

BIG AND DEFINITELY BEAUTIFUL!



Dominic Picksley visits Northumberland to find a county packed full of history, splendour and a few welcome surprises along the way...

THE fire in the lounge roared and delivered a warming glow as a force eight gale whipped up a frenzy in the Northumbrian night as we settled into our first evening at Springhill Cottage, a stone's throw away from the coastal village of Seahouses.

Not only is the holiday home one of nine fabulous cottages located at Springhill Farm – a destination that has been honoured with the prestigious AONB (Area of Outstanding Beauty) Award for Excellence – which is an organic working farm run by the Gregory family, but holidaymakers also have the choice of 'roughing it' in a bunkhouse or a wigwam, basically a wooden shack shaped like an upturned boat (sleeps five) that comes equipped with electric heating, a fridge and wi-fi access.

The bunkhouse, newly opened in 2010, sleeps a total of 32 – eight rooms, four bunks to a room, all with en suite shower facilities – and knocks socks off traditional backpackers' hostels, with its underfloor heating, comfy communal lounge and well-stocked self-catering kitchen. And then there's the stunning views from the balcony, with Bamburgh Castle to the north, the Farne Islands to the east and Cheviot Hills to the west. And all that for £12 a night. Bargain.

We went more 'up market' and spent a week at Springhill Cottage, originally a family home for the Gregorays, a four-star location whose interior was lovingly described as "shabby chic" by mum Julie, who runs the holiday operation with daughter Sarah. And the vista that greets the washer-upper from the kitchen window is simply stunning, with what seems to be a huge swathe of Northumberland opening up before your very eyes, with the North Sea stretching out on the horizon.

On our first morning in the cottage, we were greeted by the sun streaming in through the curtains, the strong winds of the night before replaced by a calm aura and blue skies, gone were the gales from the night before.

We headed to the beach. Miles of golden carpet stretched out beneath our feet as we clambered over the dunes and on to the award-winning

sands for a day of rock-pooling, an activity that was to become a firm favourite of my two-year-old son.

You could have walked for miles in either direction, and local dog walkers and horse riders were out in force taking advantage of the autumn sunshine – and such were the decent-sized waves crashing against the shoreline, a spot of surfing could have been on the menu and I was to get my first taste of riding the waves later that week.

Before that, though, we ventured a couple of miles down the road to the ancient capital of Northumbria, to the village of Bamburgh, home of the magnificent castle perched on top of a rocky outcrop and a structure that completely dominates the landscape for miles around.

The castle dates back to the year 547 when the Kings of Northumbria chose Bamburgh as their Royal capital, with Ida the Flambeearer laying the first timbers of a wooden stockade overlooking the sea – and a more impressive location you could hardly find. It has had a tempestuous history over the past 1500 years, but now belongs to the Armstrong family, whose introduction says: "These formidable walls have witnessed dark tales of royal rebellion, bloody battles, spellbinding legends, millionaire benefactors and ghosts who love this building so much they'll never leave".

What impressed my little boy the most, though, was the Armstrong and Aviation Museum set within the grounds and housed in the West Ward. With displays of old aeroplane artefacts, artillery and weaponry from the two World Wars, and telling the story of the first Lord Armstrong's engineering achievements, it seemed a little out of kilter alongside the historical splendour of the castle, but actually it proved a fascinating insight into the world of aviation during wartime and beyond.

The main buildings of the castle housed a vast array of weaponry, paintings and archaeological finds, with the King's Hall and Cross Hall adding the 'wow factor' with their glorious teak-lined walls and ceilings, along with huge colourful tapestries making

this location fit for a king. The location of the castle really is a photographer's dream and down on the beach in the shadow of the stone fortress, even the most novice of snappers could not fail to capture the glory of the scene.

It was on this beach later in the week, on a perfect sunny morning, that I had my first taste of surfing. I always imagined myself, hanging ten down in Devon or Cornwall, but I discovered that Bamburgh, along with the nearby beaches at Seahouses and Beadnell, is something of wave-riding hotspot.

Qualified surf instructor and local lad Ben Patterson runs 'Boards and Bikes' (www.boardsandbikes.co.uk) a local mobile adventure service, that hires out surfboards, wetsuits and mountain bikes or thrill-seekers and he and I strode out onto the sand, with our boards tucked under our arms.

After a safety 'chat' it was then on to the basics of learning – still on terra-firma – and then we entered the water, a moment I had dreamt about for years.

As a surf music aficionado, I had always longed to get out in the water on a board and now here I was, getting ready to go my own mini 'Surfin Safari'. But the reality was far removed from what I imagined – I could barely sit on my board without falling off, never mind stand up and 'walk the nose'. Now I truly understood what the term 'Wipe Out' meant and I proved a big flop in my first experience of surfing, possibly standing, if you can call it that, for about half a second in total, before being plunged into the icy shallows of the North Sea. It was still great fun, though.

After those excursions, it was time to replenish my energies with a hearty meal at the Bamburgh Castle Inn (www.bamburghcastleinn.co.uk), back in Seahouses. The 18th-century building is sat above the old lime kilns on the quayside, with splendid views of the castle and the Farne Islands from the upper floor of the restaurant.

The steak and ale pie went down a treat with a pint of local brew, while my wife and son tucked into a delicious bounty of fish and chips. And the toffee sponge for afters was to die for. The Inn also has 30 bedrooms and was

redeveloped recently making it a very attractive place to stay, eat or just have a quiet drink, and is in walking distance from Springhill.

Seahouses is also the location for the Seaford Ocean Club and my wife enjoyed a pampering session, where she was treated to a facial.

Looking radiant again after the hour-long treatment, she then joined us in the indoor 20-metre swimming pool where the three of us had a relaxing time while the rain lashed down outside.

With a pool and spa, fitness gym, health and beauty suite, as well as a lovely little coffee shop, all housed within the futuristic-looking complex, the Ocean Club is a popular retreat for local residents and is definitely an oasis of calm when the weather is stormy outside. During the week, we also

headed to the tiny village of Heatherslaw, about 20 miles north-west of Seahouses, home of a delightful light railway company, that takes passengers on a 30-minute journey alongside the River Till to the nearby village of Etal.

This feels like 'Wind in the Willows' territory; the riverbanks bustle with wildlife, while herons cruise the fields and with the sun shimmering on the water, this really is an idyllic spot for a relaxing jaunt by steam.

Northumberland is a huge, beautiful county with so much to see and do, and I haven't even mentioned Alnwick Castle, Holy Island or Hadrian's Wall, to name but three more of the big attractions in the area.

A return visit is definitely on the agenda and maybe next time we'll see what the wigwams have to offer.

TRIP FACTFILE

Dominic and his family were guests of Northumberland Tourism and stayed at Springhill Farm Accommodation (www.springhill-farm.co.uk).

Prices for Springhill Farm's holiday cottages start from £250 up to £1830 for a seven-night stay.

Wigwams: £18.50 per adult per night (£19 in 2011), £10 per child (£11 in 2011) and £2.50 per dog.

Bunkhouse: Adults £12 per night £14 in 2011), £10 per child (£11 in 2011).

Bamburgh Castle Inn: www.bamburghcastleinn.co.uk

Boards and Bikes: Prices start from £8 for surfboard hire; wetsuits start from £6; bikes start from £20 per day