

BEST OF BRITISH

# Cheltenham In Bloom

THE GLOUCESTERSHIRE TOWN IS HOME TO ONE OF THE UK'S PREMIER HORSE RACING VENUES AND GATEWAY TO THE BUCOLIC BEAUTY OF THE COTSWOLDS. PIPPA CUCKSON REFLECTS ON ITS SPORTING PEDIGREE WHILE FARHAD HEYDARI OPENS THE DOOR TO THE COUNTRYSIDE BEYOND



ALAN CROWHURST/GETTY IMAGES

**THE SPA TOWN OF CHELTENHAM, ON THE NORTHWEST FRINGES OF THE COTSWOLDS, IS LINKED WITH SEVERAL IMPORTANT INTERNATIONAL FESTIVALS – MUSIC, SCIENCE, LITERATURE.**

But racing fans acknowledge the existence of just one, so venerated it is known simply as The Festival.

This is the annual four-day event, which NetJets sponsored for the first time this year, where over 200,000 pilgrimage each March, in awe of the world's best jumping horses battling over the taxing terrain of Prestbury Park. To have a runner in anything at Cheltenham is a lifetime's ambition. To win a feature trophy – the Champion Hurdle, the Queen Mother Champion Chase or the Cheltenham Gold Cup itself – is like bagging Olympic gold, silver and bronze all at once.

The Festival's outsized draw accounts for £50m of business at Gloucestershire's hotels and pubs, a figure that will only increase with the recent £45m investment in the new grandstand. For those curious to get an immersive experience before next year's Festival, there are three excellent options on offer the rest of the year: The Showcase (27-28 October), which opens the season in style with races across two days; The Open (17-19 November), a three-day spectacle of all that jump racing offers; and The International (15-16 December), the key preparatory race for the Festival with a number of marquee races of its own.

Racing in the Cheltenham area dates from 1815, originally over the flat, whose first Gold Cup, in 1819, was won by the ominously named Spectre. Crowds of 50,000 were soon attracted – as were pickpockets, cardsharps and prostitutes which outraged the local rector, Francis Close. In somewhat unpriestly behaviour, Close incited an arson attack that razed the grandstand to the ground. As a result, races were moved out >



◀ **Scenes from the Festival**  
A sense of occasion fills the air at Cheltenham events, from the serious business of the racing to frivolous fun and fashion on the sidelines



**The Jockey**  
NOEL FEHILY ON WHAT IT TAKES TO WIN AT CHELTENHAM

**How did you trounce Douvan, the clear favourite, for this year's Queen Mother Champion Chase?**

*I had a great chance of being second with Special Tiara. I got over the last fence and was surprised something hadn't come up to us. He has one way of running and that's flat to the mat and jump – I just let him get on with it. I've always loved two-mile chasers, and the Champion Chase is the one you want to win.*

**Trainer Henry de Bromhead gave you the ride on Special Tiara. How important is a jockey's relationship with the big stables?**

*When you're riding freelance in particular, that kind of support justifies slogging up and down the motorways and the cold, dark mornings on the gallops, a million miles from the likes of Cheltenham.*

to Prestbury Park in 1831, though economic depression led to the demise of Cheltenham flat racing just two decades later.

But then steeplechasing took off. In nearby Andoversford, the first Grand Annual Chase was run over four miles on the open countryside in 1834. Initially nomadic, the race settled at Prestbury in 1847.

In 1881 Prestbury was sold to Mr WA Baring Bingham, who revived the racing in 1898 and founded Cheltenham Racecourse. He staged its first festival from 9 to 10 April 1902 and started to accumulate prestigious races from other tracks.

A revitalised Gold Cup over jumps was run in 1924, won by Red Splash, whose owner pocketed the princely sum of £685.

