

Messing about on boats

Darren Calpin and daughter Ellie set sail to Wildcat Island on a trip to the Lakes

THERE IT IS!" I shout, as our kayak arcs gently round the island's small, rocky headland. "That's it, Daddy. There! THERE!" squeals my excited eight-year-old daughter, now up on her knees pointing at the secretive natural harbour coming into view. Ellie and I both start laughing as I carefully manoeuvre our inflatable craft into the tiny yet oh-so-familiar landing place. "That's it," I declare. "We've finally reached Wildcat Island!"

Though the diminutive outcrop we've just landed on is actually called Peel Island, Ellie and I know it best as the famed isle from Arthur Ransome's 1930 novel, *Swallows & Amazons*. A classic tale of kids messing about on boats, Ransome's idyllic Lake District yarn was adapted into a much-loved film in 1974. A film which

sentimental dads like me expose their children to, year-after-year, in the vain hope they will one day get to share such timeless adventures with them. Today is that day – and boy does it feel good!

With our kayak safely pulled ashore, Ellie and I immediately start running around like mad things, giddy with the fact we have the whole place to ourselves. We quickly find the Harbour Path, traverse the Thick Trees and eventually identify the iconic Lighthouse Tree. Once we've got our bearings, we calm down a little and kick back at the camp site, where we read aloud from my old dog-eared copy, just for good measure.

Yep, these are the kind of days you want to last forever. But with the sun now dipping and the temperature starting to drop, our brief time here is, all too sadly, at an end. After vowing to return, we absorb one final vista of vanilla rays bouncing

off Coniston's cut glass surface then paddle back across to the lake's eastern shore, where dry boots, warm undies and a snack-filled Mini await.

"TO HELP ALL..."

In the very same year Ransome's timeless classic was published, a fledgling organisation called the Youth Hostels Association was established in Britain. Set up as an antidote to the poor air quality, cramped housing and harsh conditions which prevailed at the time, the YHA had a clear purpose: "To help all, but especially young people, to a greater knowledge, use and love of the countryside, particularly by providing hostels or other accommodation for them on their travels."

I love this mission statement. With so many kids now glued to their phones and tablets, I can't help but feel this kind of messaging is more vital than ever. With this in mind, I've arranged for us to bed

Ellie sets sail on the good ship Calpin



It's Wildcat Island!

For Darren and Ellie, the Lakes are the stuff of adventures



down at three different YHA hostels: Hawkshead, Ambleside and Coniston Holly Howe, all three of which are proximal to The Lakes' twin jewels of Coniston Water and Windermere. And just to add a little more spice, we'll be staying in a different type of accommodation at each one. On our first night, we're staying in a camping pod (essentially a wooden hut) at Hawkshead, which just happens to be a Regency mansion with delectable lake views over Esthwaite Water.

Though it's her first time hostelling, Ellie clearly appreciates the informal vibe, mixing easily with chatty troops of Lycra-clad cyclists and family groups with friendly dogs. After knocking up a simple hot meal in the vast (and sparkling clean) communal kitchen, we adjourn to a stylishly modernised stone barn bedecked with vaulted timber beams, large soft sofas and half-a-dozen dining tables.

In short time, the ample space is filled with our fellow guests, talking excitedly about the day's adventures while finding space for their damp clothes atop the many radiators. Comprehensive meals and unfurled OS maps colonise the dining tables, while book-lovers and board game fiends annex the oversized sofas. Ellie quickly makes a friend and ends up playing cards for hours while I listen to an array of accents share their plans for tomorrow. There are no TVs and no-one is on their phone. When we finally retreat to our cosy timber tent (conveniently warmed by an electric heater), Ellie and I both fall into a quick and contented sleep.

LAKELAND INSPIRATION

Of course, Arthur Ransome isn't the only noteworthy author to have been inspired by the beauty of The Lakes. The Romantic poets, most notably Wordsworth, Southey and Samuel Taylor Coleridge were »



The ultimate guide book



Base camp for the night:
a 'pod' at Hawkshead



Beware
(Peter)
rabbits...



frequently roused by the region's breathtaking scenery. That Victorian Jack-of-all-trades John Ruskin was also a resident, as was the universally loved John Cunliffe, the man behind Postman Pat. If there's one author who's more associated with the Lake District than any other though then it surely has to be Beatrix Potter.

