

Visiting the Cotswolds: A Guide to What, When, Where and How

Why visit the Cotswolds?

A very good question..... The Cotswolds lies on the western side of England with the majority of it in the county of Gloucestershire which is situated between the major cities of Bristol (to the south) and Birmingham (to the north). The Cotswolds is one of the largest Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty in England stretching some 100 miles from Chipping Campden in the north all the way to the city of Bath south of Bristol. It is a popular tourist destination for both domestic and overseas visitors who come here to “escape” from the humdrum of bustling city life. Indeed the Cotswolds became well known towards the end of the 19th century when the “arts and crafts” movement became established in the region. This was an attempt by some people to “stand up” against the industrialisation that had come to dominate life in the mid to late 1800s and to promote a return to the “traditional” skills and ways of making things. You will find the influence of this arts and crafts movement all across the Cotswold region.

The Cotswolds is home to some of the most iconic English landscapes. Ask anyone who does not live in the UK to describe typical English countryside and 999 people out of 1000 will describe something that is readily found in the Cotswolds region. From gently rolling hills, large fields of crops, sheep and cattle, delicately winding rivers and streams to the classic Cotswold villages virtually unchanged from a time when life was very different (and some may say, better!) than it is today. All this, and much more, in a region that is accessible by both vehicle and on foot helps make the Cotswolds a place of relaxation, timelessness, and beauty that is hard to match in any other part of the UK.

*Cotswold Photography Tours exists to help share the whole Cotswolds experience with visitors. Our unique approach to offering tours means that we can take you to the places that you might expect to visit on a trip to the Cotswolds AND take you to some of the places you might not and that no other tour company would visit. **Why?** Because we emphasise the photographic aspect of touring the Cotswolds and that encompasses a lot more than just the well-known Cotswold villages visited by every tour company out there. **How do we do this?** Because we know the Cotswolds. After nearly 40 years of wandering round and photographing the Cotswolds we know how to escape the crowds even in summer; we understand that great photographs can be had in the least likely of locations where others see “nothing”; and we also recognise that if you are a “one off” visitor then you will want to see the “classic Cotswolds” that just have to be seen!*

The information contained here provides general guidance on some of the factors you may wish to consider when planning your visit to the Cotswolds and when considering booking on one of our superb Cotswold Photography Tours. The information is based on our experience of living and working in the Cotswolds for over 50 years but is intended only for guidance. We would direct you to the relevant tourism institutions or hospitality sectors for more specific information eg on current accommodation, availability and prices to enable you to plan your Cotswolds stay in detail.

1. When to visit the Cotswolds.

The short answer to this is: anytime! The Cotswolds has its own magic in every season and it's very much personal taste as to which you prefer. One of the key things is the weather – this is the UK after all – so here's an overview of some factors to consider season by season:

- * the main tourist period is from April (Easter) to September peaking in July and August. During this period some places in the Cotswolds (for example Bourton-on-the-Water, Stow-on-the-Wold, Broadway) can become extremely busy. Booking (a good way) ahead for these periods is virtually essential.
- * things are much quieter during the winter months, but equally there is less going on around the Cotswolds. That being said, December and the Christmas holiday period can be busy in the Cotswold villages as each puts on its own Christmas festivities. If you enjoy exploring and photographing during quieter periods and are not so fussed by the weather then there is a lot to be said for visiting in the late November through to March period.
- * in general the weather is extremely variable in the UK at all times of year but this makes a visit here more exciting! Here's a run-down of the pros and cons of each season in the Cotswolds:

Winters in the Cotswolds tend to be mild, often wet or damp and generally quite cloudy. This will be punctuated by (usually short) spells of much colder, brighter weather. Overnight frosts are possible from late October but snow has become less common over the last 40 years and heavy, disruptive snow fall is rare (the last was the winter of 2010-2011). Nonetheless, the Cotswolds, because of its elevation, will often get a dusting of the white stuff at some point over the winter and this is most likely to occur from January through early March. From a photographic point of view the winter can be the best and the worst time depending on your photographic interests! The Sun is low in the sky all day (around the solstice the Sun struggles to an altitude of 14 degrees above the horizon at midday) which means you can landscape photograph all day! The downside is that from early November to the end of February the daylight lengths are SHORT! In December the Sun rises around 08.15 and sets around 15.45. On a dull winter day you will be lucky to get 6 hours of reasonable daylight. On the other hand if you want to try some astrophotography out in the Cotswolds, this is the time of year to do it!

Spring in the Cotswolds has tended to arrive earlier in recent years. By mid February (or even earlier some years) the first of the Spring flowers are appearing. Unless we are hit with a cold snap in March conditions start to become much more pleasant and daylight lengths increase to near 12 hours. However, days can be windy and chilly with frequent showers and areas of low pressure bringing unsettled conditions across the Cotswolds. By April the place is a bustle of new life – both plant and animal – and this is a great time to be out and about exploring the Cotswolds. Easter triggers the start of the new tourist season and during the Easter break popular villages in the Cotswolds can become very busy. Photographically this is probably the second best time of year to be in the Cotswolds (the best, in my opinion, is the Autumn). There is an increasing chance of good outdoor conditions and days can be pleasantly warm from mid-March onwards with temperatures occasionally reaching 20+ °C especially as April advances. That being said, conditions at this time of year are still very variable and can change dramatically from day to day. Snow is still possible at any time in April (although it will not last for long) as are overnight frosts so you need to come prepared for “all seasons” if you are visiting in the Spring. But of course all this

can make for some exceptional photography!

