

WEEKENDS AWAY

Your Questions Answered

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Many members have never been on one of our "Weekends Away". If this includes you, you may have considered sending off the booking form, but have felt unsure whether you would enjoy one of these events. To give you a better idea of what you should expect, these are the answers to questions that are sometimes asked.

What is the accommodation like?

Apart from the odd exception, we stay in a "basecamp", which sounds like something you would experience on an expedition to the Himalayas. Unlike the mountaineering variety, however, these basecamps are available at various National Trust properties to provide simple, self-catering, but definitely indoor accommodation. They are intended primarily for volunteer groups, which are given their use free of charge, although in exchange for their labour. The Trust also hires them out to other groups.

Similar to small youth hostels and usually located in converted cottages, farmhouses or other farm buildings, basecamps offer separate bunk-bed dormitories for men and women, washrooms with showers, an adequately equipped kitchen, a dining area and generally some sort of lounge area (which, thankfully, will not include a television). All have first aid and fire alarm facilities.

The provision of heating has varied in the past, but there now seems to be a tendency towards full central heating. This is obviously very welcome during the colder months, although there can still be problems. Take Hardwick Basecamp, for example, which we have visited in January. Hardwick used to have a reputation for being cold. Central heating was installed several years ago, and the dormitories now can perhaps be a little too warm. The dining and lounge area, however, is in a large room, and the roof space has not been enclosed with a ceiling. Despite the large radiators, we found this to be nice and warm when the wood-burning stove was well under way, but chilly otherwise.

I can't cook! Does this matter?

Most weekends require just one evening meal on Saturday, with another on Sunday only when Monday is a Bank Holiday. New Year can be the exception, as our stay might be longer. If there is more than one evening meal, we may spoil ourselves by having one reasonably priced dinner at a local pub, perhaps on the last night. On Saturday night, however, we'll almost certainly eat at the basecamp.

As the basecamps are self-catering, we have to provide our own food, and clearly someone has to do the cooking. Experience has shown that the average group will include one or two people who are both willing and able to cook. Perhaps some prefer to prepare a meal rather than clear up afterwards! It's not necessary to produce a recipe, as the group leaders will already have done this, but, if you're not a cook, just let one of the leaders know. The important thing is to adopt the communal spirit and help wherever you can. None of the major jobs are left entirely to one person, so you might be able to assist the cook, or help with breakfast (cooked breakfasts have become traditional, but not obligatory). If all else fails, there is always the washing and drying up.

What work will we do for the warden?

The type of work compares exactly with our Sunday tasks. There is a lot of woodland work, with exceptions such as building a fence or painting metal tree guards. As with Sunday tasks again, the warden will sometimes work with us, while sometimes he will show us what needs to be done and then leave us to it. Our day usually starts at 7.00 or 7.30, when someone (normally one of

the leaders) gently stirs you from your slumber with a cup of tea. We then have about two hours to eat breakfast, prepare packed lunches and generally get ready before the warden arrives. If the work is at a distance, he'll probably have a minibus to transport us to the site.

On a normal weekend, we'll finish work at about 4.00 on the Saturday, when the warden will return us to the basecamp. We then have the evening to ourselves. On the Sunday, we'll be travelling home during the afternoon, so we'll finish the task at lunchtime. After eating, we'll pack away our things, then clean the basecamp before we depart. Cleaning the basecamp may sound ominous, but doesn't take long, even with a small group. The intention is to clear up our own mess, so that the next group will find it as we did.

On a Bank Holiday weekend, we might work a full day on Sunday, but then have Monday morning free to explore the local area before leaving in the afternoon.

How do we spend the evenings?

As we usually arrive on Friday evening, and everyone will have eaten either on the way or before leaving, we often gather in the basecamp and then find a local pub. If you don't know other members of the group too well, having a chat over a drink is a useful way of breaking any ice.

Saturday evening will centre on dinner. It's normally the only evening meal of the weekend, and some have become legendary. One recipe to enter CNTV folklore was Richard's lemon pudding, which was introduced during a New Year stay at Cragside, and which has been repeated since (probably by demand!). Many of us take wine to have with the meal, but we are a reasonably sober lot, and it's certainly not compulsory.

How the rest of Saturday evening is spent will depend on consensus. We might go to the pub again, or go for a walk, or put the two together. Or we might stay in, which has been known to result in lively conversation, and sometimes a few simple party games. Cambridge NTV doesn't have a reputation for being boisterous, however, so we're not particularly wild!

What else do I need to know?

If you decide you're interested in a weekend, telephone and enquire well in advance. Some weekends book up quickly, so leaving it until late can result in disappointment. Others book up slowly, and the leaders have to decide whether to proceed about a week beforehand. A few weekends have been cancelled because too many members left it until the last minute to show their interest.

To reserve a place, we ask you to complete and return the booking form that you receive with your programme and newsletter, and to enclose a £5 deposit. This money is used to buy our food, so it becomes non-returnable once the shopping is done. The cost of food per person usually exceeds £5, but is very reasonable. You'll be asked for the extra at the end of the weekend.

During the preceding week, or possibly earlier, the leaders will arrange lifts and send you details of the weekend. We try and car-share, so, if you're not driving yourself, you'll be put in touch with your driver. Petrol costs are divided between you and any others travelling in the same car. The driver normally sorts this out.

National Trust properties are often located in some of the most beautiful parts of the country. It's worth going away at weekends just to experience these locations. We will see something of the area while we're working, but, even when we don't have a Bank Holiday, we do try and put time aside to explore. This is often done before we leave on Sunday, although the amount of time depends on the distance we have to travel to get home.