Newmarket had long been the headquarters of flat racing. Frederick Cathcart championed Cheltenham as chasing equivalent. A new stand was built in 1924, cosy by current standards, and remained in use for 70 years. Corporate hospitality, nowadays as big a draw as the racing itself, was also pioneered by Cathcart, who gave a "Luncheon and Private View to Press and Officials". He introduced a level-weights extended three-mile steeplechase, the Cheltenham Gold Cup as we know it.

The special test of Cheltenham is not just the distance or track configuration, but the steeper-than-you-realise climb to the line. Only the bravest horses who have already dug beyond deep can conjure up that something extra to race to the finish.

Horses good enough to return year after year added to the Festival's reputation. The first of these household names was Golden Miller with five consecutive Gold Cups from 1932. Postwar, Cottage Rake's hat-trick began the annual Irish invasion, of both horses and spectators, a major feature of the Cheltenham atmosphere, especially in the tented village, which is the largest of any UK sporting event.

By the 1960s, the growth of racing on TV happily coincided with the Arkle era. The term "legend" is overused, though not for Arkle. He won three consecutive Gold Cups. A class above

ALAN CROWHURST/GETTY IMAGES (4), CODY GLENN/GETTY IMAGES (2)

the rest, Arkle was forced to carry huge weights by the handicapper, but still romped home before the rest. Now mentioned (almost) in the same breath are tiny Dawn Run, the flying grey Desert Orchid, Best Mate and Kauto Star.

The Festival alone turns over £600 million in bets. One Irishman won enough on Istabraq one year in the Champion Hurdle to pay off his mortgage – then promptly lost his entire house on Dorans Pride in the Gold Cup. Such swings, too, are part of the place, a history-rich sporting paradise that ranks high among the world's best. ■



✈ As well as Gloucester Airport (6 miles/10km), Cheltenham is just 20 minutes by helicopter from NetJets London Heliport.



**The Trainer**  
JESSICA HARRINGTON DESCRIBES A CHAMPION HORSE FOR THE COURSE

**What makes Gold Cup winner 2017 Sizing John a champion?**

*He went from running over two miles at Christmas to winning at over three miles. He jumped like a buck – that's what got him the whole way. He jumps at two-mile speed while the others jump at three-mile speed. I was hoping they'd go fast enough so that Robbie [Power], his jockey, could keep easing him back.*

**Did you make extra preparations?**

*At home, Sizing John and Supasundae live away from the other horses. Six weeks ago we called Cheltenham to ensure they got "companion" stables, so they could see each other. Sizing John lived with a goat before he came to me!*

# Call of the Cotswolds

PICTURESQUE AND STEEPED IN HISTORY, THE ENGLISH REGION – ON CHELTENHAM'S DOORSTEP AND JUST AN HOUR OR TWO FROM LONDON – OFFERS THE WARMEST OF ENGLISH WELCOMES

Like the Berkshires, Provence and Tuscany, the Cotswolds has long inspired poets, artists and authors alike, all of whom have rhapsodised about its picture-perfect villages, fecund farms and gently rolling hills – a remarkable, seductive and mostly unchanged rural idyll located just 160 kilometres from London. In recent years, however, this specially designated "Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty" – crisscrossed by limestone walls, winding streams and a lattice of walking trails and scenic roads – has begun to garner the attention of foodies, who come from near and far to dine on locally sourced fare in the many converted coaching inns, atmospheric gastropubs and smart restaurants that speckle the region. Add a few newly refurbished country-house hotels to this delectable mix, as well as a spa and a noted cooking school, and it's easy to see why more than a few cosmopolitan >

