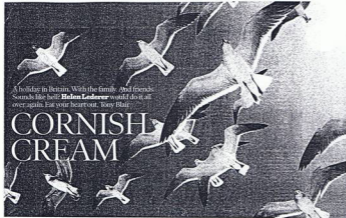


Travel Etc.



A holiday in Britain. With the family. And friends. Sounds like hell. **Helen Lederer** would do it all over again. Eat your heart out, Tony Blair.

CORNISH CREAM

The idea was to spend a week in a house by the sea somewhere in good old blighty. I'd had enough of hurtling off to Heathrow for an "all-inclusive" week in Sardinia or Turkey, especially when the inclusive bit meant theme nights, children's discos and having to engage in compulsory poolside banter with anal friends from Clapham who go riding at weekends and have at least three children, all of whom are invariably "bright" and annoying. (How do I know this? Summer of 1998. Don't ask.)



So it was with this in mind that I invited my two best friends (plus offspring and partners) to really stay with me at Clipper House in Looe. When the English middle classes say "a house by the sea", it can't just be an old house by any old sea. "You mean like Lillingston-on-Sea" quipped one rather jaded friend who was in obvious need of a holiday. "No," I replied smartly. "Like Boddings-with-a-View." I'd been reliably tipped off that Clipper was one of the most beautiful holiday houses in east Cornwall (I'm not stupid) and also that it had just been listed out in the most exquisite style with a sea view to die for.

The brochure revealed not only the most straining views of the beach and harbour, but also the latest in CD systems, fridges and even a games room complete with piano, pool table and dartboard. Nine rooms altogether with various combos of banks and twin systems would easily sleep — well, hundreds, should you be the kind of person who has that many friends and wants to see them all at the same time in their PJs.

Clipper House, the brochure went on, could be used as a venue for family reunions, whist' workshops and, more recently, gigs, some kind of "Corporate" weekend for people to do whatever it is corporate people have to do but in a stunning setting. (The setting makes it more

fun than the boardroom, I suppose.)

As far as I was concerned, I just wanted to stay in a lovely holiday house that didn't smell of stewed cabbage, have plastic walkways or boat candlewick bedspreads with fairy sheets. I wanted to share some peace and good vibes with my friends in a lovely setting in England. Above all, I wanted to avoid those embarrassing breakfast moments when incarcerated in a room full of strangers being served muddy coffee by an owner who you know would really rather be doing something else.

I needn't have worried with Clipper. As soon as we arrived I was struck by the generic tranquility of its floors and walls. (Oh, you can get tropical walls and floors — simply contrast with highly patterned slug pile and peeling polystyrene tiles.) The springs, sandy-coloured carpets rustling throughout the house hugged our toes as we padded about. The house was all ours for a week. Yippee. Sanded wooden beams framed a bar-top area which soon became one of our favourite spots. The child got stuck into playing at being barmad (haven't always known when she got the idea from) while the adults (well, just me at this point) were very quick to sit up on a hot mat and ponder which particular travellers' refreshment to imbibe upon arrival.

I have to say here that the first best friend had let me down before we got there. She said she'd double-booked with a yoga week in Dublin and could I go another week? No, I couldn't. The second best friend could only come down in the middle of the week for reasons which were no longer, I had to make the decision quickly to switch off from the more intricate of the details in case I fell

into a coma and never woke up. So it was just me and child who had the place to ourselves for a few days, which made it all the more sticky to surrender when the second reserve list of friend with husband and other friend (who'd by now sorted herself out) descended halfway through.

Meanwhile, we were very happy on our own, thank you very much. All the rooms are delicately painted to echo the colours outside, which were almost exclusively those of sky, sea and sand in the manner of Sidney Simon, Gilmour or any other of the more subtle-sounding Impressionists. The view was indeed looked the same for hundreds of years and it was only when I peeped through the binoculars to see town life close up that I identified the odd Adidas waterproof which brought the scene up to the present day. Our arrival coincided with the Looe Festival and lots of cheery marching and skipping down the quayside to a brass band caught my attention. What had thought a week at the seaside would turn me into a peeping Tom?

