



Go Wild in the country

Anna Turns took her family to run, jump and climb their way around **Bear Trail** and learnt there's much more to outdoor play than just muddy paws.

U h oh, you can't go over it, you can't go under it. We'll have to go through it – the mud, that is. Every obstacle at the new, tailor-made Bear Trail experience near Cullompton presents a fun challenge. Whether it's racing on the zip line, clambering over a huge net with big mud pits below, crawling on all fours through the bear tunnel, teetering across the wobbly bridge or pulling yourself up the rope to reach the summit of Bear Mountain, there's an element of risk-taking. The adventure trail is intended to take you out of your comfort zone for a couple of hours, up and over, underneath and through the series of 16 rather hefty obstacles.

Bear Trail's founder, Ben Jordan, is ex-Army and opened up this family-friendly activity centre on a 10-acre plot of land last summer, with hopes of bringing a military aspect to it. "I love assault courses and I love wood-fired pizzas, so I've combined the two and created a place where families of all ages can enjoy a day out together," he explains. Ultimately, it's about breaking barriers: "Although some of these obstacles might look fairly simple, some children will spend 20 minutes on one piece of kit and they will be breaking barriers... they remember that achievement when they have done something they didn't think they could and then they come back to try new things."

Ben remembers one example vividly: "Last year, one five-year-old girl wouldn't go on any of the kit, then she went two rungs up the first net and got scared, but later on that day she came and found me in the office to tell

me she'd been right over the top. Her pride and sense of achievement was incredible."

Ben, 31, left the Army as a captain four years ago, and then worked for Mole Valley as a buyer, and sold tractor parts to earn enough money to set this place up. "I'm a northerner but my wife Clare has connections to Devon and it was a very wise decision to move here. We built it in just 11 weeks, which was epic." Where we are sitting at picnic tables was previously a sheep barn full of hay bales, Ben tells me, and the rest of the land was a sheep field. "My bank manager told me I either had a great vision or I was insane, so it was a big leap of faith."

Ben's original inspiration for creating Bear Trail was to encourage children to escape screen time and enjoy playing outdoors: "We've lost that connection with being outside in the elements and it's so important to get out into the wild and explore." Ben grew up in the middle of nowhere: "I spent my whole childhood playing on hay bales; my friends and I were always in the farmer's barns, so we have made a hay bale race here, which is great fun." (Yes, Ben, I agree. I can't have looked particularly elegant clambering over the hay bales in full waterproofs, but who cares?!)

As a parent, I often hear myself restricting my children – 'don't touch that', 'be careful', 'slow down in case you fall over', 'try not to get your clothes dirty'. Free play allows us to escape that constant inhibition and encourages us to self-explore. At Bear Trail, children have total freedom to explore away from the rules we usually impose, without any boundaries, and suddenly the possibilities become so much more creative and exciting.

On the way to Bear Trail, my five-year-old decided she really didn't want to get dirty, but once she saw the set-up she couldn't wait to get going. If only I'd described it as a giant playground instead of an obstacle course, she wouldn't have worried! According to Ben, a lot of children first do a circuit without doing any of the obstacles, then they dip a toe in and start trying to climb things, and by the end of the day they are often lying in the mud. "In the summer, after four hours here, some children will literally be doing mud angels," he laughs.

Risky play in a safe environment is a positive feature of any child's education. Providing them with opportunities to explore and learn to take risks teaches them about success and failure and how to find motivation again for the next challenge. Physically, it's essential for the development of motor skills – climbing, sliding, balancing, jumping from heights, hanging upside down – all this challenging play tests their limits and helps them to explore their boundaries, mentally and physically. "Improving coordination through physical activity directly helps reading and writing skills at a later stage, so crossing the midline and doing two different sets of actions at once are all really vital. For us, it may seem like second nature, but for young children it's an essential part of their learning process, and this place seems to be a really favourable environment for children with special needs too."

Even our one-year-old manages to clamber through the tunnel on his own and cross the wobbly bridge slowly with help from us. And our five-year-old's favourite challenge is Bear Mountain. Climbing up to the top with ropes and getting down all by herself gave her an enormous sense of pride on her rosy-cheeked face.

It's not all about the children, though. Ben has introduced a series of Bear Fit adult fitness classes around the 800m track. "It's like circuits with traditional squats and climbing up ropes but it's outside, so it's different to being in a gym," he says.

Ben is looking forward to developing the trail. "I want to build a super treehouse in the middle, extra obstacles and more rope bridges across the stream, plus extra showers." He'll also be building a bear walk: "Just like in the bear hunt story, there'll be lots of different textures to touch – pebbles, reeds, sand and wood, for example."

Of course, there's an element of competition too: "We have constructed everything in pairs so that you can race – one lad in the summer finished the whole course in just three minutes 40 seconds. My assistant manager, Lee, is a former Marine, and I am ex-Rifles, and we took 4½ minutes to complete it!"

As family attractions go, Bear Trail is rustic and far from commercial, but that is what makes it so wonderful. The idea is simple but once you get here, the transformations can be pretty groundbreaking. **M**

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Bear Trail's founder, Ben Jordan

