

Paradise found, in the heart of big tree country

It's going to let you in on a secret. I've found the perfect place, less than two hours drive from Glasgow, Edinburgh or Aberdeen, for a

by Campbell Ramage

family mini-break. But please don't tell all your friends, otherwise the

place will be over-run next time you visit.

While most folk see the half-term break to grab a quick bit of sun to top up their Vitamin D, or head to the coast for a bit of a city break, we opted to

stay closer to home. No cramming everything but the kitchen sink into one of those tiny hand-digger coves for our family of four this year. We were excited to bypass the A9 and take the scenic route this time.

And scenic is exactly what you'll get round these parts at this time of year, for Perthshire is Scotland's big tree country and in Autumn the glens and forests are bursting with reds, browns and yellows that would give New England a run for its money.

We had booked a short stay at Mains of Taymouth country estate in East Perthshire, just inland from the centre of Scotland. We were staying in Ardenay Cottage in the older part of the estate - perfect for a family of four but, there are plenty of other options, with some places sleeping up to 12 guests. You can even bring along your four-legged friends. As we pulled up outside there was only one word to be heard from each of us - 'Wow!'

THIS old farm building has had a thorough modern makeover and as you walk through the front gate the first thing you notice is the smell - perfect for relaxing after a long day. Inside the entrance to the building is this much-needed coupe which you unlock.

As the name suggests the estate sits at the end of Loch Tay, at the mouth of the River Tay. It is beautiful round here, we strolled along the waterfront for a while before heading into the old Taymouth Castle estate where the kids found a great playground.

The next day was so jam-packed we barely had time to catch a breath. After breakfast we headed to nearby Cluny Castle to see the glen. Because of squirrels, before heading back to the estate where the kids were booked in for a pool-cum-spa experience. Most of them were pretty nervous but Elaine at the station was great, and with the help of posties Flora and Annet, they managed a half hour tick along by the river, while we learned a little of the local history. By now the thought of the hot tub was appealing but the



Nature: Head off on a wildlife safari at Mains of Taymouth

sun was still shining and the hot sauce-calm as we grabbed the chance to hire a couple of loaves from the local bakery and explore the nearby woods and grounds.

After all that we were starving, and when better to eat than at the Courtyard Bar and Restaurant, just a short stroll from our front door. Be sure to book in advance though, as this place fills up with guests and birds every night. The menu is a mix of classic favourites and they do a mean spicy pizza. After dinner there was only one thing left to do. Dive into the hot tub for a quick moonlit dip before bed. It really would have been rude not to.

With our bags packed we all agreed we weren't quite ready to head for home just yet, so we took the about three along to the Red Deer Centre in Duff, where the vets tried their hand at gold-panning and the centre's resident deer expert Tony has two cool spring venison, rosy hangers to add him with his preparation.

Our two-day mini break felt more like a fortnight with the amount we managed to fit in. And there was still more to see. There's a golf course on the estate, boat hire, wildlife safaris and mountain bike trails.

We'll definitely be back for another visit. That's if it's not fully booked now. I've got my secret out the bag.

TRAVEL FACTS

To book a stay at Mains of Taymouth visit www.taymouth.com, cook or call on 08587 830225. The Red Deer Centre is at www.nighlandsafari.net or call on 0857 826071.

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