New comfy beds and crisp-white towels made me strongly content as I snuggled down on our first night listening to the waves and watching the stars through the enormous windows — not something I would ever expect to do at home. We back on to a garage, in any case. Candles which had clearly seen much use by the previous occupants were everywhere, and when we lit them the house became even more pretty and magical. There, there, wasn't a sense of peace brightened by the fact that my mobile, for some reason, wasn't taking messages. We felt well and truly alone —

Until, that was, the friends descended. We watched knowingly as they, too, exclaimed at the décor and



Early hours delivered peace and tranquillity. The view outside the windows is an ideal example of the serene surroundings that the house offers. The view from the games room is particularly good. A generous portion of the view from the porch is reflected in the beams. (Photo: Guy Lawrence)



the views, at the lovely tea bathroom and the general atmosphere of such utterly gorgeous luxury on a cliff. Once everyone had allotted themselves a room (an act which took the teenage family a particularly long time since they weren't sure how much to reveal re sleeping arrangements in front of us adults) we settled down to a delicious array of picnic food and celebratory wine. This was followed by a rare music and mime performed by the younger members on the steps in front of the huge refectory tables with the help of Geri Halliwell (regrettably not on CD). It turned out to be a far better show than any of the themed nights at the Sardinian all-inclusive. It was also an experience which had become all too rare in our compartmentalised London lives. I started to feel like the person I thought I'd like to be but never had the time for — oh, never mind.

Maybe there's a lost bit of childhood in us all which hankers for those family holidays where we'd all pile into the car to set off for Cornwall via Exeter and stop off for cream tea whenever the wheels might strike. Package holidays have a lot to answer for. One of my favourite moments of the holiday (apart from watching the harbour at night from the stuporous sofa by the conservatory window) was tracking into a slice of cottage (the kind of fall-bodded sponge slice with icing and nutmeg) while passing some slightly weird items in the Folk and Farm Museum in Looe town.

By the way, we named this place "the quietest village in England" because you could hear a hair fly by, it was so silent. We didn't actually prove that, but it was very quiet. I noticed I had a "Habitat" from inside a hollow" exhibit, for in-



stance, which was reasoning I'm pretty sure would have eluded me had we not popped in. We then dove straight into a discussion about the merits of the Eden Project nearby. One lady thought it was a marvellous attraction and better than "that Dome affair", while the other thought it unfair on everyone else who hadn't been given Lottery lolly and how could they compete? Well, of course, we all had to go along after that, to decide for ourselves.

We found the Eden Project after stopping off in St Austell, which is about 10 miles west of Looe, for a quick slider, which in turn made us seriously consider buying a stand-down sideboard for £250. We didn't, but only "due to transport restrictions", we explained to the man. He nodded in a rather Cornish way, I thought.

The Eden Project turned out to be a cross between the Getty Museum, the South Bank and ... well, the Eden Project. To see it at dusk was perfect, as the sun set behind the three huge biomes. Inside was a "theatre of plant life", which unfolded as we smelt herbs, felt rubber and looked at various crops we take for granted, such as sugar beet and the cola plant. There was a notice telling us that the Incredible String Band were due to play there next week. "The incredible who?" asked one of the teenagers, but he was too fascinated reading about "a giant Duran Duran turned into a bit of art" to be bothered with the reply.

We made a slight detour to Padstow that night because one of our more de-luded party insisted on directing us to that "Rudolf Steiner chippy" in Padstow (translation: "The Rick Stein restaurant in Padstow"). Sadly for us, you have to book in advance, or so a very smiley waitress told us, but we were comforted with lots of smiley photographs of Rick himself beaming back at us from various bookshops and giftshops in the vicinity. In the end we made do with listening to the Welsh male voice choir on the quay, resplendent in their blazers and gold buttons. But not for long because we were hungry.

