Water wonderland

Jonathan Manning heads east to spend a week in the flatlands of the Fens, which are packed with nature, never-ending views and captivating towns and cities.
Welcome to a geometric landscape, one sliced and diced by drains and dykes into an orderly shape. The flatlands of the Fens are an extraordinary place, where giant skins and vast horizons deliver an epic sense of space. Every slight change of light alters the mood, from blue sky optimism to grey sky menace. At their best, the Fens are mesmerising, but even at their bleakest there’s an other-worldliness to them. Is this a landscape or a waterscape, a super sticky Chelsea Bun, something of an economist Maynard Keynes and author Virginia Woolf… but you don’t need to swim naked in the river like they did.

TOURING: CLUB SITES

The Brewery Tap
Inside this former Peterborough labour exchange is the award-winning Oakham Ales microbrewery. Tasty, good-value Thai food, too.

Contact: 01733 389655, thebrewerytap.com
Nearest featured site: Ferry Meadows

Houghton Mill
Enjoy a cuppa in the riverside tearoom, then stack up on wholesome flour, ground at this Huntingdon mill itself. Isn’t it time you packed your breadmaker when you go caravanning?

Contact: 01480 301494, nationaltrust.org.uk/houghton-mill-and-waterclose-meadows
Nearest featured site: Grafham Water

The Orchard Tea Garden
It’s a lovely walk along the river from Cambridge to this heavenly Grantchester tea garden, which has discovered a waterfall below the apple trees. In the 1910s, it was the haunt of poet Rupert Brooke, economist Maynard Keynes and author Virginia Woolf— but you don’t need to swim naked in the river like they did.

Contact: 01223 352500, orchard-grantchester.com
Nearest featured site: Cambridge Cherry Hinton

Fitzbillies
Behind the classic shop front of this Cambridge cake shop and café/restaurant, there’s one tale you have to add to your order — a super sticky Chelsham Bun, something of an institution for generations of students.

Contact: 01223 352125, fitzbillies.com
Nearest featured site: Cambridge Cherry Hinton

BEST OF FENS

With more time on my side, I could walk the path that accompanies the rivers Great Ouse and Cam all the way from Elly to Cambridge, but I’m determined to sample a full-on Fen experience. One of the last remaining traditional Fens, Wicken Fen is at the heart of a project to restore the wetlands that once spread across this region. It’s not being abandoned to nature, but water levels are higher, creating an environment where rare plants, birds and dragonflies thrive among the sedge and reedbeds.

Standing on the boardwalk, I’m overwhelmed by this floating landscape. Terra firma could become ‘terra squelcha’ (with one foot wrong, and the sense that I could submerge and disappear feels slightly sinister). When I spot the fish, standing metal bath tub in the restored Fenland cottage, I wonder whether it was used for the man who allegedly ‘banned Christmas’!

Imperial War Museum Duxford
Such a spectacular collection of wartime aircraft, at least a full day’s exploration. Perhaps time your visit to the area with one of the three fabulous air shows scheduled for 2016.

Contact: 01223 835000, iwm.org.uk/visits/iwm-duxford
Nearest featured site: Cambridge Cherry Hinton

Skylark Maize Maze & Funyard
This outdoor play centre in March is open at weekends through the summer holidays for pedal go-karting, den building, pig racing and a huge maze maze.

Contact: 01954 741212, skylark-events.co.uk
Nearest featured site: Fields End Water Caravan Park

Hamerton Zoo Park
Catch a ride on this heritage steam railway whose locomotives include a familiar blue engine named Thomas

Contact: 01780 784444; nvr.org.uk
Nearest featured site: Ferry Meadows

Nene Valley Railway
Catch a ride on this heritage steam railway whose locomotives include a familiar blue engine named Thomas

Contact: 01719 784444; nvr.org.uk
Nearest featured site: Ferry Meadows

FOR THE FAMILY

FOR THE FAMILY

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BURGHEY HOUSE

Set aside a full day to visit this majestic Elizabethan house in Stamford. Once you’ve seen all the treasures inside, head outside for the fun Garden of Surprises, the Sculpture Garden and the Deer Park.


contact: 01780 752451, burghley.co.uk

NEAREST FEATURED SITE: FERRY MEADOWS

contact: 01353 667735, elycathedral.org

ELY CATHEDRAL

Dominating the city and the countryside that surrounds it, Ely Cathedral inspires an even greater sense of wonder inside. The interior represents a stunning feat of medieval engineering, while the view from the West Tower seems never-ending.


contact: 01353 667735, elycathedral.org

NEAREST FEATURED SITE: FIELDS END WATER CARAVAN PARK

FITZWILLIAM MUSEUM

Celebrating its 200th anniversary in 2016, the Fitzwilliam in Cambridge houses the richest of collections, from ancient Egyptian, Greek and Roman artefacts to Renaissance masterpiece paintings. Admission is free.


