

TREASURE HIGHLAND

COURTYARD The Granary Court cottage was the perfect base for the holiday

Outdoor activities and animal magic prove to be perfect for all ages as the hunt for hidden treasure helps sort the boys from the men. Learning to ride horses is an optional extra.

CLARE JOHNSTON

They may just be an hour-and-a-half by car from the Scottish capital but the Highlands are really a world away.

Setting off with my husband and two sons for a weekend break, we had all the usual tensions of taking wrong turns and misreading signs as we headed to our destination of Aberfeldy.

For our first stop, we were to join the Red Deer Encounter organised by Highland Safaris, and pulled into the car park just in time for the 12.30 start.

Led by our guide and owner of the attraction, Donald, we got up close and personal with the deer, learning all about their life cycles, habits and personalities.

The boys were allowed to hand-feed the animals and they turned out to be friendly enough, in spite of those antlers.

We had lunch at the café, a real treat of home-cooked, hearty dishes enjoyed next to a coal-burning stove.

But the highlight of the afternoon was the gold panning, also organised by Highland Safaris.

Armed with our rubber pans, we were each given a bucket of dirt to sift our way through and, what do you know, there was gold in them thar hills.

In truth, we found only small flecks of actual gold but we unearthed large amounts of fool's gold, along with a few little gems.

Our eight-year-old son, Oliver, was beside himself with glee, declaring himself rich by the end of his panning session and asking where he could trade them in for an iPhone 5.

He didn't take the news that his discovery wasn't worth thousands well.

There was plenty to do for younger children too, with a play park and

mini-tractors to scoot along in, which kept our six-year-old son Sam entertained while we concentrated on looking for gold.

Afterwards, we headed to the Mains of Taymouth estate where we had booked a self-catering holiday house – one of several at the 120-acre site, which also offers holiday apartment lets.

The estate is close to the conservation village of Kenmore and bordered by the Tay Forest Park and River Tay.

It's a stunning and peaceful setting that transports you away from all the stresses and strains of city living.

We stayed in the Granary Court cottage, part of the converted 19th century courtyard building.

It has had both a tasteful and luxurious upgrade, with our cottage boasting a really impressive open-plan kitchen with stairs leading up to a large lounge.

Granary Court sleeps eight, with four bedrooms (two en suite), a private garden, hot tub and sauna – the last three features, proving a particular hit with the kids.

Whether rain or sunshine, they were able to play in the heated tub while we read the papers or watched TV nearby.

As well as offering self-catering accommodation, the estate is also home to a golf course and riding stables. An on-site deli and gift shop offering a range of local foods and products meant we didn't have to go far to buy our essentials.

The Courtyard restaurant, also on-site, has a crowd-pleasing menu of favourite dishes, including pizzas, steaks and fish, cooked to a high standard.

There was something for everyone, and the quality of food meant we ate there on both nights of our weekend break.

Another highlight was the chance to take our boys horse riding. Our youngest was really reluctant but within a couple of minutes, stable manager Katy Bennett had

'A stunning setting transports you from the stresses and strains of city life'



NATURAL Oliver and Sam get to grips with the horses



COMFORT Mains of Taymouth accommodation

Travel info

- Granary Court starts at £1600 for a week's let, but the price varies. You can book a five-star, one-bedroom Maxwell villa for £200 per night. The five-star, two-bedroom Maxwell villa and Gallops Apartments are £250 for one night.
- www.taymouth.co.uk for more details.
- Highland Safaris' Red Deer Encounter is £5 per person or £15 for a family of four.
- Visit www.highlandsafaris.net

convinced him to give it a go. The two ponies were extremely gentle – and patient – with their new riders.

By the time their 30-minute session was up, the boys had learned how to take charge of the reins, trot and even turn full circle on their saddle.

They were desperate to go back, and we paid the stable another visit before leaving the following morning.

The estate is popular with families and groups of visitors alike.

Bespoke treatments are available through Revive Beauty, who will come and do manicures, including shellac nails, make-up and massage therapy.

There was so much to do on-site that we didn't venture much further, but it would be easy to fill a longer holiday with the huge range of nearby activities and sights.

Through the estate, guests can arrange to go canyoning, white water rafting, kayaking, canoeing, mountain walking and biking in summer, while in winter you can try ice climbing, ski mountaineering, or even igloo and snow fort building.

At the nearby Loch Tay Boat House, there are a range of boats to hire, which vary from cabin cruisers to rowing boats and canoes. There are 20 swing mooring points available for private hire and two slips for boat launching. Mountain bike hire is also available from the boat house.

It goes without saying that in such a stunning countryside location there are a host of forest and river walks available for those who want to get close to nature.

Having heard of a visitor who discovered 30 grammes of gold in a nearby river, my eldest is already planning his next trip. This time, he tells us, he will make his fortune.