

No text messages, no clothes shops. Just the two of us and the rain

Olivia Greenway takes a mobile-mad teenager to the Highlands in search of some 'quality time'

WHERE does a single mum take her 15-year-old daughter on holiday – the daughter who runs out of phone credit after week one of her monthly contract, who takes hair-straighteners on Duke of Edinburgh Award field trips, and who often regards her mother as something unpleasant one finds on one's shoe?

I could have taken the easy option and gone with her and a friend to a theme park, but I wanted us to have some of that 'quality time' we keep being told we all need, with just the two of us.

So we took the sleeper train from London to Fort William in the Highlands and went back to nature. Well, almost. No five-star hotels, posh meals or spa treatments for me; no clothes shops, internet connection or mobile signal for her. Would this make us or break us?

Rachael was moderately excited when we boarded the train and found our cabin. She even managed to break into a smile. We had a bunk bed with cotton sheets and duvet, an overnight set with toothpaste and soap, a little sink, a light with dimmer switch – and had even been promised breakfast in the morning, served in our room.

It was like a very thin hotel on wheels. Even I was excited.

There was the small matter of there being barely any room for our suitcases – the cabin really was bijou. But we managed. After a relaxing night, cosseted by the movement of the train, we arrived in Fort William dead on time. Even the car-hire man was waiting for us.

'Car hire? You didn't mention that,' said Rachael. 'I thought this was all going to be environmentally conscious and responsible tourism.'

'Hiring a car is not exactly irresponsible,' I replied. 'It's the smallest I could get. We will only use it to get to and from the guest house and it will shelter us from the rain.'

'Oh God, does it rain here?'
'A bit, sometimes.' I expected my nose to start growing any minute. In any case, I needed to improve her



SPLENDID ISOLATION: Olivia and Rachael and the beautiful island of Kerrera. Left: A piper greets passengers boarding the Jacobite route train

GETTING THERE

FARES on the Caledonian sleeper from London Euston (www.scotrail.co.uk, 08457 550033) start at £19 each way if booked online, with half-price standard fares for children. **Cuilldorag House**, near Fort William (www.cuilldoraghouse.com) offers double rooms with breakfast from £50 per night for a minimum of two nights.

mood to prepare her for the guest house being a mobile and internet-free zone.

As it was, I needn't have worried. She was smitten. As we parked the car at our guest house, Cuilldorag House at Onich, a few hens ran for cover – a signal that there would be fresh eggs for breakfast – and we soon discovered that nearly all the vegetables and salad greens used were organic. The other must-have boxes were ticked: clean and comfortable room, friendly hosts and a generous breakfast. A huge bonus was the optional extra of a delicious three-course evening meal.

It had started to rain the moment we arrived, not an unexpected event in this part of Scotland. The trick is to be prepared, with waterproof trousers and anorak, a penchant for hot chocolate and, in our case, a much-appreciated car. Driving here is a joy because there is so little traffic.

The information centre at Fort

William has plenty to keep you dithering about what to do next. The Scottish Sea Life Sanctuary near Oban has lobsters, starfish, sharks and rays. We saw rescued otters and seals being fed and listened to a talk about their conservation.

The area near Glencoe is also worth visiting. As townies, we didn't contemplate Munro bagging and settled instead for leisurely walks to enjoy the spectacular scenery. We fancied watching dolphins, but the boats trips were cancelled due to bad weather so we visited the town of Oban instead. It is a busy port, with car ferries to the larger islands such as Mull.

Just out of town, at Gallanach, is the foot ferry to Kerrera. When the ferryman feels like it, he comes over and picks you up. Across the small stretch of water we found a beautiful island. A walk along a cinder track, following the shore line, led us to the Bunkhouse tea room.

The two-mile trek took us about an

hour. We dawdled a bit, taking pictures and seeing no one. The only sounds were the odd bleat from a sheep, the gush of water rushing down the hillside in rivulets and the mournful cry of a lone gull.

BY THE time we got to the tea room the sun had come out. We sat outside on picnic benches and had splendid toasted cheese and chive sandwiches with slabs of fruit cake and organic Earl Grey tea. It was an Enid Blyton moment to savour. As we strolled back to the ferry, I realised we were walking arm-in-arm and laughing.

We were still all smiles the next day when we took a trip on a steam train.

The 42-mile Jacobite route from Fort William to Mallaig is highly recommended. A Scotsman in full regalia pipes you on board. As well as the satisfying chug-chug of the train, the smell of coal and the steam

seeping up between the seats, the journey is a landscape photographer's sweetshop. There is the spectacular 'Harry Potter' viaduct of 21 arches at Glenfinnan, towering Ben Nevis, lochs and tumbling streams. Dropping to the coast, there are views of the sea and the Hebrides beyond. Lunch at the port of Mallaig could be freshly caught fish with chips eaten at the quayside.

We returned first-class, which affords a larger seat and tea or coffee served at the table.

We both agreed that we'd had a great time, doing things we would not normally do. We came back refreshed, understanding each other a bit better. And you can't put a price on that.

At home I put the key into the front door. 'I hope you are going to come food shopping with me?' Rachael's thumbs were twitching text messages on her mobile. 'No chance, I've got better things to do.' Well, perhaps some things will never change...