The famed children's author wrote many of her tales of Tom Kitten, Jemima Puddle-Duck et al at Hill Top, a 17th century cottage and working farm which she bought in 1905. It's only a 15-minute drive from our hostel so Ellie and I dutifully head over for a gander. After negotiating some devilishly svelte country lanes, we park up in Near Sawrey, the kind of quaint hamlet where outdoor

tables topped with freshly-baked cakes and honesty boxes hide up empty wee lanes.

As we walk up towards the main house, Ellie points excitedly at the enclosed vegetable garden set squarely in front of the cottage. "It's Mr McGregor's garden!" she gasps, and it certainly has that familiar vibe. We have a good mooch around it, looking for Peter Rabbit's secret tunnels and that green gate the daft cat is always running into. Even on a drizzly grey day like today, it's rather delightful.

A reverential hush descends when we enter the house proper, and a National Trust steward approaches to check our tickets and avail her knowledge. Ever the sucker for an assertive woman, I instantly take advantage of her kind offer, for everyone knows NT stewards are the de facto guardians of Britain's most esoteric knowledge. Thus, as

we check out the trophies, books, paintings and curios within the property's time capsule interior, we learn that Potter decreed everything should be left exactly as it was when she lived here. To my surprise, I also find out she was a self-taught illustrator who had to publish the early Peter Rabbit stories herself as publishers turned her down flat no fewer than six times. In addition, we also discover Miss Potter was an impassioned conservationist, won prizes for breeding Herdwick sheep, and was the first author to dream up the concept of character merchandising (she designed and registered a patent for a Peter Rabbit doll in 1903).

Up the creaking stairs we go, passing another NT guardian on the light and airy landing until, finally, we come to the piece de resistance: Beatrix's writing desk, set small and neat in a modest study overlooking >>

the garden. I always find it quite moving, being at an exact place where creative history was made. Ellie, who is far more taken with a rather lavish dolls house, is slightly less moved. The gift shop is, as you'd expect, an homage to Potter's pioneering ideas of character merchandising. We leave with a pencil, some chocolates and a nagging feeling that J K Rowling is likely to be a big Beatrix Potter fan.

SENSATIONAL VIEWS

It's well known that the area around Coniston and Windermere proved rich inspiration for Ransome when writing *Swallows & Amazons*. Bowness was 'Rio'; Coniston Old Man became 'Kanchenjunga' and Bank Ground Farm served as 'Holly Howe'. What is not so well known though is how Captain Flint's houseboat is based, in part, on a Victorian-era steam launch

The Lakes have inspired so many literary greats, from Ransome to Wordsworth

that cruised Coniston Water and was captained by a man Ransome befriended as a boy. Joyously, that vessel - a splendidly handsome vision of dreams - is still sailing today, and it is with great anticipation that Ellie and I now watch it puff sedately towards the jetty we're queued up on with 25 other eager-looking passengers.

Ellie is buzzing. However, this may just be the after-effects of the frenzied duck feeding session she shared with several other children by

the waterside cafe a few moments ago. The ducks of Coniston Boating Centre are the greediest and fattest I've ever encountered, and will surely be identified as a hitherto unknown wildfowl/piranha crossbreed in due course.

A drizzle descends as we totter onto the refined timber deck of the 86ft-long Steam Yacht Gondola. We throw a wave at the cheery captain in his snug, elevated wheelhouse and head below, enjoying a welcome »



Greedy ducks on the shore of Coniston



Ellie soaks up the relaxed YHA vibe

blast of heat from the hissing boiler as we pass the engine room. We all take our seats in the rarified surroundings of the luxurious First Class Saloon, its gilded columns, plush carpets, vaulted ceilings and varnished walnut trim evoking the halcyon days of decadent Victorian tourism.

