



AllWays Traveller

Stratford-upon-Avon, UK

www.allwaystraveller.com

Wills fans well and truly win me over

Known the world over as the birthplace of William Shakespeare, Stratford-upon-Avon is an historic English market town on the banks of the river Avon.

This area is known as Shakespeare country and the link with the world's greatest playwright brings visitors galore to the town.

But there is much more to enjoy in and around Stratford.

Strolling the banks of the Avon itself or, a little further out, the rolling rural Warwickshire countryside.

Using Stratford as a base, one can also get easily to Warwick, Kenilworth and Royal Leamington Spa or into the area of outstanding beauty that is the Cotswolds.

Ashley Gibbins

Managing editor
AllWays traveller

The Menzies Welcombe Hotel

The Menzies Welcombe Hotel Spa & Golf Club, Stratford-upon-Avon, which is located in 157 acres of its own parkland, is a short break destination in its own right and an excellent base for visiting Stratford.



www.discover-stratford.com/
www.shakespeare-country.co.uk



Shakespeare in good hands with this Trust



by Ashley Gibbins

It comes as no surprise to realise why Stratford-upon-Avon is one of the UK's top tourist destinations, attracting over three million visitors, from every corner of the globe, every year.

Who, after all, does not know that Stratford was the birthplace of one William Shakespeare - the Bard of Avon - who remains revered 450 years after his birth in 1564 (and death in 1616).

Still a universal relevance

As the world's pre-eminent playwright, Shakespeare's works continue to enjoy a universal relevance and a constant re-envisioning and reworking in all manner of performances worldwide.



And being able to get an idea as to where he, and his wife Anne, were born, lived and died has an enduring fascination for visitors.

On the cold February weekday I was in Stratford, I came across a large group of Chinese students and gave directions to a family of four from Russia.

I then strolled around Shakespeare's birthplace with a New Zealand couple who proudly claimed to be lifelong 'Bardaholics'.

Although I have enjoyed productions of his plays a number of countries, I decided to visit the properties managed by the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust with less than a hundred percent enthusiasm.

The cult of the celebrity, particularly one so long gone, is not really my thing and I had decided to focus my feature on Stratford despite (not because of) the Shakespeare.

The Shakespeare trail

The Shakespeare 'trail' in Stratford takes in the five houses relating to the Bard's life, which are owned and managed by the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust.

Shakespeare's Birthplace



Shakespeare's Birthplace, which was where he was born and grew up, has been a tourist attraction for over 250 years.

Shakespeare also spent the first five years of married life in this house with his wife, Anne Hathaway.

For millions of Shakespeare enthusiasts worldwide, the house is a shrine and has been visited by Charles Dickens, John Keats, Walter Scott and Thomas Hardy.

Nash's House



Nash's House was named after Thomas Nash, first husband of Shakespeare's granddaughter, and a wealthy local property owner.

It is a well preserved Tudor building and the ground floor is furnished as it would have been in Nash's day.

Next door are the foundations of New Place, which was the house bought by William Shakespeare in 1597.

It was where Shakespeare lived when he was not in London. He died here in 1616.

My plan comes unstuck



This cunning plan, or maybe obvious journalist angle, quickly came unstuck when I entered the first of the rooms in the house that was Shakespeare's birthplace.

There was Catherine, one of the many volunteers who provide the live commentary for visitors.



And rather than taking a cynical, 10 minute, scamper through the property, found myself being captivated by Catherine's knowledge of William Shakespeare, his family and the times he lived in.

This filled 25 minutes alone and, moving on found a lady dressed in Tudor costume who was equally as enthusiastic and knowledgeable about the leather goods making operation of Shakespeare's father, his prominence in the town and eventual fall from grace. Another 20 minutes well spent.



Upstairs in the house two actors were taking requests to perform parts from the Bard's plays.

And, finally, Katie, enthusiasm personified, told me how Shakespeare, as a wealthy actor and playwright, restored his father to a position of prominence in the town.

That I became completely caught up in all things Will, during my tour of the homes managed by the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, was due to the compelling enthusiasm of everyone involved.

