



SUSPENSE

Ever wondered what it's like to spend a night in one of those hanging tents you see in 'big wall' climbing films? Now you can find out. **Ellen Tout** gets a taste of life on the edge when she tries portaledge camping in the Wye Valley

PHOTOGRAPHY: NADIA DAVIES & KEVIN ROET

IT WAS A SPUR-of-the-moment decision. When I read about camping on the edge of a cliff in the Wye Valley, I knew I had to try it. The opportunity to experience this beautiful landscape from a perspective usually reserved for pro climbers was too tempting to pass up. But as I wait with my girlfriend (who has also been 'roped in' – no pun intended) on a quiet residential road in the village of Woodcroft, Gloucestershire, on the England-Wales border, the nerves mount, and I wonder if going for a hike would be preferable after all.

Our guide is Kevin Roet, a lifelong lover of climbing, mountaineering instructor and founder of Rise and Summit (riseandsummit.co.uk). We meet at midday and he explains that portaledge camping is designed to allow experienced climbers to rest when they spend multiple days on a big wall climb; the likes of El Capitan in the Yosemite Valley. He says he wanted to make the experience accessible to other people who share his love of the outdoors. Kevin regularly sets up camp here in the Wye Valley, as well as on the Pembrokeshire, Dorset and Devon coasts, overlooking the ocean. Tonight, we'll be sleeping (or at least attempting to) around 90 metres above the valley floor on a small two-person portaledge. It's not one that's been adapted for novices; rather it's exactly the same 'tent' as climbers like Kevin carry in a haul bag, pitch on the cliffside and bed down upon.

"Are you excited?" he asks as we set off. "Sure," I reply, trying to convince myself. We initially follow the Offa's Dyke Path, quickly slipping from the small village, past farmland and turning off down into the wildness of the Wye Valley and Lancaut Nature Reserve. The trail is overgrown and as we make our way along its steep course, heavy rain sets in. In the past, this area was quarried for limestone, and the cliffs rise proudly above us, mirroring the undulating shape of the River Wye.

We stop at a section of the path that is blocked by boulders, and Kevin explains that climbing is the only way up. He mounts the lengthy hill with goat-like ease, leaping from boulder to boulder

PORTALEDGING



[previous page] Kevin getting the portaledge into position [above] Ellen and Kevin practising abseiling [right] Ellen bedding down on the portaledge

and chatting casually as we trail behind him, carefully checking our footing and scrambling over the rocks.

A PRACTICE ABSEIL

Our base for the night is the cliffs near Wintour's Leap. According to local legend, it was here, during the English Civil War, that Sir John Wintour escaped his foes by leaping on horseback off the uppermost rockface and into the depths of the valley below. Here, Kevin will spend the night in a bivvy bag, whilst we'll hang out a few metres below. As he sets up camp, even peering over the edge of the crag makes my stomach wobble. But, gradually, the downpour passes, and the clouds lift to uncover tonight's lodging.

Immediately below, the River Wye snakes along the valley floor, fringed by grassy banks with little marshy islets jutting out into the water. Dense woodland runs parallel with the river, opening up into vast grazing fields, dotted with farmhouses and livestock. The bleats of sheep echo around the valley. Around us, the cliffs provide some shelter and jackdaws nest in their limestone crevices, calling to each other and swooping over our heads.

Kevin suggests that we practise abseiling – “It will help you adjust to the height,” he

promises. Leaning back into my harness and off the edge, the stone still slippery from the rain, I'm terrified. It takes a while but, listening to his advice to breathe and trust the kit, I make it safely down into the thick of the valley. Warmup complete, I'm now ready for the portaledge.

Kevin sets up the portaledge and talks me through the steps before abseiling down to adjust it. It has a lightweight metal frame, with red canvas stretched between the bars, and hangs from risers in each corner. This is attached to ropes and looped around large boulders at the top. It's just big enough to snugly fit two people. There is a fly roof that can be deployed if the rain picks up, but that leaves even less space to manoeuvre around! Although it looks somewhat like a tent, in reality the portaledge is just that – a ledge. There are no guy ropes or pegs to secure it to the rockface. Instead, the natural shapes of the limestone are used to wedge it into a semi-balanced position.

