

Travel and Adventure: Castle hopping in England's north

by Ruth A. Hill

England's medieval castles lie in various states of opulence and ruin. They harbor plenty of old stories about turbulent history, family intrigues and tragedies. But many that still stand in these 21st century days offer more than leftovers from the past to lure visitors to their gates.

MEDIEVAL CHAMBERS - The Muncaster Castle, located on England's west coast, was once a vital Roman naval port. CNS Photo courtesy of England's North Country. **TINY TRAIN** - Ravenglass & Eskdale Railways is a good way to see lake country scenery. CNS Photo by Brian Sherwen for England's North Country. **CASTLE IN THE DISTANCE** - Bamburgh Castle rises like a sentinel above the North Sea near the Scottish border. CNS Photo by Allan McPhail for England's North Country. **ON THE NORTH SEA** - The rocky causeway in front of Lindisfarne Castle on the North Sea. CNS Photo courtesy of britainonview/Martin Brent. The lords and ladies have more than heritage preservation on their minds. Upkeep on castles is bloody expensive, and there's a need for constant fixing and sprucing up. Lavish gardens and art collections, an owl preservation center, tea rooms, elegant sleeping chambers, live musical concerts, culinary demonstrations and even a knight jousting school are now divisions of castle business. Many earn restoration funds by attracting movie producers to their grounds.

Castles have varied personalities, from those replete with priceless art treasures and an aura of the wealthy lords and ladies who own them, to others with 10-foot-thick stone walls and armor displays that testify to intrigues and turbulence. So seeing one doesn't come close to the experience of seeing more. Along English roads that lead to the castles are other reasons to linger. Spectacular scenery in the legendary Lake District, for instance, is where generations of poets, painters and writers have found their muses.

Recommended itineraries are available from Visit Britain at www.visitbritain.com or by calling 800-462-2748. One sojourn possibility: Depart Manchester in a hired car and meander these sites from west to east:

Muncaster Castle (www.muncaster.co.uk)

Birds are as much a part of castles as turrets, and there is an interesting collection of fowl at Muncaster -

more than 45 species of owls. The castle is headquarters for The World Owl Centre, a conservancy. Birds are on display daily at 2:30 p.m. Muncaster is situated on England's west coast, near the village of Ravenglass, once an important Roman naval port. It's been home for the Pennington Family for more than 800 years.

Tours of the medieval chambers happen daily in the afternoons, except on Saturdays, which is reserved for weddings. Expansive valley views and some of the largest rhododendrons in England bloom in the gardens each spring. The family has just opened The Pennington Hotel, a contemporary new lodging and restaurant in Ravenglass that was a 16th century coaching inn. Nearby attractions include the Hardknott Roman Fort ruins and Ravenglass and Eskdale Railway, whose narrow-gauge trains have been joy riding tourists through the western lake country scenery for more than a century.

Beatrix Potter Gallery & Hill Top (www.nationaltrust.org.uk)

Step into the world of Jemima Puddleduck, Tom Kitten and Peter Rabbit at Beatrix's 17th century farm, Hill Top Farm. Furnishings include the author's china, furniture and art collection. She purchased the farm in 1905 with royalties from her first books, including "The Tale of Peter Rabbit." The furnished farmhouse is located in Near Sawrey inside the legendary Lake District and a gallery that displays Beatrix's original sketches and watercolors is nearby in the Village of Hawkeshead.

Bowes Museum (www.thebowesmuseum.org.uk)

When John Bowes (a relative of Britain's Queen Mother) and his wife Josephine decided they needed a museum to house their extensive art collection, they commissioned the design and build of a French chateau-style building in Barnard Castle, a historic market town dating to Roman times. Its 1892 opening launched a repository that continues to be northern England's best show of decorative arts. An amazing, now-fragile, 100-year-old silver swan is the museum's icon. A manual crank activates the bird daily, and visitors marvel at how the swan catches and swallows the fish that surround it.

