

London Trend Report – November 2008

From Spa to Neo-Spartan: The New Comfort Culture

Spa culture and jetting off for a city break has become something of an addiction among Londoners, and having suddenly to cut back on such things the regular weekend pampering in a luxury spa hotel has called for some drastic measures. So how do hitherto spoilt Londoners survive the weekends, holidays or recover from urban stress in the new economic climate?

Following on from the travel trend, "From one Extreme to Another" – see London Report August 2008 (<http://www.strathern.eu/Trend-Report-Archive.aspx>) which reported an increase in staycations and domestic travel, we have seen the rapid rise this year of luxury campsites. This so-called "boutique camping" is becoming more popular as the comfort level inside tents increase to include such things as proper wood burning fireplaces, comfy real beds and flushing toilets.

As the Cool Camping series editor Jonathon Knight says, "What these camping experiences have done is to open up the option of camping to people who don't like to get too dirty or putting up their own tent."

One popular and growing chain of boutique campsites is Featherdown Farms. Each site is on a real working farm so there are the added advantages of fresh (often organic) products from the farm shop, and animals for the children to see. Following a rapid expansion there are now 18 sites, with more planned for enterprising farmers who have found it a great new way to diversify and make extra money.

As well as creature comforts, contemporary camping today means offering new unusual experiences, such as staying in a 1924 Romany Caravan that has been restored to provide a comfortable stay in a secluded part of a forest (www.underthethatch.co.uk). For more extreme camping experiences, the Livingstone Safari Lodge in Kent gives you a taste of Africa without having to leave the UK, and for a fraction of the price. Staying in an authentic South African luxury safari tent, you can go on a dawn safari with the rangers or just watch the African wildlife such as wildebeest, Zebra and giraffes from your veranda.

Here the guests are given packs of toiletries hotel-style, to add to the luxury tent experience.

Not to be outdone, the Forestry Commission who have for many years rented out notoriously spartan and utilitarian holiday cabins for people looking for a rural retreat, are trying out a new "VIP eco cabin" concept. Interior designers have been let loose at the Deepark Forestry Centre in Cornwall, and the brochure now boasts that the lodges – or rather "woodland palaces" – have sumptuous soft furnishings, and outdoor hot tubs on the veranda overlooking a lake. Floor to ceiling windows mean panoramic views, and if you do venture out, the resident rangers offer excursions such as night wildlife watching with night vision goggles. With prices from as little as 800€ for a week for a cabin sleeping six, they are seen as an accessible, affordable and family-friendly alternative to the hassle and expensive of going abroad.

The fact that even upmarket lifestyle magazines such as Vogue are reporting on camping trends, reveals much about the fact that today it is about style and comfort. Or as they put it "a back to nature experience without sacrificing luxuries." Decorative tents by Cath Kidston and Pod Caravans are just a few of the designer-led changes in outdoor living. A stylish caravan was once a contradiction in terms, but the Pod Caravan is a small smart living space for two that can be hooked up to even the back of a mini to provide a bed, cooking and washing facilities for a romantic weekend away. Their streamline shape, modern funky fabrics and pastel colours has done the near-impossible, and made caravanning cool. Not then much of a leap of the imagination to picture a weekend in a Philippe Starck / Terence Conran / or even perhaps Prada-designed tent/rural cabin, with Aveda cosmetics and ready made Jamie Oliver-style organic meals delivered to your tent-flap/cabin door by a butler in designer Wellington boots.

The New Spartans

Bible: "Cool Camping" (a guidebook to the coolest campsites in the UK and Europe, aimed at contemporary campers)

Buzz words: boutique camping, luxury lodges, podding, camping-chic

Future Potential : camping sites with mini-spas, in-your-tent beauty and massage services, designer-cabins and designer luxury tents.

<http://www.coolcamping.co.uk>

<http://www.featherdownfarm.co.uk>

www.totallywild.net

www.forestholidays.co.uk

www.cathkidston.co.uk

www.podcaravans.co.uk