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SLEEPING UNDER THE STARS AT RIVER COTTAGE



Stylist contributor Christina Quaine is a camping convert after enjoying

a stormy night in a plush tent at the River Cottage Pop-Up Hotel in East Devon My debut camping experience was at Gilwell Park, Essex, as an eight-year-

old Girl Guide. I didn't enjoy it much, mainly because I woke up in the middle of the night to find my sleeping bag soaking wet. I'm pretty sure it was just rain. I hope it was just rain. When Mum and Dad came to collect me I felt like a world-weary traveller. The reality is that I'd been away for one night, three miles from home.

I've been camping again

since then and it usually involves weeping in tent-erecting exasperation or, at the very least, a freezing-at-night-sweating-in-the-morning cycle. Not to mention the constant threat of an over-jolly festival-goer crashing into my canvas abode.

The Pop-Up Hotel has about as much in common with my previous experiences

as a five-star hotel does with a fleapit hostel, thank goodness. It launched last year at Glastonbury, and from 10 August until 7 September, will be pitching its tents in the fields behind Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall's River Cottage in Axminster, on the Devon/Dorset border. I recently got a sneak preview and can honestly say it's like being in the boutique hotel room of

your dreams. Except your room is a tent.

'ME' TIME

Due to my fiancé, friends and any family member I would comfortably share a tent with all being busy, I used it as a fun, life-affirming opportunity to spend some quality time with myself. I am, it turns out, great company. My home for the night was



➔ a suite, which resembled a small marquee in size – in fact, I'm sure I've been to wedding receptions in smaller. At my suite's entrance was a decking area where mahogany-leather deck chairs would have made the ideal perching point, had it not, unsurprisingly for this summer, been hammering down with rain. But it didn't matter, because inside it was warm and inviting, with a tasteful grey and cream colour scheme (interiors are done by Vicky, wife of The Pop-Up Hotel founder Mark Sorrell). Centre stage was the king-size bed covered with a toasty duvet, squidgy pillows and woolly blankets, and beside it a two-seater leather sofa, velvet armchair and a coffee table with a jug of fresh lilies. Not a single sleeping bag in sight.

Best of all, this was a tent with a toilet. Behind my bed, a canvas zip-up wall concealed said loo (yes, a proper one – with a flush and toilet roll!), plus a basin and shower complete with Bramley toiletries. A shower in a tent is never going to be your best-ever but the water pressure was good enough to give my hair a proper wash in the morning.

I couldn't stay at River Cottage without trying one of their famous cookery courses. They are running exclusive courses for guests of The Pop-Up Hotel (such as foraging for pizza ingredients before making the pizza yourself) but I opted for the One Day at River Cottage, where I got to make carrot hummus, beef stew, grilled mackerel, panna cotta and shortbread. Oh, and a massive farmhouse loaf. It was well worth the effort and at the end of the day, all 20 of us sat outside at long tables overlooking the valley as we devoured the food

we'd cooked and enjoyed a glass of wine. Even if, like me, you're hopeless in the kitchen, the enthusiasm of teachers Rob and Tim is infectious, and I came away feeling like I could host a very respectable dinner party with the recipes I'd learnt.

RURAL LIVING

After all that hard work, I couldn't wait to get back to my suite to do nothing and I arrived to find a flock of sheep grazing around my tent. Very idyllic, I thought, as I snuggled down under a blanket with a book and cup of tea to the sound of rain thudding on the canvas and a gentle baa-ing. I wasn't

“CENTRE STAGE WAS THE KING-SIZE BED COVERED WITH A TOASTY DUVET. NOT A SLEEPING BAG IN SIGHT”

remotely hungry after a day of constant grazing in the River Cottage kitchen, but hotel guests can enjoy the specially-devised tasting menu at the hotel's pop-up restaurant. It's also open to non-staying guests and the menu features Sharpham cheese and dishes like spiced organic lamb and summer vegetable risotto.

Bedtime was the ultimate test of my solo camping bravery. It's all very well when

the lights are on (yes, these tents even have bedside lamps) but when you're plunged into rural darkness it's a different story. Being a Londoner, I'm suspicious of the countryside – so despite being the cosiest and most comfortable I've ever been when camping, I did have trouble drifting off to sleep. I tried counting the sheep – or at least their bleats – and eventually nodded off.

When I awoke the next morning I was so relieved I hadn't been eaten by a cow, that I celebrated by having breakfast brought to my tent. Yes – tent service, with what has already gone down in

history as my favourite ever breakfast. I sat with the doors open looking out at the rain falling onto the fields (yep, still raining) and I enjoyed the loveliest homemade granola, scrambled eggs on toast, apple juice and two cafeteries of fresh coffee.

As my train sped back to London I felt more relaxed than I have in ages. I'd love every camping experience to be as luxurious as my stay at River Cottage but I suspect I'll have to contend with dodgy tent poles and soggy sleeping bags again in the near future.

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