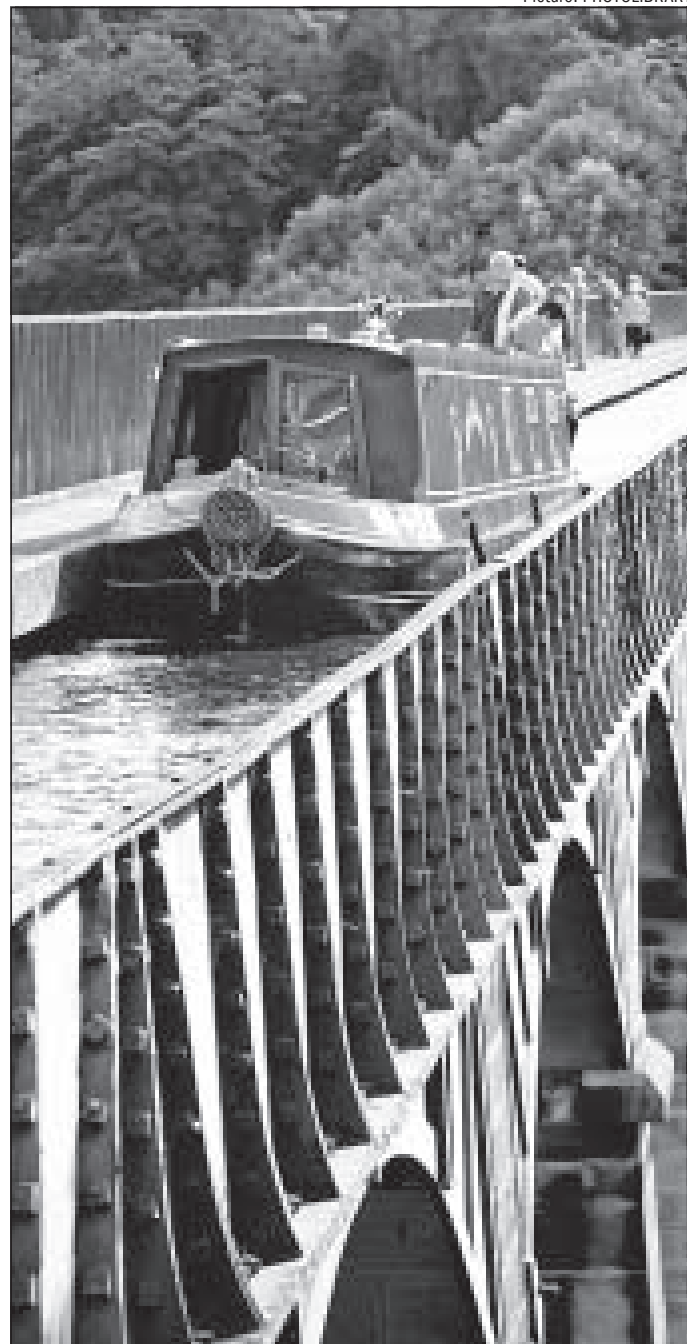


The perfect ice breaker

JAMES ELLIS and his wife visit a cryotherapy spa on the Welsh borders in Shropshire for a tranquil weekend away from bustling city life just before the arrival of little ones

Picture: PHOTOLIBRARY



SAIL THE HIGH SEES: A canal boat takes in the incredible views as it crosses the Pontcysyllte Aqueduct in Llangollen

I'M STANDING in my bathrobe looking through a window, the other side of which is hot and steamy with a rivulet of water running down the pane. On my side of it, the mercury is at -12C, the glass is frosted and a sprinkling of snow covers the floor. It's no wonder there's a cold front to the south.

I'm practising cryotherapy in Britain's only "snow cave" at the Lion Quays Waterside Resort near Oswestry, in Shropshire.

Developed by the Japanese in the Seventies and later adopted by eastern European sanatoriums, cryotherapy is exposing your body to freezing temperatures. It is said to aid skin conditions as well as relieve stress, insomnia and depression.

