

Left to their own devices

David Byers bonds with his daughter on an activity-filled digital detox in the French Alps

‘Alexa, stop!’ my daughter Grace shouted, pulling the duvet over her head. But it wasn’t my 12-year-old’s bedroom smart speaker alarm that had woken her at dawn on this particular morning. Rather, it was the village cockerel, and the bells from a nearby 1,000-year-old church. As is the case with so many families with adolescents today, battles over technology dominate much of our lives. Daily arguments over Grace’s frequent desire to access her devices at all times (and to circumvent the restrictions my wife and I have put in place) have strained our relationships with her.

And that is what led us both to be here, in this little wooden bedroom in the village of Vaujany in the French Alps, listening to the cockerel and blinking at the sun coming up over the Massif des Grandes Rousses.

Grace and I had been sent here – 1,250m up in the Oisans region – in August, as a kind of spiritual referral by colleagues. We were here for a two-day programme

called Rivers, Rocks and Reconnection, designed by the travel company Summer France, in which we would bond by doing a series of escapist, exhilarating activities such as whitewater rafting. It promised to boost our relationship as father and daughter, away from the pressures of daily life and the pull of our devices. The Alpine sun would be a bonus.

On that first morning, as Grace grumbled at her imaginary Alexa and then asked me for the umpteenth time why the wobbly hotel wi-fi wasn’t connecting, I was worried – principally about what on earth I would say to her during three days on top of a French mountain.

That sense of unease grew when, shortly after a rather too indulgent breakfast at the Hôtel Les Cimes, we prepared for our first activity – squeezing into wetsuits and rafting down fast-moving mountain rapids.

As we assembled by the Romanche, a river about half an hour’s drive from our hotel, Grace initially was not impressed. Where were we and why were we doing this, she asked. The wetsuit was

stiff, she complained. The water shoes didn’t fit and “everyone” was laughing at her. None of this, of course, was true.

There was no time to fret. After the briefest instructions we were given a paddle, paired up with a friendly Dutch family and ushered on to a boat.

As the sun beamed down, we hurtled forwards, the instructor perched at the back of our raft bellowing variously “Forward!” or “Back!”, as we careered past tree branches and in and out of rapids, spinning as we did so.

Grace sat in silence, a stony expression, teeth gritted. But then everything changed. We were ordered to pull over on to the riverbank, get out of the boat and wade back into the water up to our waists. We were then told to lift our feet up and allow the current to pick us up and hurl us downriver to where another instructor was waiting.

Grace’s face lit up when she saw others were doing this, and she was doubly thrilled to witness the risible attempt at this feat made by her father, which led to me flailing

comically and gasping at the shock of the ice-cold water.

Later, we stopped further downstream and the instructor turned the raft upside down to become a makeshift diving board. Grace, a master at gymnastic front flips, threw herself in. And then there was free swimming, where we all leapt into the rapids with the boats still moving and were carried downriver by the freezing water, exhilarated and thankful that the outside temperature was 30C.

Grace's glee was caused by the immersiveness of Alpine swimming – an electric physical experience to cure a racing mind; a million miles away from the brain-deadening passivity of staring at a device. It was a pattern that would be repeated several times in the coming days.

On returning to Vaujany, I came back down to earth with a bang. Sitting on reclining chairs in the village square, the Alps laid out before us, Grace declared she was scared of butterflies. Deep

breaths were taken, then it was time for a hike.

We took Vaujany's cable car – a route that in winter would be crammed with skiers – for a hike around the Alpette, a tranquil plateau with four lakes (summer lift passes £12pp; seealpedhuez.com).

Much to my surprise, Grace – who just a few minutes ago couldn't stand the sight of a butterfly – began to run into this verdant naturalscape and down to the first lake that glinted invitingly before us.

She asked if we could put our feet in, and we did so for a long time in companionable silence, looking at the aquarium swimming around our toes. Immersiveness in water,

again, helping us unwind.

On our second morning ("Alexa, stop!" again), we headed up the cable car armed with mountain ebikes to meet the instructor Remy for a three-hour lesson.

Despite the extra power, cycling on rocky mountains is fiendishly difficult.

Just as with the rafting, Grace didn't look enthused initially, complaining about feeling tired – a mood that worsened temporarily when her bike slid on one steep hill and she fell, cutting her leg. At home a similar incident might have triggered demands to give up. On this occasion, after a few tears, Remy patched her up and she resolved to get back on her bike; we carried on over jaw-dropping terrain to Alpe d'Huez.

In the afternoon, to ease our aching muscles, Grace and I retired to Vaujany. We would be leaving the next morning, so it was time for our final activity – one that we'd repeated every evening at Grace's insistence: swimming in the municipal pool, complete with twisty water slide.

It wasn't glamorous, but for an adolescent who uses physical activity as an antidote to anxiety, swimming is a passion (from £5; accommodation.vaujany.com).

Time and again she insisted I accompany her on the water slide, whooping with laughter as I landed. I wondered: how many more years will she want me to do this? How much longer until I become an embarrassment? These moments are precious, I reminded myself.

There are many things I don't understand about my eldest daughter – and I suspect that these will only multiply as she gets older. But in a world full of pressures – amplified by the addictive

technology in the palms of our hands – a weekend of pure escapism brought us greater contentment than we've had for months. We're going back as a family this summer.

David Byers was a guest of Summer France, which has seven nights' B&B from £541pp, including flights, car hire and activities (summerfrance.co.uk)

“

We careered past tree branches and in and out of rapids



David and his daughter Grace, above, rafted along the Romanche River in the Oisans region, right

> 26 January 2025 at 0:00

