

TRAVEL TAKE-OFF
Last minute availability

● **GREECE:** Cox & Kings (coxandkings.co.uk; 0207 873 5000) offer their seven-day Classical Greece tour, incorporating highlights of Olympia, Delphi, Mycenae and Epidaurus, from £795pp – saving up to £280pp. Includes flights, transfers, guided excursions and most breakfasts. Book by June 20 for travel on September 12 and October 3 departures.

● **THAILAND:** Destinology (destinology.co.uk; 01204 821 419) offer 14 nights at the four-star Khao Lak Seaview Resort & Spa (B&B) from £869pp (two sharing) – saving £239pp. Includes flights with Etihad with London Heathrow. Book by May 19 for travel in May and June.

● **CAMBODIA:** Steppes Travel (steppestravel.co.uk; 0843 778 9926) offer four nights at Song Saa (full-board) and two in Phnom Penh on a philanthropic Journeys of Change programme for £2,445pp (two sharing) – saving £1,050 per booking. Includes international and domestic flights and transfers. Valid June, July, August and October.

● **DEVON:** Woolacombe Bay Holiday Parks (woolacombe.com/bp) offer a seven-night holiday in a Bronze apartment (self-catering) from £399 (family of four) – saving £320. Includes activities and entertainment. Valid for May 23. Book online.

● **AUSTRALIA:** Austravel (0800 988 4834, austravel.com) offer their eight-day Tropical North Queensland holiday, with a week at the four star Mantra Aqueous in Port Douglas and a Quicksilver Outer Barrier Reef cruise, from £1,149pp, saving £390 per couple. Incl flights from Heathrow with Cathay Pacific and transfers. Departures in November.

● **MADEIRA:** Sovereign Luxury Travel (0843 770 4526, sovereign.com) offer seven nights at the five-star Quinta Das Vistas Palace Gardens from £665pp – saving 25%. Includes flights from Gatwick, lounge access and transfers. Departs May 15.

● **RHINE CRUISE:** The River Cruise Line (rivercruiseline.co.uk; 0844 544 6437) have buy-one-get-one-free offers on a wide choice of Rhine cruises for selected departures during June and July. Their ten-day Rhine to Switzerland Cruise (full-board) costs from £949pp (two sharing) – saving 50%. Departs June 22. Includes regional coach departures from a number of points across the UK, ferry from Dover to Calais and onward coach journey to join the cruise ship in Koblenz.

● **MARRAKESH:** Travelzoo (travelzoo.com) offer three nights at the five-star Adama Resort Marrakesh in a private villa (half board) from £199pp (two sharing) – saving up to 46%. Includes flights from London or Bristol, transfers, a massage and a bottle of local wine on arrival. Departs on select dates from 18 November-9 February, 2015.

● **CANCUN:** Flight Centre (flightcentre.co.uk / 0800 258 5773) offer seven nights at the three-star Sotavento and Yacht Club (room only) from £639pp (two sharing) – saving £250 per couple. Includes flights from Heathrow. Valid June 4-11. To book quote reference: 2643538.

● **POLAND:** Travel Interaction (travelinteraction.co.uk; 0208 588 9513) offer three nights at the four-star The Galaxy Hotel from £139pp (two sharing). Incl flights from Stansted on various dates from Nov 1 2014 – March 25 2015. Book by May 21.



● Ross-on-Wye, which claims to be the home of the British tourist industry; below, relaxing at the Hay Festival of Literature

AS the sun begins to sink on a bright April evening the imposing Black Mountains and its volcano-like highest peak Waun Fach stretch majestically before us while farther off we can make out the hazy grey rim of the sprawling Brecon Beacons.

We are sitting in England but have a great view of Wales. The Butty Bach ale, brewed in the nearby Wye Valley, is also going down a treat.

Our location, to be absolutely precise, is the wooden decked terrace of The Pilgrim Hotel in the quaint Herefordshire village of Much Birch, about half way between Ross-on-Wye and Hereford.

