

Heading to the Hills

*The Malvern Hills, separating Worcestershire and Herefordshire, is an ideal spot for a weekend wander and Cottage in the Wood offers easy access to the hill-trails. **Giselle Whiteaker** dons her hiking boots*



“The best view in England,” touts the website for Cottage in the Wood in Malvern Wells, Worcestershire, repeating the London *Daily Mail’s* praise. That’s a tall order in a country with an abundance of picturesque moors, chocolate-box villages and undulating hills. Gazing out over the patchwork farmlands of Worcestershire though, we are inclined to agree. The milk-chocolate earth, paddocks of green, and patches of bright-yellow Rapeseed stretch as far as the eye can see from our vantage point at Cottage in the Wood’s outdoor café tables, and with the sun casting a warm glow over the countryside, the vista is breath-taking.

“That is spectacular,” says my friend Lizzie, breaking into my reverie. I nod my head in agreement. The view is simply spellbinding. We’ve come to Worcestershire keen to walk in the Malvern Hills and there’s no better place to start than here. The hotel clings to the side of the hills’ slope with direct

access to the many walking trails. We’re saving that for tomorrow, though.

Cottage in the Wood features three main buildings- the Main House, Beech Cottage, and our temporary abode, the Pinnacles. Our generously-proportioned room has a balcony which looks out over those views, making it difficult to tear ourselves away – but there are new places to explore before the day disappears.

A short drive down the road is Malvern, the original site for the restorative springs in the area. The Malvern water, says Dr. John Wall, is famed for containing nothing at all. Anne, one of the enthusiastic staff at the Malvern Tourist Centre, tells us that the Queen travels with Malvern water to use in her cups of tea. “I freeze it into ice cubes. The Queen has it in her tea, but I have it in my G and T,” she adds with a twinkle in her eye. “There’s a spring over there,” she says, gesturing across the road. “You should try the water for yourself.”



Cottage in the Woods Restaurant





Great
Malvern Priory

Armed with a list of Malvern's top sights, we cross the road to sip the water in the hopes that it will aid our health and longevity. It's like drinking air. It is so pure and flavour-less that it makes me wonder where the taste comes from in the rest of the water I drink. Perhaps I should take a leaf out of the Queen's book and travel only with this pure thirst-quencher.

Wandering past independent stores in eclectic clusters along the streets, we pass through an arch – the Priory Gatehouse – housing the Malvern Museum. We don't have time to linger as we walk the perimeter of the Great Malvern Priory to find the entrance gate. It seems we have walked the long way around, but in the warm sunshine we don't mind. The ornate façade of the Priory combined with the glorious stained-glass windows inside more than compensate for our efforts. The coloured-glass detail within the frames is incredible, and the recent additions by Painter and Stained Glass Artist Thomas Denny are an interesting counterbalance. "They're like Marmite, you either love them or hate them," Anne warns us. The two window-designs appear like crayon sketches, and the longer we gaze into the vibrant colours the more we see. They are certainly different.

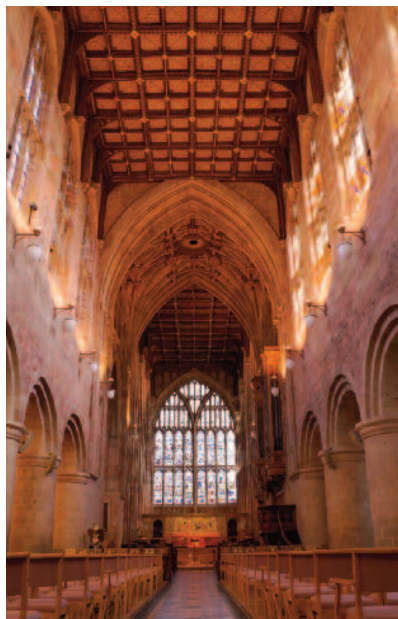
We stroll through the lovely Priory Park, sitting directly behind the theatre complex, where families are making the most of the weather, frolicking on the grass in the fading light. Before the sun dips too low, we stretch our legs on the uphill walk to St Ann's Well, catching glimpses of the town-panorama through the trees. With thoughts of eternal youth in our minds, we again imbibe the water which gushes from a spout over a basin. It's past the café opening hours or we may have opted for a Queen-style Malvern water tea.

The following morning we are up bright and early, fortifying ourselves with a delicious breakfast by the Cottage's picture-windows, the sun again beaming. Armed with full bellies and a hand-drawn copy of a map, we set off on the leafy trails that zig-zag over the hills.

Butterflies flutters past as we make our way up to the ridge, where we are rewarded with incredible views, both left and right. On the eastern side of the hills, lies Worcestershire, while Herefordshire stretches away on the west. The Worcestershire Beacon lies at one end of the trail, facing off against the Herefordshire Beacon, otherwise

known as the British Camp, at the other. The ridge is relatively narrow, providing 360-degree views along its length. Paths run directly over the curves of the hill, as well as around the edges, offering ramblers varying difficulty levels.

"Look," exclaims Lizzie, pointing out a small black and white adder as it slithers across the path, quickly disappearing into the undergrowth. "That's the first snake I've seen in the UK," she says as she gazes after it in fascination. Other walkers wander past, oblivious to our wildlife encounter.



We walk for hours, only realising how hard we've worked when we collapse into comfortable lounge chairs back at Cottage in the Wood for a pre-lunch aperitif. A light bite in the form of a tapas platter full of tasty treats restores us for a jaunt into nearby Upton-upon-Severn.

Strolling along the Severn River, it's hard to believe that the water levels are a constant threat to the town. Flooding here is par for the course, but today the river is host only to a few small boats chugging through. Soon the town will be packed with festival-goers, the mainstay for the local economy.

With the Worcestershire fresh air flowing through our veins, we have earned our supper. Returning to our table by the window at Cottage in the Wood, we gaze out into the encroaching darkness, small lights flickering on to light

the night. The menu features a broad selection of delicacies and decision-making is difficult, but I finally select on the braised pork belly with pleasingly-crunchy black pudding bon bons, while Lizzie chooses the venison Carpaccio. Both dishes are superb, as are our mains. My honey-roasted Gressingham duck in a Five Spice scented sauce is tenderly-pink, cooked to perfection, and Lizzie's pan-roasted bream melts in her mouth.

We're both pleasantly full, but unable to resist temptation. Lizzie indulges in Tastes of Apple and Blackberry, while I tackle Chocolate Elements for dessert – a generous selection of multiple chocolatey treats, ranging from a chocolate tart to homemade chocolate and hazelnut ice-cream and a decadently-goopy brownie, amongst other morsels.

Sated, we sit on our balcony as the stars flicker to life. Our calves ache in that good way, and we wear self-satisfied grins.

Tomorrow we will leave Cottage in the Wood to return to hectic city life, but tomorrow's another day. ■

“

“They're like Marmite, you either love them or hate them”

For more information on the family-run Cottage in the Wood see www.cottageinthewood.co.uk

