

Travel and Adventure: Riding through the Cotswolds in a Rolls

by Ruth A. Hill

Blenheim Palace, Winston Churchill's birthplace and one of Britain's most opulent houses with seven acres under its gilded roof, is a sight to behold, even if you arrive by bus. But my friend Diane and I dreamed of a different sort of arrival - something a "Brit different" that would provide a lasting if not indelible memory.

BLLENHEIM PALACE - Blenheim Palace was home to the 11th Duke of Marlborough and the birthplace of Sir Winston Churchill. CNS Photo courtesy of Blenheim Palace. QUAIN T VILLAGE - Medieval villages with winding roads are a part of the Cotswold touring. CNS Photo by Ruth Hill. COTSWALD - This retail emporium in Cotswold, nestled in the rural countryside, offers everything from high-priced gadgets to edibles, even organic clothing. CNS Photo by Ruth A. Hill. TEWKSBURY - Golden stone, as seen in this row of houses in Tewksbury, is a Cotswold trademark. CNS Photo courtesy of Gloucestershire Tourism. Why not spin around the Cotswolds' lovely lanes in an antique Jag, MG or maybe even a little Triumph? Some cute little roadster with a decidedly British accent would satisfy our fantasy. But wait - Blenheim's grandeur calls for a more elegant arrival. So maybe we approach those great gates behind the Rolls-Royce lady who sits atop one of the world's most distinctive radiator grills. Could we hire one, maybe just a day's spin? Maybe so, but there's that nasty need to drive on the left. Neither of us had ever done that, and the idea was a bit daunting. Yet we did want to be independent. What to do.

Touring England's Cotswolds region is a jolly good idea for many kinds of travelers. Intrepid hikers and bikers, antique hounds, gardeners and even tour bus brigadiers find satisfaction. But none of those were our style.

We were still considering the classic car idea as we completed our trans-Atlantic MAXjet flight into London Stansted, an excellent airport choice for vantage on the area. At the wheel of the plain vanilla sedan we engaged at the airport, we took deep breaths as we shifted into a two-hour drive toward Oxford - our first go at left-side driving.

Because of our jet-lagged condition, it wasn't a breeze, but we did arrive safely with no incident. In town, we managed to maneuver the university and author C.S. Lewis sites on our own, so we had confidence about moving on. Off we went with maps and tour books in hand to consume the Cotswolds, an area many consider the essence of Englishness.

Size-wise, this 25-by-50 mile slice of County Gloucestershire is compact enough to sample in a couple of days. Yet a longer linger allows time to savor both the countryside and its people. Thatched roofs, winding country lanes, sheep in the meadow and village pubs filled with affable local characters combine for an experience that is sure to live up to anyone's expectations. It's also an enclave of rich and privileged, titled and royal, where elegant gardens and mansions contrast with the farmhouses of golden stone that are centuries-old icons.

Our first stop after Oxford was Chastleton House, near the market town of Moreton-in-Marsh. Inside this Jacobean treasure-trove, we saw rare tapestries, portraits and even kitchenware - all 17th century originals that have survived the centuries. Because of financial constraints or maybe a dedication to preservation, the family who occupied Chastleton continuously until it passed into the National Trust's hands only a few years ago had altered the original architecture and furnishings little since its 1603 construction. It felt like we'd stepped into a time capsule. The house and its contents are the same age as the United States.

After tea and sandwiches along Moreton's High Street, we set out for Batsford Arboretum, a 55-acre horticultural display of about 3,000 trees, shrubs and bamboos from around the world. Created in the style of a Victorian wild garden by a late 19th century British diplomat, the lord's love of things Asian comes through not only in the plants but also in the Japanese Rest House and bronze statues of Buddha and a Foo Dog.

We concluded this day in Chipping Campden, a well-preserved 12th century market town where stands the church of St. James, one of the area's historic worship houses built by wool merchants who prospered from the medieval era into the 19th century.

The next morning we set out for Cheltenham, a bustling city on the edge of the Cotswolds, where we found plenty of shopping, parks and gardens. Salads and pasta came with culinary entertainment for lunch at Zizzi. St. James Church, a 19th century deconsecrated church where the chefs performed on what used to be the altar.

We'd reserved our second night with William and Veronica Stanley, proprietors of Home Farm Cottage in Ebrington, where we were told we'd find plenty of thatched roofs and good pub grub. Though our directions were clear enough, we somehow got hopelessly confused.

Getting lost in the Cotswolds can be great fun if you have the time and daylight. But our light was diminishing, and so was our patience. The more lane-winding we did, the more we seemed to be off-track and in the path of local drivers. By cell phone, we got through to the Stanleys, and they talked us into their courtyard, where we came to a thankful halt before some mesmerizing scenery. Inside the house of golden Cotswolds stone that's been in William's family for four generations the ambience was oak beams, an inviting Inglenook fireplace and warm hospitality.

Over a bountiful farm-style breakfast the next morning, we mentioned our car dream to Veronica. She suggested we consult with Gloucestershire Tourism, and that's how we found Dream Wheels and Martin Allison. The plan turned out to be a perfect Cotswold finale: Get ourselves to Daylesford Organics near Stow-on-the-Wold, and he would meet us there in a Rolls Silver Shadow.

At Daylesford, we experienced all the sleek and sophisticated products that owner Lady Bamford, a confidant of Tony and Cherie Blair, has to offer. This is what some call "Harrods in the Cotswolds," a comparison to London's famed retail emporium that actually has no peer. Nestled in the rural countryside, it's an upscale yet casual crunchy granola haven for healthy lunching on artisanal breads and cheeses, high-priced gadgets and edibles for foodies, and even organic clothing designed by the lady herself. We sampled, then opted for a spa treatment in the hay barn to prepare for what was ahead.

When Martin arrived, we knew our dream had grown wheels. The sleek lines and elegant interior of the Rolls carriage set our mood for the ride to Blenheim. Martin would be our driver, and he brought along a portable GPS device just to make sure we'd navigate the scenery without a bump.

I can only say our Blenheim arrival made us feel we were ready for a Hollywood golden-age premiere. The incredible site of the palace was our movie set, ready for the red-carpet appearance of the stars. Yet this was a balmy October day far from Tinseltown. It wasn't either of our birthdays, and it had been a long time since either of us had been a bride. Even Martin seemed caught up in our fantasy.

There, in front of this grand palace a succession of well-heeled dukes have called home, I surmised that meandering the Cotswolds on just about any kind of transport can be a delight. But how very nice to do it with class.

IF YOU GO

Cotswolds trip-planning assistance is at www.visitgloucestershire.com. Classic car hire and portable GPS navigators are available from <http://www.dream-wheels.co.uk/>, <http://www.classicmotoring.co.uk/> and <http://www.greatscapecars.co.uk/>. The ultimate classic car experience includes a private driver and guide. For those who wish to take the wheel themselves, a portable GPS can aid in navigating country lanes.

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