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Cotswolds' Top 10

Here are just some of the highlights of this quintessentially English area of rural Britain, which is peppered with stone villages tucked into lush river valleys and graced with elegant, historic towns



▲ **Gloucester.** Renowned for its sublime cathedral, other highlights include a fascinating waterways museum and historic docks. See page 21.



▲ **Cheltenham.** This town, which is noted for its specialist shopping, proudly shows off its Regency splendour, best seen in the Prom. See page 62.



▲ **Westonbirt, The National Arboretum.** The stunning arboretum was planted in the 19th century and is a celebration of trees from around the world. See page 28.

▶ **Cirencester.** Roman settlement meets 21st-century bustling market town. Visit the museum of Roman antiquities and then hit the speciality shops. See page 48.





▲ **Sudeley Castle.** A romantic setting for hundreds of years of history, Sudeley Castle is also renowned for its award-winning gardens. See page 66.



▲ **Snowshill Manor.** All you could wish for from a typical Cotswold-stone manor house, surrounded by gardens inspired by the Arts and Crafts Movement. See page 69.



▲ **Stratford-upon-Avon.** For lovers of all things Shakespearean, the town is a shrine to the immortal bard. See page 74.

▼ **Chipping Campden.** This is one of the most beautiful of the Cotswold small towns, with a totally unspoilt high street. See page 79.



▼ **The Slaughters.** These two idyllic Cotswold villages are almost too beautiful to be true, pure architectural and rural bliss. See page 91.



▼ **The Cotswold Way.** Stretching 102 miles (164km) along the Cotswold escarpment, this long-distance footpath can be joined at several points along the way. See page 53.



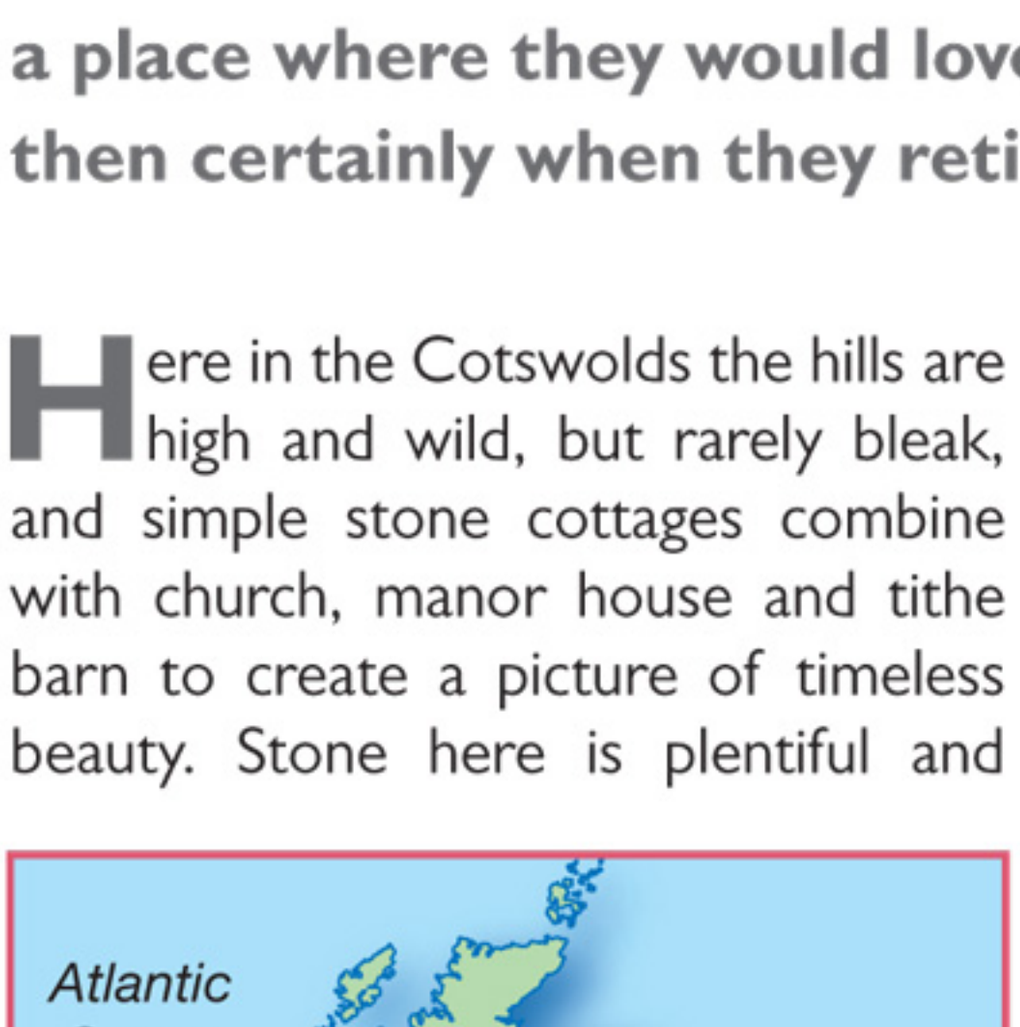
An aerial view of Painswick village on a summer's day

Overview

Cotswolds' Rugged Harmony

To many people, the Cotswolds is the essence of England, a place where they would love to live – if not immediately, then certainly when they retire.

Here in the Cotswolds the hills are high and wild, but rarely bleak, and simple stone cottages combine with church, manor house and tithe barn to create a picture of timeless beauty. Stone here is plentiful and it is this stone that gives the region its character, creating a harmonious landscape of fields bounded by dry-stone walls, churches with majestic towers, opulent town houses, stately homes and humble cottages with lichen-patched walls beneath steeply pitched roofs of limestone tile.



