

The weather is good for the entire day which allows us to picnic, at which point a ferret comes out to say 'hello'. After lunch we visit the railway shop and museum where there are a range of train sets for the enthusiast no matter how old they are. The museum itself is a great place to spend time acquainting yourself with all things train related. Sadly there isn't a huge amount of time and the children haven't got the attention span to hang around.



Above: Isle of Wight Steam Railway, left: Hover Travel Hovercraft

At the Train Story Discovery Centre we learn about the history of the Isle of Wight Steam Railway and how it was started by a group of teenage enthusiasts wishing to save the steam trains. What an achievement. This is a magnificent place where there's a full size model train that children and adults alike can pretend to drive by stoking the coal. They can even dress up as a train driver. So Henry (3) and Harriett (8) do.

There are carriages and trains that you can walk around and listen to engaging audio stories, enhancing the experience. The children thoroughly enjoy running around this large centre, which includes a little wooden train set for the children to play with. Distressed railway carriages are lovingly restored to their former glory by staff and volunteers, who are preserving some of our important past.

Time to head for the play area. It's funny because early afternoon tends to be tired time for Henry and yet he is so full of enthusiasm he seems to overcome any lethargy and runs like billyo to the train shaped climbing frame and then the swings. Meanwhile the girls venture to the woodland stage where Caroline enjoys a good chuckle when she sees light hearted sayings in and around the trees. "It is all in close proximity," she says. "Which is great because it means I don't have to walk too far."

After a couple of days rest we venture to Winchester, only about half an hour from our home. There we visit Winchester Discovery Centre and see an excellent exhibition by designer Orla Kiely. A Life in Pattern delves into the designer's world and is a visual feast of many colourful and inspiring fabrics. Dresses, handbags and even seat covers feature her unique 1960s inspired designs. We learn that she has even collaborated with Citroen. We shall buy some of her cushions for our new sofa.

At the Theatre Royal Winchester we see The Gruffalo, The Witch and The Warthog starring the award winning author Julia Donaldson. It is quite something to see Julia on stage performing in front of us. She has sold over 13 million copies of The Gruffalo and written more than 200 books. Not only can she write but she can perform, too. In fact she has been a performer for years, having busked her way round Europe in her youth. And what fun this show is. Julia appears on stage alongside her husband Malcolm, who plays the guitar. Her sister Mary joins them together with a couple of friends. They look so comfortable and relaxed. They sing songs and introduce us to some of Julia's much loved characters such as The Witch, Superworm and finally The Gruffalo. As The Witch Julia dons a wig and sits on a broomstick reciting her story. Little Henry (3) is spellbound especially as it is Halloween time and there's a witch's cackle. Afterwards there are songs about The Ugly Five; creatures like the vulture, warthog and the spotted hyena, which highlight their characteristics and teach us some interesting facts. Julia then teases the children by saying, "I've covered all my stories and I've finished." The lights go down and there are sighs of, "Oh no you haven't, what about The Gruffalo?" In time the lights come back up and she becomes the mouse in The Gruffalo scaring away a fox, an owl and ultimately The Gruffalo himself. This hour-long performance keeps the children's attention throughout and they thoroughly enjoy it.

Afterwards there is a book signing and our children meet Julia, who signs one of her books for them.

For more information visit:
www.hovertravel.co.uk
www.iwsteamrailway.co.uk
www.haven-falconry.co.uk
www.theatroyalwinchester.co.uk

Watch the videos at www.travelwriter.biz