

# THE ONLY WAY TO DO THE COTSWOLDS

There's simply no better way to take in the lush English countryside than from behind the wheel of a dashing 1963 Austin Healey with a car-mad co-pilot, discovers Trish Welsh.





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- 01 Driving through the countryside in style
- 02 Laburnum walk at Abbey House Gardens
- 03 Elegant bathroom at Manor House Hotel
- 04 Rock-star park at The Churchill Arms

Some things were made for each other: strawberries and cream, Bogart and Bacall, and visiting the Cotswolds in a classic car; surely the most luxurious way to discover this picturesque pocket of England.

Northwest of London, the region is dotted with postcard-pretty villages linked by narrow country lanes that meander through rolling green hills criss-crossed with dry-stone walls, bubbling streams and old stone churches.

This beautiful countryside is made for touring in style, which is why we find ourselves driving to Warwickshire to pick up a sleek classic sports model from The Open Road Classic Car Hire people.

Tony and Elaine Merrygold have been collecting and hiring out their stable of prestigious sports cars from their home in Sherbourne since 1997. We choose our 'serious toy' for the next two days: a 1963 Austin Healey 3000 Mark IIA, a 1970 Jaguar E-Type Roadster, a 1969 MGB Roadster or a 1973 Triumph Stag.

My co-driver, having driven an Austin Healey many years ago, is keen to try his skills at handling this particular Mark II, and so, after Tony explains the special features of the vehicle, we duly sign up. During a practice drive around the block we both realise very quickly that power steering hadn't been invented when this little beauty was built and using the clutch proves a little tricky too – real leg-power comes in to play.

We set off with great excitement south along the original old Roman Fosse Way, now the A429, to pretty Moreton-in-Marsh. The town's bustling Tuesday market, the largest open-air street market in the Cotswolds, is in full flight. We note a plethora of tearooms and antique shops, but no parking spots.

At Stow-on-the-Wold, we browse some of the 40 famous antique shops for which the town is famous and are fascinated with the campaign furniture at Christopher Clarke's shop with reputedly the largest stock from the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries in the

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country. When we return to the car a few admirers are checking it out. One adds: "And very nice too."

With the hood down and the wind in our hair, we push on to beautiful Bibury, famous for its trout farm and the village's most photographed feature – Arlington Row, a string of nine adjoining 1380-built stone houses with stone roofs and cottage gardens.

Next stop is Cirencester, considered the capital of the Cotswolds and an early Roman fort town known as Corinium Dobunorum. A visit to the award-winning Corinium Museum explains much about its early inhabitants with displays of many local Roman finds.

We are headed for The Manor House Hotel in Castle Combe for the night, so travel via the charming former wool town of Tetbury, with its 17th century flower-trimmed market hall, antique shops and country homewares stores such as Highgrove, the profits of which go to Prince Charles' charities.

According to my edition of *Lonely Planet*, Castle Combe is "as close to the English ideal as you can get." We drive through the picturesque stone village, through the hotel's automatic main gate at the end and follow the driveway alongside the River Bybrook that meanders through the grounds.

The 14th century Manor House Hotel is the quintessential English country manor house, featuring myriad chimneys and towers and steep gables shrouded with ivy, and is on 148 hectares of manicured lawns and gardens with its own private 18-hole championship golf course.

Our spacious room is one of 21 in the main building, with 27 further luxury accommodations in adjacent old weavers' cottages that were once part of the township. Executive chef Richard Davies uses many home-grown vegetables and herbs in the hotel's Michelin-starred restaurant, The Bybrook, as well as pork and bacon from home-reared Gloucester Old Spot pigs, and eggs and poultry from free-range chooks.



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08 Wisteria-covered archway, Abbey House Gardens  
09 Architecture worth travelling for  
10 Manor House Hotel: timeless beautiful

Visit [www.signaturemagazine.com.au/drive-the-cotswolds](http://www.signaturemagazine.com.au/drive-the-cotswolds) for more information and images from this trip.

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We ponder the 43 different gins in the club-like bar before ordering a French Hoxton which arrives in an insulated goblet the size of a small goldfish bowl. Dinner is sublime. It begins with an amuse bouche of pea espuma with chorizo dressing that sets the tone for the evening. I then choose sweet, succulent hand-dived scallops with apple, walnut, cauliflower and pickled shallot followed by smoked belly of Manor House pork, braised cheek, mustard mash, Stornaway black pudding and carrot puree. Each is a work of art and a true taste sensation, but when matched with sommelier-suggested wines, they form exquisite combinations of flavours. For dessert, it's home-grown rhubarb, crème fraîche parfait, rhubarb granola and sorbet with pistachios.

Next morning, we stroll through the village – the central market cross and string of perfect stone houses is the location for much of Steven Spielberg's *War Horse*, while in nearby medieval Lacock we learn its streets were the settings for *Emma*, *Pride and Prejudice* and recent *Harry Potter* movies.

At Malmsbury, with its beautiful 15th century market cross and 12th century abbey ruins, we visit Abbey House Gardens, revived 19 years ago by Ian and Barbara Pollard. The gardens are exquisite with the UK's largest private collection of roses (some 2000), double herbaceous borders said to rival those of Monet's at Giverny, 300,000 spring bulbs and a spectacular laburnum walk – magical in May in its full golden glory. Flowering cow parsley lines narrow

country lanes and hawthorn hedgerows blossom as we drive north to the Upper and Lower Slaughter, among the prettiest villages in the area. Drivers of two other classic sports cars toot and greet us like old friends.

As we head back to Warwickshire to relinquish our beautiful vehicle, we understand why such sports cars are true classics that appeal to car enthusiasts of all ages. With the top still down and wearing broad smiles, we pinch ourselves knowing we've had great fun seeing this beautiful region in such style. ♦

**Travel file**

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