myself away to the glorious Aqua Sana spa, on the last morning, I almost dissolved with pleasure. This was high-end, and then some. So much so, I didn't mind not having a treatment, because otherwise I might have missed a stop on the journey to ultimate bliss. In the space of three hours I took a herbal inhalation bath, a lava-volcano sauna, a rain walk through a simulated

tropical thunderstorm and was steamed, minerally, aromatically and blossomy.

There was the lemon grass sauna, which felt like melting inside a sherbet lemon, the salt room, which was invigorating, and the full-body multi-sensory spa, which tipped me to such a point of cellular tranquillity that I nodded off in the aqua-meditation room. Afterwards, I was so relaxed I could barely walk and, in truth, if I'd visited the spa on the first morning I would have selfishly insisted on going every day. All day. Meanwhile, back at the lodge, not one of the six televisions was on. Instead, dens were being built and games invented.

My quibbles were very minor; baskets on the bikes would have been a bonus, for schlepping wet towels and swimsuits back from the pool. There were very few clocks, which might have theoretically promoted chillaxing, but made it tricky to coordinate meetings. And when I asked the well-scrubbed young people manning the activities desk if they had a map of walks, their bafflement was really rather sweet.

"Where do you want to walk to?" the bright-eyed activities bunny replied.

"You know – just a walk," reiterated the guest.

"But where do you want to end up?"

"In nature. In the woods."

"You're already in the woods!" Big smile. It briefly occurred to me that I ought to feel snooty about the absence of nature walks, but given that I had no intention of going on one, I decided against it.

Center Parcs is orchestrated entertainment and manicured nature, which for a short break, suited us fine. The glass-sided "dome" or Subtropical Swimming Paradise, heated to 29.5C, housed not just the slides and water rides, but a profusion of orchids, palms and bamboos, rescued by botanists from Sumatra, Laos and Burma, where they were endangered by deforestation.

By the end of three days, the children had to be bullied, cajoled and bribed to get into the car. They have also been pleading with their father since we got back to take them again.

After all, he's never been to Center Parcs and probably still believes the whole site is covered by a big retractable glass dome.

Essentials

● A stay at the new Woburn Forest Center Parcs (08448 266266; centerparcs.co.uk/woburn) costs from £399 for a four-night midweek break in a two-bedroom Woodland Lodge, from £799 for a four-bedroom Executive Lodge, or £1,399 for a top-of-the-range four-bedroom new-style Exclusive Lodge with private games room, sauna, steam room and hot tub. The price includes unlimited entry to the Subtropical Swimming Paradise, but not activities that have to be booked, such as Segway hire or crafts sessions. Visitors can bring their own bikes or hire them there. There are several restaurants and a supermarket on site and all lodges have kitchens.

We had our own sauna, bikes to ride where we pleased and trips planned



F STOP PRESS

Clockwise from top:
Woburn Forest Center
Parcs; putting the
finishing touches to
the new site; and the
infinity pool at the
Aqua Sana spa



