

An Englishman's home

Studley Castle offers a quintessential countryside escape a stone's throw from Stratford-upon-Avon, finds **Natalie Marsh**

For someone who didn't want to shoot the animals, that's three crows she's shot now," I heard someone say behind me. Not real crows, I must add. I'm staring down the barrel of a gun, one eye closed, arms supporting the weight of my weapon, finger about to squeeze the trigger.

I'd hit a bullseye, struck some medals, and the only things left standing were shaped like animals. So I took a shot at one – and the crow-shaped metal target flopped backwards.

Indoor shooting is one of the activities available for guests staying at Studley Castle in Warwickshire, the newest addition to Warner Leisure Hotels' portfolio. With Stratford-upon-Avon to the south and Birmingham to the north, Studley Castle is surrounded by quintessential English villages, rolling hills and winding country lanes.

As a self-confessed city girl, spending a weekend deep in the English countryside isn't something I'm that familiar with. However, it didn't take me long to get on board with the idea of leaving my hectic London life behind for a weekend, and appreciating all that the Warwickshire countryside had to offer.

COUNTRY LIFE

Studley Castle sits on the Arden Way, a 26-mile circular trail that takes walkers through some beautiful countryside. We dug out our hiking boots and took to the woodland path, which passes through quaint villages such as Alcester and Henley-in-Arden. The latter's high street is home to charming cafes, charity shops ➤

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STUDLEY CASTLE

The Grade II-listed Studley Castle was given a £50m makeover when Warner Leisure Hotels took over, opening the property earlier this year. The building retains its history and charm, but has a new look, with quirky decorations and ornaments in every corner of the hotel.

Our room was spacious, with the added bonus of a balcony overlooking the beautiful Warwickshire countryside. The hotel's main restaurant, which doubles up as the evening entertainment venue, offers a huge variety of delicious food catering to every taste. Facilities include a cinema room, luxurious spa with top-class treatments, and a gym. Guests can also try their hand at activities such as yoga and laser clay-pigeon shooting. Pashley bikes are available to borrow, allowing guests to explore the castle's grounds and the local area at their leisure.



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Shakespeare's New Place; Natalie (right) and her mum at Studley Castle; Purity Brewing Company; Avon

PICTURES: The Shakespeare Birthplace Trust/James Kerr; VisitBritain/Lee Beel; Jake Nash; Warner Leisure Hotels



and two churches. The heritage centre takes visitors on a journey through the history of the village from Norman times to the present day. There's even an Anderson air raid shelter outside.

Henley-in-Arden is also famous for its ice cream. Served since the 1930s, Henley Ice Cream boasts around 50 flavours, and despite the lack of sunshine, I still stopped by – and can vouch for the clotted cream and blackcurrant.

Beer drinkers will feel at home in Warwickshire. Near Alcester village is the Purity Brewing Company, based in the grounds of a working farm; we were even greeted by the farm's dogs when we drove in. Tours, which can be booked through the excursions team at Studley Castle, take place on Saturdays, and are well worth it.

We were handed half a pint of Purity beer on entry, before being shown around the brewery and learning about the beer-making process from grain to glass. We then had the chance to sample any of Purity's beverages. There's a beer for every taste, from pale and amber ales to lager – and many are labelled after the farm's animals.

Just 15 minutes from Warwick is the charming Hatton Shopping Village, where several boutiques, including a beauty and hair salon, jewellery and accessory shops, are situated inside old farm buildings. They still maintain their original signage, such as 'granary', 'hay store' and 'saddle room'. It's the ideal place to search for unique gifts, and I couldn't resist a trip to the sweet shop, where they served up some delicious homemade fudge.

SHAKESPEARE COUNTRY

Stratford-upon-Avon was the home of William Shakespeare, but for those who wish to explore the town outside its literary legacy, the town's butterfly farm is a good place to start.

There were butterflies everywhere, showing off their bright colours as they flitted around. From dazzling bright blues to tiger-print patterns in different shapes and sizes, about 2,000 reside at the farm. In separate rooms are several other animal habitats, including a huge leafcutter ant colony – watching the thousands of ants carry out their duties was nothing short of mesmerising.

But there is obviously no better place to trace Shakespeare's history than in Stratford. Visitors can tour the house he was born and grew up in, right in the centre of town, where they might also come across some of the resident actors performing scenes from his plays. A five-minute walk away is Shakespeare's New Place, where he lived for 19 years until his death. A yearly pass (£22.50 for adults and £14.50 for children) offers access to both properties, as well as three others connected to the bard and his wife, Anne Hathaway.

If recent history is more to your customers' taste, recommend a nostalgic lunch at the Fourteas Tea Room. Just up the hill from the river, it serves a wide range of teas, sandwiches and cakes. Servers are dressed in 1940s attire and the tearoom is ornately decorated with posters and trinkets from the decade. The sandwiches even come with the crusts cut off.

With enchanting villages and towns, beautiful countryside and plenty of history and culture, Warwickshire was the serene getaway I didn't know I needed. I should leave London more often. **TW**

BOOK IT

Warner Leisure Hotels offers two nights' B&B at Studley Castle from £159 per person, arriving on November 20. warnerleisurehotels.co.uk