

Talk of the Town

Don Jolly chats about four Club sites offering easy access to the attractions of London and its surrounds



DON'T FORGET
You can book your pitch online at caravanclub.co.uk/searchandbook, by calling our Advance Booking Service on 01342 327490 or, for AS sites, calling them direct.



Heath, field, wood and covert are perhaps not words you would immediately associate with London and its suburbs, but that's exactly what we have this month. Each of our sites is close to the

M25, from which you can easily access many of outer London's attractions, as well as some remarkably attractive countryside. If you fancy venturing into central London, it is best to leave the car on site or at a station and let the train take the strain. A big bonus is that each of the sites is open all year. >>

THIS MONTH'S FEATURED SITES

ALDERSTEAD HEATH
See p198 of the *Sites Directory & Handbook 2011/12*

GATWICK (FORMERLY AMBERLEY FIELDS)
See p205 of the *Directory*

COMMONS WOOD
See p143 of the *Directory*

WYATTS COVERT
See p67 of the *Directory*



Alderstead Heath Club site

FOR THE FAMILY



Blue belle

Steam trains operate on the **Bluebell Railway**, currently running between Sheffield Park (close to the National Trust gardens) and Kingscote. Next year, an extension to East Grinstead should be completed.

T 01825 720800
W bluebell-railway.com
Club site Gatwick



World of fun

Part theme park, part zoo, **Chessington World of Adventures** is popular with families. Coming next spring is Zafari, an interactive African wilderness experience.

T 0871 663 4477
W chessington.com
Club site Alderstead Heath

HANDSON



Wild days

At **Paradise Wildlife Park** you can feed the gentle red panda or face your phobias by holding snakes, lizards and tarantulas. Great fun!

T 01992 470490
W pwpark.com
Club site Commons Wood

Brick-tastic

Land of the Vikings, Knights' Kingdom and Pirates Landing are just some of the places you can visit at **Legoland Windsor Resort**. Don't miss the Pirates of Skeleton Bay stunt show!

T 0871 222 001
W legoland.co.uk
Club site Wyatts Covert



FOOD + DRINK



Fine wines

Denbies Wine Estate, on the North Downs near Dorking, produces 400,000 bottles of award-winning wine annually. There's an excellent restaurant here, too.

T 01306 876616
W denbies.co.uk
Club site Alderstead Heath

Time for a pint

The Flight Tavern, by Gatwick, is a large pub offering meals that has a sign recalling Gatwick Airport as a Second World War fighter base.

T 01293 518181
Club site Gatwick

SIPTIP



Green machine

On the outskirts of Welwyn Garden City, Mill Green Mill produces flour which you can buy to make your own bread. It is also home to a museum featuring local history displays.

T 01707 357850
W welhat.gov.uk
Club site Commons Wood

Flight lunch?

Denham Aerodrome offers two places to eat – the Crew Room Café (opening times dependent on weather and demand) and the Biggles Restaurant.

W thecrewroomdenham.co.uk
W bigglesrestaurant.com
Club site Wyatts Covert



“A big bonus is that each of the sites is open all year”

As you might expect, Alderstead Heath, the first Club site in the London area reached by caravanners taking the motorway from the Dover ferries, is popular with foreign visitors.

It is a beautiful site featuring a wide variety of mature trees and a garden designed with plants and benches from this year's Chelsea Flower Show. There's a children's play area, an adventure playground and mini goalposts, plus a giant chessboard where young and old alike can exercise their minds. Look out for the good dog walking area, too. If you need to stock up on food, you've got both a Sainsbury's (in Redhill) and Tesco (in Caterham) just a short drive away, and there are several good pubs in the area, including The Fox on Coulsdon Common which has an excellent menu and the Feathers Hotel on the A23 in the village of Merstham.



Commons Wood Club site

If you'd rather eat in but don't want to cook, local Indian and Chinese restaurants will deliver to the site free of charge, while every Friday a fish and chip van calls in between 5.30pm and 7.30pm.

There are several footpaths close to the site, including the North Downs Way and, being close to the M23 and M25, you can quickly access numerous attractions by car, including the National Trust properties of Chartwell, Polesden Lacey, Reigate Fort and Wakehurst Place.

WING IT TO SUSSEX

You might think a caravan site next to the runway at Gatwick Airport would be a bit of a turn-off. But Gatwick Club site (formerly Amberley Fields), which is positioned exactly so, is surprisingly popular. One couple I met had been there for two weeks and would happily return. It's a plane-spotter's heaven!

There is no denying there is some noise, mainly from jets lifting off opposite the site entrance (landing aeroplanes use reverse thrust before they reach the site and the noise is muffled by trees) but, strangely, most people become accustomed to it. No-fly time runs (supposedly) from midnight to 5.30am.

The site is convenient for travelling into London by train (it's just 20 minutes on the

Gatwick Express), or even to Brighton. Most people take the taxi to the station.

The site has only 24 permanent touring pitches, but has storage space for 450 caravans. There is also a rally field with economy pitches which is used during the peak summer months (and came into its own during London's Olympics).

For eating out, the nearest pub is the Flight Tavern right next door, but in my opinion better options are the Gatwick Manor, on the A23 nearby, or, alternatively, nearby Charlwood village has three pubs from which to choose.



Pretty Denham village

DID YOU KNOW?

Gatwick has the world's busiest single-use runway, averaging 52 aircraft movements per hour



Gatwick Club site

On the opposite side of London, Commons Wood lies at the southern edge of Welwyn Garden City, a modern town built after the First World War, mixing urban settings with a green environment. Commons Wood mirrors that ideal and is surrounded by trees, the horseshoe-shaped site offering a grassy area at the centre and hardstandings around the edge.

