

Find some family harmony

The independence of a cottage, the facilities of a country-house hotel: a new kind of holiday complex makes an ideal family break, says **Rob Ryan**

When we look for a holiday cottage, there's one thing that many of us put a premium on: splendid isolation. For a few days at least, we want our little home to be a castle, with a moat of wide-open spaces in every direction. It's an attractive idea — until the moment you get there, unpack the bags, settle in and think ... um ... what do we do?

And that's where groups of cottages come into their own. We're not talking about Butlins-style chalet complexes here: we mean places with a bit of character and seclusion, often conversions of the outbuildings or workers' cottages of large estates.

They have plenty of advantages. For a start, they're often located in the middle of extensive grounds, rather than having a patch of garden. They tend to come with more facilities than a single cottage — a dedicated games room for the kids, perhaps; a soft play area for toddlers; a tennis court or two; even swimming pools. Children have the chance to meet like-minded peers around the pin-ball machine or pool — always a bonus for families. And they allow large groups to holiday together with a minimum of fuss and with the maximum of privacy, certainly compared to taking over a single house.

In short, cottage complexes are a great way to holiday — and we've found 10 of the best. Prices are for a week.

1 MAINS OF TAYMOUTH COTTAGES

Perthshire

With six converted dwellings around a central courtyard, in the village of Kenmore, Mains of Taymouth has a fabulous setting at the head of Loch Tay — plenty of forests, hills, lochs and ancient history to explore. The cottages sleep between 3 and 10.

Facilities: there's an on-site nine-hole golf course, a bistro, children's swings, and rabbits and ducks. Cottages are very well equipped: some have their own sauna and hot tub.

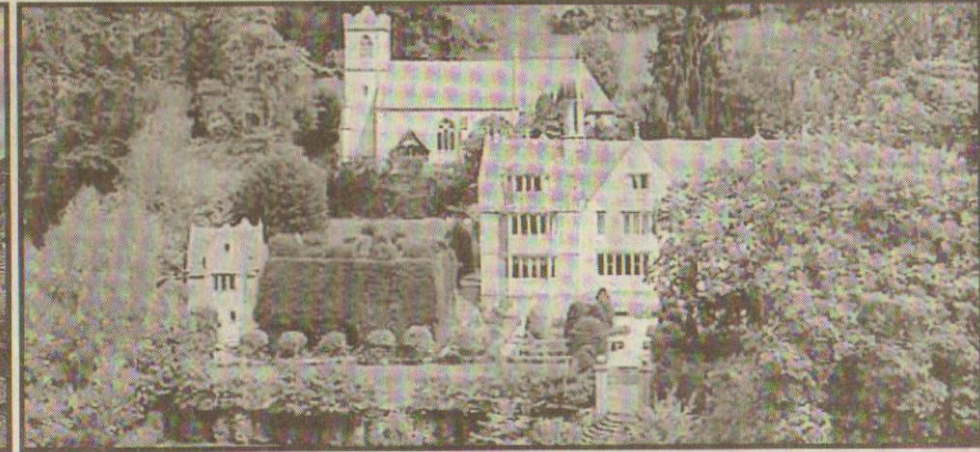
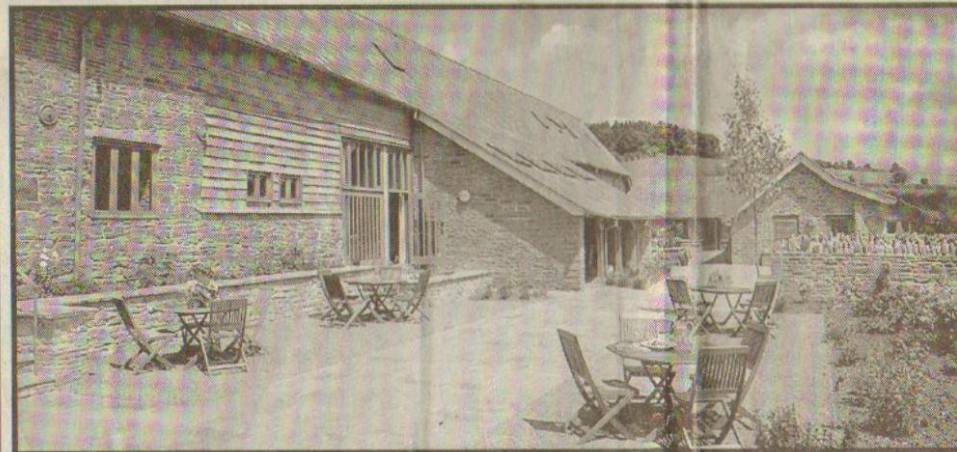
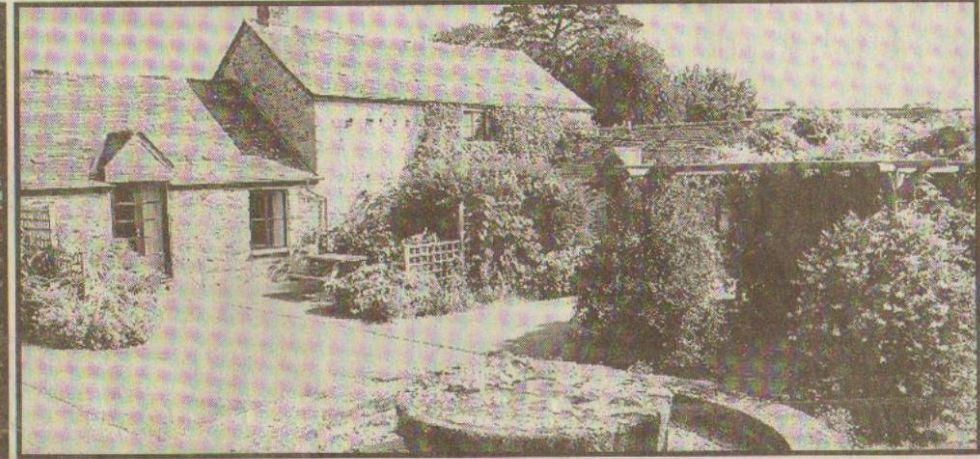
Ideal for: those who want to combine a few holes (Glen-eagles is also nearby) with a taste of the Highlands (if you want some hand-holding, the cottages offer guided Highland Adventure Safaris).

