

## The picturesque Cotswolds makes an idyllic UK break

Every time I visit the Cotswolds I'm astounded by its beauty. The honey-hued houses, cosy pubs and tearooms, and narrow, winding streets have a film set-like quality.

In this rural paradise I half expect Bilbo Baggins to pop up from one of the cute, quirky cottages and invite me in for tea.

It's for this reason that I've found myself returning to the Cotswolds year after year – and made a quiet resolution that I'd buy a property of my own here one day.

With the A-list now making it their weekend destination of choice that dream is looking more unlikely – house prices have soared thanks to the likes of Kate Winslet, Hugh Grant and the Beckhams snapping up homes here, many of them clustered near exclusive private members' club Soho Farmhouse in Chipping Norton.

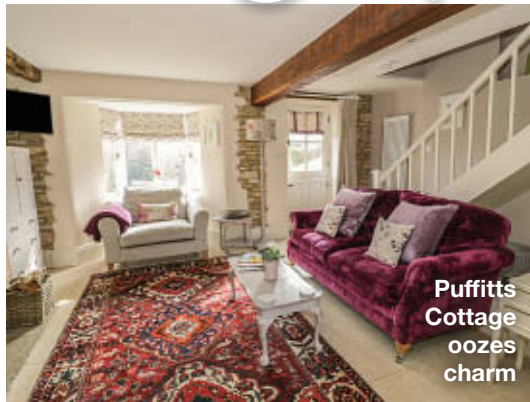
There are plenty of swanky hotels here now to cater to this upmarket clientele but on my recent trip with my husband, we opted for a more low-key (and, let's face it, more affordable) option, by hiring a holiday home. We found adorable Puffitts Cottage via the Sykes Holiday Cottages website. The location sold us straight away – it was a short stroll into the centre of one of the Cotswolds' prettiest villages, Bourton-on-the-Water, and just a few doors down from a highly rated pub called The Mousetrap Inn.

The property was charming, with three bedrooms, a bathroom with claw-footed bath and a large open-plan kitchen/dining area, with a squishy sofa in front of a log burner. A lovely additional touch was the welcome basket with tasty treats waiting for us upon arrival.

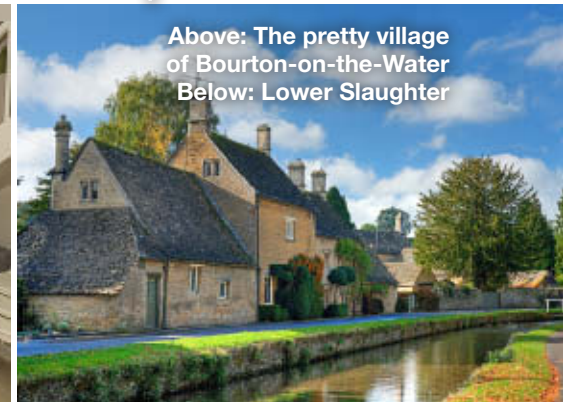
We wandered into town at dusk and prepared to do battle with a coachload of tourists – we'd been warned that the village often got exceptionally busy. But we found it almost eerily quiet. The beauty of staying in the village is that you can enjoy it at its most peaceful when all the day trippers have gone home.

Visitors head here for its ample attractions, including the miniature village which contains local buildings as they were in the 1930s, as well as the Cotswold Brewing Company at College Farm, where you can take a tour and tasting session. But most visitors just want to meander and take pictures of its

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Puffitts Cottage oozes charm



Above: The pretty village of Bourton-on-the-Water  
Below: Lower Slaughter

Instagram-friendly main promenade, lined with independent shops, restaurants and pubs, which are great options for a leisurely lunch or dinner.

The next morning we pulled on our walking boots. There are lots of hikes in and around Bourton-on-the-Water, but we opted for a fairly easy circular route to Lower Slaughter, another pretty-as-a-picture village on the banks of the River Eye that has remained unchanged for more than a century.

As regulars to the Cotswolds, we had already wandered through most of the must-see villages in this part of the world. But one place we'd never seen was Blenheim Palace, which was only a 40-minute drive from our cottage. We spent hours at the sprawling country estate in Woodstock – the principal residence of the Dukes of Marlborough – marvelling at the gilded state rooms and walking through the 2,000 acres of parkland.

After an active week, we finished our break with some much-needed relaxation at

Barnsley House, a gorgeous 17th-century manor that's now a luxury hotel. Our destination was the spa, a glorious hideaway in the gardens overlooking open fields, where we rotated around the sauna, steam room and outdoor hydrotherapy pool, before indulging in a treatment each. Since reopening after Covid-19, this wellness area is currently only open to hotel guests and your spa time slot must be booked in advance.

As we left, I reflected on my wonderful day playing lady of the manor. My country pile in the Cotswolds is sadly still eluding me, but this would definitely do for now. 📍

**Kirsty Nutkins**

*Sykes Holiday Cottages (sykescottages.co.uk) offers a seven-night stay at Puffitts Cottage from £879. Blenheim Palace Park and Gardens tickets cost £28.50 for adults, £16.50 for children – blenheimpalace.com. To book at Barnsley House, call 01285 740000 or visit barnsleyhouse.com.*