Once underway, Ellie and I devour our packed lunches then head straight to the bow. It seems strange to think that, save for a 44-year hiatus (between 1936 and 1980) when it became a private houseboat, tourists have been enjoying this same jaunt, and these sensational unchanging views, since 1859. More passengers venture out to join us as the sun attempts to displace some half-hearted clouds.

The barren peaks of Coniston Water's western shore escort us as we

put-put south at a stately pace. While the captain uses a muted tannoy to give us a bit of background on the places we pass, his assistant fields questions out on deck. "We can stop off at a few places as we go," she tells us, "so just give us a shout if you decide to stretch your legs".

We decide to stretch our legs as far as the engine room, where passengers are encouraged to chat with the crew and watch them feed (eco-friendly) sawdust logs into the gleaming steel engine's firebox.

Ellie and I give each other a knowing look as we note the glinting gauges, Victorian styling and billowing heat: Grandad would love this!

Reaching its southernmost point of the journey, the Steam Yacht Gondola executes a broad 180 degree turn, bringing it, very temptingly, within striking distance of our old friend, Peel Island. Heading north once more, we hug the lake's leafier eastern shore where the homes of both Ransome then Ruskin stand aloft in seemingly timeless fashion. Both men would've seen this fine vessel chugging along many times from their somewhat isolated lookouts. Ruskin – a visionary conservationist who helped create the National Trust – would surely approve of the fact the SYG is now owned and operated by the very organisation he felt inspired to establish. [CTW](#)



NEXT ISSUE: Read part two of Darren and Ellie's Lake District adventures as they continue their epic trail.

Let's hit the road...

Darren Calpin and daughter **Ellie** take the high road, quite literally, on a Mini break in the Lake District

ONE OF THE great plus points of the Lake District is that, as long as you're well fuelled and suitably dressed, there's always plenty to do.

My daughter Ellie, attired daily in her creaking cagoule and robust hiking boots, is the perfect case in point. Whether it's choosing the right stones to dam a stream in Grizedale Forest, hiking up sodden trails to see tinted Windermere views from Claife Heights, or tracing a modest waterfall to its source around the back of our youth hostel, she's clearly in her element. Personally, I would add driving to the list of the region's many plus points. When the narrow roads aren't busy and the weather is good, driving around the Lakes is an utter delight. That being said, I do have a Mini – I'm sure my opinion would alter somewhat if I was piloting a people carrier or campervan.

Of all the scenic A and B roads we've explored though, it's the drive along the A593 which makes me say "Oh, Ellie – look!" the most often. Heading north west out of Coniston, the seven-mile-cruise up to Ambleside is pure joy, like driving a go-kart through a gallery of HD screensavers. Not as challenging or windy as some of the other roads we've

had to contend with, this undulating strip of single carriageway folds and bends its way through a series of landscapes: one moment we're driving through Blyton's Dorset, the next we're negotiating the Scottish Highlands. Confused canopies of green and gold disorientate us while lonely single-drop waterfalls plummet down scarred, vertiginous peaks with complete single-mindedness.

PEAKS AND TROUGHS

Unsurprisingly, I initially miss the intended turn-off for our hostel when we finally reach the outskirts of Ambleside. It's getting dark when we park my fatigued Mini in the lakeside hostel's jam-packed car park on the northernmost tip of England's largest puddle. »



Ellie arrives at Beatrix Potter's House, Hill Top

While Windermere at dusk is quiet and calm, YHA Ambleside is anything but. The corridors are busy, the common rooms are busy, and the bar and dining areas are busy. Adolescents by the busload; adults few and far between. Seeking food and just a little bit of quiet, Ellie and I strike out on foot in search of some fish and chips. Some 45 minutes later we're in the centre of town, sharing a huge helping of both as we sit on a roadside bench watching various Gore-Texed groups debate which pub should be their base for the evening.

