



The cabin in the middle of the woods

Every adult remembers their first residential school trip, however long ago it was. Mary meets Matthew Lea from Fenland Adventure who is running them

IT SEEMS TO be a rite of passage for virtually every child; get towards the end of your primary school years and then the whole year goes off on a residential adventure where they try activities such as rock climbing, zip wires, go karting, orienteering, cooking over open fires and even target shooting and axe throwing. I remember going away to France when I was in my final year at junior school (many, many years ago) and my daughters heading off to Norfolk and coming back full of it and even years later still reminiscing with friends about their trip. At my daughters' school, the year 6 trip to Norfolk became a bit of a legend; anticipated for months and then talked about for many more months afterwards with the younger years desperate for their turn to come round asap.

For many children it's their first time away from their parents so

definitely a time to remember. Some are nervous about it but most are just thoroughly excited and those that wobble soon get over it. And for some parents it can be quite stressful for the same reasons.

Someone who understands this very well is Matthew Lea because he is running a similar business right on our doorstep. Fenland Adventure offers an affordable outdoor learning experience that encompasses the physical, educational and fun complete with a residential stay in an off-grid cabin near to Rutland Water.

Matthew, along with his team, has over 20 years' experience of outdoor education and is a great advocate of getting children outside to experience nature first hand. They gain confidence, learn a lot including problem solving and resilience and, of course, for those on the residential courses gain and develop essential life skills.

Fenland Adventure offer different products mainly to schools but occasionally take their equipment to large external events. They can bring their gear to a school and run an activity day so the children from a year group will have the day set aside to enjoy orienteering, air rifle shooting, archery, bushcraft and even climbing as they have a mobile climbing wall. And something to note is that all their equipment is child sized so scaled down to suit up to 12-year-olds.

Many schools start with a day's activity and then quickly book a residential course as well. The site that Fenland Adventure use is an off-grid cabin in the middle of woodland that can sleep up to 30 children plus teachers in dormitories. There is a kitchen, a mess hall and toilet facilities as well as plenty of land to run the activities on. More children can be accommodated by using tents as well so there is space for 100 children at one time. As the site is off-grid power is supplied by a generator which is turned off at night – an adventure in





itself. The cabin is an old WWII hospital with a corrugated iron roof so can be pretty hot in the summer and chilly in the cooler months – resilience is the key but it makes it much more fun too. There are beams in the mess hall and the whole cabin creaks as it warms up in the sun and is pretty noisy when it rains. ‘The kids love it and it is certainly quirky,’ explains Matt.

‘Our aim has always been to provide affordable outdoor activities and a residential option as well,’ says Matt. ‘And today this is vital as families face the cost of living crisis. We feel it’s important that children get the chance to try different outdoor activities particularly at such a young age. Some children will never have been orienteering,

many more won’t have shot with an air rifle or bow and arrow and many will have never lit a fire or gone climbing. It’s vital to push them out of their comfort zone particularly at this age. And this also includes spending a couple of nights away from their parents with the chance to enjoy a midnight feast along the way.’

Most of the children coming on these activity days are aged between seven and 12 but it is mainly the year 6s who experience the residential visits and love every minute of it. I expect most of us can still remember the anticipation, sweets for the journey and goodies for after lights out as well as strong friendships made and adventures shared.

A typical day on a residential visit consists of four x 1 1/2 hour sessions followed by an evening session such as capture the flag, camp fire with marshmallows, scavenger hunt and the very popular water slide.

Every child will be challenged and encouraged to have a go at everything but no one is forced. Matt and his team are very experienced in getting children to face their fear and participate. Challenging yourself is a great lesson to learn at a young age and that challenge might mean getting just off the ground on the climbing wall. For some that will be much more of an achievement than the child who shimmies to the top without a care in the world. But, of course, that child might struggle with another activity that the unwilling climber excels at – all good life lessons.

Fenland Adventure had quietly got established and building a solid reputation before Covid hit. This scuppered things for a while obviously but now Matt is finding they are extremely busy. Getting their name out there is what it’s all about and word of mouth has proved great for their reputation and business growth. Once a school has booked them once they are always booked again, which says it all really. And many more children are now able to look back with fond memories of their time staying in the off-grid cabin in the middle of the woods.

www.fenlandadventure.co.uk