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Britain's best treehouses and woodland attractions

As half term approaches, Sophie Campbell branches out into the forest to see what's afoot in the high-flying world of tree tourism.

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How I got into this mess I don't know. I am 30ft in the air, clipped to a wire running from one mighty tree trunk to another, in the company of an 11 year-old called Anthea who has nerves of steel. My young godson, with whom I am meant to be bonding, is padding happily along a wire with his father far below, a mere hop from the leaf mould. All the parents, inexplicably, seem to be safely on the ground, shouting up encouragement, driving Anthea to aim for Level 7, where the air is thin and one slip means dangling for hours while the rescue team scrambles. Luckily she freaks out at 45 feet and we return to blessed earth. Scary? Yes. Fun? Some of the best I've had in a long time.



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I'm not alone. Trees are back. After years in the wilderness, you might say, they are back stronger than they have been since The Adventures of Robin Hood was Saturday morning telly or Pooh Bear became famous for his honey habit. The Forestry Commission reports 100 million visits a year to its sites in England, Scotland and Wales. Tree houses have escaped from private gardens to become hotels and attractions. People are walking through woods, admiring art in woods, going to concerts in woods, climbing trees, conserving trees, sleeping in trees and flying between trees on army-style zip wires.

"There's a definite increase in interest," says Paddy Harrop, the national recreation manager for Forestry Commission England. "We ask visitors why they like woods and they say it's the peace and quiet, which is weird when you've got all the mountain biking and high-rope stuff." Thirty per cent of visits to Commission forests are by mountain bikers and its 15 forest-adventure sites are managed by Go Ape!, one of Britain's biggest tree adventure suppliers.

Over in Norfolk, the family attraction BeWILDerwood is also making a success of arboreal adventures. It was opened in 2007 by Tom Blofeld, who inherited an estate in the Broads, wrote a book about some creatures called Marsh Boggles and created a woodland adventure park to go with it. They hoped for 130,000 annual visitors by 2011; instead they got 13,000 over their first half-term and should hit 165,000 this year.

"It was a pretty simple concept," he says, "children running around in the woods, like we used to do when we were small. But it just seemed to hit a moment. Jamie Oliver was doing his school meals thing. Parents wanted to see their children outside, playing healthily, and to play with them."

Den-building may be the big buzz word this year, but trees, as Paddy says, are about tranquillity as well. As winter approaches, everything quietsens; concerts and light shows are over for the summer, visitor numbers drop, birds and animals leave or hunker down. Now it's the trees' turn to put on a show: this month, arboreta such as Westonbirt in Gloucestershire – famous for its maples – or Winkworth in Surrey will burst into firework displays of leaf colour.

Perhaps the most magnificent of all will be in Perthshire, Scotland's "Big Tree Country". Here an odd combination of circumstances – propitious climate and soil, a massive tree-planting effort by landowners in the early 16th century (after the forests were depleted by the building of the Great Michael warship) and an unusually rich tradition of plant collectors – has landed it with some of the biggest, most beautiful and most famous trees in Britain.

Meanwhile, given the chance to go to Level 7 with Anthea, I'd probably risk it. But I'd be just as happy to sit under one of the unwired specimens with a book, being grateful for the greatest free gift on the planet: the humble tree.

COMING TO A FOREST NEAR YOU

Click on the **Forestry Commission's** website (www.forestry.gov.uk (<http://www.forestry.gov.uk>)) for details of accessible woodland around Britain.

The Woodland Trust (01476 581143; www.woodlandtrust.org.uk (<http://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk>)), our main woodland conservation charity, is seeking support for its new forest of native trees, 850-acre Heartwood Forest, near St Albans in Hertfordshire.

ZIPPING THE LIGHT FANTASTIC

(Note that some high-ropes courses have height or weight restrictions for children and that bad weather, particularly high winds, may stop activities.)

Go Ape! (0845 643 9215; www.goape.co.uk (<http://www.goape.co.uk>)) specialises in high-wire forest adventures, has the longest zipwire in the country (426 metres, at Aberfoyle) and has 22 venues across Britain. Gorillas (over 18s) from £25 per day and Baboons (10-17 years) from £20; prices may rise at peak seasons.

BeWILDerwood, Norfolk (01603 783900; www.bewilderwood.co.uk (<http://www.bewilderwood.co.uk>)) is open from Feb half-term to Oct half-term and costs £6 for anyone over 92cm tall (free if shorter), £10 over 105cm tall and £8 for over 65 years.

Tree Surfers, Cornwall (0845 459 4632; www.treesurfers.co.uk (<http://www.treesurfers.co.uk>)) is new this year. The Tamar Valley centre has three high-ropes courses, open until the end of October. Children under 18, £17, adults £20.

Tree Top Adventures, Snowdonia (01690 710914; www.ttadventure.co.uk (<http://www.ttadventure.co.uk>)) is open all year round (shorter hours in winter) and run by a former Commando. Try the 100-Foot Plummet, the biggest in Europe, from a Douglas fir. Standard course £15 for under 16s, £20 adults.

Goodleaf Tree Climbing, Isle of Wight (0333 800 1188; www.goodleaf.co.uk (<http://www.goodleaf.co.uk>)) set up four years ago by a New Zealander, is open all year; you are roped, taught to climb up into the boughs and can sit about in hammocks at the top on arrival. A 2½ hour session costs £35 for over 17s and £25 for 8-16s.

