

“NO ELECTRIC HOOK-UP,
NO CUSHY FACILITIES,
**JUST US
AND THE
GREAT
OUTDOORS.**
WHAT HAD WE BEEN THINKING?”

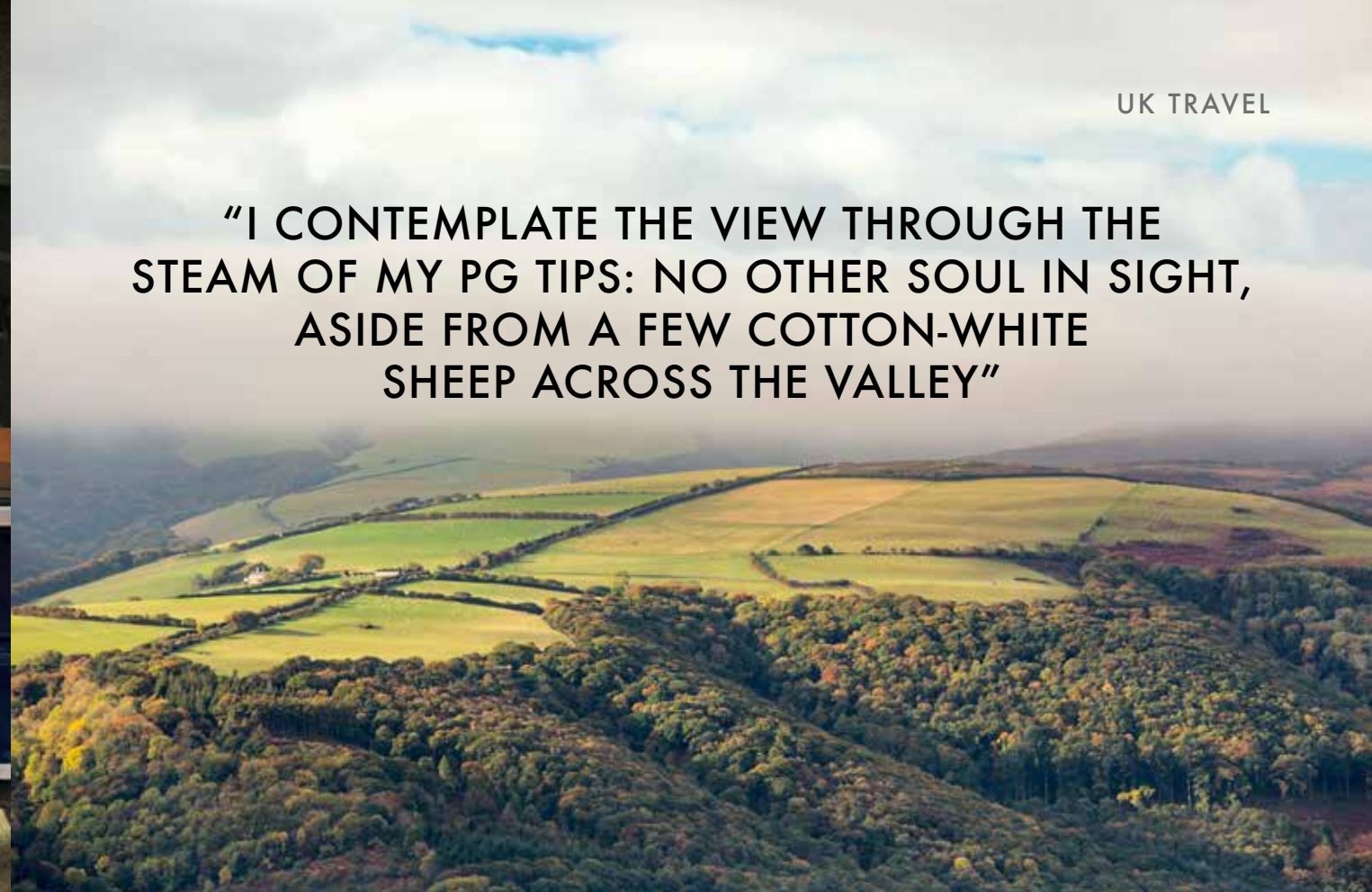


New website Wild With Consent offers campervanners exclusive access to beautiful, remote corners of Britain for the price of a typical pitch. Could our pair of middle-aged road trippers hack a long weekend off-grid in Exmoor?

WORDS BY HAZEL PLUSH • PHOTOS BY ADAM GASSON



"I CONTEMPLATE THE VIEW THROUGH THE STEAM OF MY PG TIPS: NO OTHER SOUL IN SIGHT, ASIDE FROM A FEW COTTON-WHITE SHEEP ACROSS THE VALLEY"



"S he's travelled to every single country in Europe, and the UK's most remote corners," says Dan as he opens the rear door of Blue Belle, my home for the next three nights. "She'll be unfazed by anything you throw at her – the wilder the better," he advises. "Just don't expect many luxuries..."