ABIRD'S-EYE VIEW

I wrap up in layers before stepping into my harness and readying myself for the descent. After abseiling down, the challenge is to remain stable and find an equilibrium with the canvas. This becomes

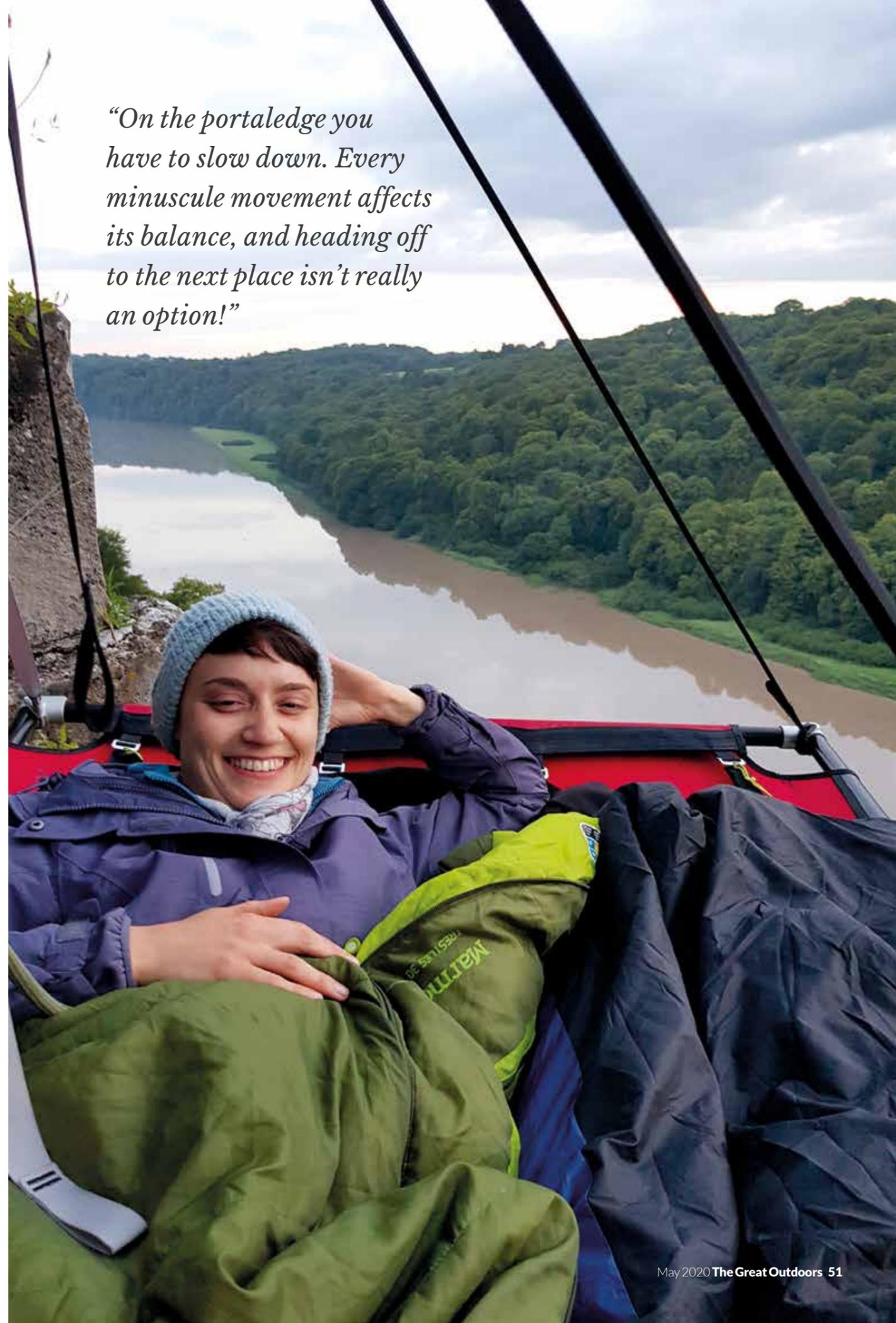
all the more challenging once there are two of us on the ledge. I'm initially startled by how much it moves around and the fragility of the fabric beneath us. Gradually, I ease myself into it, hanging my feet off the end like a swing and leaning my back against the cliffside.

We watch the hues of the landscape transform as the sun drops down – our own bird's-eye view. The wind whips around us, jackdaws chatter, and bees feed on the flowers growing within the cracks of the cliff. We even spot a deer make her way through the long grass below and drink from the river, completely unaware of any humans punctuating the environment.

Although we're not 'doing' anything, the view occupies me completely and, hanging there, it's unexpectedly calming. We feel perfectly alone and absorbed in nature. Often when we're out walking, we only pause to briefly take a photo or eat; but on the portaledge you have to slow down and sit. Every minuscule movement affects its balance, and heading off to the next place isn't really an option!

