

Beach and beats to banish the books

Close your eyes and picture the scene: the golden sun is only a sliver on the horizon. The clouds are backlit with the dying embers of the day. The waves are crashing safely in the distance. The sand is blissfully warm; its fierce, midday heat has receded, leaving only the comforting warmth of a hug. You could be in Costa del Sol or Alicante, but the train ticket in your hand says 'Bangor West'. It feels just like that Carlsberg ad on TV: probably the best weekend in the world. Now open your eyes, and let me tell you about my 48 hours of complete bliss!

Let me take you back to June 2022. After a full year of study, study, and ... you guessed it ... more study, my friends and I had finally finished our GCSE modules! Year 11 had been a real slog if I'm being honest. The teachers said it would be tough, but it was more like trying to climb Everest while juggling. While reciting the periodic table. While blindfolded. You get the idea! The hardest exam had been the biology module, and I am counting down the days with a dreadful knot in my stomach until results day. But that dark cloud of doom is not for now. I promised you a tale of fun, so let's get back on track.

The final exam was over, the rest of the school year was nothing compared to what we had all been through, and we were ready for the treat that had been strongly hinted at by our parents. We didn't know what it would be, but our best guesses were in line with some of the lame attempts the old folks had made in the past: perhaps a pizza party? A sleepover? A cinema trip? Nope, it was none of these (phew!); it was way better. In fact, it turned out to be the best weekend of my life! My parents and my three best friends' parents had been planning the treat of all treats...they booked us an Airbnb in Bangor, right beside the beach, for a whole weekend! No parents, no siblings, and best of all, no books! Exams were over and the fun was ready to begin.

I won't spend time describing our shouts of joy, our fear that they were messing with us, or the countless hours spent planning outfits and activities. Instead, let me tell you what this dream home was like. Imagine a magazine show house. Imagine New York City. Imagine celebrity luxe. Well, take away a little of my exaggeration and that's what it was like. To us, it was a palace and we were the princesses. We walked into the hallway and the decor took our breath away: polished floors, plush cushions, a kitchen to die for, a TV screen wider than my wildest dreams. And just when we thought it couldn't get any better, we stepped out the patio doors and there she was in all her steaming hot, bubbly glory: a hot tub!

Well, as soon as our parents gave us the (very long) list of things we weren't allowed to do, ensured we understood how to lock and unlock the front door (I mean, we're fifteen, not five!) and gave us every emergency telephone number on the planet (they may as well have printed off the phone book the list was so long), they left us to it. A whole weekend of friends and fun! Well, we wasted no time in getting the snacks open, the movie on the big screen and into the hot tub to take all the selfies we needed to boast on Instagram. The first night was a late one,

but it was just so incredibly good to chat and enjoy some stress-free time with friends. Our skin was more wrinkly than a raisin by the time we got out but it was worth it.

The next day was shopping, beaching and eating. Again, I'll skip over the minute details, but it's safe to say we made the most of every moment. The highlight of the weekend was our last-minute decision to get a disposable BBQ and some supplies from Tesco and head to the beach. The day had been blisteringly hot and we were all a little bit like lobsters ... oops ... that was one of the rules from the parents ... use sunscreen. Well, we'd been careful about everything else on their list, so hopefully they'd forgive us for that one! We lit the BBQ and enjoyed the experience of looking over the sea while our burgers and sausages sizzled and popped. As we finished our food feeling like professional chefs and feeling grateful for the Duke of Edinburgh trip we had been on a few months before, we began to hear faint threats of music and a bass note floating through the air towards us. The breeze carried the sound away momentarily, but when it drifted back stronger, we were keen to discover the source. We didn't have to wait long: our Instagram post had been seen by most of the kids in our year group and they arrived on the beach with speakers, ready to party! We literally couldn't have had more fun that night. The playlist was incredible, the moves were crazy and the feeling of being surrounded by your friends was ... well, I think I might have run out of words for the first time in my life!

As we sat by the campfire (lit by another Duke of Ed. survivor!) and sang along to the greatest tunes of the summer, we watched the sun slip silently beneath the horizon. The day was over, and we were being picked up from our palace in the morning by our worried parents who probably spent the whole weekend checking their phones for missed calls from us! There was a tear in my eye as I realised that the weekend was coming to an end. But I know for sure that the memories of that weekend will stay with me forever. I learned some basics that weekend: how to cook and share a house with friends, how to light a campfire, and how to work the dishwasher. But more importantly than that, I made memories with people I love, I grew a little taller and more confident, and I experienced true friendship and belonging. It was a weekend I will never, as long as I live, forget, and I will be grateful to my parents forever and a day for the best post-exam treat I could have ever dreamed of!