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This Small Town in the Cotswolds Might Be the Best-kept Secret in the U.K.

Winchcombe, a real hidden gem in the U.K., is home to historic attractions, beautiful walking trails, and charming pubs.

By **Olly Beckett** | Published on December 11, 2022



Unlike some more popular locations in the U.K.'s bucolic Cotswolds, where tourists come by the busload, the main parking lot in [Winchcombe](#) has space for only one coach, and charges just £1 per day (approximately \$1.20) for cars. That £1 is exceptional value considering the various sights to see in this ancient town, which deserves a far larger audience.

PHOTO: ANDREA PISTOLESI/GETTY IMAGES

Some of the attractions here are more obvious than others, not least [Sudeley Castle](#), where Henry VIII's wife once lived and other royals have passed. Parts of the castle were constructed in the 15th century, including the chapel in which lies the remains of Queen Katherine Parr. Another of Winchcombe's grand buildings is St. Peter's Church, which is adorned with gargoyles and grotesques. On the walls, you may be able to spot the bullet marks from when the town was embroiled in the English Civil War.

Winchcombe has a proud history of rambunctiousness. The fields around town were perfect for growing tobacco — so much so that, in the 1600s, the local crop proved competitive against Virginia-grown imports. Too competitive, in fact, and with zero duties being paid to the crown. This, of course, displeased Charles II, who consequently banned British tobacco. How did the people of Winchcombe respond? By continuing to grow tobacco and fighting off soldiers sent to burn the crops.

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For a place that isn't inundated with tourists, you may be amazed to learn that Winchcombe was once a chief city of King Coenwulf, who founded an abbey here during his rule from 796 A.D. If the prevalence of their villas is anything to go by, the Romans also once fell in love with Winchcombe — you'll feel like you are Indiana Jones when you find the ruins of one villa in the depths of Spoonley Wood. Here, you can seek out a squat corrugated hut, lift the sheet of plastic on the ground, and see a well-preserved mosaic — all for free.

Some of the area's past can be found in the town's antique shops, and if you're hankering for a traditional cream tea, the [Winchcombe Antiques Centre](#) also has a cafe overlooking a typical English garden, at the end of which comes the gentle sound of the River Isbourne. According to the sign on the well-maintained riverside walk, this is one of only two rivers running continuously north (the other being the Nile).

There's more traditional fare to be experienced in Winchcombe's old pubs. A favorite of mine is the 15th-century [Lion Inn](#), thanks in part to its large open fireplace. Tourists who only visit the Cotswolds' more crowded spots will also miss out on Winchcombe's fine Indian restaurant, a deli that sells delicious local produce, and a bakery with an abundance of freshly made

off North Street lies Bull Lane, where you'll find another one of the town's gems: [Swift Studio](#).

Pop in here and you'll find at least one item among the well-curated range of locally handmade art and design that'll make a perfect gift or an adornment for your home. You may even come away with an original piece, perhaps painted by the owner/artist Guy Warner himself. "There are several galleries and shops selling local handmade crafts here," Guy told *Travel + Leisure*. "Anyone who comes to Winchcombe will often find they have the freedom to enjoy these places without the crowds, and sometimes will even be able to chat with the artists themselves."



People on a street in Winchcombe, The Cotswolds, Gloucestershire, England, United Kingdom

PHOTO: MATTHEW WILLIAMS-ELLIS/UNIVERSAL IMAGES GROUP VIA GETTY IMAGES

Just about all the shops you'll find here are independently owned by people living in Winchcombe. Archway Barn, Footlights, and Barnbury are stocked with fashion, furniture, and a cornucopia of curios. Located at the edge of town, on a site that has been producing pottery since the 1800s, Winchcombe Pottery sells stoneware pieces that are both practical and attractive.

scientists to safely gather and study this space rock, which has recently helped tell the story of where Earth's water came from. A piece of this meteorite can be seen in a special display in Winchcombe's museum, which is free to enter, donations welcome.

At 4.6 billion years old, the meteorite has, without doubt, become the oldest part of Winchcombe's history. Compared to this, the neolithic burial ground at [Belas Knap](#) seems like the recent past. Constructed around 3000 B.C., this tall hump of ground contains hidden chambers, and you can see over to Cleeve Hill, the highest point in the Cotswolds, from here. On a clear day, you may even be able to spot the hills of [Wales](#) in the far distance.



Belas Knap Long Barrow ancient monument near Winchcombe, Gloucestershire, UK

PHOTO: TIM GRAHAM/GETTY IMAGES

Belas Knap is a one-hour walk from Winchcombe up a steep hill — a theme of many walks around town. The 102-mile Cotswold Way passes through Winchcombe, as do six other long-distance trails ranging in distance from 14 to 100 miles. No wonder this town is known as the "walking capital of the Cotswolds." There's also a solid selection of shorter walks (one or two of which don't involve hills), and the information-rich [Winchcombe](#)

along the same path.

Just beyond Winchcombe are the ruins of [Hailes Abbey](#), founded in 1246 and once a center of monastic life. A little further beyond this lies the grand Jacobean mansion Stanway House, open Tuesday through Thursday during the summer, including the formal gardens that feature the largest gravity-fed fountain in the world.

In the [Cotswolds](#), honey-colored stone buildings are nestled in valleys that are a patchwork of fields and forest. Everywhere you go, you'll find quintessentially English scenes. By the time you leave Winchcombe, your camera will be full of such scenes, including the row of houses along Dent's Terrace (designed by famous architect Sir George Gilbert Scott), the hills framed by North Street, and Sudeley Castle with its verdant backdrop.



A view of Sudeley Castle nestled in a valley. Seen from the Cotswold Way National Trail, Gloucestershire, England.

PHOTO: MARC GUITARD/GETTY IMAGES

There are many more subtle subjects for your camera, too. Try and spy the balcony through the arch of St. George's House, where a Civil War cavalier was reputedly shot before escaping. Or, the steam trains puffing out of

It takes approximately three hours to drive from London to Winchcombe, and Oxford is just over an hour away. You can also take the train to nearby Cheltenham — around two hours from London — and then a 23-minute local bus to Winchcombe. For those wanting to stay a few nights, there are great accommodation options in pubs or holiday home rentals. Just don't expect to join a coach trip with hundreds of other tourists.

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