Suitably satiated, we return to the hostel which is, if anything, even busier than before. Our accommodation for the night is a large private room replete with two bunk beds, a private bathroom and a separate toilet. A huge long radiator sits beneath an expansive bay window promising splendid lake views. However, we have a problem: noisy teenage neighbours.

I knock on their door and ask them to "keep it down" but they pretend not to hear. With diplomacy clearly not an option, I speak with the reception team who deal with the matter swiftly, removing/relocating the offenders in double-quick time. "They've been running around the corridors making a kerfuffle," says the mustard-keen woman on reception.



Let the board games commence

Just time to skim across the water...



"But we didn't know which room they were in until you gave us the nod."

Though Ellie and I are both a little tired now, we're not yet ready for bed and so decide to explore the hostel's labyrinthine interiors. Away from the busier areas, we find two large kitchens and a separate common room, peopled only by a few guys playing cards and a family going through the last, painful throes of Monopoly. I knock up a brew, Ellie finds the Scrabble and, quick as you like, all is well with the world.

WHAT ARE THE ODDS?

Is there a better way to start the day than waking up to a handsome view? As I pull back the curtains the dead calm waters of Windermere reveal themselves in all their glory. From our

enviable vantage point, we can see a good way down the vast lake's ten-and-a-half mile length. Darker clouds are heading our way. Ellie springs out of her bottom bunk and bagsies the private shower first.

Washed, fed and watered, we pack up the car and point it towards a nearby waterfall. Sadly, Ambleside's considerable traffic conspires with its one-way system to make progress painfully slow. When we finally find the access road we're looking for, we're met by a ROAD CLOSED sign.

Not ones to give up, we set about finding an alternative route. However, this sees us heading up impossibly narrow residential roads with the kind of handbrake-heavy inclines that make passing other vehicles a heart-in-mouth affair.



Ellie and Lucy: schoolfriends reunited!

When we do finally get to the road we think we need, it turns out to be a cul-de-sac. If I was in a Tom & Jerry cartoon I'd have steam coming out of my ears by now.

Keeping the expletives I'd like to shout out well under wraps, I fashion a nine-point-turn in the tiny car park of a doctor's surgery (but decide not to pop in for a stroke assessment). Then I pilot Mini back down the same panic-inducing roads we just came up and rejoin the \$%#*&! one-way-system for yet another go around

the Lake District's slowest \$%#*&! merry-go-round. Ellie and I both agree that Ambleside isn't showing itself in its best light and so make the executive decision to cut-and-run. Ten minutes on the A593 is all it takes to bring my pulse rate back down to non-nuclear levels.

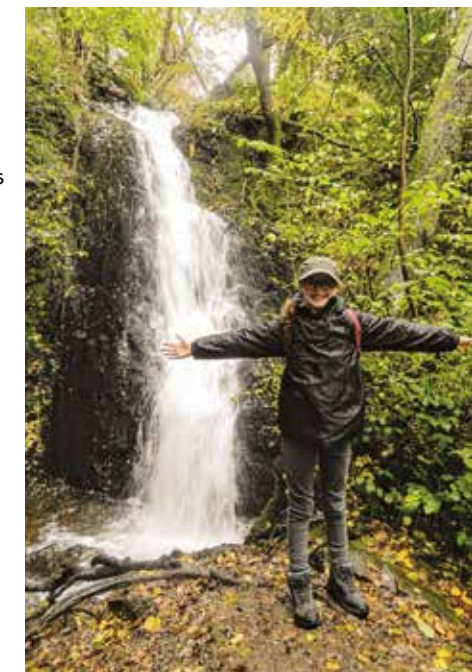
Sitting modestly in the lea of the Old Man of Coniston and just half a mile from the lake shore, the relaxed wee village of Coniston is an easy place to fall in love with. Indeed, we both feel very at ease ambling around the grey stone buildings and quaint souvenir shops that line its twee high street. A gloriously traditional display of tantalising treats in the window of an olde-world sweet shop draws

Ellie in like a moth to a flame. As well as a selection of chocolates and bons-bons, we leave armed with a wonderful treasure hunt pack which leads us all around the village and shore in search of anagram-themed booty.