But: you haven't quite got the golf course or restaurant (see below) to yourself — there is a small caravan park, run by the same owners, down the lane, although this is highly regarded and well run (with enforced restrictions on noise).

Eating out: the Byre Bistro is on site if cooking palls, but there are a couple of worthwhile places in Aberfeldy (about six miles away) — Farleyer House (01887 820332) and 7 The Square (01887 829120), both of which use well-sourced local ingredients.

Dogs? Yes.

How much? Archway, which sleeps five, costs from £326-£587; Stables, which sleeps eight, with two lounges and a sauna, plus a hot tub on



All together now: for impressive facilities and oodles of character, try the cottage complexes at Taymouth (top left), Tredethick (top right), Ford Abbey (bottom left) and Owlpen Manor (bottom right)

the patio, comes in at £636-£1,320. Three- or four-night short breaks from £250. **Contact:** 01887 830226, www.taymouth.co.uk.

2 BEACON HILL FARM COTTAGES

Northumberland

Twelve comfortable and very well-equipped cottages, sleeping two to six each, on 350 acres of grass and woodlands, with beautiful views to the coast and hills of the northeast. **Facilities:** there's a fantastic 40ft indoor pool, a sauna, a steam

room, sunbed, a spa room and a large gymnasium, an all-weather tennis court, a games room, an adventure playground, all-weather cricket nets and a two-acre trout lake for fly-fishing. Riding is available on the farm in the summer. Home-made meals can be pre-ordered to be waiting in the cottage freezer. It has won a fistful of awards, including the ETC's Self-catering Holiday of the Year. **Ideal for:** the hyperactive family — swim, pump iron, play tennis, bowl a few overs and walk those rolling hills.

But: no butts.

Eating out: The Angler's Arms at nearby Weldon Bridge is a very atmospheric old coaching inn (although the actual restaurant is an old Pullman railway carriage).

Dogs? No.

How much? A cottage sleeping four costs from £350-£820. Three-night short breaks start at £325.

Contact: 01670 780900, www.beaconhill.co.uk.

3 BARNACRE COTTAGES

Lancashire

Just four converted cottages (sleeping four to eight) set in 12 acres, in the beautiful Forest of Bowland, with views across the Lake District. The interiors are a godsend for those fed up

wood-burning fires, Mark Wilkinson kitchens, Miele and Neff appliances.

Facilities: kids' play area, all-weather tennis court.

Ideal for: families who want more than the basic self-catering experience, and who prefer to cook in the sort of kitchens and eat off the kind of crockery they'd like to have at home.

But: not a huge amount for small kids to do on site. Active older kids will find plenty of diversions in the area, though.

Eating out: try the Michelin-starred Heathcote's, nine miles away — though families often favour the Italian restaurant Quattro's, on the A6 at Forton.

Dogs? No.

How much? The Piggeries sleeps four plus cot and costs



4 VERE LODGE

Norfolk

to 61 people at full occupancy) and the facilities, Vere manages to offer an air of peace and tranquillity in eight acres. There are plenty of animals on site to help keep kids amused, and the vast beaches of north Norfolk are a 30-minute drive away.

Facilities: a leisure centre with heated pool, sauna, solarium, games room and table tennis. There's a shop, and frozen meals can be pre-ordered.

Ideal for: anyone who wants to combine country with comfort, especially families. The short breaks are very good value.

But: not for those averse to a floral pattern — the cottages are traditionally furnished. Heating and electricity are not included in the price.

Eating out: it's worth booking