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Britain

Campfires, canoes and the search for Wild Cat Island

Sarah Unwin Jones and family swim and sail in the Lake District setting of Swallows and Amazons

Sitting on the afterdeck of a varnished wood steamer with a writhing golden snake at the prow, we glide down Coniston Water in the Lake District feeling every bit as adventurous as Captain Flint in *Swallows and Amazons*. The steam yacht *Gondola* could be a double for Flint's houseboat — indeed, the author Arthur Ransome scrawled on a faded postcard of the yacht in her Victorian heyday: "Captain Flint's houseboat, something like this" (you can see the picture in the wonderful Ruskin Museum in Coniston). So a cruise on her is an appropriate way to chart the lakeside locations familiar from the *Swallows and Amazons* books — and now the film. "But where's the cannon?" demands our own Captain Flint (aged three, piratical tendencies).

Actually, a cannon wouldn't look out of place on this boat, fired by an oversized boiler from the Ffestiniog Railway. She chuffs past the farmhouse inspiration for Ransome's Holly Howe (now a guest house called Bank Ground Farm) and then the Old Man of Coniston, known to the Swallows as "Kanchenjunga".

"There's Wild Cat Island!" yells the ship's boy (aged seven) as he spies the wooded Peel Island just visible on the eastern shore, and Ransome's inspiration for the Swallows' summer camp.

It's all I can do to stop him leaping overboard and swimming for it.



The steam yacht *Gondola* on Coniston Water

We had set up camp the previous evening at Low Wray campsite on Windermere, having left home with the car loaded to the gunwales and crewed by me (Captain Nancy of the *Amazon*), my husband (Captain John of the *Swallow*) and our two boys.

A short galumph downhill through the idyllic oak woods, and we stood before an exquisite reed-lined bay shimmering in the early-evening sunshine, the peace disturbed only by the honking of geese and the squelch of nearby wetsuits. It's a great setting for a few days' escape: camping, swimming, canoeing and sailing — what could be better?

And so we head off on Ship's Boy's orders in search of "Wild Cat Island". First, driving down through the luxuriant ferns of Coniston's idyllic wooded banks, we pass the bungalow in which Ransome, once a foreign correspondent in Moscow, lived with his second wife, Evgenia, Trotsky's former private secretary. Then we prepare to get wet — we are going to swim to the island.

We pull up behind a beach about 750m from Peel Island and looking across pike-infested waters, where the open-water expert Pete Kelly, of Swim the Lakes, is waiting. "If not duffers, won't drown," he says. He brings his safety canoe anyway.

"Where do we change?" jokes my husband. "In the Lakes, the outdoors is your changing room," grins Pete, as we struggle to get into wetsuits on the roadside, a process I can only describe as like trying to play Twister while tied up with rubber bands.

Diving into the cool waters on a hot, sunny afternoon, we find ourselves immersed in the landscape, the sky huge above us, bumping into the occasional ship-wrecking rock jutting from the erratic geology of Coniston's lake bed.

Occasionally we look down and there is nothing but sunlight streaming into the depths. It is magical, thrilling and sometimes scary.

Ship's Boy leans over the side of the canoe, goggles on, plunging his head under water in search of pike. Coast clear, he leaps in and we all splash towards the island. We round the rocks and come upon Ransome's secret harbour, exactly as we had imagined it, but with wild neoprene-clad kids grinning down at us from the walls.

"We made it!" yell the boys before scampering past a classic wooden Wayfarer dinghy to plant an imaginary flag on "Wild Cat's" peak as Pete hands out some well-deserved grog (ginger beer).

The next day we head north on a road known evocatively as The Struggle (although from the passenger seat it was a breeze) through the bleak majesty of the Kirkstone Pass to Ullswater. This northern lake is wilder than Coniston or Windermere, the stony fells rising more directly from the shore, and it is our setting for more watery adventures.

First, canoeing. On a beautiful beach fringed with oak trees, we raft canoes together against the gathering wind and set off for the remote eastern shore under the guidance of the unflappable Luke, all-round self-effacing mountain man from Reach Beyond Adventure.

We soon settle into a paddling routine that could generously be described as wildly inefficient. Ship's Boy is trying to work out how much he can splash Luke without retaliation. Captain Flint is paddling elegantly backwards. Husband has stopped paddling in case we veer off course due to the "strength" of his paddling skills. And I, privately, am Shackleton in his vessel *James Caird*.

We stop off to explore Norfolk Island, named long ago by the eponymous duke and used, we muse, for lavish picnics, with butlers rowing flambéed pheasant and pickled swan over on silver salvers. I realise our hastily assembled peanut-



butter sandwiches may not be up to scratch.

Another short passage and we reach the far shore, scrambling up a steep bank beneath beech trees to find a spot for a brew. After a successful hunt for a spring through a bracken-topped bog, Luke shows us an ingenious way of balancing a billycan over a fire. Later we cook dough twists over the embers. The secret is in the kneading, Luke tells us, among other more crucial (but less tasty) survival tips.

To explore this more northerly area more easily, we have decamped to the newly renovated 18th-century cottages at

“We take turns at the tiller to keep the bow steady on the speck of beach in the distance”

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PETER URWIN



Waterfoot Park on Ullswater. It's just a short walk to Pooley Bridge — or Pooley No Bridge as it was known by locals after the catastrophic floods last December — for dinner in the welcoming 1863 Bar Bistro Rooms. The delicious upmarket evening menu here makes it worth a detour, although Captain Flint mutinied at the sight of his flower-scattered risotto.