Yes, we like Coniston village very much and it is with some reluctance we head back to the car to leave. Driving out of town, Ellie screams at me with insane urgency: "Stop, Daddy! STOP!"

Pulling off a manoeuvre Magnum PI would have been proud of,

I whiplash the car into a side street and beg Ellie to tell me what the emergency is. "It's Lucy!" she says: "I saw Lucy from school!" Thankful that the emergency services won't now be needed, I undig my nails from the steering wheel and gingerly reverse back onto the main road, shaking my head at the prospect of bumping into someone we know from 250 miles away. But no, there she is, Ellie's friend Lucy, standing about 200 yards away with her family, looking right at us. What are the odds?



STARGAZING

Our hostel for the night is YHA Conston Holly Howe, a 150-year-old Lakeland slate country house set within neat, leafy grounds on the outskirts of the village. Looming peaks gaze down on us as we (!) once again shift all of our gear into our third and final accommodation - a landpod. In case you don't know, a landpod is a camping pod set on stilts with a few extra luxuries, like a modest seating area and LED lights, thrown in. The coolest thing about these innovations though is that you can roll back the removable roof and sleep under the stars. I'm feeling pretty smug as I look around at our neighbours in their grand, family-sized teepees: can you roll back your roof?

The hostel is about half full, mostly with hiking groups and damp-haired families ferrying plates of food between the steamy kitchen and large common rooms in a casual, home-from-home manner. Ellie >>

devours her tea (which is essentially a meal and a pudding in one hit) with ruthless efficiency then sets about making friends. Within the hour, she's playing board games and exploring the basement games room with a girl of a similar age and her little brother. I kick back by the Victorian fireplace and lose myself in a book, looking up only to note the gentle drizzle of earlier has been replaced by a squall. Horizontal rain pummels the oversized windows with alarming vigour.

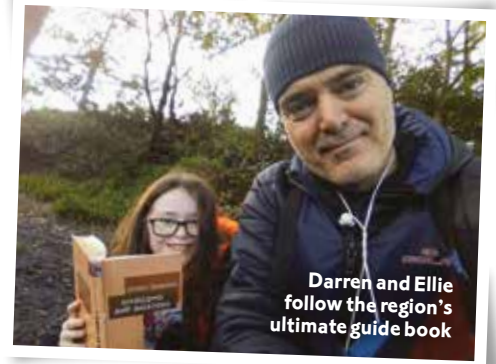
Through the night, the squall upgrades to a tempest which then morphs into a typhoon, the rain and wind almost biblical. As someone who loves being under canvas when the weather gets wild, I absolutely love it. Ellie, who is blessed with the ability to sleep through an earthquake, doesn't stir until morning. When we finally throw off our cosy duvet(s) and venture outside, we hear our neighbours talking about the poles on their tepee having a 'good old creak' through the night. At one point, the

lady shoots me a look that seems to say 'How was the stargazing, your royal smugness?'

LIKE A DUCK TO WATER

After an impromptu game of 'walk around the entire hostel with a tray of breakfast to find Ellie' (she was playing in the games room), I collect yesterday's wet clothes from the drying room and pack up the car for the final time. Before pointing the car south for home though, we head to one of the Lakes' loveliest scenic spots, Tarn Hows.

Although the car park is heaving and there are plenty of people enjoying the picnic spots, this highly picturesque body of water surrounded by spruce and pine is a joy to walk around. We take a detour along a trickling stream which eventually grows into rapids yielding several



Darren and Ellie follow the region's ultimate guide book

cascading waterfalls. The going is tricky and challenging in places but Ellie seems to like it all the more for it. She really seems to be taking to this outdoor adventure lark like a duck to water. She looks like Lara Croft, standing tall and proud in front of the waterfall for her millionth photo.

As she holds on to a tree and leans out to get as close to the torrent of water as possible, I'm reminded of the YHA's original mission statement: "To help all, but especially young people, to a greater knowledge, use and love of the countryside."

Job done, I think. [GTW](#)



Have Mini, will explore...