

The grandparents' guide to surviving half term

With a few tricks, and some last-minute plans, it's easy to make next month's holiday a happy one, says Jan Etherington

I have a recurring dream that I am chasing Princess Belle (from *Beauty and the Beast*) down Main Street at Disneyland Paris.

Except it isn't a dream. I had spent an hour queuing, with my two granddaughters, to see a Disney princess, and Ivy, seven, was struck dumb, staring silently at this vision in acid-yellow ruffled taffeta. Only when Belle swept out of the door did she scream: "I didn't ask about her favourite colour!"

"She's wearing yellow. I'm guessing it's that," I suggested.

"We don't know! Chase her, Nana!" I finally caught Belle by Peter Pan's Flight. Her favourite colour is yellow. No surprises there.

Parents are used to rushing around after children, but half term for us grandparents – whether it's a day or a

whole week – can result in a level of exhaustion previously encountered only by unfit marathon runners.

I have four grandchildren (two in Australia) in their teens. But with toddlers or teenagers, it's daunting being "parents" again – if only temporarily.

So to avoid becoming a "grumpy grandparent", it's important to pace yourself. If the whole family has rented a holiday cottage, avoid becoming the unpaid childminder by reminding them of the "grandparents' charter". You're happy to spend a third of the time looking after the children, on condition that for a third you will all do something together and a third will be for "grandparents only" – which you will probably spend sleeping or seeing a physio.

Some will have already received the emotional-blackmail conversation. "We



▲ Generation game: Jan Etherington and her family explore Latitude Festival

need to get away for a few days – and they really love seeing you..." You will be on call 24/7, so spend the next couple of weeks getting fit – especially if you are lifting toddlers on to the loo, or into the car seat.

Be braced for the first question, when older grandchildren arrive anywhere: "What's your Wi-Fi password?" Spell it out sweetly, because you are not the parent and a holiday is not the time to lecture them on screen time.

With grandchildren in tow, I have an excuse for new and unexpected experiences. I can spend the day at Legoland, drive a Tube train at the London Transport Museum, go stargazing, try archery or let others take the strain at a dedicated kids' festival.

You might think that museums would not always be a first choice for

children, but I remember very clearly my grandad taking me to see the Crown Jewels in the Tower of London when I was six, so I know that golden masks and sparkly treasures are mesmerising to even the very young.

My generation of fit, active grandparents are more likely to whizz down a zip wire than snooze in a deckchair, hanky on head, like my grandfather. My role model is instead my adventurous Welsh grandmother, who led my three sisters and me along the Gower cliff paths, like the Von Trapp family, rewarding us with ice creams and pick 'n' mix, warning us: "Don't tell your mother."

So if you are searching for half-term fun close to home, here are some ideas for outings that grandchildren and grandparents can enjoy together – and not a word to Mum and Dad.

HOW TO KEEP EVERYONE ENTERTAINED

CHILD CARE WITH A SENSE OF HISTORY
Lanarkshire

As you're doing the day care, why not visit the first workplace nursery in the world? The pioneering 18th-century mill village of New Lanark is now a Unesco site; together you can ride a pod through history, visit the old classroom and spinning mule, lick New Lanark ice creams, stroll to the Falls of Clyde and burn off any leftover energy in the natural playpark. Stay at New Lanark's hotel or cottages, which offer fine village and river views.

Tickets £5 adults, children free (01555 661345; newlanark.org). Family rooms from £99pn; cottages (sleep four) from £290 for two nights (01555 667200; newlanarkhotel.co.uk)

FUN ON A BUDGET
Lake District

Want to make your pension stretch further? For bargain family fun, book into a youth hostel (note, "youth" not required) – the YHA's January sale is offering 25 per cent off. Consider YHA Ambleside, right on the shores of Windermere; basic but comfy private rooms have a mix of bunks and double beds, and some have lake views. It is also well placed for accessing lakeland activities that suit all ages, from Ambleside Climbing Wall and Beatrix Potter World to genteel cruises and varied walks.

