

Oxford, the Cotswolds & Around



A haven of lush rolling hills, rose-clad cottages, bucolic views and graceful stone churches, Oxford and the Cotswolds are as close to chocolate-box Britain as you're likely to get. This whole region reeks with charm and is riddled with implausibly pretty villages, thatched cottages, fire-lit inns and grandiose manors. In places there's a fine line between delightfully quaint and cloyingly twee, but it's easy to avoid the peddling of nostalgia and the crowds that flock here and discover your very own slice of old-world England.

Beyond the bucolic views and romantic rural retreats, you'll find a stunning array of grand cities and elegant towns to visit. Top of the bill is Oxford, home to the world-renowned university and the academic elite. Its wonderful college buildings, superb museums and dreamy atmosphere make it a great base for exploring the area.

Just north of here is Churchill's extraordinary pile, Blenheim Palace, and to the west you'll find the Regency grandeur of Cheltenham and the glorious cathedral in Gloucester. To the south the Queen herself has a weekend pad, the majestic Windsor Castle, and nearby are the sedate and intellectual charms of the scholarly town of Eton.

You can see most of these attractions on a day trip from London but to really do them justice you should plan at least an overnight stay in Oxford and the Cotswolds. Public transport here is good but a car or bike will help you get off the beaten track and away from the crowds. Be prepared for busy roads in the summer months though, especially around the Cotswolds.

OXFORD, THE COTSWOLDS & AROUND

HIGHLIGHTS

- Following in the footsteps of Lyra, Tolkien, CS Lewis and Inspector Morse as you tour the **Oxford colleges** (p241)
- Discovering deserted **Cotswold villages** (p253) straight out of medieval England
- Soaking up the atmosphere in the Queen's very own hideaway, **Windsor Castle** (p272)
- Feeling the hairs on the back of your neck rise as you revel in the reverberations at a concert in **Gloucester Cathedral** (p267)
- Wandering the quiet medieval streets of **Painswick** (p261) at sunset and wallowing in their unspoilt splendour



■ POPULATION: 3.8 MILLION

■ AREA: 4239 SQ MILES

■ UFO HOT SPOT: UFFINGTON

History

The Bronze Age chalk horse at Uffington and the Iron Age hill fort close by are some of the earliest evidence of settlement in this part of England. In Roman times the region was traversed by a network of roads, some of which still exist today, and as word of the good hunting and fertile valleys spread, the region became heavily populated.

By the 11th century the wool and grain trades had made the locals rich, William the Conqueror had built his first motte and bailey in Windsor, and the Augustinian abbey in Oxford had begun training clerics. In the 12th century Henry II fortified the royal residence at Windsor, and in the 13th century Oxford's first colleges were established.

Meanwhile, local farmers continued to supply London with corn, wool and clothing. The Cotswolds in particular flourished and amassed great wealth. By the 14th century the wool merchants were rolling in money and building the beautiful villages and graceful wool churches that still litter the area today.

The region's proximity to London also meant that it became a popular retreat for wealthy city dwellers. The nobility and aristocracy flocked to Hertfordshire and Buckinghamshire, building country piles as retreats from the city, while the farm labourers made redundant by mechanisation moved back to the towns and cities. Today the area remains affluent and is home to busy commuters and a popular choice for wealthy Londoners looking for second homes.

Information

The popularity of the Cotswolds as a holiday destination means that you'll find helpful tourist offices in all towns and a wealth of information on the area. Outside the Cotswolds, the region is far less visited and information points can be rather thin on the ground. St Albans and Windsor are your best bets for assistance, or visit www.visitsoutheastengland.com and www.enjoyengland.com for the local low-down.

Activities

Walking or cycling through the Cotswolds is an ideal way to get away from the crowds and discover some of the lesser-known vistas and villages of the region. You'll also find great walking and cycling opportunities in Buckinghamshire's leafy Chiltern Hills and

along the meandering River Thames. For more information, see **Outdoor Activities** (p108) or specific suggestions for walks and rides throughout this chapter.

CYCLING

Gentle gradients and scenic vistas make the Cotswolds ideal for cycling, with only the steep western escarpment offering a challenge to the legs. Plenty of quiet country lanes and gated roads criss-cross the region, or follow the waymarked **Thames Valley Cycle Way** (NCN routes 4, 5).

Mountain bikers can use a variety of bridleways in the **Cotswolds** and **Chilterns**, and in the west of the region the **Forest of Dean** has many dirt-track options, and some dedicated mountain-bike trails.

WALKING

The **Cotswold Hills** offer endless opportunities for day hikes, but if you're looking for something more ambitious, the **Cotswold Way** (www.nationaltrail.co.uk/Cotswold) is an absolute classic. The route covers 102 miles from Bath to Chipping Campden and takes about a week to walk.

Alternatively, the **Thames Path** (www.nationaltrail.co.uk/thamespath) follows the river downstream from its source near Cirencester to London. It takes about two weeks to complete the 184-mile route, but there's a very enjoyable five-day section from near Cirencester to Oxford.

Finally the 87-mile **Ridgeway National Trail** (www.nationaltrail.co.uk/ridgeway) meanders along the chalky grassland of the Wiltshire downs near Avebury, down into the Thames Valley and then along the spine of the Chilterns to Ivinghoe Beacon near Aylesbury in Buckinghamshire offering wonderful views of the surrounding area.

Getting There & Around

Thanks to the region's proximity to the capital, there are frequent trains and buses rumbling in and out of London. Getting across the region can be more frustrating and time consuming though. Renting a car gives you the most freedom, but be prepared for busy roads in the Cotswolds during the summer months and daily rush-hour traffic closer to London.

Traveline (☎ 0871 2002233; www.traveline.org.uk) provides timetable information on all public transport.