



How I spend my time

My Cotswolds

Kiloran McGrigor worked in London for many years but now runs her classic Cotswold cottage near the historic town of Stow-on-the-Wold as a luxury bed and breakfast in tranquil surrounds



Squeezing through a back alley of medieval Stow on a bright autumn day, walls leaning over so far they might touch (did J K Rowling get her collapsing Goblet of Fire maze idea here?) and gazing up at rooftops, a tower, eucalyptus trees and blue, blue sky, I remember why I moved here.

It is breathtakingly beautiful and the change in the season is palpable. There is the distant beat of music and the delicious smell of wood smoke. Stow is abuzz with visitors and locals mingling together on the day before the Moreton (-in-Marsh) Show four miles north down the Roman Fosse Way. Moreton is a lively market (Tuesday) town with a railway line direct to Paddington in an hour and 40 minutes.

Stow has a gentler, but more dominant character. It is 700 feet above sea level – the highest town of the Cotswolds (valleys) wolds (hills) with the tower of St Edward's Church (770ft) visible for miles around and floodlit at night. There is an air of Tuscany about it and the centre is unblemished by modernism. Strolling and shopping is fun and the narrow streets force cars to slow.

Stow boasts some excellent clothing boutiques, antiques and book shops, two delicatessens, an organic food shop, an artisan chocolatier and Scotts of Stow – the mail order company.

With pre-Domesday roots, Stow is renowned for its Horse Fairs (two a year) and the battle on 21 March 1646, the last of the Civil War, ending with Charles I's followers being imprisoned in the church – two miles from the site of the battle, which was in my

parish, Donnington. Take a break at The Coffee Shop near the church. If you have the energy, leave the square by the north end and turn right at the police station down Well Lane to join a circular eight-mile walk of the villages around the town. There's an excellent leaflet on this and the history of Stow available from the tourist office. (cotswolds.com)

There are plenty of wonderful restaurants here, too. Old Butcher's in Sheep Street recently delighted my well-travelled American friends, who declared the fish soup as good as any they had tasted in Europe. There are plenty of good surrounding pubs, too, including the Horse and Groom at Bourton-on-the-Hill, the King's Head at Bledington, and The Kingham Plough. (theoldbutchers.com; horseandgroom.info; kingsheadinn.net; thekinghamplough.co.uk)

There is a simple and delightful drive that takes you from Stow through the Slaughters (Bourton-on-the-Water), to Naunton, the Guitings, Broadway Tower and the town itself, to Chipping Campden, my favourite Cotswold town ('chipping' meaning market).

Visit the church of St James, and Court Barn, an arts and crafts museum. (courtbarn.org). Just up the road at Hidcote Manor Gardens, laid out by Lawrence Johnston, the red border is stunning. (nationaltrust.org) Sezincote is nearby – the inspiration for the Brighton Pavilion. (sezincote.co.uk) The



COTSWOLD CALM: Kiloran McGrigor, inset (top), with Islay and Gigha; shopping in Stow, above

autumn colours at Batsford Arboretum are always glorious. (batsarb.co.uk)

It's half an hour to Stratford-upon-Avon in one direction, perhaps via Upton House, with its superb art and porcelain collection. (nationaltrust.org.uk) And in the other direction it takes about the same time to reach Woodstock, Oxford and Blenheim Palace. (blenheimpalace.com)

My recommended walk starts at Adlestrop. Jane Austen's uncle was rector and she is said to have set her novel *Mansfield Park* here. You strike up over the fields past the 400-year-old Jacobean Chastleton House, upon whose lawns the rules of modern croquet were decided. Don't miss the dovecote and the church.

Higher up the hill there is an Iron Age hill fort encircled by trees – undoubtedly connected to the ancient and almost spooky Rollright Stones one mile north (Oxfordshire's challenge to Stonehenge). You then descend through the Daylesford Estate. Stop at the Daylesford Organic Farm Shop for coffee, or, even better, lunch. The brainchild of Carole Bamford, wife of the JCB excavators' chairman, here an elegant farm barn meets top London store food hall with a cookery school, restaurant, bakery, butcher, fishmonger, clothes boutique, flower shop and spa. (daylesfordorganic.com)

Cross the Evenlode river to St Nicholas's Church, Oddington. It has been cut off from the village since the Great Plague; it has a great fresco and the pulpit leans from the wall at an alarming angle. If you don't stop at Daylesford, the Fox Inn at Lower Oddington should not be missed. (foxinn.net) This is your classic English pub, serving excellent food. Then it's back to Adlestrop and Wren House for tea in front of a roaring fire, followed by a well-earned hot, fragrant bath.

Wren House: B&B from £90 per double room. There is also a beautifully modernised, Grade II listed self-catering cottage for two in the grounds, priced by days and season. Visit wrenhouse.net. (01451 831787)

Kiloran, who previously worked for the royal household, also sells her homemade marmalade at Finns of Chelsea.

● Please check opening times of country houses and attractions during winter months.