Four-bed room from £452.20 for four nights; use code JANSAL22 for discount (0345 371 9620; yha.org.uk)

PLAY PIRATE
Somerset and Wiltshire

Hire a narrowboat and the whole family can relax into the same, gentle pace – and can all muck in with boat life. Children will love having a go at steering, operating the locks and playing pirates. The western end of the Kennet and Avon Canal, between Bath and Bradford-on-Avon, is a fine choice, passing handsome stone aqueducts and Cotswold hills, with plenty to do at either end – from the Myths and Monsters exhibition at Bath's Victoria Art Gallery to the Thermae Spa, bike hire and waterside cafés.

The Blake narrowboat sleeps six and costs from £755 for four nights (0344 984 0322; drifters.co.uk)

SHARE THE SEA AIR
Cornwall

To wow all ages, head here: few locations can beat that of Polurrian on the Lizard, an Edwardian cliff-top pile-turned-boutique hotel gazing west from the Cornish coast. This corner of Britain is also one of the nation's warmest spots – handy for a February break. Diversions for children, from toddler to tween, are plentiful: an indoor pool, cinema and playground plus half-term games, crafts, cookery and more. Indeed, grandparents can leave the kids to it and spend days in the spa, the sea-view lounge or on coast walks from the door.

Family rooms from £269pn B&B (0117 946 7072; i-escape.com)

KICK BACK AT KID FEST
Shropshire

If you have no idea what to do with your young charges, take them somewhere that does. At the Shropshire Kids Festival (Feb 26-27), children from babies up to the age of 14 can try all sorts of activities, while you watch from the comfort of the cocktail bar. Options include making and baking, obstacle courses, spacehopper racing, roller disco, boxing and bee workshops, and STEM stuff galore. Stay nearby, at the lovely old estate workers' cottages in the grounds of 18th-century Peplow Hall.

Tickets £7.50 adults, £19.95 children (01952 432175; shropshirekidsfest.co.uk). Pheasant cottage (sleeps five) from £782 for three nights (0121 517 0350; luxurycottages.com/shropshire)

CYCLE AT ALL SPEEDS
New Forest

The New Forest is one of the best places in the country for safe cycling, with more than 100 miles of designated off-road tracks as well as plenty of flat terrain, quiet lanes, excellent café stop-offs



To wow all ages, head to one of the warmest corners of Britain

and freely wandering wildlife to spot. Cyclexperience rents out all types of bikes – from electric to tandems and trailers – so there's a ride to suit all ages and fitness levels. Stay at Brockenhurst's family-friendly Balmer Lawn Hotel, which has an indoor pool.

Bike hire from £20 per day (01590 624808; cyclex.co.uk). Family rooms from £240pn B&B (01590 623116; balmerlawnhotel.com)

HOLIDAY LIKE ROYALTY
Isle of Wight

Treat the grandchildren like proper princes and princesses by staying with Queen Victoria. Pavilion Cottage – formerly a cricket pavilion, now a smart self-catering retreat – lies within the grounds of Osborne House, Victoria's beloved holiday home; after hours, guests get her private beach and red squirrel-scattered estate to themselves. Even if you don't stay, English Heritage members can bring up to six children for free. Eighteen of the organisation's sites – including Osborne – are hosting half-term Explorer Quests, which help children get interactive with history.

Pavilion Cottage (sleeps four) costs from £515 for three nights (0370 333 1181; english-heritage.org.uk)

A KNIGHT TO REMEMBER
Warwick

For a taste of the medieval – yes, even older than Grandad – head for Warwick Castle this half term, as the Festival of Archery (Feb 12-27) takes over the grounds. Watch master bowmen, cheer at dramatic tournaments and have a go yourselves. Children will like the Horrible Histories Maze, grandparents will like the staterooms and everyone will love the birds of prey. Stay in the castle's riverside Knight's Village – lodges come with medieval decor and access to the banquet hall and themed revels.