Alnwick Castle (www.alnwickcastle.com)

This giant, art-laden fortress on an estate of some 120,000 cultivated acres has appeared in a couple of Harry Potter movies. Seeing all its parts can consume at least a day, especially if your youngsters want to dress up like knights and ladies and take on the Knight's Quest challenges, an interactive experience in the stable yard. The Percy family has occupied the fortress for almost 700 years, and it remains the home of the duke and duchess of Northumberland. The duchess's pet project is a new contemporary garden headlined by The Poison Garden, where the deadliest plants grow behind bars. Various shopping and refreshment stops on the estate round out a day's visit, notably The Treehouse, a unique place to wine and dine amid rope bridges, turret-topped alcoves and bark-covered wooden chairs and tables.

Bamburgh Castle (www.bamburghcastle.com)

Roman Polanski shot his 1972 "Macbeth" movie in rugged Northumberland near the Scottish border. One location was Bamburgh, which also made appearances in other flicks ("El Cid," "Becket") with medieval timelines. The castle rises like a sentinel above the North Sea, looking like everyone's image of the 12th century medieval fortress that it was. Destroyed in the 15th century War of the Roses, it was rebuilt in the Victorian period. Its roots reach into the fifth-century Anglo-Saxon era. Today, Bamburgh's 10-foot-thick walls hold modern apartment residences, an active archaeology program that invites visitor participation and collections of armor, porcelain, tapestry, photographs and furnishings owned by the Armstrong family.

Lindisfarne Castle (www.nationaltrust.org.uk)

This edifice on a rocky Northumberland island crag near the Scottish border was created from a Elizabethan fort and later converted into an Edwardian-era home that's popular for tours and weddings. Visitations must be carefully timed to tidal flow, because the island is cut off from the mainland twice a day by water. The village of Lindisfarne has a population of fewer than 200 people and a few eating and sleeping accommodations. Also of interest on "Holy Island" are sites connected with Britain's early development of Christianity by the Celts, including the ruins of a 12th century monastery and Lindisfarne mead, favored by the early monks and still produced by St. Aidan's Winery.

Durham Castle and Cathedral (www.durhamcastle.com)

A UNESCO World Heritage site in Durham City, these companion Norman structures are considered to be the finest examples in the world of their period. Both were built in the 11th century, following Norman conquest of Britain. The castle was built to protect the bishop of Durham from attack, and is an excellent example of motte and bailey castles. It has been occupied since 1840 by University College, Durham City, and is open for tours and low-rate bed-and-breakfast accommodations during university holidays. The cathedral dates to 1093 and houses the Treasures of St. Cuthbert, the seventh-century saint of Lindisfarne. Objects on display include Cuthbert's cross and coffin.

Lumley Castle Hotel (www.lumleycastle.com)

Mead and entertainment by lords and ladies of the court are on this Norman castle's Elizabethan weekend banquets, along with its draped and tasseled bedchambers. The castle has roots in the 10th century, and like all good castles, it has a ghost - Lily of Lumley, the ill-fated wife of a former owner. Multiple stairwells and labyrinths set the mood. Dining in the Lumley's Black Knight restaurant is fine enough for a lord - or the most exacting guest. Near Durham.

Castle Howard (www.castlehoward.co.uk)

There hasn't been a castle on these grounds since the 17th century, but this palatial 18th century country home of the current Howards is a sight to behold, inside and out. Inside are sumptuous collections of paintings, porcelain, sculptures and furniture. Surrounding it are 10,000 acres of gardens, lakes and fountains outdoors as well as an RV and tent campground, children's playground and a land train. Cafes, a tearoom and several shopping stops for accessories, chocolates, plants and books are among the estate's features. Outdoor concerts, fairs and festivals are on the castle's event calendar. Located in York.

Ripley Castle (www.ripleycastle.co.uk)

Oliver Cromwell was once a prisoner in this castle where the Ingilby family has resided for nearly seven centuries. One Ingilby saved the life of King Edward III by shooting a wild boar that was about to commit regicide. Tours of the castle and gardens are designed for adults and children, and there's even a children's play trail to occupy youngsters while their parents enjoy the castle grounds. Occasional culinary classes are also on the castle's roster. Ripley Village is on the estate, and its centerpiece is Boar's Head Hotel, a former coaching inn with elegant accommodations and dining. Located in North Yorkshire near Harrogate.

Ruth A. Hill is a freelance travel writer.

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