I peer inside: a two-burner gas stove and stainless steel sink sits to the left, a long padded bench to the right; a tiny fridge is fixed to the ceiling; a showerhead, powered by a hidden pump, promises engine-heated water for an outdoor spritz. As the founder of Defender Campers, Dan Usher-Clark is clearly *au fait* with this Defender 110 TD5, one of his fleet of three Land Rover rentals. He climbs in, unclips a few hooks, pulls down the bench back, and – hey presto – it beomes a small double bed. There's no doubt Blue Belle is well-suited to a wild camping trip, but there's a question nagging at my mind: am I?

That night, I think I have my answer. As the late-summer sun dips over Exmoor, bathing its meadows in a warm golden glow, the air fills with

violent expletives – again. Knuckles graze on the pop-up roof hinges, toes stub on the storage boxes: it's an evening of slapstick injuries, after a journey of stall-starts and crunching gears. Unused to the manual demands of a classic Defender, my partner John and I have bounced Blue Belle through Somerset, ostensibly to wild-sleep on a secluded hilltop. It's a gorgeous spot, high above the Exe Valley, a patchwork of sheep-clipped greens and deer-grazed woodlands – but I confess we feel woefully out of our depth.

After a supper of soup, I tumble into bed, knowing I won't sleep: we're too soft, too middle-aged, for this kind of jape. In the youthful glow of our twenties and thirties, we relished every adventure – but at some point, we've quietly

swapped our tent for shepherds' huts, lodges and, eventually, 'a nice B&B'. This is our attempt to prove we still have our edge: a wild weekend at the helm of Blue Belle. No electric hook-up, no cushy facilities, just us and the Great Outdoors. What were we thinking?

To my enduring surprise – and with no poetic licence, I promise – I sleep for eight blissful hours that night, and even 6'4" John has enough room to stretch out. With the morning dew clinging to the grass, we tuck the bed away, pop the kettle on and unfurl the camp chairs provided by Dan. Quietly, I contemplate the view through the steam of my PG Tips: no other soul in sight, aside from a few cotton-white sheep across the valley. A handful of ripe blackberries gleam in the nearby brambles – ready for breakfast. With fresh eyes and clear skies, suddenly our plan doesn't seem quite so ridiculous.

ROAMING FREE – WITH PERMISSION

In most of Britain, wild camping is illegal. While Scotland's 'right to roam' ethos grants public access to the majority of the countryside, the private land in England, Wales and Northern Ireland remains exactly that. You can't make do with a quiet roadside or picturesque parking space,

Left Hazel and 6'4" partner John get to know Blue Belle, their compact home for three nights
Above Morning mist rises over Exmoor – the kind of precious view that wild camping affords

either. Even on public land, overnight stays are largely banned, with vehicles confined to official sites – but Wild With Consent, a new online directory, aims to change that.

In the style of a hotel-booking website, it connects intrepid campers with landowners happy to host them, and even lists multi-night itineraries for those keen on a tour. Before deciding on Exmoor, I pored over photos of wildflower meadows in Wales, woodlands in Hampshire, Northumberland lakeshores and coastal clifftops in Cornwall. There are scores of spots to choose from, all totally remote and otherwise off-limits to outsiders. But for around £25 to £45 per night the site is all yours, with no other campers permitted.

You don't need to be driving a Defender: only a few Wild With Consent locations require off-road capabilities. However, the sites can only be booked for self-sufficient vehicles – no tents – and they have zero facilities. I know what you're thinking: what about toilets? Your vehicle should have its own loo, or you must water the hedgerows yourself – and leave no trace of your visit.

Spanning the border between Devon and Somerset, Exmoor encompasses 268 square miles of heather-topped moors and sylvan farmland, »



WILD VANNING: THE ESSENTIALS

Outside of Scotland, wild camping is illegal without permission from the landowner – but the Wild With Consent experience guarantees their approval, as well as exclusive access to each site. It is open to all campervans, motorhomes, caravans and other self-sufficient vehicles, and well-behaved dogs are widely welcomed. A few locations can only be accessed by 4WD, but this is clearly noted on the listings. A three-night self-drive trip through Exmoor, staying at Stockham Farm, West Ilkerton Farm and Parsonage Farm Bay View – including 4x4 hire with Defender Campers (defendercampers.com) – is available through Wild With Consent, from £450. To book, visit wildwithconsent.com.

Above and right Exmoor deer admire Blue Belle's facilities, including a shower (sort of), a surprisingly comfy pop-up bed and a gas stove for that essential brew

meandering rivers and little-used beaches. After a lazy morning, we motor – a little more smoothly this time – to Dulverton, one of the many pretty villages that freckle Exmoor's hillsides and hollows. It's also a fine spot for a ploughman's lunch, with riverside strolls at Tarr Steps just a few minutes further.

Naturally, finding Wild With Consent's campsites requires detailed directions: either on paper, or via the What3Words app, a free, highly accurate navigational aid used by the emergency services. As we set our coordinates – literally – for our second night's stay, we feel oddly invincible. We have everything we need, and Blue Belle is clearly unfazed by even the gnarliest terrain. We've seen enough Exmoor farmers driving Defenders to know she's the right vehicle – and, yes, we are starting to feel more at home.