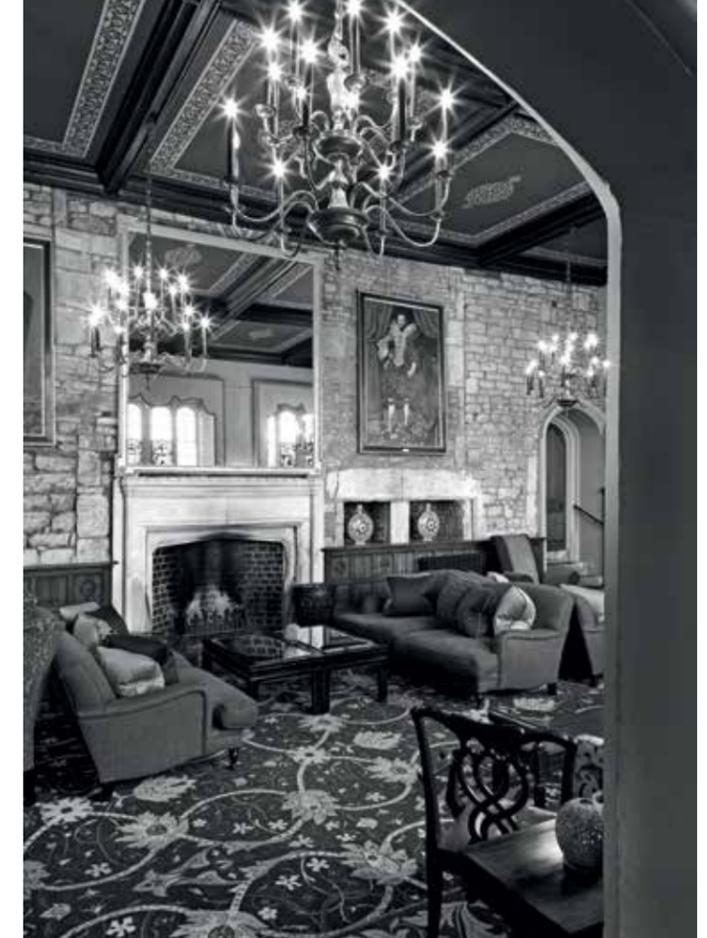


faces are now permanently calling its thatched or honey-hued cottages, not to mention sprawling piles, home.

Paradoxically, a veritable baby among the region's roster of pubs is housed in a building that dates to 947AD, making it one of the oldest inns in Britain. Following a sizeable investment by current owner Brakspear Brewery, the Grade II-listed **Porch House** ([porch-house.co.uk](http://porch-house.co.uk)) in the eye-catching Georgian market town of Stow-on-the-Wold is a timeless wonder. Head chef Stephen Small purveys a regularly changing menu in a warren of low-ceilinged dining and drinking spaces consisting of restored fireplaces, exposed beams, flagstone floors and mix-and-match chairs, while upstairs 13 chintz-free en-suite bedrooms await those who wish to linger longer. Just around the corner you'll find the newly made-over **The Sheep on Sheep Street** ([thesheepstow.co.uk](http://thesheepstow.co.uk)). The stone-fronted, 17th-century edifice belies thoroughly modern interiors (including 22 bedrooms) and an even more modish culinary concept: chef Antony Ely's wood-fired cuisine fuses Asian and Mediterranean flavours to winning effect.

An equally intriguing bolthole was once the former Tollgate Inn, dating from 1750, which Carole Bamford of Daylesford Organic fame treated to a wholesale makeover in the village of Kingham. **The Wild Rabbit** ([thewildrabbit.co.uk](http://thewildrabbit.co.uk)), as it is now known, boasts a dozen stylish rooms and the adept culinary handiwork of Michelin-starred toque Tim Allen, who utilises the mostly organic harvest of British farmers and artisan producers while dreaming up impressive dishes like braised veal rump served with confit onions and truffle puree in a space with stone walls and open hearths. Across the village, Emily Watkins, who tenured at The Fat Duck, beckons gastronomes at her long-standing pub **The Kingham Plough** ([thekinghamploUGH.co.uk](http://thekinghamploUGH.co.uk)), with six petite rooms and a charming eatery featuring a seasonal Italianate menu to boot.