To make sure we didn't go hungry the next night, we booked Sharon, the Clipper House resident cook, and asked her to "do us proud" for supper. (I didn't make the phone call and this expression, it seems, is one which some people's husbands use only when they are on holiday. Thankfully not mine. And sorry, Sharon, if you're reading this.) However, she did "do us proud". Efficiently. Sharon and her friend Jess turned up bearing bags of this and that and cheerfully started doing kitchen-type things in a confident sort of way. In no time at all, but still allowing time to squeeze in a gin and tonic from our favourite bar area, we found ourselves seated round

a candle-lit table with flowers and the best coq au vin we'd ever tasted. Not only did Sharon and Jess cook, they washed up as well, which was like being a host at your own dinner party but without the stress, preparation or grimy aspect.

We did have a go at the dishwasher, which was so state-of-the-art it frightened the more spineless of our group (including me). In fact it was so advanced it did a full cycle in two minutes and was a bit like washing up in space. (No, I've never actually washed up in space, but if I did ... oh, never mind.)

It became tempting to lounge around in the snooker room, particularly if you were any good at scoring. I wasn't, so it seemed incumbent on me to suggest one faction hole up in the house with supplies of Coke, crisps and videos while the more intrepid and slightly older section (me) zip around the woolly monkey sanctuary which was just a car's nip down the cliff path from Clipper itself.

When we got there, a team of enthusiastic monkey keepers gave a running commentary about which woolly monkey had fallen out with whom and which purposeful male was going into a secret space to nuzzle with whom. This was rather similar to the teenage factions developing back in the games room at Clipper, but I didn't say so since I was with their parents at the time.

Back at base camp, Looe's beach was flat, stony and glorious, so lounging about on it needed no debate. It was fun to watch the speedboats whizz by every so often. We kept meaning to go on one but somehow the pull of the towel won through. We did take a boat down the River Looe, though. Then we hired some crab lines from the quay and showed a bit of bacon on the end as instructed and waited for a crab to appear. There was one rather sorry species which was duped by the bacon, and we townies became fascinated when boiling it up later. Something not dissimilar to glue erupted from its backside. We thought fondly of Sharon and her coq au vin.

The rock pools seemed a good alternative to crabbing, and we fished about for shrimps, knowing that if they were anything like that crab we'd leave them be this time.

On our last day we all mooched about, clearly tad to relinquish the house we now thought of as "ours". Then we squabbled, as you do when you have to pack up and go home. The spouse of my third best friend suggested going to Flambards theme park. "You're too old!" we chorused, but this was more to punish him for taking us to Padstow that time without telling us you had to book first. We ended up going to Fowey, about 10 miles west of Clipper, and found an aquarium instead. This turned out to be home to a rather mesmerising octopus. It

looked to me as if it was wearing a colostomy bag which was, in fact, just its breathing tube - all rather frightening, since some of us are just not Pisces-friendly. We then drove on to Polperro, where I oversaw my Pisces fear and tackled into the most glorious sole at a brasserie. We also saw the famous model village and diorama about the magic of King Arthur. I wonder what King Arthur would have thought of Clipper House? I wonder if they've booked for Easter?



The Facts

Getting there

By road, Looe is on the A387, off the A38 to Liskeard. By train, change at Liskeard for Looe. Take a taxi to Clipper House from Looe station, a drive of about 10 minutes. For train times and ticket prices, contact National Rail Enquiries (tel: 08457 484950).

Being there

A week at Clipper House in July and August costs £1500 for a maximum party of 22 people. A week in the Main Sail and Crow's Nest apartments costs £550 for a maximum of five people. Contact Clipper House, c/o Roma French, Minado, Harnaflore Lane, Harnaflore, West Looe, Cornwall PL13 2ST (tel: 01503 262754; email: r.french@clipper@aol.com).

Further information

Looe Tourist Information Centre, the Guildhall, Fowey Street, East Looe (tel: 01503 262072) is open 10am to 5pm every day. To find out more about the area visit the South-East Cornwall Discovery Centre, Millpool, West Looe (tel: 01503 262777; net: www.southwestcornwall.co.uk), open 10am to 5pm every day except Saturday; admission free.



Share things: the cry of swooping seagulls, fresh lobster, the smell of the sea. Helen Ledere, left, found that her seaside holiday in Looe, Cornwall, with family and friends was all that she hoped it would be

COMES, SW/005