



Shepherds' delight

Philip's Hillside Huts are the perfect base to explore Northumbria, writes **David Robinson**

Four years ago, Philip Gregory and his wife Fiona were clearing away brambles from an overgrown wooded field edge on their Northumberland farm when she straightened up, and pointed towards the coast four miles away. "Look at that view!" she said. "We're missing something here."

What she first thought they were missing were two or three safari tents and the beginnings of a high-end campsite. And sure, it could have worked: Northumberland is fast becoming the new Cornwall, the 17-mile sands of Durridge Bay are just four miles away and even more extensive than the more famous coastline around Bamburgh and Lindisfarne further north. A wild flower meadow in front of a few yurts, sheltered oak coppices on three sides, maybe even a hot tub to relax in while soaking in the countryside views? Of course it could have worked.

But Philip wasn't convinced. As well as working as a PR consultant for, amongst others, Edinburgh auctioneers Lyon & Turnbull, he'd also spent most of the previous three and a half decades organising safaris. No man in Northumberland probably had as keen an eye for what kind of upmarket holiday could work on a

farm like the one he'd grown up on. And safari tents weren't, he thought, the way to go.

What was? He had clear ideas on what he wanted – huts and cabins built to their own precise specifications, all with the kind of rough and ready cosiness they had seen that summer while visiting a cousin's mountain resort in the Canadian Rockies. Those, though, were too big; more like Swiss chalets than shepherds' huts. It took time to find a British hut-making company whose huts were both sturdy and quirky enough to match their vision, and even longer to get planning permission, but the first hut went up a year ago and the fourth (and probably final) one last month.

All four are made from reclaimed wood, insulated with wool, but otherwise distinctive, with fixtures and fittings from a whole variety of sources. The rusty corrugated iron cladding on the new hut? That came from an Ayrshire farm ravaged by Storm Arwen. The wood for all four, both inside and out, was originally from an old Cheshire mill.

In our own split-level hut, the rocking chairs came from Glasgow, the bath from Somerset, the wash basin used to be a jam boiling pan before Philip got a blacksmith to put

a plug in it, and the kitchen top was a former school chemistry lab table, on which you can still see where the Bunsens once burned.

Upstairs, a high and ultra-comfortable double bed had a bookcase built into its front. I've never actually seen that before, and I wonder why not as it makes a whole load of sense (particularly when, as here, crammed with William Boyd novels and nature books).

Philip's farm, hardly a two-hour drive from Edinburgh, is situated off the A1 two-thirds of the way between Alnwick (a definite tourist stop-off, whether for the castle, gardens, Barter Books or Aln Valley railway)

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and Morpeth. And yet while you might hardly be able to move for tourists at places like Craster, the coast that you can see from your hut is often quite clear of tourists.

There's a reason for this. Two generations ago, this part of southern Northumberland was on a working coalfield, with open-cast mines just behind the sand dunes. These days, the only signs of that are absences rather than presences: hard by such spectacularly beautiful beaches, for example, you might reasonably

Hillside Huts has four individually designed luxury shepherds' huts with views to die for, above

expect to see villages, golf courses, bigger car parks, and far more cafes and tourist businesses. Their absence is a mystery that only makes sense when you find out that the coast road started life as a link between the mines.

I don't doubt for a minute that Durridge Bay will one day get the tourist numbers you might expect. Already they are starting to come to places like Amble – a jobs blackspot once the mines closed – lured by its fish restaurants (try The Fish Shack, opened in 2016 by local lad Jack Charlton) and marina-facing flats.

In the meanwhile, this part of the Northumbrian coast is a neglected gem. If you want to explore it, I can't think of anywhere better than Philip's huts.

As well as being ridiculously comfortable, they've also each got a wood-fired hot tub next to their verandah. De-stressing is easy. Climb in as the sun goes down, soak in the warmth, and watch the light fade from the fields till this part of the world becomes dark all the way to Denmark.

Prices from £145 per night (two-night minimum) to £226 (high season). Further details, see www.hillsidehuts.co.uk or phone 07767 668400.