contact: 01223 332900, fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk

NEAREST FEATURED SITE: CAMBRIDGE CHERRY HINTON

WIMPOLLE ESTATE

There’s a 20th-century feel to the interior of this National Trust house in Royston, the largest in the county. Don’t miss the fabulous walled garden and traditional farm with rare-bred livestock.


contact: 01223 206000, nationaltrust.org.uk/wimpole-estate

NEAREST FEATURED SITE: CAMBRIDGE CHERRY HINTON

just a few miles, but a complete world away, is the buzzing city of Cambridge, a hub of history and hi-tech industry. Base camp is Cambridge Cherry Hinton (56 pitches, 48 on hardstanding) where different levels create the feel of a sunken valley. The caravanners to whom I speak all offer the same advice – don’t try to drive into the congested city centre, where bicycles ‘attack’ from all directions.

Happily, a bus stop virtually on site provides a launchpad to whisk me into the heart of the city, although I still have to keep my senses alert to the ‘whispering menace’, otherwise known as student cyclists. Thankfully, very few seem to oil their bike chains so they approach with a warning squeak, which is just as well because my attention is elsewhere, distracted by the beauty of the colleges.

Take a punt

King's, with its famous chapel, Trinity and St John's have the showiest facades, but I’m smitten by pretty Clare College and handsome Downing. Punting along the Backs (back of the colleges) is a wobbly thrill, more akin to dodgems than a gondola ride, and I do my best to stay upright and dry to the disappointment of my children. However long I have to spend in Cambridge, it’s never enough, but I manage to squeeze in a visit to the brilliant Fitzwilliam Museum, before stocking up with appetising treats in the market.

Just out of town, it’s impossible to ignore the fascinating collection of aircraft at the Imperial War Museum Duxford, a big hit with my boys, while Wimpole Hall with its magnificent parkland, gardens and rare breeds farm is an instant family favourite.

“Punting along the Backs (back of the colleges) is a wobbly thrill, more akin to dodgems than a gondola ride”
TOURING: CLUB SITES

OUTDOOR FUN

Grafham Water
The perimeter track around this giant reservoir makes an easy 10-mile trail with dazzling waterside views and no traffic to disturb the peace. Just note there’s a 10mph speed limit for bikes.

Contact: 01480 812154, anglianwater.co.uk/leisure/water-parks/grafham
Nearest featured site: Grafham Water

Wicken Fen Nature Reserve
An impossibly rich nature reserve, Wicken offers a heart-stopping sense of space with its vast skies and endless horizons. It is also the National Trust’s oldest nature reserve.

Contact: 01353 720274, nationaltrust.org.uk/wicken-fen-nature-reserve
Nearest featured site: Fields End Water Caravan Park

Cycling
The nine-mile ‘Lodes Way’ takes you from the stunning Wicken Fen Nature Reserve to the pretty village of Bottisham, letting you explore Cambridgeshire’s manmade waterways and beautiful Fen landscapes along the way.

Contact: sustrans.org.uk

Punting, Cambridge
Balance precariously on the end of a punt and push your way along the Backs with a pole for a fabulous view of Cambridge’s prettiest colleges. Or let an expert guide take the strain.

Contact: 01223 359750, scudamores.com
Nearest featured site: Cambridge Cherry Hinton

MEMBERS’ VIEWS

In between days out, Phil Newbury from Radstock, Somerset, was hoping to land a giant carp from the lakes of Fields End Water Caravan Park. “I came here because I have not spent a lot of time in this part of the country at all,” he said. “I had heard about the Fens and thought I would come and see them.” At the end of a “really good week”, his highlights had been Cromwell’s House and the cathedral in Ely, Sandringham, Cambridge… “and a couple of nice carp!”

During a week-long stay at Grafham Water, Colin Evans from Spalding, Lincolnshire, had visited Sawbridgeworth Antiques in Essex, as well as St Neots, St Ives, Huntingdon and Cambridge in Cambridgeshire. “I really did like Cambridge and the park and ride is brilliant – just £1 to park and the bus fare was free with my pass. There is so much to do from here in Bedfordshire and Northamptonshire as well.”

Reluctantly packing up after a three-week stay at Cambridge Cherry Hinton, David and Helen Green from Northwich, Cheshire, would soon be returning. “We like looking at the colleges and I like King’s College Chapel,” said Helen. “We also go to Ely and my husband is a keen birdwatcher so we go out to a few nature reserves.”

A regular visitor to Ferry Meadows since the 1970s, Robert Jolley from Wellingborough, Northamptonshire, was just coming to the end of a fortnight stay, his second of the year. “The country park brings us back,” he said. “We have a dog so it’s ideal for going for a walk, plus I like to fish and play golf, and they are both here.”

Club Together
The online community that just keeps growing
To read even more member views, see our fantastic online forum at caravanclub.co.uk/together