Our dinner arrives with door-to-door service – a large plastic bottle with a hole cut out to create a flap is pulleyed down to us on a rope. From it, we retrieve a warming mug of soup and some salad. ➤

“On the portaledge you have to slow down. Every minuscule movement affects its balance, and heading off to the next place isn't really an option!”



PORTALEDGING

We give Kevin the signal and send it back up. He later lowers down some much-appreciated hot chocolate. Although I'm enjoying the portaledge, the concept of sleeping here has been playing on my mind. It's tight with the two of us and on either side there is nothing but the air and the rippling valley below. To make us 'comfy', Kevin lowers down sleeping bags and a sack in which to hang our boots.

A DEEP AND DARK SKY

Settling in for the night, it's difficult to get comfy – the force of the harness pulls upwards when I try to move – and, although safe, with the drop right there, it takes a while to psych myself up to sleep. It's not at all cold and, other than the occasional bleating of a sheep, it's silent. Above me, the night sky is deep and dark, glittering with stars. To begin with, each time I slip into slumber, I dream that I am falling and wake with a startle. The wind has picked up again and it's a challenge to surrender to sleep, but slowly we do. And when I do open my eyes, I'm rewarded with the most amazing night's sky. It's beautiful.

The morning soon comes, and Kevin wakes us with coffee and toast cooked over the clifftop campfire. I feel surprisingly well-rested and refreshed from the cool air. But I have a yearning to set foot in the valley we have called home for the night.

Saying our thanks to Kevin, we follow the trail back down to the water's edge. We hike through the trees and over rocks, hugging the edge of the Wye. We meet no people, but a mile or so along we reach the deserted village of Lancaut, where the ruins of the 12th-Century St James Church still remain. Each year, weather permitting, a pilgrimage is made to this site and a service is held within the ruined building.

Set on the bend of the river and with no access via road, I can imagine families over centuries rambling and clambering to reach this most remote of locations. Other than perhaps the odd farmhouse or brave climber heading out for the day, the landscape feels unchanged since then. It's a privilege to have spent the night amongst it.

■ [Book your own portaledge adventure at riseandsummit.co.uk](https://riseandsummit.co.uk) ➔



[right] Nadia and the view at Wintour's Leap

CURIOUS CAMPING

Want to try a different camping experience, but don't fancy being suspended in space? Luckily, Britain is full of unusual and off-the-beaten-track camping spots – here's our pick of the best



Photo credit: Badgells Wood

CHAMPING AT ST JAMES CHURCH, KENT

Champing is camping overnight in historic churches, made possible for a few months a year by the Churches Conservation Trust. Bed down between the pews of churches like St James in

Cooling, Kent – the inspiration for the opening chapter of Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* – for an unforgettable night's sleep. champing.co.uk



Photo credit: St James Church



Photo credit: Canopy and Stars

CONVERTED SHIPPING CONTAINER THE LAKE, CORNWALL

Spend the night in a converted shipping container washed up on the shore of your own private lake, with nobody but the resident wild ponies for company. Solar panels

power the lighting, water for cleaning comes from the lake, the woodburner warms you at night, and a wild swim tops it off. canopyandstars.co.uk

BADGELLS WOOD, KENT

Set in the Kent Downs and an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, Badgells Wood offers authentic off-grid woodland camping. Pitch under the trees, set up your campfire and perhaps enjoy a bushcraft lesson. For walking, the Pilgrims' Way trail passes right by here. badgellswoodcamping.co.uk



Photo credit: Treetop Camping

TREETOP CAMPING, ISLE OF WIGHT

For a secluded and adventurous night, try treetop camping with the help of an expert Goodleaf tree climbing guide. In the grounds of Northcourt, a historic Jacobean manor house, you'll learn essential tree climbing skills then head to your hammock to be immersed in the dusk chorus and stars amidst the canopy. goodleaf.co.uk/tree-top-camping

Photo credit: Rise and Summit



RED KITE TREE TENTS, POWYS, WALES

These insulated canvas pods hang from the branches of the forest on the edge of the remote Elenydd region. Cross the drawbridge to find your own firepit, kitchen and bathroom. The tents get their name from the red kites that soar above. A river flows past, and it's a 10 minute walk to find any mobile signal.

chillderness.co.uk/red-kite-tree-tents



Photo credit: Red Kite Tree Tents

CLIFF CAMPING ABOVE THE OCEAN

Rise and Summit, the company that provided Ellen's portaledging experience in the Wye Valley, also offer camps above the waves on the coastal cliffs of Cornwall, North Devon and Dorset. Expect sea air, wildlife sightings, and spectacular ocean views. riseandsummit.co.uk