Summer in the Cotswolds is often idyllic although conditions can still be quite variable especially in May and early June when it can sometimes be hot (above 28C) for a few days but then within 24 hours be back to highs of 13 or 14C. By late June and into July and August conditions tend to be more stable and, although it may not be hot and sunny, daytime temperatures usually make it to at least 20C with night temperatures rarely below 10-12C.

The great thing about the summer period in the Cotswolds is that daylight hours are in abundance. In June the Sun rises before 05.00 and sets around 21.30. It is light enough to see properly from about 04.15 to 22.00 at this time of year so you will certainly get your photography hours in!

The downside (depending on your viewpoint) is that the summer is the busiest tourist period and many of the well-known places in the Cotswolds will be rammed with visitors. BUT, here at Cotswold Photography Tours we help you to get the best photography all year round and with our bespoke tours we can start as early as you like, getting out in to the Cotswolds for some fabulous landscape (or village) photography before the majority of people have even crawled out of bed!

Autumn in the Cotswolds is, perhaps, the very best time to visit. September and October are characterised by pleasantly warm days with 25C plus temperatures quite possible in the first three weeks of September, gradually turning cooler as October proceeds. Evenings become fresher and can be quite damp but night frosts are rare in this part of the UK at this time although not impossible from mid-October onwards. Statistically, September is the month most likely to yield clear skies. Daylight lengths are still round 12 hours and the change to Autumn is slowly reflected in the changing colours of the landscape. It is also the harvesting period in the Cotswolds and this can provide some excellent photographic opportunities. The real Autumnal colours in the Cotswolds creep in during October. The period of best colour tends to be very short (maybe a couple of weeks) and does vary slightly from year to year depending on the weather conditions to that point. However, the generally milder / warmer climate these days means that if you want to photograph the best of the Autumn colour in the Cotswold landscape the time to visit is the last two weeks of October through to the first week or two of November. After this the November daylight hours diminish rapidly and the conditions are more likely to be dull and damp!

2. Getting to the Cotswolds

Access to the Cotswolds is reasonably good from all parts of the UK. If you are travelling from abroad you may well enter the UK by one of the London airports – Heathrow or Gatwick. There are bus services from both of these places to Gloucester and Cheltenham (the two main towns in the Cotswold area). A bus from London Heathrow to Cheltenham will take 3-4 hours typically. From Gatwick, somewhat longer.

A quicker way to get here from London is by train. Pick up the Great Western service from London Paddington rail station to Cheltenham Spa and you'll be here in just over 2 hours.

If you hire a rental car be prepared for very busy roads around London and other major cities. The two main routes out of London over to the West of England are the M40 / A40 which will bring you over to Gloucester and Cheltenham via Oxford and the M4 which is slightly to the south of the M40 and accesses Reading, Swindon, Bristol and on into Wales. The distance to Cheltenham by either route is about 100 miles but will typically take 2.5 to 3 hours.

From Gatwick you will have the delights of the M25 London orbital motorway to navigate. At the best of times this is usually a nightmare and at the worst of times is, well, a definite nightmare! From the M25 you can access both the M4 West and the M40 West.

Approaching the Cotswolds from the south you will most likely be on the M5. This comes up from Exeter (in Devon) to Bristol and then north to Gloucester and Cheltenham before continuing north to Birmingham.

Coming from the north west of the UK you will be on the M6 which then accesses the M5 just north of Birmingham and is the route to south west England and the Cotswold region. The M6 is a notoriously busy and often very congested motorway, especially around the junction with the M5 and also further north towards the Manchester area. Be prepared for any journey on this route to take much longer than you might expect!!

From north east England you will likely need to use the M1 (south) and the M42 Birmingham orbital motorway heading west to join the M5 just south of Birmingham. Like the M6, the M42 can be extremely busy and delays are not uncommon.

3. Where to stay in the Cotswolds

The Cotswolds is well geared to welcoming visitors and there is a variety of accommodation to suit various budgets. If you are on a limited budget you could do worse than look at staying in a Premier Inn or Travelodge and there are various of these usually situated close to major road access points.

Bed and breakfast (B&B) accommodation is a popular way to stay in the Cotswolds and there are some lovely B&Bs around the place. As with all accommodation it is advisable to book (well) in advance and secure your room especially if you are visiting during the main tourist season (April through September and in particular July and August).

There are plenty of (very nice) hotels in and around the Cotswolds. Some of these can be very pricey, especially for summer stays and you will typically find these more up-market hotels in the larger Cotswold villages such as Bourton-on-the-Water, Stow-on-the-Wold and Moreton-in-Marsh.

Holiday lets and cottage rentals are another option and these can be found across the Cotswolds. Book well in advance especially if you want something a bit more luxurious and / or of a traditional Cotswolds nature.

Finally, for those on a serious budget there is the camping option. There are a few camp sites around the Cotswolds with varying degrees of amenities including sites offering the relatively recent fad of "glamping". Be aware that even the camp sites tend to get booked up fully quite early on especially for the school summer holiday period (mid-July through end of August).

We have a limited selection of some accommodation in the Cotswolds on our "Accommodation in the Cotswolds" page of our website. This is by no means a definitive list and is limited to the more major village areas. Cotswold Photography Tours has no vested interest or relationship with any specific hotels, B&Bs or other accommodations and we leave the judgement about suitability to you!

4. Information about the Cotswolds

You can find out more information about the Cotswolds, accommodation, things to do and seasonal events occurring in the region on various websites. A small selection of reputable sites is below (in no particular order).

www.visitengland.com *definite check out if you are visiting England*

www.cotswolds.com *all about the Cotswolds!*

www.visitcotswolds.co.uk

www.cotswolds.info *all manner of information about visiting the Cotswolds*

www.thecotswoldsguide.com

www.cotswoldsaonb.org.uk/