

Let's get together!

Creating and building connections with friends and family is essential for happiness, and it's good for your physical wellbeing, too. We explore a few beautiful places, where you can celebrate, unite and relax with loved ones



FOR A BIG FAMILY GATHERING WITH KIDS

Enjoy a Cornish Christmas with the extended family in a cosy chalet at Gwel an Mor, Portreath

'LOOK, IT'S A UNICORN!' I shout. 'It's a reindeer, mother,' says my 14-year-old teen, rolling his eyes. 'A unicorn, a unicorn,' squeals a chorus of my nieces, four, seven and nine. 'The unicorn has come to help pull Santa's sleigh,' says my son, winking at me over their heads. Day two, and we are all finally bonding at our annual Christmas break with the whole family.

No, not in Lapland, but at Gwel an Mor in Portreath, Cornwall, a five-star resort, high on a hill overlooking the Atlantic Ocean. But, with its Scandinavian cabins and residence eco lodges, we could very well be on Santa's ranch. Cosy, with wood-burning stoves in each cabin and a hot tub on the deck to relax in, you can watch for his sleigh's progress in the dark sky above every night. Most cabins house five to six people >>>



ABOVE FROM LEFT Feed foxes at British wildlife centre, Feadon Farm, which is situated on the grounds of Gwel an Mor in Portreath, Cornwall, and run by chief ranger Gary Zammit; one of Gwel an Mor's luxury six-sleeper chalets, which provides ample space for friends and family to unite for a Christmas break

ABOVE FROM LEFT The beautiful grounds surrounding Chateau St Pierre de Serjac. The 36 Provencal-style apartments are ideal for a glorious gathering. Wake up to an expansive vineyard view from one of the Chateau's eight luxury rooms; see in a big birthday in style at former vicarage, Edells, which lies deep in the Kent countryside

>>> perfect if two families want to be together, but prefer to go to their own base at night.

Cornwall does that twinkly, Dickensian Christmas thing well – with the City of Light parade in Truro (21 November), Fowey Christmas Market (30 November) and Padstow Christmas Festival (6–9 December), but Gwel an Mor is a great venue for a family get-together, as there is plenty to do on-site, too. There's a spa and an indoor pool for those wanting to relax (I had an incredible one-hour massage), a play barn with soft play and a climbing wall for the younger children, a new all-weather 'Famous Nine' golf course for the grown-up kids and, for everyone, the highlight of our stay, Feadon Farm, the wildlife centre. Here, you get to meet owls, foxes and reindeer up close. Gary Zammit, their chief ranger, is a local celebrity and his enthusiasm for British wildlife conservation is contagious. He'll inspire you to take a walk down the famous South West Coast Path – with 630 miles of superb coastal walks to discover, and he also leads guided tours into the woods at night to meet the local wildlife.

You may even be lucky enough to bump into the cast of *Poldark*, as they recently chose the resort as their Cornish home during filming. I know what I'll be asking for this Christmas. Who needs unicorns? **Suzy Walker**

● **Luxury Christmas holidays** at Gwel an Mor start from £545 per week

FOR A GIRLY GETAWAY

Jet off to a chateau in the Languedoc region of the south of France for a minibreak with your girlfriends

I'm here with a gaggle of gals for a rare child-free minibreak and we intend to make every second of this adventure count. Touching down at Montpellier airport, we pop on our sunnies and head to the magical Chateau St Pierre de Serjac, which comprises eight luxury hotel rooms, a vineyard, spa and hotel, as well as 36 self-contained Provencal-style apartments set in 200-acres of countryside. A chorus of 'wows' resounds as we amble up its vineyard-lined drive.

We are shown to our rooms, overlooking acres of wineland; mine is the chateau's former chapel, which has been sensitively restored by a local artist. I take a moment

to prance about in my robe, pop a *macaron* in my mouth, and send a few 'look where I am' photos to friends and family back home, before accessorising with a touch of sparkle for the evening's festivities of swing bands, cocktails and tapas in the Chateau's on-site vault.

The following morning brings cycling, wine tasting and a halfway chic picnic stop, laid on by Monica of Courtyard Kitchen. We meet Greg, our cycling guide, and begin our gentle ride through rolling vineyards towards Chateau

de la Liquiere, where we sample some truly delicious wine. Later that afternoon, we enjoy well-earned treatments in Serjac's onsite spa; floor-to-ceiling glass windows with views over vineyards and lavender fields create the most serene setting. A sleep-inducing aromatherapy massage follows several laps of the heated pool and a brief sauna. We're in French heaven. *Paradis*.

Our final dinner is with the Chateau's charismatic owner, Karl, who regales us with stories of truffle dogs and eco gardening. The wine flows a tad too well and, several hours of animated conversation later, we reluctantly head to bed.

The next morning, we hit the poolside's sunloungers to natter and read as much of our novels as possible. The sun and our spirits are up, but it's time to go...

We chortle like schoolgirls all the way to the airport, with a quick visit to the coast at Bouziques for oysters and white wine. We've shared the most glorious getaway together. We feel restored, relaxed and reconnected. *'La vie est belle'*, as the French say, and, after a weekend such as this one, I couldn't agree more. **Leona Gerrard**

PHOTOGRAPHS: TOPPHOTO

● **A one-night stay** in a hotel room starts from £192 per night based on two sharing, and includes breakfast and access to the spa. A self-catering apartment sleeping two starts from £157 per night for room only. To book, visit serjac.com. For a dining experience with Courtyard Kitchen, see courtyardkitchen.fr

FOR A BIRTHDAY CELEBRATION

Hire a magical Victorian vicarage in Kent to party the night away with your dearest friends

It is 4am, and I'm watching the dawn break above the trees in the Kent countryside. With my closest friends around me, we jump as a herd of deer appears over the brow of the horizon, unconcerned that a group of midlifers are contemplating the meaning of life at this early hour. I had hired Edells, a bohemian Victorian vicarage deep in the countryside to celebrate a big birthday.

We set up the dining room with two log fires, candlelight and a murder-mystery theme, and prepare the feast – there are speeches, dancing and now, to end a perfect evening, a herd of deer.

With plenty of space for 20, including dogs, Edells is rustic and comfortable. When you walk through the door, you expect the vicar to arrive

and invite you for tea and cake in the well-stocked library. For grown-ups, there are roll-top baths; for kids, there's a nursery in the attic with old toys and a dressing-up box. For walking off hangovers, there are landscaped gardens to get lost in and an amble to a local pub for a hair of the dog the next day. Full of Arts and Crafts charm, with original William Morris wallpaper, it's the ideal backdrop to kick back, relax and celebrate. **Suzy Walker**

● **A one-night stay** at Edells starts from £60 pp per night; from £3,000 for the whole house per week. Chef hire, catering, yoga classes and bicycle hire available. See edells.co.uk