CHOOSE YOUR OWN ADVENTURE

Just after closing the field gate at West Ilkerton Farm, near Lynton, we spy Victoria Eveleigh striding across the grass towards us – the wind in her hair and two dogs enthusiastically circling her feet. As the owner of the farm, she's come to check we have everything we need.

Does she think we're crazy for choosing to snooze in her field? "Not at all!" she laughs.

"In fact, I think it's very sensible indeed. The peace and solitude, that view..." she gestures to the Bristol Channel, and the South Wales coast beyond. "We're always delighted to share it."

Having bred Red Ruby cattle and Exmoor Horn sheep for over a century, West Ilkerton embodies Wild With Consent's fondness for sustainably run, heritage-focused farms. Victoria leads guided tours, and you can buy farm-reared steak for your supper. Here on the moor's cusp, the Eveleighs have created a haven for wildlife too: as we set up camp, the meadow is busy with butterflies and rabbits, while touselled ponies peek through the trees.

Mindful of last night's frustrations, we resolve to relish – not rush – the evening's prep. Stirring a bubbling pan, clipping the bed down, positioning the chairs and table just so; with time on our side, these tactile tasks feel satisfying, even a little ritualistic. It's a reminder of our 'old days' of camping, with this glorious location all to ourselves.

Off-grid camping isn't for everyone, but Wild With Consent is a safe, reliable opportunity to give it a go. Rather than braving multiple nights, you could



"THE EXPERIENCE GIVES US RICHES GALORE: FREEDOM, SOLITUDE, TIME – AND REASSURANCE THAT WE HAVEN'T LOST OUR EDGE"

use it to shake up a 'regular' holiday in your caravan, spending one evening *au naturel* before continuing to a proper campsite the next day. Or you could explore the countryside on your own doorstep at home, keeping your comforts close at hand.

But maybe, keen to ignite your smouldering sense of adventure, you'll embark on a longer jaunt: a few days perhaps, a return to life's simpler joys. As we tuck in for another night under the stars, I marvel at how we've settled into the rhythm.

Blue Belle may not boast many luxuries, but she's given us riches galore: freedom, solitude, time – and reassurance that we haven't lost our edge after all. ■



YOUR EXPERT

Hazel is a freelance travel writer and editor who contributes regularly to *The Telegraph*, *Wanderlust* and *National Geographic Traveller*.



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6 OF THE BEST

REMOTE PLACES TO STAY

Love a remote getaway but not convinced by camping?
Here are six offbeat rentals with all mod cons



1

Swap your sofa for a forest-view hammock, and your television for birdsong, stargazing and squirrel spotting. Near Snowdonia National Park in North Wales, **Hoseasons' Pen Y Bryn treehouses** sit high in ancient oaks, sleeping up to four people in rustic-chic comfort.

 Seven nights from £1,197, [hoseasons.co.uk](https://www.hoseasons.co.uk)



2

Visiting Lundy Island is an adventure in itself: just 5km long and 1km wide, it lies off the coast of Devon, and can be reached only by boat or helicopter. Most people come for the day, but staying at **The Landmark Trust's Old School** lets you enjoy Lundy's hiking, fishing and edge-of-the-world beauty in peace. **Sleeps two: four nights from £360, [landmarktrust.org.uk](https://www.landmarktrust.org.uk)**



3

For a large-group getaway, **Hatterall Farmhouse** – available through **Handpicked Cottages** – is tucked away in the foothills of the Black Mountains, on the border of Herefordshire and Wales. It's a beautifully restored remote 17th-century homestead, with huge dining areas both indoors and out. **Sleeps eight: four nights from £1,720, [handpickedcottages.co.uk](https://www.handpickedcottages.co.uk)**



4

It may be far-flung, but **Hinterlandes Cabin** in the Lake District has some seriously luxe creature comforts: think wood-fired hot tub, a marble-clad bathroom and Bang & Olufsen speakers – plus glorious walks from its door. It's part of Canopy and Stars' collection of wild-yet-luxurious stays. **Sleeps two: from £134 per night, [canopyandstars.co.uk](https://www.canopyandstars.co.uk)**



5

Torsa Island sits off Scotland's west coast, in Oban – an area known for its dolphins, golden eagles and porpoises. There's just one dwelling on the isle: **Torsa House**, a three-bedroom bolthole, which sleeps six in utter solitude. A motorboat is provided for exploring the islands. **From £1,487.50 per week, [hostunusual.com](https://www.hostunusual.com)**



6

A five-bedroom lodge overlooking the Peak District's Rudyard Lake, **Chalet Du Lac** has a distinctly Val-d'Isère style: all sturdy wooden beams and cosy nooks, with a lake-view hot tub on the terrace. Spend your days fishing, walking and board-gaming beside the log burner. **Sleeps 10: from £2,709 per week, [cottages.com](https://www.cottages.com)**