

## Family breaks

# Welcome to the new Center Parcs

‘Sub-tropical’ pools, water rides and spas have come to Woburn Forest, an hour from London. **Julia Brookes** gets a sneak preview

I am sitting in a bubbling hot tub at my “exclusive” lodge, gazing at the towering conifers of Woburn Forest and the starry canopy above, while drinking a toast to the Labour MP Hazel Blears. Sounds unlikely? If it hadn’t been for the former communities secretary overruling the planning inspectors, Center Parcs’ fifth holiday village, near Flitwick in bucolic Bedfordshire, might never have been built — and I wouldn’t be enjoying a taster of what’s in store when it opens officially on Friday.

Cycling around the undulating 362-acre site on the Duke of Bedford’s estate, it looks like £250 million well spent, although as CEO Martin Dalby says, nothing here is that different from the other four villages — everything has just been updated. There are 625 wooden-clad lodges dotted about the trees, plus a 75-room hotel and

six spa suites, and if you’ve ever heard Center Parcs being sniffily dismissed as a middle-class Butlin’s, forget that comparison. This is rustic bliss for townies (and the closest Center Parcs to London, at just an hour’s drive north of the capital).

More than 25 years at the top of the UK short-break food chain has honed its design skills, and it knows what we want. These aren’t holiday chalets but high-spec, low-energy houses that you’d happily call home, with swish open-plan interiors, picture windows and sloping roofs. My top of the range lodge has four incredibly comfortable en suite bedrooms, each with crisp linens, a flat-screen TV, a smart kitchen with gadgets aplenty and even a games room with a small pool table — plus hot tub, sauna and steam room outside.

But my children, Center Parcs Elveden regulars, barely give all this gorgeousness a second glance before haring off to the village’s heart — the Sub-Tropical Swimming Paradise — and one of the reasons why Center Parcs has been recession-proof (and able to boast an astonishing year-round occupancy of 97 per cent). It’s

encased in a clamshell exterior with an enormous glass frontage and filled with lush plants nobly rescued from areas of

East Asia threatened with deforestation.

They whizz through three exhilarating water rides — Tornado, Twister and Typhoon — as well as a lazy river, an adventure playground and every kid's favourite, the open-air Wild Water Rapids (although, curiously, nowhere to have a proper swim). The verdict? "Paradise" is slightly bigger than the one at Elveden. And my husband comes back from the Typhoon looking distinctly shaken, which means it's perfect for keeping bored teens coming back for more.

What I'd certainly make a return trip for is Woburn's Aqua Sana: big, beautiful and as sleek as anything you'll find in a five-star hotel, although nowhere near as snooty. I wander through six "multi-sensory" spa areas, trying out myriad steam rooms and saunas, fragranced with everything from blossom to lemongrass, a rain walk (aka bracingly cold shower), reflexology footbaths, cocoon-like relaxation rooms and a warm, albeit small, outdoor infinity pool with massage jets and calming views of the forest. It's a glorious place to be, and a three-hour session is barely enough to do it all. My facial in one of the 22 treatment rooms leaves me relaxed to the point of comatose, and the staff make my

14-year-old spa first-timer feel comfortable.

We decide that it's the staff that make Woburn special. Mainly young and local, they're endlessly enthusiastic and uniformly cheery, whether they're supervising one of the hundred

or so activities —

favourites are laser combat, Kettlecise (workouts with kettlebell weights), aerial adventure and canoeing on the lake — or helping me to select the perfect bike to get around on (you really do need a bike).

Of course there are a few niggles. I chat to Nicole Guest from Wendover in Buckinghamshire who tells me that while her children William and Josie much prefer it to Longleat, because it's less hilly, and she thinks the lodges are nicely done, she also

feels there's still the same range of "over-priced, mediocre chain restaurants".

And, having given it a try, Norman and Joanne Fletcher, from Boston in Lincolnshire, won't be coming back, despite admiring the shiny spa and the sports plaza. "It's not as good as Elveden," Joanne says. "There are no communal areas just for lounging as there are there so we've spent more time in our villa. You've either got to eat or shop."

There are indeed more shops (stocked with plenty of middle-class staples such as Emma Bridgewater, Cath Kidston and Fat Face) and restaurants, including the Shearing House — all industrial chic and communal tables, that serves a great Sunday roast and local bitter. The nifty new wristbands that double as house and locker keys can be loaded with credit-card details and used to pay in various outlets, making it all too easy to spend money.

However, the main complaint this summer is likely to be the cost of a break. Even a two-bedroom woodland lodge, the lowest grade of accommodation, will set you back £899 for a three-night weekend in August. When we checked, this compared with £599 at Elveden. If you fancy a few days hanging out in the illuminated hot tub of the top-range lodge, sleeping eight, that will cost £2,899 — and that's if you can nab one as they're almost sold out.

The price at Elveden for the same date was £900 less. You could afford a budget break with guaranteed sunshine for the same money, but if your kids have anything to do with it you probably won't.

More than two million of us will stay in a [Center Parcs](http://centerparcs.co.uk) over the next year, all drawn by the promise of adventure-lite for the whole family, with as much or as little activity as we want — whatever the weather.

## Need to know

Julia Brookes was a guest of [Center Parcs](http://centerparcs.co.uk) (03448 267 723, [centerparcs.co.uk](http://centerparcs.co.uk)). Three-night breaks in a two-bedroom lodge at Woburn Forest start at £399



The new Center Parcs in Woburn Forest; below left, a lodge interior

