



Out & about

The Pilgrim Hotel makes a fine base for visiting unspoiled market towns and great walking country...

HEREFORD

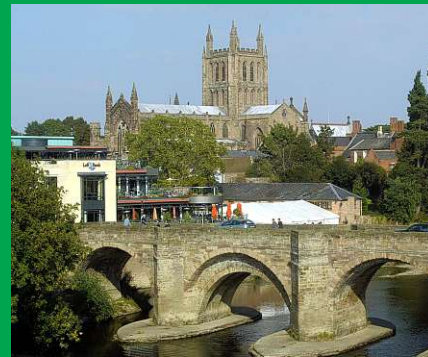
Home of one of England's finest cathedrals, whose ancient chart Mappa Mundi is a tourist attraction in its own right. Plenty of independent shops and a lovely square and covered butter market. Avoid north-south trips through Hereford on the A49, especially at rush hour. Recommended: in a cider-producing area, take a tour and bag some take-away at Dunkertons Mill in Pembridge, near the town of Leominster (pronounced Lem'ster).

ROSS-ON-WYE

The central features of the market town situated at the end of the M50 are 14th Century St Mary's Church and the Market House, both in the local red sandstone that is also seen in nearby Goodrich Castle. On the outskirts, the huge Labels clothing and household goods outlet attracts visitors by the coachload. Recommended: haddock, chips and mushy peas in the Seven Seas Fish Bar, Broad Street.

FOREST OF DEAN

Magnificent oak-dominated former royal hunting forest on elevated ground in that isolated part of Gloucestershire west of the River Severn. Principal towns Coleford and Cinderford are nothing special but there is rewarding hiking and cycling from the visitor centre at Speech House Plantation. Recommended: the climb to Symonds Yat Rock, the hill almost enclosed by a meander in the River Wye.



Hereford Cathedral

HAY-ON-WYE

The market town, just in Wales, has reinvented itself as a literary centre, with countless second-hand bookshops and a starry annual festival. Hay, a good base for walks in the Black Mountains, also has independent food and clothes shops. Recommended: if you visit only one bookshop, make it the cavernous CBS situated in the town's old cinema. The bookish should allow half a day for a through inspection.

MONMOUTH

An old Roman and county town situated at the confluence of the Rivers Monnow and Wye, and the birthplace of King Henry V, whose greatest victory is commemorated in the name Agincourt Square. The two sides of an impressive main street are full of independent shops. Recommended: the town's museum honours connections with both Lord Nelson and the luxury car firm founder Charles Rolls.

MUCH Birch? Sounds like a Victorian headmaster's correction policy. It turns out to be a village stretched along the A49 in Herefordshire. At its northern end, with views towards the Black Mountains and Brecon Beacons, the former rectory is now the Pilgrim Country House Hotel.

Privately owned and homely with flagstone corridors and countless nooks for quiet chats or private aperitifs, the Pilgrim is the antidote to bland, big-chain hosteleries.

My unflashy but comfortable room had views to a magnificent cedar. Beyond the croquet lawn, pheasants patrolled the grassy grounds – unaware that seasonal game is on the Pilgrim menu.

On which subject, you don't go hungry. On my first night in the Valley Restaurant I saw off a lovely tomato and roasted red pepper soup then struggled to finish an enormous regional treat: fidget pie, which is actually from Shropshire, a few miles to the north. It was reputedly created as a "leftovers" meal, with apple, spuds and gammon topped with shortcrust pastry.

Night two: blue cheese and pear soufflé then rare sirloin steak. The Wye Valley Bitter was a tasty companion – it's a better beer than the same brewery's stronger Butty Bach.

Between belly-busting dinners, and breakfasts featuring a delicious local sausage, I took my walking boots to Hay Bluff in the Black Mountains and to Symonds Yat Rock, situated above a dramatic meander of the exquisite River Wye.

But hotel proprietor Steve Boyle showed me some



Pilgrim Country House Hotel, in Much Birch, Herefordshire.



Hay Bluff in the Black Mountains.

great walking closer to home – from the front door of the Pilgrim.

Boyle, a huge man, was a potent lock forward who played rugby for England and the 1983 British Lions. He gets just as much respect in these parts for packing down with one of the best sets of forwards ever to serve no-nonsense Gloucester RFC.

With Boyle to the fore, we tramped from the hotel through Much Birch and across farmland to the beautiful hamlet of Llanwarne, with its abandoned sunken church.

On a bright autumn morning we continued westwards towards Penstone Wood and Weavers Hill before returning to the hotel via the imposing Bryngwyn Manor and a little museum dedicated to the memory of Violet Szabo, the Anglo-French spy who was posthumously awarded the George Cross after being tortured by the Gestapo and executed by the SS.

The half-day walk worked up my appetite for lunch, after which I drove up the Golden Valley to Hay-on-Wye for a browse in the little town's second-hand bookshops.

If you like a holiday packed with bright lights and modern tourist attractions, you may not like this part of the world. If fresh air, great scenery and historic buildings sound more appealing, you won't be disappointed. It's an England you struggle to find elsewhere.

● The Pilgrim Hotel, Much Birch, Hereford, HR2 8HJ. Tel: 01981 540742. Website: www.pilgrimhotel.co.uk.