It is a beautiful, and for me anyway, intriguingly new part of the countryside – that green strip of sleepy villages and pretty market towns that straddles the border of England and Wales.

It is a funny old thing when you spend the best part of 40 years forking out hard-earned cash on elaborate and sometimes exotic trips around the world when you haven't really explored what is right on your own doorstep.

It is about 90 minutes from Swindon to Much Birch: once you get past Gloucester – the halfway point – it is countryside all the way as we pass a string of inviting, olde world-type pubs of which I make mental note to pop into some time.

The 20-room Pilgrim Hotel certainly looks the business as we pull into its spacious car park directly off the A49. It is a large and elegant stone building that oozes up-market rural charm.

It is no surprise to learn that in a previous life The Pilgrim was a Victorian rectory until, in the early 1970s, it was tastefully adapted and enlarged as a hotel.

The business, however, was not in the greatest of nick when Steve Boyle acquired the property 11 years ago.

Steve, 60, is a former international rugby player who represented England three times. It should have been more but he was unfortunate enough to play in the same position as the side's revered skipper Bill Beaumont.

A lock noted for his bullish scrummaging, Steve played 312 games



for Gloucester, scoring 77 tries and helping the cherry and whites to a County Championship. He also won a coveted place on the British Lions tour of New Zealand in 1983.

Rugby, however, was an amateur sport in those days and Steve worked in banking before venturing into the hotel business which eventually saw him snap up The Pilgrim.

He recalls: "It was run down and unloved back then, and had been poorly managed."

Only three percent of visitors returned for a second stay, he shrugs.

Steve has since poured large sums of cash, thought, effort and TLC into the venture, creating a stylish yet traditional hotel/restaurant where 25 per cent of guests now return after their initial stay.

"Some stay here three or four times a year – usually for two to three day breaks," he says.

The aforementioned terrace, with its idyllic views of the Welsh hills and mountains, along with the adjoining conservatory restaurant, are among several recent additions that have been seamlessly added by Steve.

Dogs are welcome at The Pilgrim, too. "Six million people own dogs in this country. Why would we not welcome them?" he says.

Speaking of which... the hotel has its own hound, of sorts. Its remains were discovered during renovation work and are now bricked up in the bar wall, next to the fireplace, along with a plaque acknowledging the former furry resident's final resting place.

The bar,



● The breathtaking view from the terrace at The Pilgrim Hotel, inset bottom left

A fine place for a pilgrimage

BARRY LEIGHTON checks out the scenery, history, ales and hospitality of green and pleasant Herefordshire



incidentally, is cosy and beamed – no need to make a bee-line for the village pub, or even

some of those alehouses we had earlier admired dotted along the road from Gloucester.

The Pilgrim sits in the heart of a ravishingly rustic region crammed with lively market towns, more castles than Game of Thrones, the occasional ruined abbey and pretty much every outdoor pursuit you can shake a canoe paddle at.

Perched panoramically above the bendy river from which it partially takes its name, Ross-on-Wye, on the northern edge of the Forest of

Dean, lays a pretty decent claim to being home of the British tourist industry.