Just 16 kilometres away, **The Swan Inn** ([theswanswinbrook.co.uk](http://theswanswinbrook.co.uk)) in Swinbrook is similarly attractive: the wisteria-clad structure is



owned by the Dowager Duchess of Devonshire's estate. The youngest of the Mitford sisters, who died in 2014, her old family photographs adorn the tastefully decorated 11-key property, where fresh-cut flowers and open fires complement an ever-evolving menu. Over in the even quainter village of Filkins, the ivy-covered **Five Ails** ([thefiveallsfilkins.co.uk](http://thefiveallsfilkins.co.uk)) continues to win accolades five years after the current owners took it over with nine accommodations. The handsome 18th-century stone building, with a commodious bar and three dining areas whose oak floorboards are draped with oriental carpets and whose walls are dressed with period portraits, comes courtesy of the husband-and-wife team of Sebastian and Lana Snow. Their daily changing menu of turf-to-table dishes is made using fresh, locally sourced produce and includes standouts like baked fillet of cod with chorizo, sprouting broccoli, fava beans, mussels and wild garlic leaves.

Another spousal team is also utilising that farm-fresh ethos. Sam and Georgie Pearman are the brains behind **The Wheatsheaf Inn** ([cotswoldswheatsheaf.com](http://cotswoldswheatsheaf.com)) in the market town of Northleach: a former coaching inn with a modernist streak and vestiges of period touches, it features 14 beautifully conceived quarters, some with freestanding baths that are very much of the moment, much like the cookery of Ethan Rodgers, who heads up the kitchen with >

▲ **To the manor born**  
The elaborately decorated Great Hall of Ellenborough Park

▲ **Area of Natural Beauty**  
Aerial view of Blenheim Palace, one of two Unesco World Heritage sites in the Cotswolds AONB, top; dining in refined surrounds at The Plough in Cold Aston

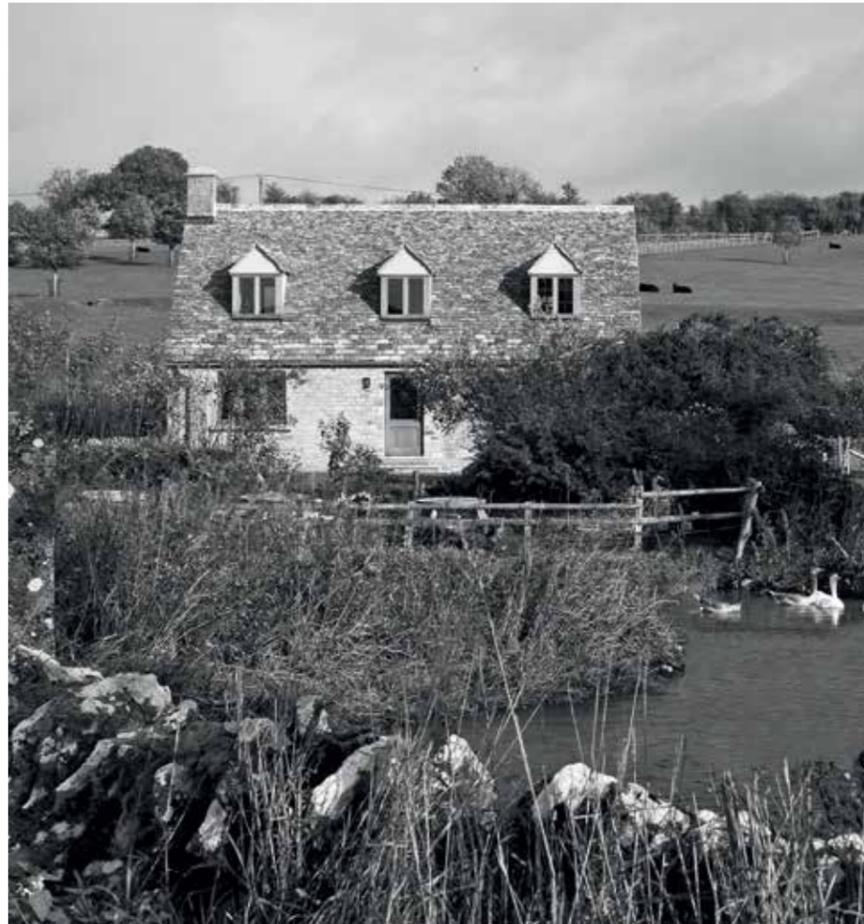
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## The beauty of nature – and indeed the British countryside generally – finds its peak in the country house hotel