There are plenty of places to visit nearby, including 17th-century Hatfield House, Knebworth House just up the A1 (M) (a Tudor building cloaked in Victorian decoration and famous since 1974 for its open-air rock and pop concerts), St Albans with its cathedral and Roman remains, and Shaw's Corner at Ayot St Lawrence – the National Trust-owned former home of playwright George Bernard Shaw. In the summer, his plays are performed in the garden.

To the east lies the Lee Valley, where the mellifluous tones of wildlife at Rye Meads RSPB reserve co-exist with the roars of racing engines emanating from Rye House Kart Raceway. If you want to return to a more peaceful setting along with close encounters with exotic animals, head for Paradise >>

OUTDOOR FUN

GO RACING



Kart capers

Rye House Kart Raceway is where Lewis Hamilton cut his motor-racing teeth! You need to book in advance – prices start at £52 for 30 minutes.

T 01992 460895
W rye-house.co.uk
Club site Commons Wood

Cycling

National Cycle Network (NCN) Route 12 runs north from Potter's Bar to Letchworth. To the west, NCN 6 can be joined near the Wyatt's Covert site, and leads on to NCN 4, the Thames Valley route. To the south, The Downs and Weald route runs close to both the Alderstead Heath and Gatwick sites.



W sustrans.org.uk

Walking

The North Downs Way passes close to Alderstead Heath, though it's best to drive west, maybe to Box Hill, where far-reaching views are uninterrupted by the M25. It's a good spot for picnics.

W nationaltrust.co.uk/northdowns
Club site Alderstead Heath



Ace place

Wakehurst Place is the National Trust's most-visited property. The 465-acre estate includes an Elizabethan mansion, beautiful gardens, woodland and lakes, plus Kew's Millennium Seed Bank, which is conserving seeds of the world's plant species.

T 01444 894066
W nationaltrust.org.uk
Club site Gatwick



CULTURE



Great Briton

The home of Sir Winston Churchill, Chartwell houses personal mementoes and photographs plus more than 130 of his paintings. The beautiful gardens feature a lake and a working kitchen garden.

T 01732 868381
W nationaltrust.org.uk/chartwell
Club site Alderstead Heath



City art

Visitors to London are spoiled for choice where art is concerned with a host of galleries. The National Gallery on Trafalgar Square is free to enter, as is the Tate Modern on the South Bank.

W visitlondon.com
Club site any featured

Hats off

Hatfield House has been owned by the Cecil family since 1611. Richly decorated, it stands in extensive parkland complete with delightful gardens, woods and footpaths.



T 01707 287010
W hatfield-house.co.uk
Club site Commons Wood

Royal treat

Windsor Castle is the largest occupied castle in the world. It's magnificent state apartments are furnished with treasures while St George's Chapel is the burial place of 10 monarchs.

T 020 7766 7300
W royalcollection.org.uk
Club site Wyatts Covert



Wildlife Park. And London is only 25 minutes away by train from Hatfield station.

Celebrating 60 years as a Club site in 2013, Wyatts Covert is tucked away along a country lane close to Denham Aerodrome. It doesn't suffer the jet noise you get at Amberley Fields, however, as most movements are by light aircraft or helicopters.

CAPITAL IDEAS

The site is popular for London sightseeing – you can opt for the Central Line underground from Ruislip or, from Denham Green Station, the overground train takes 30 minutes into London's Marylebone Station. It also stops at Wembley, handy for those heading for football matches at the stadium.

Across the A412, the Grand Union Canal offers delightful walking and cycling opportunities along its towpath (many of the roads hereabouts are too busy to be recommended for relaxed cycling). At site reception, you will find directions for an hour-and-a-half walk from the site, along the canal to The Coy



Carp pub (good for a lunch break), returning via the South Bucks Way. The walk does, however, involve crossing the busy A412 twice, so care is required.

Picturesque Denham village, a short drive from the site, is well worth a visit, though it can get very busy on a warm, sunny day. It's excellent for dining out, with three pubs – The Swan Inn, The Green Man and The Falcon Inn – and an Italian restaurant called Da Remo.

So, if you're looking for easy access to the excitement of the Big Smoke but want to relax on a typically high-quality Club site base, any of the four locations mentioned here will fit the bill. ■

MEMBERS' VIEW

Robin and Anne Bickers from Oakham in Rutland have stayed at Alderstead Heath three or four times and find it convenient for visiting friends.



"It is also one of the Club's most attractive sites, its trees breaking the site into glades rather than serried ranks. There is also a good choice of grassy pitches or hardstandings."

John and Cynthia Sweet from Coulsdon, Surrey, were a fortnight through a three-week stay at Gatwick Club site and were loving it. "Despite the proximity of Gatwick," they said, "you soon get used to aircraft noise. We would be very happy to return."



John and Patricia Durose from Bolton often stay at Commons Wood when visiting their daughter and family, but on a recent visit they arrived early for London sightseeing. "I'd like to visit the RAF Museum at Hendon or the RSPB's Rye Meads reserve," said John. "While I'll probably go shopping," added Patricia. They also had tickets to see *Spamalot* in the West End.



Jackie and David Evans from Ashby-de-la-Zouch in Leicestershire have stayed at Wyatts Covert three times while visiting their daughter in south-west London. "There's such a lovely welcome here and never any hassle. It's beautiful, we love it," they said.



To read even more member views, see our fantastic online forum at caravanclub.co.uk/together

