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.

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...
The Jokey
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 go on with it. I’ve always bred 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?
It takes to win.

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 1980s, 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 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 Duran 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 (6miles/10km), Cheltenham is just 20 minutes by helicopter from NetJets London Heliport.

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, feud 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 cosmopolitans would...

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 speeds, table 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?
As ride from Andover and Suttons racecourse from the other horse. Six weeks ago we called Cheltenham to ensure they got “comfortable” stable, as they could see each other. Sizing John bred with a goat before he came to me.
faces are now permanently calling its thatched or honey-hued cottages, not to mention sprawling pile, 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) 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). 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), 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), with six petite rooms and a charming eatery featuring a seasonal Italianate menu to boot.

Another spousal team is also utilising that farm-fresh ethos. Sam and Georgie Pearman are the brains behind The Wheatsheaf Inn (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...
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 (ploughinn.coldaston.co.uk) 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), 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), 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.

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