

WINTER WEEKEND Hay-on-Wye

Settle in for a read at this Welsh border town known as the 'Woodstock of the mind', then set off for a walk around the Brecon Beacons. By **Jeff Robson**

Why Hay-on-Wye? If any town in the UK, or indeed the world, has become synonymous with books and bookshops, it is Hay-on-Wye. Set in farming country at the foot of the Brecon Beacons in Powys and straddling the English-Welsh border, for hundreds of years its principal claim to fame was a castle which was a focal point in the many battles fought across the Welsh Marches. But in 1961, Richard Booth inherited a nearby estate and opened a second-hand bookshop in the building that had been the fire station. His entrepreneurial spirit and genius for generating publicity (plus some shrewd bulk book purchasing in America) led to a string of further acquisitions and other booksellers following suit.

In 1988 came the first Hay Literary Festival, described by Bill Clinton as 'the Woodstock of the mind', which regularly attracts around 100,000 visitors. This year's event runs from 25 May to 4 June (hayfestival.com/home) but Hay is a haven of chain-free book-browsing and ideal base for a day's walking all year round.

How to get there and around

GWR (gwr.com) runs regular services from Paddington to Hereford, the nearest railway station. The T14 Stagecoach South Wales service (Monday-Saturday) and the 39A operated by Yeomans Travel (Sundays and Bank Holiday Mondays) run regularly from Hereford to the centre of Hay. Journey times are around an hour. During the festival, a shuttle bus service operates. Information on timetables is available at traveline.cymru. The town is eminently walkable once you're there.

Drop your bags

The Swan Hotel on Church Street is a Grade II listed Georgian building in the heart of the town. The atmosphere is warm and inviting, with wood-burning stoves in the bar areas. The 19 rooms are newly refurbished, elegant but cosy.

The Garden Room – the main dining space – has a grand fireplace and full-length windows offering views out



to the surrounding countryside. Families and dogs are welcome. Lunches and dinners offer classic dishes such as smoked salmon and dill fishcake or honey mustard gammon terrine to start, followed by Herefordshire steak and lemon-baked salmon for mains. The 1812 Bar and the Market Bar offer lighter options but the accent is still on fresh local produce. Breakfasts are hearty if you are preparing for a serious walk or a full day's browsing. Doubles from £145 (swanathay.co.uk)

Bookshops are the principal attraction for visitors; below, the Baskerville Hotel
VISIT WALES, GETTY



night, its history as a Norman fortress, Jacobean manor house and Victorian aristocrat's residence are all in evidence in its new incarnation as an arts centre, education and exhibition space and museum of the area. The views from the Tower may be somewhat obscured on a rainy day, but there is also a warm, inviting café and – of course – a bookshop. Tucked away on nearby Lion Street the Hay Distillery (haydistillery.com) brews award-winning craft gin which you can sample in its cosy bar.

A drink by the fire

The Blue Boar on Castle Street is family-run and family-friendly, with food ranging from toasted sandwiches to main meals. The Old Black Lion (oldblacklion.co.uk) on the site of the Castle's Lion Gate is rumoured to have had Oliver Cromwell himself as a guest during the Civil War siege of the castle. It has been a Good Food Award for Gastro Pubs winner two years running and also offers jazz nights and B&B accommodation. Kilverts Inn and Hotel on the Bull Ring (kilverts.co.uk) is named after the clergyman whose diaries detailed 19th-century life in rural Powys. It was also one of the event sites at the original Hay Festival.

Dinner time

Hay's restaurant scene runs from the Michelin-starred Chapters (chaptershayonwye.co.uk) to tapas at Tomatitos (haytomatitos.co.uk) and contemporary Indian cuisine at Red Indigo (redindigo.co.uk).

The Three Tuns (three-tuns.com) is a prime spot for an evening drink, but also serves an Italian-inspired evening menu. The accent is on local produce, with a Hay charcuterie board among the starters and mains including Ragstone goat's cheese pizza with butternut squash and spinach.

Winter walks

There are walks to suit all levels of fitness. The 177-mile (285km) Offa's Dyke Path runs through Hay (nationaltrail.co.uk) and Hay to Knighton is a 25km (15-mile) route with the Hergest Ridge as the climax. On the eastern edge of the Brecon Beacons, the Hay Bluff and Lord Hereford's Knob is a muddy, 9.2km circular trail from the Hay Bluff car park, taking in the highest peak in the Black Mountains. A gentler stroll is the 3km River and Rail Circular Walk, from the Oxford Road car park. See visitwales.com.

Browse the shops

Naturally, the bookshops are the main attraction and each one is a bibliophile's dream. The Cinema Bookshop (haycinemabookshop.co.uk) is the quirkiest location, in a former picture house. Booth's Bookshop (boothbooks.co.uk), the converted fire station where it all began, has a cinema as well as one of the most elegant frontages in town and acres of wood panelling and shelving, plus reading areas and a café. The town's other shops all share the same individual, independent spirit. The Old Electric Shop on Broad Street (oldelectric.co.uk) sells clothing, furniture and homeware as well as (naturally) books. The Welsh Lavender Farm (welshlavender.com) behind the ornate Victorian clock tower in the High Town area offers luxurious skincare products, while the Hay Deli on Lion Street (haydeli.co.uk) is ideal for grabbing some fresh local produce to take home.