LOCATION AND TOPOGRAPHY

Stone also defines the boundaries of the Cotswolds. The region's creamy white oolitic limestone constitutes a distinctive geological feature. The Cotswold Hills were formed from limestone created by the accumulation of shelly debris beneath the warm, shallow Midlands Sea that covered much of west-central England in ancient geologi-

cal times. This thick compressed raft of calcium carbonate was later thrust up by tectonic pressure to create a tilted sheet running southwest to northeast.

To the north, west and south this sheet forms a cliff-like escarpment running from Mickleton, near Stratford-upon-Avon, southwards to Wotton-under-Edge, near Bath. Walkers can follow the length of the escarpment along the Cotswold Way, a long-distance footpath designated in 1970. Its highest point, on Cleeve Hill, north of Cheltenham, rises to 1,040ft (317 metres). The edge is littered with prehistoric hillforts, burial mounds and the remains of ancient quarrying. The limestone grassland that tops these hills is rich in wild flowers, including rare orchids, which are festooned with butterflies.

Off the main roads you will descend into wooded valleys with houses clustered around village greens, ancient churches and welcoming pubs. Many of the settlements in the Cotswolds are tucked into hidden hollows and

Cotswold stone houses in Guiting Power.





The tall spikes of the 'Cotswold Queen' Verbascum, growing in a cottage garden.

valleys where they are invisible to anyone travelling on the high roads. The lanes here are narrow and twisty, often no more than a farm track, and it is advisable to have a detailed map to hand.

The prettiest Cotswold villages lie along the valleys of the Churn, Coln and Leach, the Eye, the Dikler and the Ampney Brook, the Windrush, the Frome and the many other brooks and streams that spring up in these hills to drain eventually into the Thames, Severn and Avon rivers. Many of these are misfit valleys (valleys that are very wide in proportion to the small streams that now flow through them), and were created by the meltwaters that flowed across the Cotswolds as the Midlands glaciers began to break up towards the end of the last Ice Age, 10,000 years ago.

Once the glaciers were gone, the streams shrank to a fraction of their original size and various settlements began to grow up along the sheltered valley sides. These provided natural terracing, fertile soils and shelter from the wind and snow of a harsh Cotswolds' winter. In several places in the Cotswolds you can still gain a real feel for the enclosed nature of the landscape, the sense of inhabiting a secret magic world cut off from the rest of civilisation.

ECONOMY

The Romans introduced the distinctive long-woolled breed of sheep known as the Cotswold Lions, on which the subsequent prosperity of the region was based. Cotswold wool had already gained a Europe-wide reputation by the 11th century, and by the 14th century it was being exported to Flanders, Spain and Italy. Wool wealth paid for the churches of the Cotswolds, the majestic abbeys (many, such as Cirencester, erased from the face of the earth during the 16th-century Dissolution of the Monasteries) and the fine houses of the merchants in Cirencester, Chipping Campden, Painswick and North-

Guide to coloured boxes

Eating
Fact
Green
Kids
Shopping
View

This guide is dotted with coloured boxes providing additional practical and cultural information to make the most of your visit. Here is a guide to the coding system.

Preserving the beauty

Laurie Lee, author of *Cider with Rosie* (1959), was lucky enough to be born near Slad, in 1914, where he spent most of his life. In 1995, two years before he died, he led a campaign to prevent the construction of a housing estate in his precious 'jungly, bird-crammed, insect-hopping valley'. Lee observed that the Cotswolds was 'easy to take for granted until you went away and discovered that the whole world was nothing like so special'.

leach. The Cotswolds continued to be a centre for textile production well into the early 20th century, with mills lining the banks of fast-flowing streams at Blockley, Chalford, Stroud and Nailsworth.

Taxation, combined with competition from South America, Australia and New Zealand, caused the Cotswold sheep industry to go into sharp decline in the 19th century, and the Cotswold Lion breed was only just rescued from extinction by a small group of enthusiasts who formed the Cotswold Sheep Society in 1892. Today you can see Cotswold Lions and other rare breeds at the Cotswold Farm Park, and see wool being spun and woven at the Cotswold Woollen Weavers.

The Cotswolds remains an agricultural region but it has also become glamorous through 'horsiculture', with the profitable sports of polo and eventing entrenched in the area, bringing the rich and famous. Landowners have been quick to capitalise on the phenomenon, with events throughout the summer at Cirencester Park, Badminton and Gatcombe Park, home to the Princess Royal. The novelist Jilly Cooper, who lives in Bisley, captured brilliantly this side of life in the Cotswolds in her comic novels *Polo*, *Riders*, *Rivals* and *Jump*.

THE FUTURE OF THE COTSWOLDS

Another important aspect of the economy in the Cotswolds is tourism. It is a struggle to maintain a balance between protecting the natural habitats and preserving the villages and towns in the region (see page 60) and providing the millions of visitors a year the infrastructure they require. Traffic and litter alone cause constant problems. In 2010, Cotswold District Council adopted a 'Going Green' policy to promote sustainable tourism in the area (see page 119).

It is clear tourism plays a major role in sustaining the Cotswolds local economy, generating around £1 billion a year and without it many regional businesses would die. Despite the outstanding efforts of the Cotswolds Conservation Board, tourism continues to put a strain on its survival as a unique environment.

Limestone rock formation known as The Devil's Chimney, on Leckhampton Hill.