Anne Hathaway's Cottage



This is the Hathaway family home, where Shakespeare courted his future bride Anne.

It is a thatched farmhouse with grounds and gardens, located in Shottery, a just over one mile from the town centre.

Hall's Croft



This is the home of Susanna Shakespeare and her husband, Dr John Hall.

Visitors can tour the rooms of a house befitting a wealthy physician.

There is also the chance to view a collection of apothecary's equipment and books in the doctor's consulting room and a first edition of his medical notes published in 1657.

Other places to visit



In addition, Mary Arden's House, is the family home of Shakespeare's mother and at the top end of Waterside is Holy Trinity Church, where Shakespeare was baptised and is buried.

www.shakespeare.org.uk

The Royal Shakespeare Company

The Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) is one of the world's most respected theatre companies.



The RSC, performs the plays of Shakespeare and his contemporaries, alongside new work, from its Royal Shakespeare and Swan theatres in Stratford-upon-Avon.

The two theatres attract many thousand of visitors annually.

Although theatrical performances have been staged in Stratford since at least Shakespeare's day, the first performance of a play by the Bard himself was in 1748 when Parson Joseph Greene, master of Stratford grammar school, staged Othello.

The first building erected to commemorate Shakespeare was David Garrick's Jubilee Pavilion in 1769.

There have been at least 17 buildings used to perform Shakespeare's plays since.



www.rsc.org.uk

Stratford beyond the Bard

That said, there is indeed more to this medieval market town than the birth of the greatest ever writer in the English language.



Its location on the River Avon makes Stratford a very attractive setting, particularly during nice weather.

There are river walks, ducks and swans to feed and boat hire and trips.

Strolling the streets of Stratford is also very interesting if one spends time to admire any number of medieval and other historic buildings.

And, thanks yet again to the Shakespeare connection, the flourishing visitor trade means there are some really good old English pubs, fine restaurants and quaint tea and coffee shops.

Stratford town walk



Stratford Town Walks offer daily guided walks *in Shakespeare's footsteps* from birthplace to grave and evening ghost walks.

www.stratfordtownwalk.co.uk

City Sightseeing

Hop on hop off open top, guided, bus tours of the town.

www.citysightseeing-stratford.com

Tudor World, the Falstaff Experience



Tudor World is a museum which highlights 16th century Stratford with information and authentic recreations.



The Falstaff Experience Tudor World also provides *Walking Tour with William Shakespeare*, with actors taking visitors to the Bard's birthplace, his daughter's houses, his grammar school, and local tavern and final resting place

www.falstaffexperience.co.uk

A place to stay : the Menzies Welcombe Hotel and Spa



Welcombe, built in 1866, is a Jacobean-style country mansion, which is now a stately home hotel run by the Menzies Hotel group.



It was built as a so-called calendar house, for good luck, with seven entrances, for each day of the week, 52 chimneys, 12 fireplaces and 365 windows.

The house itself is hugely impressive, with oak paneled lounge and formal, two AA rosette, dining overlooking the formal Italian gardens and water features and 157 acres of rolling English countryside beyond.



A grand staircase leads to the bedrooms which include four-poster suites.

Waking up to see the sun rising and the morning mist shimmering over rolling parkland and deer grazing was wonderful.



Those who have read my previous features will know I urge you, if staying in top notch or luxury hotels, to make the very most of them.

And so it is with the Menzies Welcombe.

Stratford Amouries



Stratford Armouries is a museum located in 86 acres of countryside, which has galleries including cannon and artillery and is currently exhibiting a collection of several thousand figures, horses, weapons and dioramas.

www.stratfordarmouries.com

Stratford Butterfly Farm



The Stratford Butterfly Farm is a delight, enabling visitors to walk among thousands of free flying butterflies and view insects and spiders (living in glass display cases).

www.butterflyfarm.co.uk

Teaching this old dog a new trick

There is also an excellent 18 hole championship golf course, which gave me the chance to take my first ever golf lesson.



I had decided that, in early middle-age (as I like to consider myself), I am going to take up golf.

There must be a reason that so many people get so passionate about the game.