fuss-free concoctions like crispy duck leg with braised red cabbage and red wine jus. Nearby in Cold Aston, a third couple are receiving kudos for having given **The Plough Inn** ([coldastonplough.com](http://coldastonplough.com)) a much-needed once-over. Nick and Laura Avery purchased the formerly forlorn 17th-century edifice in June 2012, reopening it to the delight of locals a year later with restored stonework, price-wise home-cooked cuisine and three cosy en-suite attic rooms.

Few establishments in the region, though, can engender devotion like that which is showered on **The Chequers** ([thechequerschurchill.com](http://thechequerschurchill.com)), a much-lauded tavern (also helmed by the Pearmans) in the picturesque village of Churchill. Expect steaks, chops and other gastro classics from the Josper grill, craft brews (there are no fewer than 14 cask and keg beers on tap) and, like most every other hostelry in the area, plenty of pooches roaming the stylish candlelit interiors – one which is very much en vogue with the local cognoscenti. Still, Blewbury newcomer **The Red Lion Pub & Kitchen** ([theredlionpubandkitchen.co.uk](http://theredlionpubandkitchen.co.uk)), set in a 1612-built structure with three guest rooms, has proven itself a viable contender for the gastropub crown: chef-owner Phil Wild's seasonal menu is strictly locavore, and dishes like braised scallops, roasted garlic frog's legs and beer-battered fish and chips have already amassed quite the following.

Also feted by locals and Londoners alike is **Dormy House** ([dormyhouse.co.uk](http://dormyhouse.co.uk)) on the outskirts of picturesque Broadway. A former farmhouse dating to the 17th century, it features 38 guest rooms designed in florals by Emily Todhunter, a swish spa and a small gym plus a pair of restaurants, one more formal than the other. Not far in charming Shipston-



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### ◀ Cotswolds' crackers

Clockwise, from top left: riverside view of The Swan Inn; in the bar at The Porch House; western art in a Wheatsheaf bathroom; partridge in salt crust from The Wild Rabbit

on-Stour, the red-bricked, Grade II-listed **George Townhouse** ([thegeorghipston.co.uk](http://thegeorghipston.co.uk)) just emerged from extensive refurbishments, offering up 15 elegantly appointed rooms and a lively ground-floor pub for locavore bites, brews and rock bands.

For those keen to stay nearer concentrated civilisation, stay in Cheltenham, the largest conurbation in the region. The former spa town is home to **No 131** ([no131.com](http://no131.com)), a clubby restaurant and buzzy bar with 11 rooms – soon to double in number – in a listed Grade II Georgian villa and a menu that screams best of British, which has become a much lauded favourite. Sister property **No 38 The Park** ([theluckyonion.com](http://theluckyonion.com)) boasts a similar mise en scène, with 13 stunning accommodations off leafy Pittville Park.

The beauty of nature – and indeed of the British countryside generally – finds its peak in the country house hotel, and none in the Cotswolds surpasses **Ellenborough Park** ([ellenboroughpark.com](http://ellenboroughpark.com)). The stately Elizabethan manor house-turned-school-turned-hotel is rendered in stone and adorned with turrets, gargoyles, arches and towers. It recently underwent a three-year refurbishment, emerging with 62 individually decorated lodgings by Nina Campbell, an India-inspired spa and a rousing wood-panelled restaurant (as well as a brasserie). It is located ideally on the doorstep to Cheltenham Racecourse, the home of British steeplechasing, and is a reminder, in the best ways possible, of all that British hospitality can offer in one of the island's most beautiful regions. ■

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