



Cotswolds charm

The Cotswolds is dotted with chocolate-box villages that form a picture of the good life. Giselle Whiteaker visits this beautiful part of England.

There is a seismic shift in progress across the globe in the wake of Covid-19. Mega-cities are fast losing their appeal for both residents and visitors. Space, gardens and access to the great outdoors have moved up in the list of desirable features, whether it's for living or leisure. While beaches remain popular travel drawcards, smaller centres and areas with natural beauty are increasing in allure.

The Cotswolds, then, will soon be booming.

It's more than half a century since the Cotswolds was declared an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). This undeniably pretty pocket of rural England covers a surprisingly large area – almost 800 square miles – and runs through five counties: Gloucestershire, Oxfordshire, Warwickshire, Wiltshire and Worcestershire. From quintessentially British bucolic villages to stately homes, rolling hills and sweeping meadows, there is plenty to explore here.

Cheltenham makes a fine base for venturing into the Cotswolds. This attractive Gloucestershire town has been welcoming visitors for almost 300 years, since the discovery of the first natural spring in 1716. You can still taste the spa waters at the Grade I-listed Pittville Pump Room. Horse racing enthusiasts flock to the town for the well-known Cheltenham Festival in March, but there's more to it than a day at the races.

Driving through the Regency spa town's leafy, green streets, past painted stucco facades and intricate ironwork balconies, we spy several of the town's highlights, including the neo-Gothic school buildings of Cheltenham College and the Ladies' College, built in the French-Gothic

style with a remarkable bronze dome. We motor past Sandford Park with its 1930s open air lido, catch a glimpse of The Neptune Fountain on the Promenade and plan a visit to the 14th century Cheltenham Minster, St Mary's, the oldest building in Cheltenham.

The Bradley Hotel is our base for the weekend – built around 1845, it is one the most important complete historical Regency houses in Cheltenham. It boasts a wonderful collection of antiques, but as a de Savary Family property, it also blends history with modernity in inimitable style. There's a guest lounge on the ground-floor that looks like it has been lifted from a stately home – it's packed with antiquities and quirky touches, such as bowls of sweets, a chess table and interesting reads. It's the perfect welcome to this intriguing town.

Each of the 10 rooms at The Bradley Hotel is different. We are in a Superior Room on the top floor, which is dominated by a fabulous mahogany four-poster bed, draped in silk and jacquard. Two deep-red leather chairs sit by a coffee table. On the table, there is a carafe with a measure of sloe gin and a sign that reads "Drink me". It would be rude not to oblige.

The Bradley Hotel is perfectly positioned in the centre of town. It's on a quiet street, yet minutes from the thriving restaurant scene in Montpellier. Boutique stores rub shoulders with trendy cafes and eateries here, with Montpellier Walk overlooked by Grecian-style Caryatids – sculpted female figures serving as architectural support. It's a pleasant place to wander and dine.

Cheltenham is the gateway to the Cotswolds and there's a simple pleasure in driving along tree-lined country >>



Main: The guest lounge at The Bradley Hotel

Above, left and right: The Neptune Fountain; a spectacular four-poster bed at The Bradley Hotel.



Top to bottom: Bourton-on-Water; The Motoring Museum; Cotswold stone properties in Burford; St Edward's church door in Stow on the Wold.

roads, through villages populated with homes made of made of local honey-coloured limestone. The most difficult choice here is which postcard-perfect place to explore first.

On a whim, we find ourselves heading to Bourton-on-the-water, just under 16 miles from Cheltenham. This quaint settlement is regularly voted one of the prettiest villages in England. Shops and cafes line the lovely main street, which is fringed by a stream, criss-crossed with low stone bridges. Young children and dogs splash in the shallow water, while parents and owners watch on, sipping their lattes on the riverbank. The Cotswold Motor Museum, Birdland, The Cotswold Brewery and The Model Village provide entertainment for those passing through, many of whom, like us, find themselves dallying here for longer than expected.

Four miles further north, Stow on the Wold is another popular spot. This market town sits on top of an 800-foot hill, making it the highest of the Cotswold towns. It is located at the junction of several main roads through the Cotswolds, including the Fosse Way, which is of Roman origin. The Market Square testifies to the town's importance in times gone by. Other attractions include England's oldest Inn, the old stocks, St Edwards church and the tombstone of Captain Hastings Keyte, who died at the battle of Stow. Not far from the town centre are the old wells in Well Lane, where the ramparts of an Iron Age fort are visible.

On the eastern side of the AONB, just over 20 miles from Cheltenham, Burford in north Oxfordshire is considered to be the southern gateway to the Cotswolds. A beautiful old Cotswold town, its High Street slopes from the high Wolds, down to the willow-fringed River Windrush, where swans and ducks frolic. A lovely three-arched medieval bridge crosses the river at the foot of the hill.

Wherever you choose to pause in the Cotswolds, whether it's Bibury, Chipping Campden or Moreton-in-Marsh, you'll find an appealing slice of rural life. We may not yet know what life after Coronavirus looks like, but I hope it's dressed in Cotswold stone. ■

For more information about The Bradley Hotel, see thebradleyhotel.co.uk

Here are three properties in lovely locations across the UK.



Wickham, Hampshire

'Chantry' is an outstanding six bedroom house, on an elevated plot of around 2.3 acres, with views towards Portsdown Hill and the South Downs in Hampshire. The rear of the home opens onto an extensive terrace with stone balustrades and steps leading down to manicured gardens. The well designed, and symmetrical frontage offers large windows and high ceilings. The accommodation includes a well-equipped Leicht kitchen with Miele appliances, six spacious reception areas and an integral triple garage. There is a separate one-bedroom annexe in the east wing, serviced by its own staircase, and there is the opportunity to provide an additional, separate annexe.

Guide price: £3,995,000

Fine & Country Emsworth

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Richmond, Greater London

This magnificent Grade II-Listed property dates back to 1743. Having been meticulously refurbished throughout by the current owners, the property now offers contemporary living, while retaining many of the original features. Originally built for the King's gardener, the property overlooks Hampton Court Green and backs onto the vast grounds of Royal Bushy Park. The home encompasses a grand entrance hall, formal reception room, family room, dining and drawing room, study, utility room and a wine cellar. With eight bedrooms, this property offers expansive living space throughout. It also boasts a large balcony, beautiful gardens, off-street parking and a garage.

Guide price: £6,500,000

Fine & Country Richmond

+44 (0)208 334 4778

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Fishguard, Pembrokeshire

Located in magical 1.5-acre grounds in the Gwaun Valley in Pembrokeshire, this historic vicarage has been renovated and extended by the current owners to create a home of timeless elegance. The gourmet kitchen with combined family room is the hub of the home providing a well-equipped place to cook, dine casually and relax. The property also features four generous bedrooms, a large sitting room, a grand drawing room, a dining room, garden room and several outbuildings. The landscaped grounds boast sunny patios, extensive decking with a covered barbecue area next to the entertainment centre, rose gardens, a woodland pathway, a pond and water features.

Price: £925,000

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