I have never played but, hell, it cannot be that difficult to hit a ball with a club in the general direction I want it to go before knocking it into a hole.

I had never ridden before but managed to ranch ride a quarter horse the first time OK.

Although admittedly I had to do little more than hang on to the horn (the stump of leather on the front of the western saddle) and pull the reins to left and right every so often to get my very obliging horse to respond.

The task of steering me onto the right course, literally, was given to Matt Lilley, the PGA golf professional at the Menzies Welcome Golf Club.



Matt has degrees in both sports management and golf and six years working at the Belfrey, one of the UK's premier golf clubs behind him.

He also has patience and a sense of humour, which were also needed in good measure during my inaugural golf lesson on the clubs practice range.

Standing correctly, getting my body into the right position and holding the club as it should be held were all relatively easy.

It was doing all three at the same time and then hitting the ball proved a real bugger.

And not just hitting it, but hitting it into the air and in the right direction, rather than skewed wildly to left or right.

But with Matt's guidance and encouragement the odd ball soared majestically (a bit of journalistic licence here) and this really gave me a buzz.

The seed sown by Matt, during my first golf lesson, may not see me blossom into a future major champion.

But it has given me a glimpse of the pleasure to be had from the game and I will persevere.

Further afield

Warwick



Warwick, the county town of Warwickshire, is located further along the the River Avon from Stratford.

This country town is dominated by Warwick Castle, with the Lord Leycester Hospital and its fine mediaeval timber framed buildings, also very interesting.

www.visitwarwick.co.uk

Warwick Castle



Warwick Castle was developed from an original built by William the Conqueror in 1068.

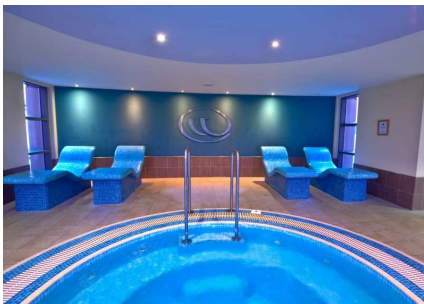
The original wooden motte-and-bailey castle was rebuilt in stone in the 12th century and then, during the Hundred Years War, the facade opposite the town was refortified, resulting in one of the most recognisable examples of 14th century military architecture.

It is also a major tourist attraction with daily tours, performances and an annual programme of special events.

www.warwick-castle.com

The Welcombe Spa

The Welcombe Spa has a calm and relaxing ambiance and all that you would expect a quality spa to offer writes Ann Mealor.



It has a large swimming pool; foot spas; four thermal rooms (a Finnish Sauna, a Caldarium, a Laconium and a Tepidarium), an Ice Fountain and Tropical and Polar Storm Showers.

I particularly enjoyed the heated loungers, which didn't look comfortable but were surprisingly soothing and relaxing.



There are also a range of body and facial treatments available using Clarins and Elemis products.

The treatment rooms are large and welcoming with flickering candles and soothing music.



The massage bed was covered with large fluffy towels making it very comfortable.

My therapist, Sophie was very knowledgeable, explained the treatment process and examined my skin to assess the products that were most beneficial for my face.

I had a 30 minute Clarins Express facial and a 30 minute back, neck and shoulder massage where Sophie, with the help of warm oil, managed to pummel away the knots in my muscles, leaving me fresh and relaxed.

All in all, a very pleasant experience.

For the fitness conscious, there is multi-purpose gym with the latest Technogym and cardio-vascular equipment.

[www. www.menzieshotels.co.uk](http://www.menzieshotels.co.uk)

More information



www.stratford-upon-avon.co.uk/
www.discover-stratford.com/
www.shakespeare.org.uk
www.shakespeare-country.co.uk

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AllWays traveller and the International Travel Writers Alliance

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AllWays

www.allwaystraveller.com

AllWays traveller provides independent travellers with a view of the world from the journalists in the International Travel Writers Alliance.



The International Travel Writers Alliance

www.itwalliance.com

The International Travel Writers Alliance is the world's largest association of professional travel journalists.



Ashley is Chief Executive of the International Travel Writers Alliance and Managing Editor of AllWays traveller