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Feeling free on a wintry weekend away in St Ives

THIS was the best idea ever! A winter break in the sunshine in a cosy little cottage right in the centre of St Ives.

The cottage is called Southern Comfort and it is just that – comfortable and comforting to the senses. The best thing about this sunny little fisherman's cottage is its position in Downalong, the central, level heart of the town. Just a minute or two's walk in any direction and you're at one of St Ives' three totally different, but equally beautiful, beaches.

Nip out of the front door and you're at the harbourside, in one of the top restaurants or browsing through the lanes full of dinky, interesting little

shops. And what's more, in the middle of winter, St Ives was even better than usual without the summer over-crowding. Better still, once you've unloaded the car, you can enjoy yourself without the usual traffic and car parking problems which can blight summer days out in Cornwall.

The interior of this fully restored but characterful cottage is luxuriously comfortable, with its downy white pillows, quilts and throws, cosy little wood burner and welcoming basket of red wine and biscuits.

But it's also comfortable in a relaxing home-from-home way, so that you're not worried about the children touching anything too precious. Which makes it the perfect getaway spot for two adults and two children, but it's

just as good for a couple looking for a romantic hideaway.

We left Torquay on Friday afternoon and arrived at the Eden Project, by a fluke, just in time for the start of the winter festival. We had gone for the ice skating, but discovered that a whole evening of entertainment was just about to kick off at 5.45pm, starting with a fantastical parade of lanterns and fireworks.

Also by sheer luck again, we discovered, wonder of wonders, that residents from Devon and Cornwall qualify for a locals discount. It was just £5 for adults and the children were free, and we can go again for free as often as we want in the coming year.

It was the best value family evening out ever, with helpers everywhere inviting us to take part in all sorts of (free) crafts, fun and games. We really did have a ball.

Eden in the dark was a whole new experience. There was something very mysterious about stepping from the cold, snowy air into the heat and dark of the biomes, lit by just a few twinkly lights. It felt like a real jungle at night, with the faintly scary feeling that something venomous might slither out of the undergrowth.

From Eden it was just a short hop across Cornwall, picking up the keys along the way in Hayle, to park smack, bang in the middle of St Ives and discover our little hideaway.

It was the perfect place to spend a winter weekend. St Ives was sunny, wild, windswept and practically empty.

We spent Saturday morning walking around the cliffs and beaches before heading into Tate Modern for lunch in the rooftop cafe overlooking the wild Atlantic sweep of Porthmeor beach. The galleries were all given over to the work of St Ives-born Peter Lanyon, who was a leading figure in the St Ives group of artists during the 1950s, together with Barbara Hepworth and Ben Nicholson, before he died tragically young in a gliding accident.

From there we strolled over the hill Hepworth's wonderful sculpture-filled house, studio and garden. She too died tragically, in a fire in the big upstairs living room-cum-studio which is now beautifully restored as her gallery and memorial. There is an overpowering sense that she's still very much there as you wander around.

From the outside the property looks like a tiny cottage, and the house itself is small and fairly austere, but the garden feels like Dr Who's tardis, totally hidden and crammed into a deceptive space behind the high walls. Hepworth's massive modern chunks of art look so totally at home, which is odd because you'd think they would look wrong packed together in such close quarters. The same goes for the

planting. Trees and exotics are kept carefully cut-back, like large-scale bonsai gardening, so that they don't overpower each other. It shouldn't all work, but it does. I think I've visited all of Cornwall's great gardens, but this strange little space is still my favourite.

On Saturday evening we stumbled the full 20 yards from our cottage to a buzzing harbourside pizza restaurant. What was wonderful was that the children could nip back to the cottage to watch TV while the adults stayed out for another glass of wine (or two).

Everybody was happy.

Sunday morning was cold but bright and we walked on clifftops and along the beaches once again, before going back to Tate Modern after discovering that our weekend happened to coincide with the once-a-month free family Super Sunday. There's no admission

charge and free craft workshops are laid on for the children. More free family fun!

COLLEEN SMITH

FACTFILE

To stay at Southern Comfort, or one of Aspects Holidays other 220 cottages in Cornwall, including the sought-after Carbis Bay and St Ives areas call the team of holiday co-ordinators on 01736 754242 to check availability and suitability.

Email : enq@aspects-holidays.co.uk

Website : www.aspects-holidays.co.uk

The main sales office in the heart of St Ives is located on The Wharf and is open Monday to Saturday between 9am and 5pm, and offers an answering service outside these hours.

Late deals

VALENTINE'S DAY

SHROPSHIRE BORDERS: Lake Vyrnwy Hotel and Spa (01691 870692) offers two-night packages from February 11 or 13 for £222, includes lake view room, special Valentines' six-course dinner, rose and chocs on arrival.
DUBLIN BAY: Irish Ferries Holidays (08717 300400) offers three-nights bed and breakfast at four-star Fitzpatrick's Castle Hotel from February 12,13 or 14, around 25 minutes drive from Dublin city and near villages of Dalkey and Killiney. Package at £199 includes return Holyhead to Dublin cruise ferry for car and two adults.

SOUTH-WEST WALES: Bluestone Wales (01834 887962) offers two-bedroom lodge for two, available February 11 to 14 for £299, includes dinner for two at fine dining restaurant Carreg Las, croissants for breakfast, something bubbly and use of spa.

WEST LONDON: Chiswick Moran Hotel (0208 9965200) offers bed and breakfast at four-star deluxe during February, includes bottle of champers delivered on arrival, from £150 for two, with full Irish breakfast.

SCOTTISH HIGHLANDS: Ecosse Unique



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(01835 822277) offers three-bedroom Neids Cottage for couples, in rolling foothills of Perthshire from February 12 for total £295, saving £60.

COTSWOLDS: Old Swan and Minster Mill (01993 774441) in Old Minster, Valentine's Weekend Escape £490 per February 13 to 15.



COSY COTTAGE: Southern Comfort is ideal place to stay whether you are a couple or have a family

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LIT BY LANTERNS: Enjoying the Eden Project



■ **WINTER WONDER:** Above, the Eden Project is a place well worth visiting even in the colder months; top, another lantern that was part of the parade

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