



# THE LIONS' SHARE

HOW FAR DO YOU GO FOR A NICE SITE? DON JOLLY GOES ON SAFARI TO UNCOVER LONGLEAT'S DELIGHTS



**T**HERE aren't many caravan sites in Britain where you can awake to the sound of roaring lions. But you can at the Club's Longleat site in darkest Wiltshire. The spacious site, located on the Longleat estate behind the Marquess of Bath's Elizabethan mansion (the first stately home opened to the paying public) and on the edge of the famous safari park (the first to be created outside Africa), must be one of the Club's most beautiful parkland locations, with plenty of mature trees to cast welcome shadows on hot summer days. Longleat has been a Club site since 1982 and four years ago underwent a major refurbishment, reopening in time for the Queen's Jubilee weekend in 2002. The redevelopment included an increase in

pitch numbers, to 114 hard standings and 51 grass pitches, and two new well-appointed timber toilet blocks with individual washrooms, hairdryers and thermostatically-controlled underfloor heating, plus two disabled and two baby/toddler units and a vegetable preparation and dishwashing area. At the same time, an old toilet block was converted to a family room, complete with big screen television, a laundry and information room (with payphone) and another disabled/toddler unit, and a dog-walking area was added. Wardens Phil and Margaret Parker, who operate a small shop selling basics at the reception, have proved popular with

everyone. "Brilliant", "Spot-on", "Friendly", "Helpful", were just some of the adjectives used by members I spoke to. In fact, one family, Barry and Suzanne Clifford and their children Lauren and Ethan, from Macclesfield, had particular cause to be grateful to the Parkers when Barry was struck down by appendicitis midway through their holiday. "They worked so hard for us," said Suzanne. However, the Parkers are at Blackshaw Moor this season, their shoes at Longleat ably filled by Gary and Theresa Hunter.

Another member, Ian Fleming, on holiday from Ellesmere Port with his son Ryan, liked the way the leafy surroundings attract



wildlife (no, not from the safari park!) to the site. So much so, he'd set up a bird table outside his caravan window. "It's great for birdwatching here," he told me, "but the squirrels are a menace, pinching all the food I put out for the birds." He loved the natural look of the site, too.

Another family I spoke to, David and Sue Talbot and their children, Logan, Lorria and Rhys, from Preston, were just setting out for a cycle ride and liked the way the park stayed open for those staying on site, so they could go for long walks and cycle rides long after other visitors had gone home. "On a fine evening," said Sue, "streams of caravanners take a stroll through the park." The Taylor family from Mold in north Wales - George, Gill, Harri, Zoe and Wayne - like that aspect of the site, too. On their third visit, they enjoyed hearing the animals in the evening: roaring lions, barking sea lions and hooting owls. "It's like we're in Africa - not that we've ever been, but that must be what it's like." The previous weekend they had their breath taken away by the awesome Red Bull flying competition, which saw stunt aircraft swooping and diving spectacularly, seemingly amid the trees. Such summer events bring more people to the site, "But even when crowded the site copes well," said the Taylors.

The Safari Park has more a sense of the savannah than a Capability Brown landscape, the only distraction being the crocodile of cars winding through. The animals are amazing, especially when you can get so close to lions, tigers, rhinos, giraffes, zebras, wolves and so on wandering in relative freedom. Most ignore the cars, except for the monkeys, who like to climb all over them, stripping them of anything vaguely loose. Windscreens wipers are a favourite. If you don't want simian vandals wrecking your car, take the safari bus instead, though book on arrival as places are limited. Another Longleat attraction for children is the theme park, featuring Adventure Castle, mazes (including the longest hedge maze in the world), a narrow-

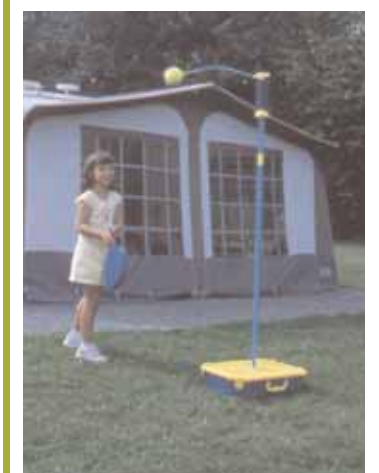
OPPOSITE PAGE: The Talbot family enjoying a bike ride at the Club's Longleat site

THIS PAGE ABOVE: Safari boats at Half Mile Pond RIGHT, FROM TOP: Longleat Safari Park; having fun on site; The Taylor family enjoying a meal together

gauge railway, butterfly garden and safari boats to watch sea-lions on the lake. Then there's the house itself, completed in 1580, which, unusually for the time, looks out on beautiful parkland instead of facing inwards onto a central courtyard. The rooms include exquisite furniture, the largest private library in Britain and a superb collection of pictures. Also worth seeing are Lord Bath's murals, depicting varied subjects, some quite racy, on show in his private apartments. If you have time to visit some other local sights, these include the National Trust's Stourhead, a magnificent example of 18th-century landscape gardening. There's a Palladian pile, too, though that takes second fiddle to the gardens, and a footpath leads to King Alfred's Tower, a 160ft folly offering extensive views over three counties. The estate includes the showpiece village of Stourton, complete with little church and the Spread Eagle Inn. Another pretty village, Nunney, lies three miles west of Frome, its old houses and church enhanced by the picturesque ruins of a 14th-century moated castle. Farther along the A361 you can board the East Somerset steam railway at Cranmore for a 35-minute return trip towards Shepton Mallet. However long you stay at Longleat, it's bound to be a roaring success.

## What to do and see

- Longleat House and Safari Park tel 01985 844400 or see [longleat.co.uk](http://longleat.co.uk)
- Stourhead tel 01747 841152 or see [nationaltrust.org.uk](http://nationaltrust.org.uk)
- East Somerset Railway tel 01749 880417 or see [eastsomerset-railway.com](http://eastsomerset-railway.com)



## Site details

Full details can be found in the Sites Directory & Handbook p180

