

PUPPY LOVE!

WANDERING on my local common, I spot two whippet puppies racing around each other in a whirlwind of lanky grey legs.

Something makes me think I could really enjoy being a dog owner. They are a great excuse to go on long walks, to start chatting and to meet people. So, as a taster, I decide to go on a dog walking holiday.

I discuss the idea with Dave, my boyfriend — who gives me a deadpan stare. 'But Xanthe, you don't have a dog.'

To me, this sounds like a challenge and, two weeks later, I announce that I have found a dog weekend in the south Shropshire countryside and that he and I will be borrowing a dog, provided by the local animal shelter.

Driving into Shropshire, I begin to understand what P. G. Wodehouse meant when he described it as 'the nearest earthly place to paradise'. It's a colder paradise than I'd imagined, but a paradise all the same.

Toad Hall, our residence for the weekend, is a beautifully restored barn, tucked at the bottom of Wenlock Edge.

Straight away I can see why the area was chosen for a dog walking weekend. To one side are the imposing Shropshire Hills and to the other Wenlock Edge, a woodland-covered ridge that runs for miles in each direction. As we pull into the drive, I can't help but feel apprehensive about our borrowed dog and what he'll be like.

Over the past two weeks, Dave

Muddy walks, wagging tails and lots of new friends.

XANTHE WHITTAKER borrows a dog for a long weekend in Shropshire and is instantly smitten



Moss and boss: Xanthe with her dog on the obstacle course

and I have amused ourselves inventing a number of scenarios, mostly involving our dog terrorising us, terrorising the other dogs or, worse, making an opportunistic dash for the hills.

Inside Toad Hall, dogs jostle

with each other to get to the food bowls and charge at our legs, trying to race through the open door. And there is the distinctive smell of wet dog. This I should have expected — dogs are allowed free rein on this

holiday. Sue, our host, is keen that we meet our dog straight away. His name is Moss, and she assures us (rather too enthusiastically) that he is going to behave perfectly.

A black-and-white collie-cross comes bounding from the other side of the room. He sniffs at our hands and whips us with his tail, which seems to have gone into overdrive. He seems friendly enough.

After the excitement of meeting wears off, I hear: 'Oh dear. Not again!' Moss slinks away, leaving a puddle at our feet. Someone is already running over with a mop. 'He's just excited,' we are told. Everyone is overly eager to make sure that Moss is made to feel welcome. 'Again?' I think.

OUR FIRST walk is along the Wenlock Edge. The views of Shropshire and the hills are exhilarating, which nearly distracts me from the fact that I'm wading knee-deep through mud.

After slip-sliding my way along one side of the steep ridge and almost losing a wellie to one particularly obstinate bog, I have befriended eight dogs and their respective owners.

I'm discovering there is a whole parallel universe of dogs and dog ownership — some of the dogs are on strict diets, some dogs have rare illnesses for which their owners need to know how to resuscitate them, some are trained gundogs. And eating chocolate can kill dogs.

I'm also starting to feel like I'm the only person in the world who hasn't read the dog-inspired biography Marley And Me, or doesn't tune in regularly to the Dog Whisperer on TV.

The dogs on this holiday are fully integrated members of their families and under no circumstances would be left at home while everyone else went away. And they seem to get along with each other — in some cases, a little too well.

The real test for me as a dog owner comes when we try dog agility. We are taken to a barn where the dogs are made to jump through hoops. For a dog who has only just met me, Moss is extremely trusting and

follows my commands to sit and jump over the hurdles.

At the end of the session, we have a competition, timing each of the dogs through an obstacle course. Moss glides around the circuit, weaving and jumping in all the right places. When the instructor tells me that he is a natural, I am beaming from ear to ear.

By Sunday afternoon, Moss is happily curled under my seat at lunchtime and no longer leaving wet little presents at my feet. I knew it was going to be hard saying goodbye at the end of our weekend together.

I watch him being packed away into the car that will return him to the shelter and feel a genuine sadness — and maybe a touch of guilt about not being able to take him home and introduce him to the whippets on the common.

With many a backward glance, Dave and I bid farewell to Moss. 'Of course our flat is too small,' we say. 'Our lives are far too busy for a pet. Who would walk him when we are overseas?'

We prattle back and forth, and thoroughly convince ourselves that pet ownership isn't right for us and that we are being responsible by not having a pet.

Two weeks later, I hear from Sue. Great news: with the help of an article in the local paper, Moss has settled into a new home.

And, after finding myself repeatedly gazing at the snap I took of him (and boring everyone I know with it), I'm off to speak with my landlord about possibly getting a pet — something small and not too demanding. A cat. Or maybe a fish.

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