Cosy cafés

Shepherds Parlour (shepherdsparlour.com) is busy, convivial and renowned for its locally made sheep's milk ice cream. If that isn't quite to your taste on a winter's day, the toasted sandwiches are substantial cockle-warmers – but leave room to accommodate something from the array of cakes and pastries for dessert.

The Granary on nearby Broad Street (thegrinaryhay.co.uk) is bustling and dog-friendly. The Cosy Café is licensed and has an all-day brunch menu; you can also book self-catering accommodation in the town through them (cosyretreats.co.uk).

Rainy day refuges

Hay Castle (haycastletrust.org) dominates the town's landscape and is as much a local success story as the bookshops. Bought by Richard Booth in the 60s, it was badly damaged by fire in 1977 but has now been restored and opened to the public last summer. Built, according to legend, by a giantess in a



THREE THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT KNOW ABOUT HAY-ON-WYE

- 1) One of Richard Booth's most bizarre, and successful, publicity stunts was declaring Hay independent in 1977. He crowned himself king (with crown jewels made from plumbing equipment) and made his horse prime minister.
- 2) Hay is twinned with Timbuktu, in recognition of the Malian city's priceless collection of scholarly Islamic manuscripts.
- 3) The nearby Baskerville Hall, now a hotel, and local legends of a ghostly hound said to presage disaster, are thought to have partly inspired Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's most famous Sherlock Holmes story.



The crate beyond

Lonely Planet's **Tony Wheeler** tours the spectacular dive sites and archaeological wonders of French Polynesia on a cruise with a difference

The *Aranui 5* is undoubtedly the most famous cruise ship in the South Pacific. Except it's not a cruise ship. It looks like the weird offspring of a cargo freighter and a passenger liner for a reason. From the bow back to the bridge, the story is clearly cargo. There are stacked containers, a curious mix of goods (the odd smaller boat, even a Land Rover) plus an assortment of forklift trucks and cranes to shift it all around. Then, from the bridge back to the stern, it suddenly becomes a gleaming white cruise ship.

Earlier versions of the *Aranui* were strictly cargo until, in the 80s, the *Aranui 1* added passenger cabins. The latest iteration can carry up to 254 passengers. Every month, she sails out of Papeete, the capital of Tahiti, making her way through the low-lying atolls of the French Polynesian Tuamotus on a two-week voyage, stopping at six of the spectacularly mountainous islands of the Marquesas.



Shuffling the deck

What do you do on a French Polynesian cargo ship? You certainly spend some time watching the cargo activity. At every port, the crew leapt into action well before we arrived, shifting the loads around to rearrange the payload from above and below decks.

At only three of our 10 stops did we tie up docks; the slide-in-sideways docking operation at the island of Ua Pou certainly deserved a round of applause. At the other seven stops we dropped anchor offshore and the *Aranui's* barges were craned off and loaded with goods to carry ashore. Docking at Ua Pou may have been impressive, but anchoring at Ua Huka was the real manoeuvring feat of the circuit: Invisible Bay is the perfect name for the narrow entrance into the port of Vaipaea.

Once ashore, there was history, Polynesian and European. Hiva Oa features Paul Gauguin's grave, a museum dedicated to his artistic life and a reproduction

of his House of Pleasure. The island also has the grave – and a museum – of the Belgian singer Jacques Brel who lived here 70 years later. There was birdlife, particularly on Ua Huka, the one inhabited island which has managed to stay free of invading black rats and as a result is still home to endemic bird species.

Underwater, the Tuamotu atolls offer some of the finest scuba diving in the Pacific. I had time to join a dive when we paused at the huge Rangiroa atoll, where divers often comment to their dive log: "The most sharks I have ever seen on a single dive." Friendly reef sharks, that is.

When it comes to local island history, the stone tiki figures of the Marquesas are clearly related to their larger Polynesian brethren, the gigantic moai figures of Easter Island. Visits to archaeological sites featured regularly on our journey, including the Te I'ipona archaeological site on Hiva Oa with the islands' biggest tiki collection. An extraordinarily energetic drumming and dancing group welcomed us to the Kamuihei site on Nuku Hiva, grass skirts flying, tattoos rippling, underlining another Polynesian Pacific connection – the Kiwi All Blacks' rugby haka being perhaps the best-known example.

There were enough archaeological sites that at several islands you could get away from the larger group and make your own discoveries. I hired a car in Atuona and drove to the nearby Taaoa site with a sadly, lonely tiki brooding under a giant banyan tree. At Ua Huka, I climbed up to the Meae Meiaute site to meditate with three rarely visited tikis, gazing down at the village of Hane on the coast. At the village of Omoa on Fatu Hiva, there was time to seek out a wonderful collection of petroglyphs just outside the village, images of fishes and faces carved into a rock face.

"This is magic," one passenger said to me as we gazed back at our final view of that Marquesan bay before starting back to Tahiti. It was hard to disagree.

The *'Aranui 5'* (above) departs for a two-week voyage around the Marquesas islands every month; locals welcome guests with a haka (inset left)

A 12-day Discover the Marquesas Cruise on board 'Aranui 5' costs from €4,623pp (£4,074) full-board with excursions. Flights extra. aranui.com

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And don't miss the chance to visit the Luxor home of archaeologist Howard Carter, who discovered Tutankhamun's tomb. Here, his scribbled notes can be found among his personal belongings.



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