

ALL A-BROADS

Head for the coast on a family break to Norfolk

By ANDY GARDNER

"COME on! Let's be 'avin' you," Norfolk celebrity chef Delia Smith once famously yelled at a football match.

So, taking her at her word, we're driving up the M11 from London to her favourite county, destination Brancaster on the north Norfolk coast.

Brancaster is one of a series of charming villages that stretches along the coast. Others include Burnham Deepdale, Brancaster Staithe and Wells-next-the-Sea - and each is a thriving fishing and sailing community.

I'd like to think Delia would approve of where we're staying. The Ship Hotel was set up by New Zealand master-chef Chris Coubrough (of ITV's Coastal Kitchen) and offers an eclectic menu of modern British cuisine with Pacific influences.

The accommodation is as good as the food, with 11 contrasting en-suite rooms, including two family rooms, making it ideal for a weekend break with the family.

Walking in, there was a welcoming scene, with a fire roaring in the corner, while families - glowingly fresh from a walk on the nearby beach - were busy getting stuck into a roast in the bar. The aroma of Yorkshire puddings and ale were evocative of a bygone era.

On our first afternoon, we took a stroll past St Mary the Virgin church, through the marshes to the long sands that make up Brancaster beach. But the North Sea was a brooding brown in the distance and it wasn't long before driving rain had us scurrying back to The Ship.

Dinner in the restaurant had the kids slurping down tomato and basil soup (£4.95) followed by "Kiwi beer" battered haddock (£11.95), while I had a main of chicken in a creamy sauce with Parmesan mash (£15.95).

Encouraged by the sight of clear blue skies the next morning, I decided we should drive to nearby Holkham Hall and Estate (www.holkham.co.uk), first fuelling up on a gut-busting breakfast.

The sense of history and splendour we got from Holkham Hall brought to mind TV's Downton Abbey - from the awe-inspiring Palladian Hall (influenced by the Romans) to the library lined with books about the travels of one of the early lords.

It is one of the finest stately homes I have ever visited, its fascinating history brought to life by interesting artefacts and guides who obviously love their job.

Highlights include the Landscape Room, containing 22 paintings by Old Masters such as Claude Lorrain and Gaspar Poussin, and the Old Kitchen, which opened in 1757 and remained in use right up to the start of World War Two.

After the drama of the estate we drove towards Holkham Bay with the intention

of taking a walk along its sprawling expanse of sand. The bracing winds never seem to abate though... and I reckon you might still need a coat even in summer.

Returning to The Ship, the girls - Katie, 13, and Beth, 11 - immediately settled down with their laptops to chat to school friends using the hotel's wi-fi. The contrast between the traditional and modern was not lost on me.

Unfortunately, the weather reverted to leaden skies the following morning. The day was going to be a challenge but, undaunted, we set out towards Great Yarmouth, the old seaside favourite which is undergoing a bit of a makeover (www.great-yarmouth.co.uk).

Better known for its man-made Golden Mile and Kiss-Me-Quick razzamatazz, the town still has plenty of

natural beauty to offer, including 15 miles of sandy beaches.

It was raining sideways by the time we got to Great Yarmouth Racecourse, in time for the last flat race of the season (adults from £13 and under-16s free, www.greatyarmouth-racecourse.co.uk).

Luckily for us, our horse was



Family favourite... Brancaster beach



Floats your boat... the beautiful Norfolk Broads



Manor from heaven... Holkham Hall and Estate



The Ship Hotel is ideal for families



Beer cheer... visit a real ale shop

What's the deal?

- ROOMS at The Ship Hotel, Brancaster, cost from £90 per night for B&B in low season to £150 to include dinner (www.shiphotelnorfolk.co.uk, 01485 210333).
- FOR more information on Norfolk go to www.visitastofengland.com

impervious to the bad weather and stormed home in first place. Leaving the town a few pounds richer, we found ourselves driving through some of the most beautiful villages and countryside in East Anglia - and skirting the famous Norfolk Broads.

The low cloud had put paid to our plans for a river trip with Broads Tours, based at Wroxham near Norwich (day hire from £79 in the low season, www.broadstours.co.uk). But we promised ourselves we would come back in summer for a trip on one of their specially-built vessels.

The final day saw us make the short journey to Wells-next-the-Sea, one of the prettiest and most historic towns in East Anglia.

It pretty much ticked all the boxes - a long sandy beach with coloured beach huts, a busy fishing quay, real local shops, cosy pubs and fine restaurants specialising in locally caught fish.

They even have a miniature steam train that takes you a mile down the beach, which the girls loved (www.wells-guide.co.uk).

Stopping by the village of Burnham Market, we soon realised why it's dubbed Chelsea-on-Sea. Large numbers of well-heeled Londoners are regular visitors here, drawn by trendy pubs and cafes that wouldn't look out of place on High Street Kensington.

My last task was to drop into The Real Ale Shop on Branthill Farm, near Wells-next-the-Sea to stock up on Norfolk Ale with from quirky-sounding breweries like Humpty Dumpty and Ole Slewfoot (www.therealaleshop.co.uk).

The sheer beauty of Norfolk with its never-ending farm lands, magical rivers, amazing wildlife and historic towns was overwhelming - without doubt it won't be long before the county will be 'avin' us back again!