

Impossible outdoor sports for the disabled



Calvert Devon's rural centre on Exmoor.

Calvert Devon, as distinct from other Calvert centres in the north of England, is on Exmoor. A quadrangle with assorted farm buildings, it is in a rural location with woods surrounding a reservoir.

While they can cater for individuals or groups from adults to excited schoolkids, they excel at providing outdoor activities for the physically or mentally disabled, a mixed

group in our case, often activities that might seem impossible. This is very much a can do organization.

From the reception desk onwards the staff were welcoming and always available. If clean bedding is required at 3am that is not a problem for the staff on duty.

Guests are each accompanied by a carer, who might share a bedroom or, as our case, be next door. I was caring for Chris, who lost the use of an arm, a leg and most of his speech after a stroke. In the past he has had his own outdoor centres, including riding his own horse.

We began with a private horse riding session, not having ridden for years. Rodney was one of the team of docile older horses. Mounting blocks were provided on each side of the horse, each with three steps rather than just a simple block. Perhaps a handrail would have helped. It took two attempts to get his dead leg across but, once in position, he was ready to go. The start was in a barn with wood chip flooring in case of an early descent. That didn't happen, so the doors were opened and, on a leading rein, he set off on a tour of footpaths that must have lasted half an hour.

Chris was less comfortable with cycling, seated next to an instructor who had full control but able to use the handle bars and pedals if he wished. Balance would be awkward when not sitting on the centreline.

Abseiling in a wheelchair sounds impossible but used a sloping wooden ramp rather than a vertical rockface. Likewise, a zipwire in a wheelchair would cause most of us some discomfort. One handed archery involved an arrangement for pulling the bow before releasing it, perhaps the thinking behind the crossbow.

Canoeing took place in pairs of canoes lashed together with the ability to paddle on either side or between the two hulls. I wore my own buoyancy aid but not until it had been inspected thoroughly. There was a hoist but it was not used. Instead, launching was from a floating jetty, the deck underwater on one side so that paddlers could step into their seats on dry land, much easier, and then the ensemble slid off for seal launching. One paddler could not sit on a seat with backrest so she was provided with a giant beanbag. Use of paddles was optional and some of us had more experience than the instructor. The trip did not go far, being concerned about being caught on a lee shore, but just being on the water was a new experience for some.



Back in the saddle for the first time in years.