

# On yer bike...it's the perfect way to explore the lakes

Margareta Pagano and family enjoy the highs of uphill cycling from a luxury woodland retreat

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With the economy so ghastly, I've made a timely discovery: a place to go to spoil yourself without breaking the bank. It's the Langdale Hotel and Country Club, set in the gorgeous 35-acre estate in one of the most spectacular of the Lake District's valleys.

Driving through the thick forests of Langdale alongside the Great Langdale Beck, you wouldn't even know this haven existed, it is so carefully crafted into the fellside. Once inside the estate's gates, you find the hotel, crouching as though it's coming out of the ground, with a waterfall gushing from the rocks at the entrance.

Dotted all around the woodland are the prettiest Scandinavian-cum-Swiss style chalets, surrounded by streams, tarns and other watery features. There are 80 or so lodges, although you wouldn't think so because they're so well hidden by the trees. These are timeshare chalets which are also available to rent.

We head for Lodge 57 in the Coniston area of the estate. It's one of the smaller chalets but sleeps four comfortably and can take six due to a James Bond-style double bed that pops out from behind the drinks cabinet.

The estate has been a secret haunt for holidaymakers ever since the gunpowder works here were closed nearly a century ago. The land was bought in 1929 by a local man, Richard Hall, who turned the site into a hotel, writing in his brochure: "It is not our intention that it should become the resort of the undiscerning, but rather it would be the rendezvous of those who appreciate its inherent charm and peaceful, friendly atmosphere."

Nothing has changed. It's as charming and peaceful as it must have been then and you can still see the remains of past industry – old blast walls, the saltpetre store, the machinery and enormous wheels which powered the water mill. The timeshare chalets came later, in the early 1980s, when a group of local businessmen bought the site. A few years ago the estate came up for sale again, but this time the timeshare owners liked it so much they clubbed together and are now the shareholders too.

Having the hotel and the lodges together is smart, as you have the privacy of self-catering; but the luxury of using the hotel's three restaurants (takeaways too), swimming pool and spa, making it ideal for families with teenagers. So it was perfectly safe to leave our daughter studying for exams while we could try out the local mountain biking routes with our 14-year-old son.

And that's why we found ourselves up at Whinlatter Forest Park, not far from Cockermouth in the northern Lakes, where the Altura cross-country route has become one of the UK's hottest trails. It's the longest track in the Lakes, a 12-mile "red" grade route with nine miles of new single track for real bravehearts. At Whinlatter, they've also decided it's time for all the family to have a go and the Forestry Commission has just built a 4.5-mile "blue" route designed for beginners.

And we were to be the guinea pigs. I'd never heard of berms, skinnies, cork screws or table tops (don't ask), but I soon found out what they were as our guide, the utterly patient Sean Rosser from Cyclewise, whisked us up and down some of the sharpest bends I've seen this side of the Alps. Every bend was worth the ache: when you get to the top of this route, there is a glimpse through the trees across to those earthly giants, Helvellyn and Skiddaw, slumbering in the distance. By the end our muscles were red hot and in need of tender care. Back at Langdale, the sports masseur at the spa was on standby; we then collapsed in the pool and steam rooms. By now it was late evening but the pool is open until 10pm, giving you the treat of watching the sun set while swimming. It's no surprise to learn that the second and third generations of the timeshare owners still come back here for their holidays.

This year's visitors will find a new attraction nearby; across the road at Cylinder Wood is the Merzbau barn where the German artist Kurt Schwitters worked when he came to the Lakes – via Norway – as a refugee fleeing the Nazis. He settled in Ambleside where, after many years of ill-health, he died penniless and virtually unknown. Today, though, he is acknowledged as one of fathers of the Modernist movement, and two local art enthusiasts, Ian Hunter and Celia Lerner of the Littoral Arts Trust, have bought the barn hoping to turn it into a mini-Schwitters cultural centre.

While we were there, they had a £250,000 Damien Hirst painting on show in the same tiny barn where Schwitters did some of his finest work. I do hope they manage to pull off the project. Schwitters is just as much part of the fells as Wordsworth or Beatrix Potter, and it's time his rich legacy finds a fitting home.

### **Compact Facts**

### **How to get there**

The Langdale Country Estate (01539 437302; [langdale.co.uk](http://langdale.co.uk)) is a few miles from Ambleside, off the B5343. One-week rentals start at £725 for a one-bedroom chalet with additional sofa bed. Double rooms at the hotel cost from £100 per night including breakfast.

### **Further information**

Cyclewise Whinlatter (01768 778711; [cyclewise.co.uk](http://cyclewise.co.uk)). Bike hire is £15 for three hours, £20 for more than three hours. Guided trips with an instructor cost £90 for three hours for a group of six. The Merz Barn project is run by the Littoral Arts Trust (01706 827 961; [merzbar.net](http://merzbar.net))