

Secrets of Somerset

Juliet Dennis uncovers the hidden stories that lie in the countryside around Bath

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If you think you know the countryside around Bath, think again. Famed for its Roman baths, medieval heritage and stately Georgian architecture, there are, in fact, a host of secret gems worth exploring in the area – which even the locals may not know about.

Around & About Bath, which specialises in day tours in and around the city, gave us a flavour of these little-known treats

on its Stonehenge & Secret Somerset tour. Managing director Jules Mittra's comprehensive knowledge of the region's geography and history is outstanding – perfect for clients seeking a fact-filled, in-depth tour that goes beyond standard sightseeing. For customers who think they've seen and done it all, this could be the carrot to tempt them to revisit this region of southwest England.

▶ SETTING OFF

Former history teacher Jules picked the two of us up from the Apex Hotel, Bath's newest and biggest convention hotel (*Tried & Tested*, page 73).

It was just us and a lovely couple from the US, and Jules was happy to tweak the tour so we could stay longer at places if we wanted to, and gave us the choice of finishing the day with either afternoon tea in an

English garden or at an ancient coaching inn.

He genuinely wanted to make the tour suit us – we definitely weren't numbers on a bus – and he was engaging in a way that made the tour not only enjoyable but also hugely educational, even for my husband Nick, who hails from Somerset and knows a thing or two about the history of the region.

Half the fun for Nick was





It's perfect for clients seeking a fact-filled, in-depth tour that goes far beyond standard sightseeing

LEFT: Juliet and Nick at Stonehenge

RIGHT: River Avon

SECRET STOPS

Without giving too much away – this is billed as a mystery tour – we stopped for lunch at a 600-year-old coaching inn in a remote spot in Somerset. There wasn't another tourist in sight as we pulled up near the inn, originally built as a rest stop for coaches on their way to London, set in a chocolate-box village of winding streets and ancient architecture.

History oozes out of every corner here, with a local manor house that was once home to the Asquith family. We paused to chat to a lady selling crockery and bric-a-brac on the roadside, before strolling inside the inn for fish and chips and local ale.

There was more history in store, with a stop at a crumbling 14th-century castle set in a quiet, rural village where, once again, we appeared to be the only visitors. It felt like we were seeing the Somerset overlooked by



the tourist trail as Jules regaled us with intriguing tales of the castle's rich, and somewhat disputed, heritage.

We finished the day with full bellies and a list of places we'd happily go back to, but as for the rest of the stops on the tour, we're sworn to secrecy – you'll have to go on one yourself to find out what's in store!

Book it: Around & About Bath offers a range of small-group tours and is sold by operators including McKinlay Kidd. New tours include Stourhead, Bishops & Cathedrals, and Potter, Pride & Prehistory. Prices depend on group size, but cost £175 per person on average including lunch, entry fees, drinks, taxes and transport. aroundandaboutbath.com

Tried & Tested

APEX CITY OF BATH HOTEL

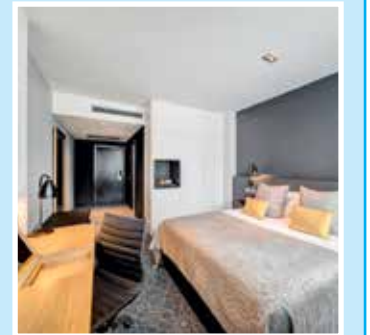
As city centre hotels go, the four-star Apex City of Bath Hotel is a great choice. It's large and modern, but what it lacks in old-world charm (and there's plenty of that in Bath), it makes up for with modern, well-equipped rooms, a buzzing bar, impressive furnishings, gym, underground swimming pool and spa and, from our room at least, a lovely view over Bath's Georgian rooftops.

It is the newest and largest hotel in the city, with 177 bedrooms, including family rooms, and a conference room for up to 400 delegates. All rooms feature large walk-in showers, baths and Elemis toiletries – plus the view from the balcony was a bonus!

It's just minutes from the city

centre on the corner of James Street West and Charles Street, with Bath's shops, restaurants, cinema and Thermae Bath Spa a stone's throw away.

Book it: Room-only rates start at £109 Sunday-Thursday or £139 on Friday and Saturday. B&B rates are £125 or £155. apexhotels.co.uk



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The best of Bath

STAND-UP PADDLEBOARDING IN THE CITY

- Strolling through the city centre is all well and good, but for sightseeing with a difference, try stand-up paddleboarding with activity operator Original Wild. Private tours along the River Avon offer an alternative view of the city and landmark Pulteney Bridge, with a few local stories along the way. Private tours from £35 per person.
- originalwild.com



COOK UP A VEGAN FEAST

Demuths Cookery School offers fun vegan cooking classes in a host of international cuisines, from its fully-equipped kitchen in the centre of Bath. A full-day Gourmet Vegan Cookery class on March 16 costs £180. demuths.co.uk



CHOW DOWN AT THE CHEQUERS

It's just a short walk from the Royal Crescent, but you'd never know that inside this unassuming Georgian building, set on a residential backstreet, lies one of Bath's best gastropubs. The Chequers has the atmosphere of an old-fashioned pub, top service and exquisite food to boot. thechequersbath.com



SAY CHEERS

Step inside a veritable gin palace at The Canary Gin Bar, which stocks 230 types of gin – some from its on-site distillery – on its 'Gin Austen' menu. For wine lovers, suggest Le Vignoble, in the centre of Bath's shopping quarter. thebathgincompany.co.uk

PICK UP A SOUVENIR

Bring home your very own bauble with a glass-blowing demo from Bath Aqua Glass, where you can chat to expert glassblowers and have a go at mastering the art yourself. Classes are daily, from £15.50 per adult. Booking in advance is advised. bathaquaglass.com



PICTURES: VISITBRITAIN/SIMON WINNALL, STEPHEN SPRAGGON, ROB WICKS/EAT PICTURES

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Guernsey Food Events

Tasty Guernsey Seafront Sundays
2 June, 28 July, 18 August, 1 Sept

Tennerfest
October – Mid November

#GreatThings