

CENTERPARCS /1/ WORST LUCK

I just knew that I **would loathe** CenterParcs. So when the people who **run** the company kindly **asked** my entire family to spend the half-term weekend **at** their "village" in Suffolk, I **dropped** the invitation into the bin.

Then they wrote and asked again. I **binned** that letter, too. But they **wouldn't** give up, **worst luck**, and **somehow** their third invitation found its way into my **wife's** hands. "Oh, come on, Tom. We've got to do something with the boys **at half-term**. They'll probably **love** it. And at least it'll be **free**."

She told me that one of her friends **had** recently taken her two children to CenterParcs and had come back with **glowing reports, telling** her: "It's not at all **what** you'd expect." I was weak. I **swallowed** all my **scruples about accepting freebies** and **put my wife in touch with** the CenterParcs **PR woman**.

I **had got it into my mind** that CenterParcs **was some kind of** prison camp - an impression **reinforced** by the book of **bossy** rules that we **were sent** before we **set off**. ("No **excessive, rowdy, offensive** or illegal behaviour. Respect all **facilities** and the environment. **Appropriate** clothing and footwear **should be worn in public places**") As we prepared for our trip, I **suggested** to the boys **that they should** pack wire-cutters, forged papers and shovels **so we could** tunnel out if **things got really ugly**.

I **can** see this was not the right **spirit in which to set off** on a half-term **treat**. But the joke **kept us going as** we **crept up** the M11 in the **pouring** rain, **talking** in German accents all the way: "Achtung, schweinhund! Vere do you sink you are goink viz zet shovel? Report to ze camp commandant immediately!" **Actually** CenterParcs **started life** in Holland, but **none** of us can **do** a Dutch accent so we had to **settle for** a mock-German one.