

TRAVEL



Coal, wine, and a hut in the Cairngorms – marvellous

The prospect of spending a night in a stone hut in a remote part of Scotland with no electricity or toilet holds no fear for **Dave Lafferty**, but he is glad to have stayed at a gem of a hotel later on during his trip

SPENDING a night in a stone hut in the middle of the Cairngorms with no power, running water or even a toilet may not be everyone's idea of a relaxing break, but this was an amazing experience and another massive tick on my bucket list.

The stone hut in question is called a bothy, one of a series of basic shelters in remote parts of the UK which can be used for free by anyone as long as they abide by some simple rules.

Bothies are mainly found in Scotland and usually frequented by walkers keen to reach remote parts but eager to split the effort over a couple of days.

The premise is simple – carry in everything you need including

food and fuel and take away your rubbish.

Our mission was to spend the night in what is deemed to be a two-star bothy in the Cairngorm mountains in winter, bagging a couple of mountain summits along the way. Mad? My friends thought my climbing pal Paul and I had finally lost the plot.

We set off from the beautiful Highland hamlet of Blair Atholl, just north of Pitlochry. Paul drew the short straw and packed the 10kg bag of coal into his rucksack while I was forced to carry the other essential items of kit – two bottles of wine.

After two-and-a-half hours and seven miles of steady uphill walking, we reached our new home, which was nestled against a hillside by a fast-flowing stream, or burn as they're known

in Scotland. A herd of red deer watched inquisitively as we unpacked the coal, wine and cooking equipment in the tiny bothy.

At this point we could see why it was deemed to be two-star. It had a roof, a fireplace, two benches and a picnic table plus a shovel which apparently was the toilet. I'll leave the rest to your imagination.

After reducing the weight in our packs, we headed off past the bothy towards a Munro (Scottish mountain taller than 3000ft) called Beinn Dearg.

It was a spectacular, albeit desolate, walk with some serious gradients. After three hours we reached the summit but we weren't alone. We were joined by about six mountain hares, looking resplendent in their white winter coats – probably desper-

ately hoping for a covering of snow so they could blend in and outwit the local predators.

After taking in the sweeping views it was back to the bothy to settle in for the evening.

As the sun dropped the temperature plummeted too and we soon realised we needed to get the fire going. That's when we discovered neither of us had ever lit a coal fire before. We tried numerous methods involving firelighters and it was looking bad until we decided to try the nuclear option which involved blasting the coal with our butane camping stove – kids don't try this at home.

After that it was an evening of fine dining – crisps for starters followed by a Pot Noodle then an energy bar for dessert and a couple of glasses of wine to follow.

The following morning I opened the front door of the bothy to be confronted by a couple of startled deer and the most impressive view I've ever seen at 6am – a sheer open expanse with no sign whatsoever of human interference.

We packed our gear with a heavy heart and retraced our steps to the car, downhill this time and with no coal or wine to weigh us down. It was a fine walk, enlivened by the sight of hundreds of deer silhouetted against the sky as they munched their way along the mountain crests.

We still had two days of mountain walking to go but for the remainder of the trip we decided a little luxury wouldn't go amiss and we weren't disappointed.

» **STONE SHELTER** Dave sets off for his walk, right. Above: The bothy or stone hut where he stayed. Below, left: The Atholl Arms, in Dunkeld.

We headed a few miles south of Pitlochry to the historic town of Dunkeld which is divided by the sweeping power of the River Tay. We booked into the beautifully situated Atholl Arms Hotel right on the banks of the Tay and in the heart of the small town.

Ask for a room with a river view and you won't be disappointed.

We soon discovered this little gem has a secret. It may be rated three star but it has five star food and service. You can dine in the hotel bar or the restaurant, we chose the latter.

The haggis, neeps and tatties for starters was superb and the sirloin steak was cooked to perfection. The sticky toffee pudding for dessert was an indulgence justified by the mountain we'd climbed the previous day.

The hotel bar is a cosy affair where settling down for a couple of hours is made all the more easier by the local real ales served by the friendly staff.

Dunkeld itself boasts a wonderful cathedral, some quaint shops and a fantastic pub right next to the Atholl Arms Hotel called the Taybank which bills itself as 'Scotland's Musical Meeting Place'.

Bands travel from far and wide to play at the Taybank which has a small main bar reminiscent of the multi-room pubs

of bygone days. We spent two nights at the Atholl Arms, climbing more mountains during the day and listening to bands in the evening. We wouldn't hesitate to return.

Whether you're having a relaxing break, climbing mountains or recovering from a night in the wilderness you won't go far wrong in Dunkeld.

FACTFILE

The Atholl Arms is offering dinner, bed and breakfast for two people for £89 per room per night until March. The offer is valid for a stay of two consecutive nights from Sunday to Thursday and is based on two people sharing a standard or twin room. Dinner includes a two course meal in the Riverview restaurant. A non-refundable deposit is required at time of booking. Call 01350-727 219 and quote 'Autumn 2012'. There is a £20 supplement per night for a river view room and a supplement of £40 for a suite. Visit www.athollarmshotel.com for further details. For information about staying in a bothy contact the Mountain Bothies Association at www.mountainbothies.org.uk. Full membership is £20 for the year (£10 juniors).



TRAVEL



COMPETITION

Name Sir Richard Branson's next plane and win Virgin Atlantic flights to London

TO mark the start of Virgin Atlantic's new flights between Heathrow and Manchester from March 31, Sir Richard Branson's airline is offering an exciting opportunity to readers of the Manchester Evening News.

It is Virgin Atlantic tradition to give all of its planes a name – from Mustang Sally to Miss Sunshine – and now readers have the chance to get involved by naming one of the new Airbus A320 aircraft which will join Virgin's fleet for its new flights to Manchester.

The reader who comes up with the best name will see it flying proudly on one of Sir Richard Branson's famous red and white planes. Not only that, but they will win two return flights from Manchester to London to try the new Virgin service out for themselves.

To enter the competition, please email your entry,



along with M.E.N your name, address and a contact number to namethatplane@fly.virgin.com by midnight on Sunday January 20.

Here are some pointers to help you pick the winning name:

■ As the aircraft will be flying around Great Britain the best names will be

typically British and reflect something of our great culture – if you want to make it about Manchester, even better!

■ All Virgin Atlantic planes have female names

■ The name should fit with the Virgin brand – something confident that makes you smile!

■ Names should be either a single name with several syllables or contain two-four separate words

■ The name must be timeless or classic rather than related to a current fashion or issues

» **Terms and conditions:** Go to manchestereveningnews.co.uk

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