

thistledown

Thistledown Farm, Tinkley Lane, Nympsfield, Gloucestershire, GL10 3UH 01453 860420/07868 713180 www.thistledown.org.uk

Thistledown is, quite simply, enchanting. More than just a beautiful campsite nestled among 70 acres of organic meadow and woodland, it is inspirational, too. It was a dream realised by Richard Kelly, who has years of experience in environmental design and construction, as well as farming. He has nurtured Thistledown since 1993, when he began creating habitats for the wide range of local plants and wildlife. Richard now runs it as an environmental learning centre with his son Ryan, and neither could be more helpful or enthusiastic about this camping environment.

It's easy to find Thistledown; just head towards a majestic wind turbine located 300 metres from the entrance. The turbine was one of the first to be erected by the increasingly popular Ecotricity, the UK's first provider of mainstream electricity produced from renewable sources. It's a part of the genuine green vibe in this neck of the Gloucestershire woods, so if you've ever fancied living the sustainable *Good Life*, then this is probably the place in which to settle.

But, in the meantime, you can camp in three main areas at Thistledown, where up to 40 pitches are available in each. But don't for a minute think that you will be crowded out. Richard and Ryan ensure that no one camps on top of one another, and the 70 acres take in trees, undulating pasture, glades of wild flowers, and space – everywhere. Even if there's a wedding in one of the pastures (think hay bales for pews and canvas bell tents decorated with hand-made bunting), with all the

tree cover at Thistledown Farm it's unlikely that you'll even be aware of it.

The top site allows cars and offers camping in pitches individually mown into a pretty elderflower orchard, while the bottom two pastures are car free. Perfection. You can stretch out knowing nothing (save the odd startled deer) will drive into you. And for those with children, real freedom is a reality here. The pastures are flanked by woodland offering numerous opportunities for lengthy walks, nature watching, or just some good old-fashioned hooning around.

Thistledown is a wildlife receptor site, which means species disturbed by developments in the area are rehoused here. Richard and Ryan often run talks, walks, and events that are free for campers – from BBQs to bird walks and bat evenings. At dusk you can actually wander down to a spot where badgers come out to feed and, as long as the wind is in the right direction (so they can't smell or hear you), you'll be able to stay transfixed for ages.

All three camping areas have fire pits (most pitches have their own) and there are a few braziers for hire. In the evening, Richard will whizz by on his little off-road vehicle selling wood by the heaped barrowful. You can take your own, but are asked not to collect it from the woods as it provides shelter for creatures such as snakes and slow worms.

Picnic tables and sawn logs are dotted around for campers as well as the day trippers who come





to enjoy this tranquil environment, its stunning views, and the nature trails on offer. Streams spouting from Roman drainage systems into small ponds gurgle in the background, and the rope

swings near them offer great excitement.

And the really magical thing about Thistledown is its colour. The trees, grassland, and space are all green. Green in colour, and green in ethos.

COOL FACTOR Camping under the stars in an ancient valley surrounded by nothing but wildlife, or (if you want your car next to you) in an elderflower orchard.

WHO'S IN? Tents, groups, dogs (on leads) – yes.

Campervans – yes (in elderflower orchard). Caravans – no.

ON SITE Campfires allowed in pre-dug fire pits. There are 3 main camping areas (40 pitches in each) on this 70-acre site: the elderflower orchard, where cars are allowed, and the car-free second and third pastures. The second pasture only tends to be used as an overflow. Pitches are unmarked, but there's plenty of room (and we mean metres, not centimetres) to stretch out and play ball games. The elderflower orchard is upgrading (from portaloos) to compost loos and showers. The pastures have compost loos, solar-powered hot showers, and basins, plus an outdoor washing-up sink. The site has numerous walks, lakes, a birdwatching hide, and a simple observatory for stargazing. You can borrow a wheelbarrow to transport your gear into the no-car zones, or pay £2.50 to be whizzed down in the off-road buggy, as long as the guys are available. Wood is available to buy by the barrowload (£10), or bring your own (just no scavenging).

OFF SITE A walk through the woods from Thistledown will take you to the fascinating Woodchester Mansion and Park (01453 861541; see www.nationaltrust.org.uk). The house is an unfinished Gothic manor, so you can open doors that go nowhere and get an idea of the building process. Don't visit after dark though; it's haunted... The area surrounding Thistledown is also known for its burial mounds. The Neolithic Nympsfield Long Barrow (see www.english-heritage.org.uk) has spectacular views over the Severn Valley, as well as internal burial chambers for viewing. Just along

the ridge is the Uley Long Barrow (aka Hetty Pegler's Tump) – take a torch if you want to see inside. On the other side of Stroud is the beautiful Slad Valley.

FOOD AND DRINK There are plans to offer locally produced organic food boxes on site, so watch this space... Foodie heaven Nailsworth is only 3 miles away. Bread will never be the same again once you've tasted the stuff at Hobbs House Bakery (www.hobbshousebakery.co.uk), and for an upmarket deli visit William's Foodhall (01453 832240; www.williamsfoodhall.co.uk). The award-winning Stroud farmers' market (6 miles away) is open every Saturday from 9am–2pm; you can buy everything from locally produced meat, bread, and cheese to Thai takeaways. Good local pubs offering food include: the Old Spot (01453 542870) at Uley, with its own microbrewery; and the Black Horse (01453 872556) at Amberley. Or for a pub within walking distance, try Nympsfield's Rose & Crown (01453 860240).

GETTING THERE From the M5 take the A419 towards Stonehouse. After a mile take the third exit to Eastington at the roundabout and head on to Frocester. At the crossroads at the top of Frocester Hill go straight over and turn left after about 300 metres, towards Nympsfield. At the staggered junction go straight across to Tinkley Lane, signposted Nailsworth. After 1 mile Thistledown is on your left. (If you reach the wind turbine you've gone too far.)

PUBLIC TRANSPORT Train to Stroud, then (twice-daily) bus no. 35 to Nympsfield. Then it's about a 15-minute walk.

OPEN April–December.

THE DAMAGE Tent £5 per night; adult £5; child (over 3 years) £2, under-3s free. Dogs free.