



The Q Factor

It doesn't matter how long you live somewhere; things you never knew existed will keep cropping up to surprise you.

by Catherine Gallop



I had driven down the old A23 a thousand times, and had noticed a tyre hanging on the edge of the road, marking the start of a rough drive through a field – to be honest the hedge-row was in the way, so not a great deal could be seen. I took that tyre at face value, and not knowing much about cars and spare parts, I filed it in my mind under 'stuff'.

The tyre has been taken down now, and replaced by a sign indicating that there is something interesting lurking behind those hedges. Driving up the track past what looks like a large grassy meadow with a shelter in its midst, I arrived at the entrance to *QLeisure*, an oasis of sporting and leisure activities. The idea of some serious go-karting and quad biking has lured me to this

off-the-beaten-track place, and I abandon my car to proceed on foot past the remains of some rather hunky looking off-road vehicles which if they could talk would probably be able to recount some hair raising moments in their lives. On further, and the sight of the Downs rises behind a beautifully constructed wooden building, spread out on one level and surrounded by well tended terraces.

Monday mornings are not the busiest of times, so I was greeted by four members of the Qleisure family who, for the past 14 years, have painstakingly put together an incredible variety of activities in this stunning location. Lloyd, the youngest son, was to be my guide, and after signing the risk form, and making sure that I "hadn't consumed any banned

substances under Olympic Guidelines" and "wasn't prone to fainting" amongst other things (they are pretty thorough in their safety checks with everything they do) we were off.

He was ten paces or so in front of me, and when he said: "...kit you out in helmet, race suit, gloves..." I thought "fair enough". When a few minutes later he reappeared with a blue meshy looking thing, I realised that what he'd actually said was 'hairnet'. Oh my, how attractive. Luckily I had not spent a fortune at the hairdressers – ladies be warned, this is not the glamorous bit of motor sport...

Kitted out in a race suit (a fetching yellow and blue number), we carried the rest of the gear to the edge of the track, and Lloyd suggested a walk round the estate to acclimatise me. We skirted around the edge of the newly built bridge on the race track, and walked towards a clump of trees on the far perimeter of the field. There, suspended 40ft off the ground, was what looked like a small viewing platform. In fact it is part of a team building assault course – the aim is for four people to stand on something not much bigger than a postage stamp without falling off. I'd like to come back sometime, and watch. By the way, to get down, the only way is on a flying trapeze bar – they call it the Giant Leap of Faith. If faith deserts you, I am assured the harnesses come in handy.

Walking back up to the off-side of the track, you really get a feel of total immersion in this rural setting. Care has been taken to protect wildlife and habitats, and it's clear that the family are concerned about safety aspects too. An elevated commentary box provides a panoramic view of all parts of the track, enabling staff to keep a constant check on the karts.

For my maiden outing, I was on my own. Hairnet, helmet and gloves fitted, I crawled into the kart, and was shown its operation. Pretty simple really, even for

a girl, it's press right foot to go faster, press left foot to stop. I think that's what Lloyd said. There was a bit of stop-starting to begin with, but then I got the hang of it and went hell for leather (he told me it was about 40mph but it felt very very fast indeed) round the 800 metre track, negotiating hair-pin bends, under the bridge, more hairpins, over the bridge, and finally back to the pits. Ooooh, getting good at the jargon, now. Lloyd insisted I go again, now that I was familiar with the course, and the second time round the wind would have been whistling through my hairnet were it not for the fact that I was wearing a helmet.

The racing itself is an exhilarating experience, carefully controlled in terms of numbers on the track, and an incredibly popular activity. I can see how it could become addictive, and why so many people come down from London and entertain clients here. On our way back to pick up the quad bikes, Lloyd told me that they also host stag and hen parties (alcohol free for the activities – bar open later!) and although the karts are only suitable for over 14s, they intend to acquire smaller karts for younger children over the coming months.

After a comprehensive lesson on how to use the quad bike (it's slightly trickier than the kart) we crept back through the gates and out into the field with the strange hut. It turns out that this is the



location of the shooting range – ingeniously set into a raised bank at the far end of the field, with targets no bigger than small coffee cups. These are well camouflaged, and would certainly test most amateur shots' abilities. This is also where archery and clay pigeon shooting takes place, with the traps hidden behind the bank, and surprising everyone as they appear seemingly from nowhere.

Leaving the field behind us, we trundled up a steep hill (the clutch worked) and across the top fields where the views to Wolstonbury Hill and beyond were breathtaking. Over in the distance, the spire of Hurstpierpoint's church indicated our close proximity to the village, were it not for the A23 segmenting the land beneath us. Down another vertiginous hill, and then the fun began as Lloyd decided I was into the swing of things and could cope with the trek through the woods. He had forgotten to mention the recent rainfall, but that didn't put me off, and we

happily splashed the beasts through some mud for the next ten minutes or so.

Apart from really wanting to take my hairnet off, I could have easily spent the next few hours hurtling along and annoying the clutch. But Lloyd would have none of it, and sensibly took me back to the gates before I got too carried away. Back at the ranch, Peter (pater familias and huge enthusiast) told me a bit about the events that have been hosted by Q Leisure. In the summer, small groups come out for barbeque and karting evenings, and on the other end of the scale, they hosted a fun-day for Amex, where 1,200 people probably had the time of their lives. It is such a big and rambling estate, you can well imagine not feeling too crowded out.

Inside the wooden-beamed oak barn a central fireplace dominates, and the room lends itself to meetings, dinners, or just chilling out on large leather sofas, with a relaxing gin and tonic after a hard day's drive. Much of the catering is done in-house, with some outside assistance for large-scale events. This is a gem of a venue, which has possibly been overlooked in the past, even though it is on our doorstep. The family are only too happy to show visitors around by appointment, and as soon as you arrive on site, you will feel transported into a world far removed from everyday cares. I can't wait to put my hairnet back on.

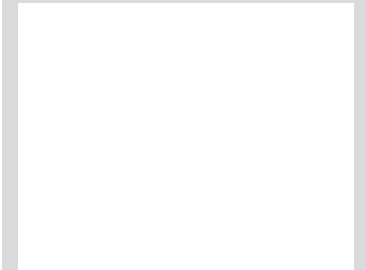
Catherine was a guest of QLeisure, London Road, Albourne, West Sussex. 01273 834403 www.qleisure.co.uk



Activities



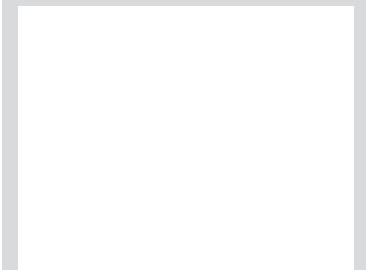
Pro-karts



Rally Karts



Quad Bikes



4x4 Off Road



Archery



Clay Pigeon