Outside the door to my cave is the spa's thermal suite, a piping hot mix of saunas, steam rooms and hot tubs with jets that pummel various parts of the body. The loungers are draped with women reading the Sunday papers, none of them tempted by the benefits of the ice chamber.

The therapist told me not to do more than 12 minutes in the cave. I last five before heading out, chilly yet invigorated, my circulation well and truly boosted. My wife Laura and I are on a "babymoon", our last chance to get away as a couple before our twins arrive. While I've become a shrinking violet in the cold, Laura has had her not inconsiderable bump subjected to the Maternity Bliss Massage, one of the only things on the extensive spa menu that she's allowed to have. Feeling incredibly relaxed, we retire to our comfortable room for a rest.

Poet AE Housman once said that Shropshire was "the quietest place under the sun"; just what we need to recover from frenetic London life. Lion Quays is also the perfect spot for some recuperation.

Our room comes with a balcony that overlooks the Llangollen Canal where narrowboats ply the waters and birds sing. Before we know it, we've drifted off, waking only in time for dinner.

The hotel's Waterside Restaurant, just 100 yards from our room, has a buzzy, brasserie-style atmosphere and is clearly a local favourite. Our meal is simple yet tasty: a tricolore salad of beef, tomato and mozzarella-dressed rocket alongside an order of king prawns, juicy and perfectly cooked Welsh steaks with creamy mash followed by an enormous Eton mess.

Keen to make the most of our one-night break we're up early the next morning to

explore the surrounding countryside. "Welcome to Wales, England's last colony," says one sign as we criss-cross into the principality and back thanks to the snake-like border defined by rivers and dykes.

A Unesco World Heritage site is right on the hotel doorstep. The Pontcysyllte Aqueduct looks outlandishly scenic, given that when you break it down it is little more than a huge supported tin bath.

Built by Britain's most famous civil engineer "Colossus of Roads" Sir Thomas Telford in the early 1800s, the 1,007ft iron trough supported by 19 brick pillars carries the Llangollen Canal over the Dee Valley, negating the need for a complicated system of locks.

The trough is just wide enough for a narrowboat to pass through and there is a towpath on one side that we walk across, gazing down as the River Dee carries merrily on some 126ft below us.

The scenery here is achingly beautiful: deep valleys, bubbling rivers, lush green woods and Housman's sleepy atmosphere are all around, which means the former occupants of our next stop must have caused quite a fuss when they arrived in Llangollen in 1780.

Lady Eleanor Butler and the Honorable Sarah Ponsonby were two upper-class

Irish women who fled the Emerald Isle and set up home here as "romantic friends" in the small cottage of Plas Newydd on a hill above the town.

News of the "Ladies of Llangollen" spread like wildfire and it was not long before they were accepting calls from famous names such as Wordsworth, Shelley and Byron. The couple's fairytale home is now open to the public. Decorated in a Gothic style and covered in carved wooden panels, it gives a fascinating insight into their lives.

Back in England we take in Oswestry, said to be the birthplace of Queen Guinevere, before touring Shrewsbury. Lying on the River Severn it's a gorgeous market town dominated by the red sandstone Shrewsbury Castle and famous for being the birthplace of Charles Darwin.

While the history is fascinating, it's one of the town's other famous son's creations that catches my eye. The Dingle in Quarry Park, designed by Percy Thrower, is a sunken garden that is a riot of colour thanks to its alpine borders, colourful bedding plants, shrubbery and water features.

From blue fingers to green-fingered in less than 24 hours. Perhaps Shropshire and the Welsh borders are not that somnolent after all.



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● GETTING THERE:

Lion Quays (01691 684300/ lionquays.com) offers double rooms from £75 per night (two sharing), room only. The Maternity Bliss Massage costs £60 for an hour. The snow cave is included in the day spa Taster Retreat package, which costs £15 for hotel guests or £39 for non-residents. Shropshire Tourism: 01743 261919/ shropshire tourism.co.uk