

Center of excellence

The fifth — and final — British Center Parcs has achieved family-holiday perfection, says **Stephen Bleach**

There are times when travel journalists bear a heavy responsibility, not just to readers, but to travel businesses, too. An unwarranted comment here, an overly negative word there, and bang: a place could go under, jobs could be lost.

This is not one of those times. I could write what I damn well like about Woburn Forest, Britain's first new Center Parcs for 12 years. I could say the Bedfordshire site was the secret lair of a Bond villain and the pool is filled with killer jellyfish. It wouldn't matter, because when it opens this Friday, it will be full, and it will stay full, possibly for ever. All Center Parcs (Woburn is the fifth) are full, all the time. They have an occupancy rate of 97.2%. Last year, 1.7m guests visited. No review could dent the shiny, green power of the brand.

So it's a little disappointing to have to report that the new Center Parcs is... brilliant. It's a work of leisure genius. There are no killer jellyfish. Though there might be something in the Bond villain thing.

The suspicion that Blofeld might be lurking up the top of the futuristic Subtropical Swimming Paradise, stroking

his white cat, is a product of the strange sense of unreality you find at Center Parcs. It's part of what makes them so successful, and Woburn Forest is the most unreal yet — spotless, calm, efficient, otherworldly. As I cycled around the Parc on a preview visit last weekend, a voice in the back of my head whispered that the whole thing was

slightly spooky. But it was easily drowned out by my kids screaming "Awesome!" at every turn.

They had a point. It looks great. The planting is shooting up and the site already feels green and leafy. The 625 lodges are pretty outside and verging on luxurious inside, with deep carpets, slick kitchens, power showers and lush beds. The Exclusive-level lodges are flasher yet: they sleep eight, have four bathrooms, five toilets, six tellies, a games den with Xbox and a pool table, and your own hot tub, sauna and steam room in the garden. You won't want to leave.

Which would be daft, because the whole idea of Center Parcs is to charge around doing stuff. So we did. First up, the Subtropical Swimming Paradise. It's fab: a tumultuous wave pool, white-knuckle water slides (the Tornado raft had me screaming louder than the kids), clever play areas for younger children, the laziest of lazy rivers, all amid

a forest of tropical plants. (There are 8,000 of them, gathered from Burma, Laos and Sumatra, and all 700 species are apparently “at risk”. I’m sure it’s all terribly ecological and planet-saving somehow, but you can’t help thinking that between logging and climate change, the rainforests have enough to cope with, without having to supply water parks in Bedfordshire.)

When you’ve tired of splashing about – which the kids never will – there’s the usual range of more than 100 activities. We did fencing, climbing, roller skating, “aqua jetting”, which is buzzing around the pool behind motorised propellers, and “laser combat”, which is paintballing without paintballs. They were all fun, apart from the guy in laser combat who seemed to think he was in Afghanistan. There’s always one.

The whole place is very big on nature. As well as installing green roofs, biomass boilers and so on, Center Parcs claims it has actually improved the ecology of the forest. It offers lots of outdoor activities, but don’t expect Bear Grylls. This is nature lite: Center Parcs likes to keep wilderness within set boundaries, preferably with a hot tub in the middle.

Which brings us to the spa. At the risk of gushing, it’s amazing: a 77,500 sq ft, many-chambered temple of steam, minty pongs, ice fountains and indoor/outdoor pools. The robed guests wandered about looking slightly dazed, which I suppose is the idea.

You don’t come to Center Parcs for the food, which is just as well. The 13 restaurants and cafes are mainly chain concessions – Café Rouge, Strada, Starbucks – apart from the Shearing House, which is exclusive to Woburn, but tastes like it’s a chain concession. There are sheepskins on the walls and the exact same combination of brand-new mismatched chairs at each table.

My pork belly was OK, the vegetables were a soggy travesty and the food took ages, but the waitress was so nice we didn’t mind. My advice? They’ve given you a flash kitchen. Use it.

With so much to do, Center Parcs breaks have always been surprisingly tricky to organise. You need a PA to co-ordinate everything. Woburn’s even made that much easier, with a clever app to book and timetable activities, and a microchipped wristband that does everything from open your pool locker to pay for your lunch.

Ah, paying. One area where Woburn isn’t an improvement is prices. The breaks themselves aren’t cheap (see below), and the activities are positively hefty. Our 75 minutes of shooting laser guns set us back £86 for four.

Price aside, all the little improvements add up to something larger. The company says this is the last Parc they’ll open in the UK, so it’s fitting that this is the acme of the Center Parcs experience. Woburn Forest is genius not because it has anything much different from the others, but because it has refined and perfected every element: carefully sanitised nature, crowd-pleasing activities, comfort, friendliness, all adding up to a cocoon of enjoyment delivered with seamless efficiency.

Yes, it’s utterly naff – cool people do not Center Parc. Yes, it’s artificial, and unreal, and slightly spooky. If you can’t stomach that, you won’t go, and they won’t care, because millions of others will. One of them will be me. Well, the kids love it.

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A bigger splash
Left, Conor Bleach tests the Subtropical Swimming Paradise (above). Below, Jacqui, Molly and Conor take aim



Peter Tarry, Stephen Bleach, Wire Image





Look and learn, son
Stephen leads by example on the climbing wall. Below, Mum and Dad's room in the Woodland Lodge

