

Client: Cumbria Tourism
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Cycling and indulgence in the Lake District

The guy next to me in the queue to pick up our mountain bikes looked more like a riot cop than a cyclist. In black from head to toe, he had gripping shoes, goggles, gloves, arm and knee protectors, even a back plate.

His dinky rucksack probably contained high-calorie carob bars and an emergency tent, and sticking out of it was a thin tube he could suck on while careering down an almost vertical slope. That is dedication – not having the excuse to stop for a gulp of Fanta when you need a breather.

My costume of trainers, long shorts and a faded gig T-shirt was rather wishy-washy. But hell, he was 20 years younger, 20 times fitter and I was going to enjoy myself anyway.

I'd been mountain biking in Grizedale Forest in 1990 – when the pro next to me was on a tricycle – but I'd returned only once, on a walk with my kids around the outdoor sculpture park.

Over the 20 years I'd put on a few stones, mountain biking had boomed and Grizedale had become one of the most popular places in the country to do it. Nicky and I had parcelled off the children for a weekend of eating, drinking. . . and exercise to work off the guilt – and so I returned to Grizedale.

Experts come here for The North Face Trail, a ten-mile, single track route with technical and demanding stretches. But if like me you don't know a berm from a perm (apparently it is a man-made mound built into mountain bike trails), you can try one of the other five routes around the 10 square miles of oak, conifer and moorland.

We hired our cycles from Grizedale Mountain Bikes at the classy visitor centre and took our sturdy Saracens on to the easy Hawkshead Moor Trail. But after 100 yards on the forest road, through heavy Cumbrian weather, we hit the steepest slope I'd seen in years.

It didn't stop there. The first half of the 10.5-mile route is a tough climb, but worth it for the swooping downhills, fresh air and tremendous forest views.

A friend of mine, a serious mountain biker, advised me to break off from the Trail for a single track along a fell to Low Parkmoor for some spectacular views of Coniston Water below.

After three hours, we arrived back at base, soaked to the skin but glowing with satisfaction. While we were downing hot soup in the busy café, I noticed the biker I'd seen earlier looking like he'd been dunked in a peat bog.

He'll soon be able to try out something even more challenging. The finishing touches are being put to a 1km black cycle run at Grizedale for experts only – those who currently travel to Scotland or the Alps to test their skills.

But if you don't want to saddle up, there are lots of other activities, including Go Ape! tree-top adventure with its high wires, walkways through branches and zip wire finish. Its sculpture park opened in 1977 and the Forestry Commission has been given cash to extend it.

One impressive work, officially opened last week, is The Wood For The Trees, a gnarly wind-blown oak that has



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been erected horizontally at the visitor centre entrance.

With burning legs, our accommodation was thankfully only 20-minutes drive away, nestled in the rugged Langdale Valley next to Elterwater village.

Langdale Estate has high-class timeshares and lodges on a sprawling but beautifully landscaped 35-acre site. At the centre is the hotel, with other rooms in nearby low-level buildings and a spa with a 20m swimming pool.

After a strenuous afternoon, lazing in the spa bath, steam room and sanarium (not as punishing as a sauna) was in order, but there is an extensive gym for a warm-down. They do a serious amount of treatments too.

But for relaxation, all I needed was a stroll around the grounds.

The Estate has been given a coveted Civic Trust Award for its environment. A former gunpowder works which closed 80 years ago, the place is typically Lakes, filled with fir, fern and rhododendron, with pools reflecting the leafy canopy and gurgling streams enveloping quick brown trout, and mossy millstones rise from flowery borders.

We were in a standard Signature Room, but it was a good size with a king-size bed, big flat screen telly, whirlpool bath, great shower and a handy drying closet that had out kit bone dry by morning. There are a couple of classy bars where you can eat but we had dinner in the Two AA Rosette Purdy's Restaurant which looks on a working waterwheel.

We couldn't resist the eight-course tasting menu, with matching wines expertly picked by restaurant manager Deepak Yadav (£74.50).

Stand-out courses included pan-fried fillet of wild sea trout in a shellfish broth, with smoked salmon tortellini and the tasting of pork with fillet, belly cheek and a crispy ear with fondant potato, apple puree and sage jus.

You can also eat in the complex's traditional Lakeland pub, Wainwright's Inn, which although a touch corporate has friendly staff, six real ales (Cumbria brewery's citrusy Langdale bitter being appropriate), log fires, flagged floors and some decent pub grub – I can recommend the steak and kidney pudding in red wine gravy (£9.50).

There is another pub at the other side of the estate, the Britannia Inn, which has a huge oak to sit under and view Loughrigg Fell. From here it is a half-hour stroll along the River Brathay and around beautiful Elter Water, with views through reeds of the Langdale Pikes, to squat, deafening Skelwith Force, which empties water from Great and Little Langdale.

Later we ate The Hideaway, a Two AA Rosette 'restaurant with rooms' on a quiet lane on the outskirts of Windermere.

The solid Lakeland building has been sympathetically revamped by Richard and Lisa Gornall with the dining room's authentic Victorian features nicely contrasted by funky wallpaper and cool lighting.

Head chef Ryan Blackburn once worked at nearby Michelin-starred Holbeck Ghyll, and it showed, with a seasonal amuse bouche of foamy spiced celeriac and apple soup and pre-dessert of blueberry fool inserted into the meal.



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The three-course dinner (£32.50) included a dreamily light chicken liver parfait with a terrific fig and pear chutney and a fillet of Cumbrian beef with a wonderfully verdant forestiere sauce. They make their own Grasmere gingerbread too, which came with a gorgeously spiky lemon posset.

On the way home from the Lakes, I always stop off at Kirkby Lonsdale, which over 15 years has turned into a posh little town, full of independent shops in nooks and crannies as well as that lovely churchyard stroll to Ruskin's view overlooking the sedate River Lune where it arcs gracefully.

At the other side of the churchyard is The Sun Inn, which I remember as a bedraggled pub but has since been transformed into an 11-bedroom, award-winning Inn by Mark and Lucy Fuller that retains its 17th century charm while allowing flashes of contemporary cool.

Its characterful bar has three real ales, there is an excellent wine list and the restaurant has seasonal dishes such as red gurnard with sweetcorn and crayfish chowder.

We tried the knockout Sunday Lunch (three courses, £21.50), with a good choice including a huge serving of potted mackerel pate with a tremendous beetroot chutney, and roast sirloin of beef and Yorkshire pudding, with the meat from the butcher next door but one.

There was a slight French accent to it all with ratatouille alongside some truly excellent fresh veg and a lovely pear tart tatin to finish.

To work it all that off, we'd better plan another epic bike ride soon.

TRAVEL FACTS

Langdale Hotel And Spa: Great Langdale, near Ambleside, LA22 9JD (015394 37302, www.langdale.co.uk). Lakeland Signature Room from £175 per night at weekends for bed, breakfast and spa. There are more luxurious Feature and Ultimate rooms.

Grizedale Forest Visitor Centre: Hawkshead, LA22 0QJ (01229 860010, www.grizedale@forestry.gsi.gov.uk). Grizedale Mountain Bikes: Grizedale Forest Visitor Centre (01229 860369, www.grizedalemountainbikes.co.uk). The Hideaway at Windermere: Phoenix Way, Windermere, LA23 1DB (015394 43070, www.thehideawayatwindermere.co.uk).

The Sun Inn: 6 Market Street, Kirkby Lonsdale, LA6 2AU (015242 71965, www.sun-inn.info).

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