

Longleat without lions

There's more to this famous attraction than the safari park.
Mike & Jane Jago recommend a few days outside the school holidays



The Caravan Club's leafy Longleat site proved the perfect base for a few days. Inset left: The 'watchkat'. Inset right: The steam engine comes out to play on Thursdays and Sundays



Longleat is undoubtedly a paradise for children and lovers of large felines, but what can it offer a couple of big kids and a small dog who has no wish to be a lion's breakfast?

If you are a motorhomer, the big questions when planning a few days' break centred on a specific place are whether or not there is a campsite within striking distance and adequate motorhome parking at the ultimate destination.

Longleat neatly ticks both of these boxes with an excellent Caravan Club site, which is actually on the estate, and within a five-minute stroll of the village square around which most of the attractions are grouped. So we booked our pitch.

With childhood memories of visits to the famous safari park looming large in our minds, we set out in a state of anticipation. But did Longleat live up to our expectations?

The campsite

Having arrived on the estate, in order to reach the site one must drive along a seemingly unending woodland road, then past the magnificent Longleat House, and around the car and coach parks. For a while you may wonder where you are heading, but in fact it's a bit of a circuit, and when you get to the site it is indeed as close to the action as it is suggested to be.

This site has 165 pitches over 14 nicely landscaped acres, excellent facilities (including motorhome service point and waste disposal), and is staffed by friendly and efficient wardens. However, the real unique selling point of this particular site is its location, bang in the middle of this most famous of family playgrounds. Downsides? There may be a bit of bustle around you. The site will be bursting at the seams in school holidays and you'll be unlikely to get a last-minute booking. Go outside weekends and school holidays, though, and you should find it a little less chaotic, as, indeed, we did.

What to do

Our first project at any campsite, once we've settled onto our pitch, is a quick stroll to get our bearings. Out of the site gate it's a left turn and within a very short time you find yourself passing the Adventure Castle (sadly, under 14s only), the safari bus stop and the famous hedged maze, with its central lookout tower and head-high yew hedges. A few more paces brings you into the village square, with its shops, food outlets, train station and general aura of jollity. From here, you can walk down to the lake then around the house, and back through the stable yard to your starting point.

Dog owners will be pleased that, although the attractions do not permit dogs, there is almost unlimited walking available allowing you to tire out your pet before visiting the places he or she is not welcome.

Things we enjoyed...

Longleat House itself is an impressive pile, which was built in the 16th century and remains a family home to this day. A walk around the interior takes you from the Elizabethan grandeur of the great hall, through the centuries to the extensive 'modernisation', which took place in the late-1800s. Some of the most interesting items are the exhibits from ordinary life, rather than the grand paintings, Sèvres and Meissen porcelain and family silver. We lingered longer at the dolls houses, the dress corridor (how tightly the ladies' corsets must have been laced), and in the servants' passages: peasant stock will out!

Outside in the fresh air, we packed ourselves into one of the little carriages on the Longleat railway and thoroughly enjoyed being jiggled around the countryside on a narrow-gauge track that runs behind the campsite and alongside the lake: keep your eyes peeled for the giant ants (sculptures, rather than features from a nightmare) and the pelicans in their own offshoot of the lake. Purists may like to know that the train is usually pulled by a steam engine on Thursdays and Sundays.

Having seen the fringes of the lake it's a must to then board a safari boat for a cruise, during which you will hope to see a pair of hippos, and also Nico the gorilla, who has his very own island in the middle of the lake - complete with satellite TV! But one thing you are certain to see - and hear - is the sea lions.

Once the boat has crossed a certain line on the lake, excited safari trippers are encouraged to throw scraps of raw fish from the boat: the sea lions appear immediately, and it's really something to see. The honking and splashing are amazing, and one quickly becomes aware of just how big these boys and girls are. Stand back from the side of the boat if you don't want a good drenching.

Back on dry land, Animal Adventure is what I think is known in certain circles as a petting zoo, in that some of the animals can be handled under the eye of experienced staff. As we wandered around - very much liking the guinea pigs, the prairie dogs (with which we lost

a staring match), and the amazing butterflies - we saw people having close encounters with ferrets, tortoises, lizards, spiders (not scary really but we definitely don't want one!), and some quite big snakes (time to go home. Now!). This is one of those places that will score highly with children, and just as well with big kids like us - although, in common with any kind of zoo-like experience, we're never quite sure just who is watching whom!

Whilst being watched by our furry friends is at the top of our minds, we have to mention the meerkats. Fans of a certain television advertising campaign (and anyone with a fondness for the small, furry

and inquisitive) cannot fail to be fascinated by a community of meerkats, who happily live their lives in a compound bordering on the area where you queue for the safari boats. These tiny rodents carry on their busy lives within touching distance (but don't touch, they will bite) of a mass of excited humanity, in whom they seem to have no interest whatsoever - except, that is, for the 'watchkat', seated at the highest point keeping an eye on passing people, but even he (or she) is really more interested in the possibility of an airborne predator than the shuffling two-footed animals and their less-than-furry offspring.

