



Betty, Belle and other stories

James Fisher leaves the city behind to go wild in Exmoor in a Land Rover Defender

IT is the most shattering experience of a young man's life when he wakes up and quite reasonably says to himself: 'I slept terribly last night.' There might be myriad reasons for this. At my advancing age, too many drinks on a week night can spark a certain anxiety that leaves the mind racing too much for rest. Perhaps it is too hot. A shared bed can always be a risk when a partner is snoring too much. However, in this instance, it was none of these things. It was, in fact, sleeping in a tent, on top of a Land Rover Defender, in a field, in the middle of Storm Betty.

There's a certain relief that comes with surviving a night in a storm protected by only two layers of canvas and a sleeping bag. In the morning, the grass is greener, the air is fresher, the sky a vivid shade of blue unseen at other times of year. As the clouds cleared and the landscape opened up, thoughts of terror that had spent the previous evening preventing sleep dissipated to ones of wonder: here is a landscape that only I could see, slowly revealing itself to me as it discarded the fearful ballgown that it had donned the night before.

Some 24 hours previously, and fully aware of the impending arrival of Betty, we arrived at Taunton train station to meet Dan Usher-Clark, who runs Defender Campers. We'd received our booking confirmation a few weeks earlier, so we knew that his radiant red Defender, Cherry Belle, would be our home for the next three nights. There's an irony that the D5 engine and its semi-baritone chugging is a sound that is slowly disappearing from our countryside; it, like the curlew, or the corncrake, is such an evocative sound of rural England. Cherry is a beauty and it's obvious almost immediately how much Dan loves it and his two other Defender campers.

The near endless versatility of these vehicles has never been much of a secret, but what Dan has done with Cherry Belle would make Mary Poppins's bag blush. Out of every corner,

The camper's reward is the first glimpse of an Exmoor vista bathed in morning sun

in every bit of space, something to make the 'off-grid' life that little bit more livable has been added: plugs, lights, plates, cutlery, a stove, a fridge, storage, more storage, a fire pit. That's before we even get to the exterior of the car, where the aforementioned roof tent sits (you guessed it) on the roof and is complemented by a foldable wrap-around awning that turns this seemingly humble long-wheelbase Land Rover into a movable palace in about 10 minutes.

It's at this point that I should admit that I have never been camping, apart from at various music festivals, but that is akin to me saying that because I can parallel park I could set a hot lap at Silverstone. I digress. Neither me nor my partner had camped before and, with the impending arrival of Betty, were feeling quite apprehensive. I think we would have been apprehensive even without Betty; after all, camping has always seemed to me an odd way to spend some time making simple things much more difficult. Making a cup of tea in SE1 is very easy; making one on the edge of Exmoor requires a gas canister and YouTube. A house made of bricks is not so susceptible to a storm,

'The D5 engine, like the corncrake, is such an evocative sound of rural England'

but a house on wheels, made of canvas, very much is. It all seems like a lot of effort.

But, and I suspect that's what those who enjoy camping have known all along, it is worth it. Because as mentioned, that first glimpse of unspoiled countryside, from a vantage point that few have ever seen, undisturbed by others, offers a type of connection to our landscape, to Nature, that prompts mental reset. Why do I go to work and reply to emails all day? Why am I driving five hours on a Sunday to go and have lunch with my relatives, whom I don't like? I should be here! Naked! Foraging for berries! As God intended!

It's easy to see at this point why the debate around access and Nature inspires so much passion. The arguments for a 'right to roam' make tremendous sense; everyone should be free to feel this way, to see these things, to share this landscape. But then the concerns of others are valid—to protect and preserve →

COUNTRY LIFE



Wild about the outdoors: a Land Rover Defender complete with roof tent is an off-grid camping set-up ready to stand up to all weathers

these landscapes and these habitats. Whatever the answer is, I don't know it. But one idea that might work is that of Wild With Consent, which is somewhere in the middle. The idea is to provide access to private land, with the landowner's consent—a nice way to find somewhere wild, isolated, but safe in the knowledge that there won't be other people around or, more frighteningly, a pissed-off bull.

It was through Wild With Consent that we had been given our route across Exmoor in Cherry Belle, with our first stop in the middle of the Brendon Hills and, indeed, Storm Betty. Despite what I may have written previously, camping in the middle of a storm is completely miserable. Everything is wet and, therefore, cold. The sensible thing to do in such instances is to find the nearest pub and try to consume enough alcohol so that, when it is time to go to sleep, the wind and rain do not interfere. Unfortunately, one still has to walk from the pub to the campsite and it is not possible to drink enough to stay upright and also sleep through the general horrors of low-pressure systems.

Thankfully, the next two days were set fair for a simple drive 45 minutes north and then west along the coast. With our camping skills hardened from the night before, setting up shop alongside the East Lyn River, in the Lorna Doone valley, was a cinch. It was there that the penny dropped; as the gentle sounds of the river were broken up only by the soft crackle of our (raised) fire and the sun set on a perfect summer's evening. It's then,

A similar sensation overtook us at our next stop, which involved driving south, up and over the moor itself, a dramatic landscape seemingly characterised only by ponies and the absence of people. Up and over the moor, and then down the other side, we arrived just outside of Dulverton, where, perched upon a hill, that great scion of south-west England, the stag, greeted us with a mighty roar. As the evening rolled in, so did the mist, filling the nooks and crannies of the surrounding valleys and giving the all-too-real sensation of truly being above the clouds.

‘The idea is to provide access to private land—somewhere wild, isolated’

As divine as the camping was (one storm aside), so was the travel. Dan's Defenders are a joy to drive and there's a certain sense of satisfaction of being in a car that is as much a part of the Exmoor landscape as the rising moors, valleys and ocean. Along the way, we stopped at countless villages, tea rooms and pubs oozing with rural charm. Joining half a village in a local pub to watch the Lionesses play football at 11 in the morning; riding horses over the moor; paddleboarding down the River Exe; swimming in the East Lyn—

importantly, at no point was there any urge to check an email, read a tweet or worry about an energy bill.

And, for urbanites such as ourselves, it was easy. Cherry Belle made cooking, cleaning and sleeping almost effortless and, as we know, she can survive the worst of what Nature can throw at her. And the campsites offered by Wild With Consent could hardly be better, revealing to two city dwellers the delights of the South-West from the literal highs to the literal lows, as well as benefiting those who protect and manage that landscape.

Returning to London, to the emails and the smog and the sirens of bustling humanity, almost felt like a betrayal. These buildings, these cars and these roads were the very antithesis of what the past three days had been about. But, the countryside and the city do not exist as separate entities—they are symbiotic. Returning with a new-found understanding, and appreciation of, Nature emboldened me to improve not only the small house in which I live, but to respect and acknowledge the work of those citizens of Exmoor who are so often ignored by the capital. So much of it is misunderstanding, but it is never too late and, indeed, it has never been easier to learn and to appreciate our beautiful countryside—and the best way is to get in it. 🐾

Wild With Consent offers a three-night self-drive experience, staying at Tripp Farm, End Field, Hall Farm and Stockham Farm, from £495, including 4x4 hire with Defender Campers. To book, visit www.wildwithconsent.com