

FRESH TAKE
Clockwise from
top left: Montagu
Arms; pine
marten; New
Forest; wide eyed
with wonder;
witch's butter



A walk ON THE WILD SIDE

On a guided family walk with Wild New Forest **Antonia Windsor** discovers an ancient landscape filled with hidden wonders, if you know where to look

Look, it's witch's butter!" my son calls out, interrupting our guide Marcus mid-sentence as he talks about the history of the New Forest. We all turn to where a bright yellow brain fungus clings to a branch. "Well spotted," Marcus replies, and my son beams with pride.

Earlier we'd eaten breakfast in a private dining room at the Montagu Arms listening to Marcus and his enthusiastic teenage son, Jamie, of Wild New Forest describe the rare flora and fauna we might see on our walk. My son usually zones out in a classroom-like setting, but he'd clearly been paying attention to the slides.

The forest has about 2,700 recorded species of fungi, with peak season running from September to November, though they can be found year-round. We'd been shown pictures of witch's butter and the striking, red-tentacled devil's fingers: an Australian import likely to have arrived on wartime timber shipments and now established in the area. We were also on the lookout for the Dartford warbler, a classic New Forest bird found in heathland and gorse, as well as reptiles (all six UK species occur here, including venomous adders, though we were assured they rarely bite) and the pine marten: a tree-dwelling mammal about the size of a cat with a bushy tail. "They look cute," Marcus warned, "but they're fierce predators."

On previous visits to the New Forest, we'd thought mainly about spotting deer, pigs, donkeys and the free-roaming ponies the area is famous for, but this was our first guided walk and I wished we'd done it sooner.

Wild New Forest is a not-for-profit company that runs guided walks and boat trips to explore the area's wildlife, with all profits funding research. "We're ecologists," Marcus explained. "We monitor the rarer species of the forest."

Their aim is simple: get people out in the forest, learning about its wildlife in a way that's accessible, engaging and – crucially for children – fun. From the moment we met them, the tone was relaxed. Marcus was warm and easy-going, slipping fascinating facts into conversation, while Jamie eagerly pointed out interesting plants, such as butcher's broom, which has antibacterial properties and is said to help ponies with stomach ache.

Their enthusiasm was infectious. While the children were hooked by the quirky names of rare fungi, I found myself drawn to the wellness nuggets they shared, such as the claim that spending time in woodland can boost health. "Fungal spores," Marcus said, "interact with the brain, and inhaling them may help improve its structure."

When you stay at the Montagu Arms in Beaulieu, the New Forest is literally on your doorstep. We'd arrived on a crisp afternoon and, despite the hotel's historic grandeur, our dog, Willow, was instantly at ease; making friends with a member of staff who emerged from behind the

reception desk with a biscuit in one hand and a friendly fuss in the other. The children raided the old-fashioned glass jars of sweets on the counter and when my apologies were waved away, I knew we wouldn't have to be on our best behaviour and could relax. Our dog-friendly room felt like a private hideaway: French doors opened onto the garden, with plush beds for us and a smaller, equally inviting one, for Willow.

Between hearty breakfasts and evenings by the fire, we'd planned an itinerary that balanced comfort with adventure. The walk, though, was the highlight.

We set off from a spot just a short drive from the village of Beaulieu, crossing a patchwork of heath, woodland and wetland. "That's what makes this place so special," Marcus explained. "You've got all these habitats cheek-by-jowl, →

**"LEARNING
DOESN'T HAVE TO
BE FORMAL
TO STICK"**



PET PERFECT
Clockwise from top
left: dog-friendly
Montagu Arms;
family breakfast;
Courtyard Retreat;
Beaulieu Village



which creates incredible biodiversity. The New Forest is one of the most wildlife-rich areas in western Europe."

The air was sharp and clean and the crunch of beech leaves underfoot quickly gave way to the squelch of boggy paths, through which Willow trotted happily. A gust of wind shook the pines, and one of the children stopped to declare, "It smells like Christmas!"

Marcus's history lesson made the forest come alive. The 'New' Forest, he told us, dates back to 1079, when William the Conqueror claimed it as his private hunting ground. "It was a status symbol back then," he said. "Today, it might be a Ferrari or a helicopter – for William, it was a hunting park."

The Conqueror's clearance methods were brutal: strict laws drove the resident Saxons out, forbidding them to forage or hunt on pain of mutilation or death.

Between the history came wildlife encounters. We learned how ponies, cattle and donkeys grazing year-round sustain populations of dung beetles, which in turn feed the rare nocturnal birds. The children were fascinated by beetles rolling perfect balls of dung to their burrows and delighted in finding the tiny volcano-shaped nests of southern wood ants. Jamie pointed out a common lizard basking in a patch of sunlight, tail a different colour from its body. "It's designed to break off if a predator grabs it," he explained, "so the lizard can escape and grow a new one."

Even the plants had stories: the coral necklace, a tiny white-flowered species found only here and in one remote part of Scotland; and the sundew, a native carnivorous plant whose sticky leaves trap insects.

Back at the Montagu Arms, we swapped boots for slippers and headed to the lounge for tea and cake. Later, over dinner at Monty's Inn – local venison for us, fish and chips for the children – the day's discoveries flowed back into our conversation: Norman kings, lizards, fungi, dung beetles. Willow lay under the table, twitching occasionally as if still chasing scents across the heath.

It struck me then how seamlessly the day had blended learning and leisure. We hadn't set out to 'teach' the children anything, yet they'd absorbed a thousand years of history and an impressive roll call of wildlife simply by walking, listening and noticing. Half-term in the New Forest proved that education doesn't have to be formal to stick; sometimes, it's best delivered on a muddy path, in good company, with the promise of a warm fire at the end. 🦋

THE LOWDOWN

HOW TO GET THERE

London Waterloo Station to Brockenhurst
from 1 hour, 34 minutes

Taxi from Brockenhurst to Montagu Arms
from 11 minutes

WHERE TO STAY

Montagu Arms, House Suite (2 adults, 2 children)
from £370 per night

Children stay free during October half term
Dogs are charged at £30 per stay including
dog bed and hamper

montaguarmshotel.co.uk

GOOD TO KNOW

A fungi explorer walk during October
half term £17 per person

wildnewforestguidedtours.co.uk