



SUMMER IN THE COTSWOLDS: Scenes from lovely Lower Slaughter (left, above, below right); a typical Cotswolds country lane (below); traditional lollies in a Burford shop (above right).



Mexican standoff at LOWER SLAUGHTER

Giving way to horses is all part of the drive along Romantic Road – where Cotswold villages are prettier than their weird names suggest **BY ROB MCFARLAND**

It is the driving equivalent of a Mexican standoff. Two of us are travelling in opposite directions on a narrow, single track road. One of us will have to back up. It's a battle of wills. I've already lost two of these this morning. I need a win.

With narrowed eyes I attempt to stare down my adversary. He seems unfazed. Five seconds pass. It feels like a lifetime.

Finally, my female passenger says to me: "Aren't you going to back up?"

"No," I reply. "Why can't he?"

She sighs. "Because he's on a horse."

I begrudgingly reverse into a passing bay. And while the rider thanks me with a wave and a smile as he walks by, the horse definitely sniggers.

Despite growing up in the UK, I'd forgotten how different driving in the English countryside is to driving in Australia. We've spent the morning hugging hedges and flint walls, never

quite knowing what we'll find around the next corner. So far we've encountered a flock of sheep, two tractors and a cheery Dutch couple on a tandem bicycle. At this rate I wouldn't be surprised to exit a bend and be confronted with a pantomime horse on a penny farthing. Although, I'd draw the line at backing up for that.

We're in the Cotswolds, an irresistibly quaint area of England roughly two hours' drive east of London. Declared an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty in 1966, the region contains a network of gorgeous little towns and hamlets linked by winding, hedge-lined lanes.

From our base at the elegant Mercure Queen's Hotel in the Regency spa town of Cheltenham, we've decided to follow the Romantic Road – a circular touring route that starts and ends in Cheltenham and which includes many of the region's most scenic spots.

Our first stop is Lower Slaughter which, despite its rather unattractive name, is one of the most picturesque villages in the area. We park the car and stroll along the banks of a shallow brook that runs through the village and gaze enviously at the cute, honey-coloured limestone cottages that characterise the region. While we pause on a bridge to take in the view, a couple arrive on horseback and stop to let their horses drink from the brook. It's the sort of quintessential English scene you'd expect to find on a jigsaw.

From here we head to Upper Slaughter and the route is a reminder of why I love driving through the English countryside in summer. The road is empty, the sun is shining and the hawthorn bushes are humming with birdsong.

We drive along narrow lanes lined with dry-stone walls, spot crumbling old



HOUSES, HORSES, WATER COURSES:
Back up or else (left); cottage in
Burford (above); farmhouse across
a Canola field (below left); Bourton-
on-the-water (right and below).



farmhouses through gaps in the trees, and stumble upon stunning vistas that boast undulating fields in every shade of yellow and green.

I'd also forgotten just how densely packed rural England is. The Cotswolds measures just 40km by 145km but contains hundreds of towns and villages. It is impossible to drive more than a few kilometres without passing through some sort of settlement. I quickly have to recalibrate my sense of distance and scale. Unlike in Australia, where I so often point the car in one direction, set

smattering of pubs, shops, restaurants and tearooms, it has several established tourist attractions, including a model village and a small but well thought out motor museum.

We find a table in the beer garden of The Kingsbridge Inn, a lovely pub overlooking the River Windrush, and enjoy a leisurely lunch under a cloudless sky. I have visions of whiling away the rest of the day here, but I'm curtly reminded that we are behind schedule and there is still a lot to see.

We spend the rest of the afternoon

thank the guy who has reversed back to let me pass, I notice he's wearing an All Blacks cap.

We roll back into Cheltenham at sunset – tired, a little sunburnt (yes, I couldn't believe it either) but smiling. The day has been a delightful reminder of how pleasurable a driving holiday in the UK can be. Get out of London and keep off the main roads and you'll see a side of England that just isn't accessible by any other means.

And while the Cotswolds is an ideal candidate for this type of trip, it's an experience you can repeat all over the country. Pick any rural region – the Lake District, Cornwall and Dorset to name but three – and you'll find gorgeous scenery, centuries of history and a genuinely warm reception. **OR**

"A random turning or a curious sounding name ... can often lead to a gorgeous country pub or historic hamlet"

the cruise control and drive for eight hours straight, you just can't do that over here. Well, you could, but you'd end up in the North Sea.

Half the fun of exploring an area like this is just following your nose. A random turning or a curious sounding name on the map can often lead to a gorgeous country pub or historic hamlet. Several times we detour from our route on a whim just to see what we'll find. Places like North Nibley, Dumbleton and Guiting Power cry out to be visited.

We stop for lunch in Bourton-on-the-Water, one of the largest and most visited towns in the area. In addition to the usual

winding our way along more tree-lined lanes, crossing bridges and streams, and driving past memory-card sapping views and through countless towns and villages. Highlights include the village of Broadway, with its impressive sweeping main street; the Tudor cottage-lined streets of Winchcombe; and the achingly quaint village of Great Tew, which is worth a visit just for a drink in its charming pub, The Falkland Arms.

On the Mexican standoff front, I lose a further three during the course of the afternoon until finally my luck breaks on a laneway outside the village of Postlip. And, believe me, it is worth the wait. As I

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