However cute the meerkat tribe may be, and however much enjoyment we get from watching them, they are not domesticated animals and are capable of reminding us that they are watching us too, and of just how unwise it would be to provoke their collective displeasure... And why do we say this? Well, we were walking the dog and stopped to look through an observation window. We hadn't been there for more than ten seconds when the 'watchkat's' whiskers began to twitch, and the whole colony suddenly appeared at the other side of the window with just one aim in mind: to give the intruder a good beating! We retreated quickly, not wishing to be responsible for a meerkat mutiny, leaving behind a crowd of fascinated humans, and in the company of a very puzzled dog!

The safari park

Of course there are lions at Longleat, and for those intent on experiencing what is probably the closest you'll ever get to lions, tigers, monkeys, wolves and more in the English countryside, there is an alternative to using the motorhome, which probably has too many interesting sticky-out bits to be sure it would get out of the monkey jungle intact. A limited daily safari bus runs (at extra charge) from the bus stop near the campsite and, although this is principally designed for those who arrive by motorbike, in soft top cars or on public transport, it would also provide the ideal alternative to chancing a motorhome safari. The bus must be booked at visitor information and spaces are limited.

Longleat facts

Longleat, Warminster, Wiltshire BA12 7NW (01985-844400; www.longleat.co.uk)
The main entrance can be found on the A362 Warminster-Frome road.

■ **Open:** daily April 9-Nov 6 (mostly 10am-6pm).

Exact opening times, and days outside the dates above can be checked online.

■ **Prices:**

Day ticket (once only entry to all available attractions on the day of purchase)

Adult: £26 Child (3-14 years): £18.50 Senior (60+): £21

Passport ticket (once only entry to all available attractions on any day during the 2011 season up to Friday October 28)

Adult: £28.50 Child: £21 Senior: £23

Longleat house only

Adult: £12.50 Child: £6.50 Senior: £8.90

Other attractions priced at entrance

Safari bus £6 per person in addition to a standard safari park ticket/day ticket/passport ticket



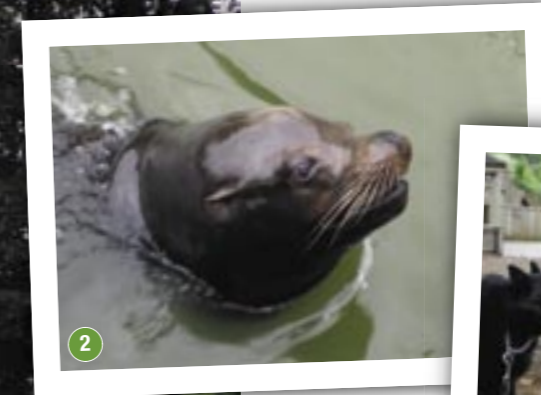
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Site facts

Longleat Caravan Club site, Warmister BA12 7NL

- ▲ **Location:** Warminster (5 miles SW)
- Telephone: 01985-844663
- Web: www.caravanclub.co.uk
- Open: 25 March - 7 November
- Charges: Motorcaravan + 2 adults per night: Members from £16.60-£24.70 (including electric hook-up). Non-members add £8 per night
- Directions: Turn left off A36 Warminster bypass (Salisbury-Frome) onto A362 (Frome). At Longleat Estate follow coach signs. Caravan Club members using the campsite are not required to pay estate entrance fees.

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Free attractions...

Once you are ensconced on site there are certain attractions you can enjoy for no outlay. The first of these is the grounds and gardens, where you can walk to your heart's content - don't miss the pet cemetery, the secret garden and the three mazes that are still in their infancy.

Around the central courtyard and in the adjoining stable block are the family bygone exhibition; meet my ancestors and life and times of Henry, Lord Bath; King Arthur's Mirror maze; and the family state chariot - all of which are free. Plus, at the rear of Longleat House, inside a little house of its own is a fascinating scale model of the great house.

There is also plenty of retail therapy opportunity, ranging from ice creams to gifts and clothing, plus restaurants and take-away outlets.

Making the most of it...

To give time to fully enjoy the Longleat experience, we recommend purchasing Passport tickets to the attractions, and a minimum of three site nights, thus giving at least two full days on the estate.

And finally...

It's always a risk revisiting somewhere you thought was brilliant when you were a child, but this one paid off. We had a grand few days, and confirmed our suspicion that we haven't quite grown up yet. We'll be back... ■

1 Looking at the great house across one of the leats that feed the lake
2 Meeting the locals **3** Where did you get those big, gold teeth? **4** The campsite really is this close to the action **5** The orangery may be approached via the maze, which is difficult to navigate successfully