The next morning, the wind rushes wildly through the trees and I'm not looking forward to our sailing trip. At the friendly Glenridding Sailing Centre, one of the few places where you can learn to sail in a traditional boat, even the sailing club are grounded. However, with experienced sailors Steve and Martin we hatch a plan to strike out for Aira Force waterfall in our *Swallow*, a traditional Lune Whammel dinghy that would take a duffer to capsize, before making our way back on land for the South Pole (Glenridding), watching out for penguins (Herdwick sheep) and crevasses (streams).

We edge out from the jetty under the small jib sail, which fills immediately with wind squalling off the fells. Sailing under Swallows and Amazons flags, and in a boat not dissimilar to Ransome's own *Amazon*, which we had coveted in the Ruskin Museum, we make exhilarating pace in the choppy waters, flanked at one point by two surfing kayakers. The Ship's Boy and I suppress the urge to yell "Yippee!" as we look behind and see gusts chasing over the lake towards us. We take turns at the tiller, tussling with the wind to keep the boat steady on the speck of beach in the distance.

The writer's children in a dinghy. Below: Ullswater

In no time we are scrunching on to the shingle at Aira Force like real explorers, waving goodbye to Martin and heading for the impressive 60ft falls.

The three-mile walk to Glenridding is a lovely trek through ancient woodland and pasture, whose springtime daffodils inspired Wordsworth. The Ship's Boy leaves stick arrow waymarkers for stragglers along the way, and our expedition arrives triumphantly at the South Pole just in time to take the thunderously fast Ullswater Steamer back up the lake. After more squally sailing the next morning, we head for home, keen to get back afloat as soon as possible.

Swallows and Amazons for ever!



Need to know

Sarah Unwin Jones was a guest of Visit England (visitengland.com) and Cumbria Tourism (golakes.co.uk)

Where to stay

Low Wray Campsite on Windermere has camping pods from £35-£55 a night (nationaltrust.org.uk). *MY Lady of the Lake* is a two-bedroom cottage for four on Ullswater. It costs from £310 for three nights in high season (waterfootpark.co.uk).

What to do

Ruskin Museum (ruskinmuseum.com) costs £6 an adult, £3 a child. The steam yacht *Gondola* (nationaltrust.org.uk) has a lake cruise for £20.50 an adult; £10 a child. Swim the Lakes (swimthelakes.co.uk) has a 90-minute taster session for £35pp. Glenridding Sailing Centre (glenriddingsailingcentre.co.uk) has one-hour taster sessions for four for £90. The Canoe and Bushcraft Journey (reachbeyondadventure.co.uk) is from 10am-4pm and costs £30pp. Ullswater Steamers has hop-on, hop-off day passes at £13.90 an adult; £6.95 a child (www.ullswater-steamers.co.uk)

Waterfront houses in the Lake District

The Boathouse at Knotts End, Ullswater

Who says messing around on the water is just for kids? This bijou boathouse, with its own jetty and rowing boat (from May to October), is the perfect couples' retreat — an open-plan bolt hole, with a small oak kitchen, sleeping area separated by folding doors and a balcony overhanging the lake. It's the perfect 21st-century detox spot: no wi-fi or TV reception, just board games, walking maps and a picnic table under the trees. Two-night breaks are from £505 (holidaylettings.co.uk).



Lake House, Coniston

The aptly named Lake House, above, is a stone's throw from Coniston Water and part of the historic Lanehead estate. The house sleeps six in three bedrooms, and there is an airy feel in the cream lounge with its wood-burning stove. Coniston Water is an ideal spot for amateur sailors; bring your own boat and you can use the shared moorings and a jetty at the end of the sprawling grounds. A week is from £836, short breaks from £585 from October 28 (015395 38180, lakeland-cottage-company.co.uk).

Holly Nook, Ambleside

Any closer to the water and Holly Nook would actually be in Windermere. Inside, the style is sleek and contemporary — open-plan living spaces, spacious bedrooms in muted hues — while outside, nature takes over with spectacular lake views from the small decked terrace. The house sleeps eight in four bedrooms; launching facilities are 90m away. A week costs from £1,450 (015394 88855, lakelovers.co.uk).

New Lodge, Watermillock, near Penrith

This unusual mix of early 20th-century gatehouse and architect-designed extension has double-height windows that make the most of views down to Ullswater. The house has its own shoreline and a small jetty, and the five bedrooms, including two singles, make it ideal for families. There are walks from the door, and cycling, sailing, kayaking and fishing near by. Three-night breaks for eight are from £1,175 (01386 898290, ruralretreats.co.uk).

Bassenthwaite Lakeside Lodges

You can bring your own boat, kayak or windsurfer to Bassenthwaite, a clutch of waterfront lodges perfect for a family break. Sleeping four, six or eight, each lodge has a private deck with gas barbecue, fully fitted kitchen and is centrally heated and double glazed. Bassenthwaite Lake offers free fishing from the jetty or foreshore (fishing licence needed), and there's a small play area for younger children. Three-night breaks are from £579, with a week from £885 for a three-bedroom lodge (01768 776641, bill.co.uk).

Annabelle Thorpe

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