

Bells, Bites and Bygone Times

Malmesbury, atop a flat hill encircled by the River Avon on the cusp of the Cotswolds, is a market town packed with history, but not resistant to change. Giselle Whiteaker visits the Queen of Hilltop Towns.



"I'm going to give you a thousand years of history in less than half an hour. Are you ready?" asks Jules Mittra, founder of Around and About Bath, a private tour company that promises – and delivers – personalised, immersive journeys for world-curious, discerning travellers. Today, my boyfriend Elio and I are the travellers and we're sitting in the resident's lounge in The Old Bell Hotel in Malmesbury, Wiltshire.

We've already been impressed by our historic surrounds. The Old Bell is arguably England's oldest hotel. It's been around since 1220. Back in the day, Malmesbury Abbey was a significant centre of learning and scholars made pilgrimages to study the manuscripts kept at the abbey, staying in this very hotel. The Old Bell Hotel has welcomed guests continuously since then. Despite its glamorous, comfortable interiors now, there are traces of the centuries embedded in the hotel, including a hooded stone fireplace in the brasserie dating from 1220. The large suite we spent the night in is named after the first King of England, Athelstan, and it feels stately enough to have hosted the man himself.

Athelstan, we learn, was the first king to be crowned on the Kings Stone at Kingston-on-Thames, the first to be knighted by a king, the first to be anointed at a coronation and the first king in England to introduce a common currency; silver coins were imprinted with his head. He's buried somewhere in the abbey next door, although the exact whereabouts of his remains is unknown. He's not the only historically famous Malmesbury resident, either – once Jules has mapped out the feudal history of the country, he tells us about monk Eilmer of Malmesbury, who made an attempt at human flight in the early 11th century. The monk attached wings

to his body and flew over 200 yards from the abbey tower before landing, breaking both legs in the process.

Feeling eminently more knowledgeable about British history, we stroll across to the abbey, where Jules points out the Norman porch, which illustrates the Christian salvation history. We would have missed it had we visited alone. Inside, a 15th-century tomb is tucked in the back corner, empty, but dedicated to King Athelstan. In the opposite corner is a beautifully illustrated 15th-century bible, a reminder of the scholastic merit of the abbey in times past.

From the abbey, we stroll into the quaint tumble of honey-stoned streets in the centre of town, then drive out into the countryside, stopping for lunch at another bell – The Bell at Sapperton – a multi-award-winning country pub sitting in a beautiful, sleepy little village. Around and About Bath is known for the carefully curated selection of dining establishments on its tours and this one is a definite winner.

Everywhere we go, Jules points out sights we would have overlooked that give insight into local life; tiny hidden churches; markets; villages that look like anachronisms. It doesn't feel like a tour; it feels like spending time with a friend who lives in the area. That's what makes Around and About Bath unique.

In the evening, back at The Old Bell, we dress for dinner before sinking into plush teal-coloured chairs at a wooden table in the window of The Refectory. The country-style restaurant features eclectically mismatched chairs, an antler chandelier, and a large dresser that hides the entry to the kitchen. Candles flicker at every table and the waiting staff are warm and welcoming. As is the food.



We dined here last night. It was so good we came back for more. We've already picked out the dishes we want to sample tonight, confident there is no wrong choice on this menu. We feast on goat's cheese and walnut 'cheesecake'; warm salt beef with crispy soft boiled duck egg; and lamb three ways: pan-fried rack, braised faggot, and slow-cooked breast. The pièce de résistance is the Angus/Charolais Cross Breed, bourbon and honey-braised beef short rib, the meat so tender it falls from the bone. We know. We chose this dish last night also. We finish our repast with iced Baileys parfait with warm white chocolate sauce and sticky toffee pudding, washing it down with a pot of tea, taken in the lounge. We're both beaming after a day – and evening – well spent.

"I don't want to leave," Elio protests the next morning, looking around our spacious suite as if etching it into his memory. It's already embedded in mine. The market town of Malmesbury remains a worthwhile pilgrimage and The Old Bell Hotel is the choice of these happy pilgrims.



Goat's cheese and walnut cheesecake



Lamb three ways



Iced Baileys parfait

To arrange your stay at England's oldest hotel, see www.oldbellhotel.co.uk and to get off the beaten path, contact www.aroundandaboutbath.com.