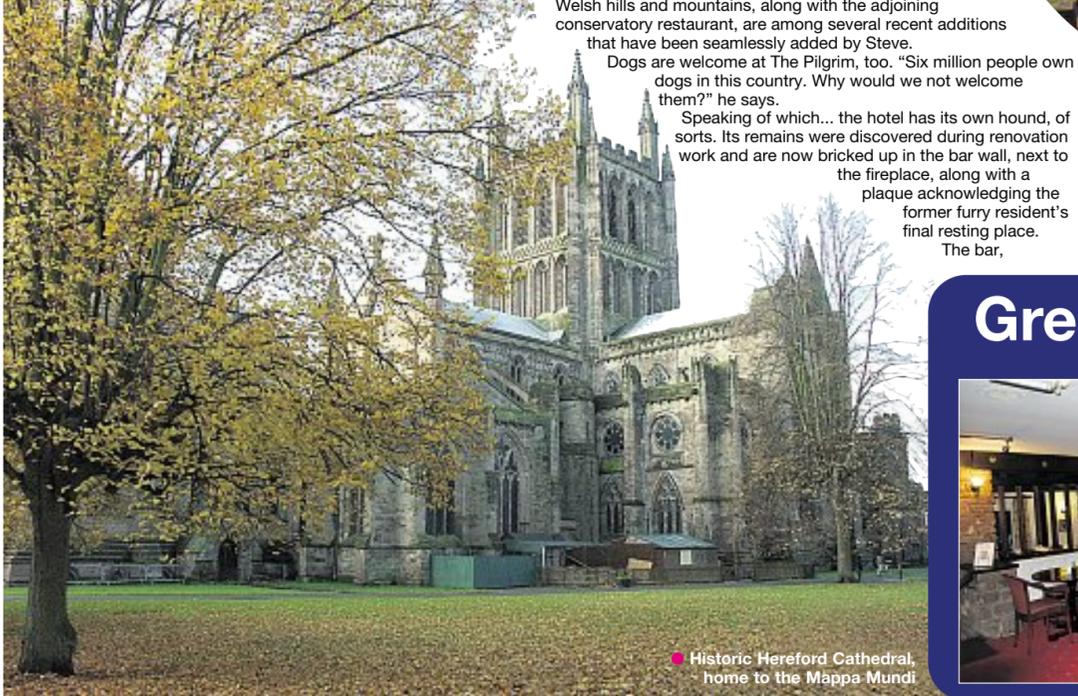
Its declaration dates to 1745 when rector John Egerton began taking visitors on boat trips along the dramatic Wye valley. Nearly 40 years later Ross resident William Gilpin published Observations on the River Wye, the country's first illustrated tourist guide, further opening the gates for visitors.

Ambling through the lofty located town, there is much to be seen and admired, from its 700 year-old church to the 17th century 'plague cross', a poignant memorial to 315 Ross victims of the black death. I'd only ever been to Hereford for purposes of watching Swindon

Town play so this was a long overdue opportunity to lay eyes on one of the nation's great treasures.

Contained in the city's outstanding cathedral, the Mappa Mundi is the largest surviving world map, beautifully inscribed on calf skin around 800 years ago and teeming with cities, towns, biblical events and assorted plants, beasts and people.

Our two-day pilgrimage to The Pilgrim also involved drives to charming Monmouth, boasting Britain's only surviving medieval fortified river bridge, and the magnificently stark and spooky structure that is Tintern Abbey where, local folklore insists, the chants of medieval monks can still be heard echoing through the its masonry.



● Historic Hereford Cathedral, home to the Mappa Mundi

Great deals for walkers and book lovers



BARRY and Pauline Leighton were guests of the Pilgrim Country House Hotel in Much Birch.

It is an ideal base for walkers with stunning views and plenty of walking in the vicinity; the famous Wye Valley Walk is a short distance away and the Herefordshire Trail passes within a few feet of the hotel.

A two-night walking break costs from £129 pp (two sharing) which includes two nights' B&B, welcome drink and bar meal on the first evening, a picnic lunch and a three-course dinner on the second day and a snack and a drink for the walk on day three.

The country's foremost event of its kind,

the Hay Festival of Literature takes place from May 22 to June 1.

Some 80,000 bookworms pour into the riverside market town which boasts a couple of dozen book shops.

Finding accommodation can be something of a nightmare and The Pilgrim, a 40-minute drive away along the River Wye, is offering a two night deals from £88 per person.

Get in touch at: The Pilgrim Hotel, Much Birch, Hereford, HR2 8HJ Telephone: 01981 540 742 Website: www.pilgrimhotel.co.ukE stay Email: stay@pilgrimhotel.co.uk