Tickets from £21pp; Woodland Lodge (sleeps four) in the Knight's Village costs from £319pn B&B including tickets (01926 406610; warwick-castle.com)

GET GREEN-FINGERED WITH THE GRANDCHILDREN
Northumberland

The National Trust's 13,500-acre Wallington estate is a great place for the kids to let off steam. However, at the end of half term (Feb 19-27) you can get more hands-on, helping Wallington's gardeners plant 100,000 snowdrops: bring gloves and wellies and head into the woods (looking for red squirrels and

otters too). Warm up afterwards in the Clocktower Café, or in Laundry Cottage: historically the washroom of the main house, it is now a cosy family retreat at the heart of the estate.

Tickets £10 adults, £5 children; Laundry Cottage (sleeps five) from £975 for three nights (0344 800 2070; nationaltrust.org.uk)

TAKE A ROAD TRIP INTO HIDEOUS HISTORY
Herefordshire

Conveying children in cars doesn't have to be dismal. Herefordshire's four Hide-



ous Histories road trips have been designed with families (especially six- to 12-year-olds) in mind, with magic, ghosts and gore thrown in. For instance, follow the Western route to find a Neolithic burial chamber that inspired CS Lewis, make a fairy house and hike a hill that is home to wild ponies. The wood burner-warmed Safari Tents at Drovers Rest offer the possibility of winter glamping, though grandparents may prefer the Shepherd's Shack instead.

Download road trips at visitherfordshire.co.uk. Shepherd's Shack/Safari Tent (sleep four) from £450/£405 for three nights (07908 162598; droversrest.co.uk)

ACTION FOR ALL AGES
Snowdonia

Looking for a sense of real adventure, for the whole family, in February? You need Llechwedd Slate Caverns. There are five multi-gen-friendly escapades

▲ Country life: take to the hills with your young charges...

▼ ... or have buckets of fun at the Shropshire Kids Festival

here – including weatherproof options. The Deep Mine Tour focuses on moving history while Bounce Below is bonkers subterranean fun for over-sevens (spectator tickets available). The main question: will Gran brave the 3,300ft-long zip wire? Stay at Rwtst Holiday Lodges, in the Conwy Valley, where nerves can be calmed in comfy cabins with mountain and forest views.

Deep Mine Tour £60 for four (01248 601444; zipworld.co.uk/adventures). Two-bed lodge from £216 for two nights (01492 701567; rustholidaylodges.co.uk)

HI-DE-HI, CAMPERS!
Lincolnshire

Butlin's is all go these days. You can expect climbing walls, go-karts, thrill rides, laser tag, and enormous indoor pools with flumes, slides and rapids galore. Skegness – the first Butlin's, opened in 1936 – sits by the town's fine, wind-blustered beach. Book a bright, New England-style Seaside Apartment, catch Bafta-winning Dick and Dom's half-term show and, as almost all activities are included, let the kids roam free.

Seaside Apartment (sleeps four) from £497 for four nights (0330 100 6648; butlins.com)

BRING EVERYONE
West Sussex

Indulge your grandkids, your step-grandkids – indeed, as many grandkids as you can round up – at enormous Arabelle, a glorious 19th-century mansion within the South Downs National Park. Ravishing to look at – with its chateau-style shutters and chandeliers – it is well appointed, too. As well as an indoor heated pool, the facilities here include a hot tub, sauna, tennis court (for family tournaments), garden playhouse, tons of toys, 40 acres of woodland to wander around in – and a firepit for roasting marshmallows under the stars. When the kids are tucked out, adults can retreat to the bar.

Arabelle (sleeps 14) from £16,500 for a week or £13,250 for a weekend (01637 881183; uniquehomestays.com)

Sarah Baxter

All accommodation prices are for relevant dates from Feb 11-27 (half term differs countrywide). All stays and activities had availability at the time of going to press