The Mighty Oak Tree Climbing Company, near Lostwithiel, Cornwall (07890 698651; www.mighty-oak.co.uk (<http://www.mighty-oak.co.uk>)) offers three-hour introductory tree climbing sessions (£120 for 1-4 climbers) and more advanced courses.

TREE HOUSES AND TREETOP WALKS

Coates Castle, Fittleworth, West Sussex (01798 865001; www.castlecottage.info (<http://www.castlecottage.info>)) has a double room with en-suite bathroom built into a sweet chestnut tree in the grounds of this gothic mansion. From £135 per night for two people, including breakfast.

The Treehouse, Halse, Somerset (01823 431622; www.treehouseholidays.co.uk (<http://www.treehouseholidays.co.uk>)) "England's first five-star self-catering tree house" is a modern shingle tree house sleeping five. Short breaks from £605 (fully booked for 2009).

The Mighty Oak Tree Climbing Company (see above) also does Tree Top Camping in "tree boats", a sort of protected hammock; £200 per person or £140 with 2-5 people, all year round depending on weather.

Alnwick Castle Garden, Northumberland (01665 511350; www.alnwickgarden.com (<http://www.alnwickgarden.com>)) has "the world's largest wooden tree house". Children can take carved pumpkins to be displayed in the Treehouse competition until Oct 29 and there is family dinner in the Treehouse costing £25 adults, £10, under 12s, bookings 01665 511852). Garden admission: adults £9, concessions £6.50.

The Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew (020 8332 5000; www.kew.org (<http://www.kew.org>)) unveiled the 59ft-high, 656ft-long Xstrata Treetop Walkway, through sweet chestnuts, limes and oaks, in 2008, and its new Tree Towers playground for 3-11 year-olds opens this month. Also look out for the Bark Essentials trail leaflet. All are free once inside the gardens and open until one hour before closing. Gardens admission: adults £13, concessions £11, under-17s free.

ARBORETA

The Forestry Commission runs the **National Arboretum** at Westonbirt and the National Pinetum at Bedgebury, Kent.

The National Trust's **Winkworth Arboretum** in Surrey (01483 208477; www.nationaltrust.org.uk (<http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk>)) is open all year, dawn to dusk. Adults £5, children £2.50, family £12.50.

The Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew also runs **The Arboretum Trust** at Castle Howard, Yorkshire (01653 648650; www.kewatch.co.uk (<http://www.kewatch.co.uk>)), open March to the end of November. Adults £5, 5-16 years £2.50, as well as the temperate woodlands of birch and southern beech at the National Trust's **Wakehurst Place**, Haywards Heath, West Sussex (0844 800 1895; www.nationaltrust.org.uk (<http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk>))

EVENTS

The Forestry Commission's award-winning sound and light show **Enchanted Forest** (0844 888 4420; www.enchantedforest.org.uk (<http://www.enchantedforest.org.uk>)) is at Faskally Wood near Pitlochry, Perthshire from this weekend to November 1. Tickets: adults from £10.75, children from £2, family from £25.75.

Snagglefang's Spooky Spectacular at BeWILDerwood (details above), October 26 to November 1: make a Hallowe'en lantern of bent willow and papier mâché and set off through the dark woods, atmosphere bolstered by smoke machines hidden in the Norfolk marsh.

National Tree Week (November 25 to December 6) is run by the Tree Council (020 7407 9992; www.treecouncil.org.uk (<http://www.treecouncil.org.uk>)) Events include planting days, walks and talks, as well as "Tree O'Clock", organised by BBC Breathing Places (www.bbc.co.uk/breathingplaces/treeoclock (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/breathingplaces/treeoclock>)) from 11am-12pm on December 5, when an attempt will be made to get the Guinness World Record for planting the highest number of trees in an hour.

CELEBRITY TREES

Perthshire's biggies include the **Fortingall Yew** (Europe's oldest living thing), one of Britain's tallest trees at the

Hermitage near Birnam, and the world's highest beech hedge at Meikleour, 100ft-high and a third of a mile long, planted in 1745 (www.perthshirebigtreecountry.co.uk (<http://www.perthshirebigtreecountry.co.uk>))

The Royal, or Boscobel, Oak, near Wolverhampton, is the tree that gave its name to a thousand pubs, as well as shelter to Charles II, who was hiding from the Parliamentarians in 1651. Souvenir hunters destroyed the original; the current tree may be around 300 years old.

Winnie the Pooh's "100 Aker Wood", actually **Five Hundred Acre Wood**, is in the Ashdown Forest near East Grinstead, East Sussex. Go to www.ashdownforest.org (<http://www.ashdownforest.org>) for a map of the Pooh sites.

Sherwood Forest, famous for the **Major Oak**, which claims to be the "most visited tree in England" (08449 808080; www.nottinghamshire.gov.uk (<http://www.nottinghamshire.gov.uk>))

The Birnam Oak, again in Perthshire, is the sole surviving tree from the "moving forest" mentioned by Shakespeare in *Macbeth* (Act V).

The gnarled trunks of the **Kingley Vale Yews**, near Chichester, South Downs (01243 558700; www.visitsouthdowns.com (<http://www.visitsouthdowns.com>)) form Britain's oldest oak grove.

The Meavy Oak, near Yelverton, Devon, is thought to be 950 years old (01626 832093; www.dartmoor-npa.gov.uk (<http://www.dartmoor-npa.gov.uk>))

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