



Explore Britain in CHAUFFEURED LUXURY

Over 28 years in development, there can be no better way to discover the innermost secrets of Britain than from the comfort of your personal guided tour.

Words Robin Glover

I SPEND MUCH OF my time attempting to avoid clichés but here we were, living the dream of the perfect English country pub. A winding country lane has brought us down to an ancient mill-house, sadly with no workings but still with the mighty millrace rushing to rejoin the river, now devoted to providing an unforgettable experience. The muddy Landrovers, panting Labradors, drovers' bridge, free-range bantams in the garden, soaring red kites in the sky above and rustic benches on waterside lawns – it's all here on the outside and, then, the interior draws you in, with its flagstone floors, open

fires, exposed beams, low ceilings (and doorways!), multiple nooks, alcoves and private areas. It was as if a film-maker's imagination had created the archetypal inn, in reality, and opened it to the grateful public. In fact it's The Swan Inn, Swinbrook, home village of the famous Mitford family, one of whom, Diana, later became Duchess of Devonshire and chatelaine of Chatsworth, Derbyshire. Clearly extremely popular with locals looking for restaurant-quality food and first-class wines and ales (I can strongly recommend the Butcombe bitter), it's the sort of place, way off the tourist-track, that the unfortunate trippers would never know existed. Happily for





“Our itinerary culminated at the inimitable Vanbrugh masterpiece, Blenheim Palace, UNESCO World Heritage Site and country-seat of the Dukes of Marlborough”

us, we were enjoying the sublime pleasure of having Ian, our personal guide, and driver, to do all the hard work for us on an eye-opening tour of Oxfordshire, even courteously modifying the itinerary to accommodate last-minute requests and delayed meetings. Using, mostly, quaint country lanes, we were treated to previously undiscovered delights, even in the headline destinations, like Burford, where Huffkins Teashop is a rewarding ‘must’, and Bourton-on-the-Water. Even more magical were the unspoilt, chocolate-box villages like Taynton, Great Rissington and the stunningly pretty Lower Slaughter, with the slow-running, many-bridged River Eye winding romantically alongside the main street. At the direct opposite of the wealth scale, our itinerary culminated at the inimitable Vanbrugh masterpiece, Blenheim Palace, UNESCO World Heritage Site and country-seat of the Dukes of Marlborough, built at enormous expense in the early 18th century. Queen Anne’s general, John Churchill (an ancestor of Winston), having won a series of decisive military engagements in northern Europe, was granted a prime tract of land, in generous and grateful recognition, and a vast sum of money with which to create an appropriately palatial house. Touring the house and roaming the landscaped estate could easily fill a leisurely day, on their own, so a return visit is called for.

Ian is one of just five excellent guides in the highly-skilled, mature and knowledgeable team of gentlemen, based on the northern edge of London, who operate under the direction of ‘British Heritage Chauffeur Tours’, a business launched by husband-and-wife, Michael and Pam Frye, in 1988, spotting a niche in the tourism market for a provider of luxury, bespoke, small-party (maximum 7 persons) tours within the British Isles. Although the bulk of the clientele comes from inbound tourism, as I found out, there is much more to appreciate, in my own country, than I had realised and having someone

else taking the driving-strain, while pointing out features and passing on anecdotes and tidbits of local history, made for an entertaining and fulfilling adventure. It comes as no surprise that the service is particularly appreciated by visitors from USA, but other nations are made ‘at home’, too. Ian speaks fluent Spanish, for instance, so Iberian and South American clients are well looked after. All clients are picked up from their hotels, either in London or around the south of England, in any one of the fleet of executive cars and cosseted from door-to-door, throughout. With BHCT, it is not a matter of choosing a set itinerary from a pre-planned programme but more like having a personal organiser to listen, attentively, to your whims and preferences and suggest the best way to achieve them. Previous requests have included a focus on such diverse characters as Jane Austen, taking in Bath and Winchester, the Beatles (Liverpool) and Lancelot ‘Capability’ Brown, whose landscaping arts adorn so many English stately homes, including Blenheim. The international success of TV dramas, like Sherlock, Poldark and Downton Abbey, spurs many to seek out the real/imaginary settings and locations, sometimes even stumbling on the actual cast, in production. Trips may also be to the amazing castles of Kent, an in-depth exploration of the Cotswolds and the Windrush Valley, taking in beautiful Blenheim Palace, Highclere Castle and Shakespeare’s Stratford, or even extended tours as far as Cornwall, Wales, the Lake District or Scotland. With BHCT, the clients’ wishes are paramount and, drawing on decades of experience, meticulous planning means there are no slip-ups, nor disappointing destinations, hotels and restaurants, the clients’ valuable vacation time is never wasted and satisfaction is assured. The impressive Pam Frye is in charge of client liaison and, with her heart in her work, she should be the first contact on the path towards a tourist treat guaranteed to satisfy. □ For more information visit bhctours.co.uk