



Get away for... THE WEEKEND!

Double up on culture in Gloucester and Regency
Cheltenham for an enlightening short break

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY: Carol Kubicki

It isn't every town that celebrates the lowly pigeon. Back in 1716, a Cheltenham farmer saw pigeons pecking salt deposits at a spring on his land. Spotting the opportunity to profit from the trend for drinking mineral water to improve health, he enclosed the spa, charged a fee and advertised.

By the turn of the eighteenth century, Cheltenham Spa rivalled Bath in popularity as visitors flocked to the town. Look carefully as you walk around Cheltenham today and you might spot ornamental pigeons on gateposts and telephone kiosks.

Cheltenham is a festival town and, in the early evening, we caught the regular bus from Briarfields campsite to see the Regency buildings colourfully illuminated for Light Up Cheltenham. Our cheerful bus driver wore a lapel badge saying *Managing Director*. We thought this was a joke until he

assured us it *was* his job title, telling us, "I like to get away from my desk occasionally."

When darkness fell, we joined a lively throng admiring the landmarks bathed in pinks, greens and blues. A big wheel in Imperial Gardens offered a bird's-eye view of the handsome buildings.

Nearby Gustav Holst's statue is surrounded by images of celestial bodies, remembering that Holst first conducted *The Planets* in Cheltenham's baroque town hall.

We moved on to admire Neptune's Fountain – modelled on Rome's Trevi Fountain and also floodlit – until rain sent us running for the next bus.

Cheltenham isn't just elegant Regency buildings and spas. Earlier that day we stopped at the Jet Age Museum to learn about the town's aviation industry. This unique collection of Gloster Aircraft >

Why? ... To enjoy visiting two places with lots to offer: the attractive city of Gloucester and handsome Regency Cheltenham

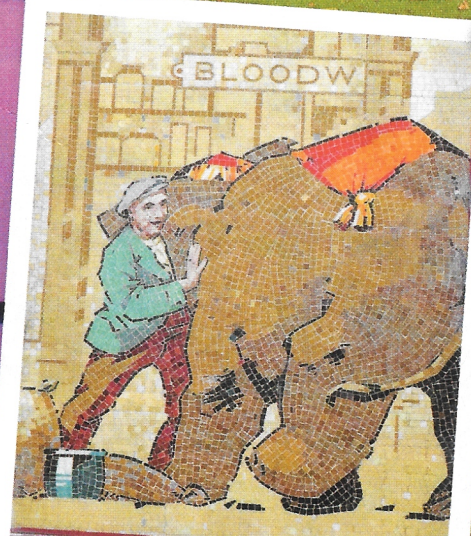


MAIN Pittville Pump Room, Pittville Park, Cheltenham*

FAR LEFT The simple Mariners Church sits among the warehouses at Gloucester Docks

BELOW LEFT The Neptune Fountain in Cheltenham is modelled on Rome's Trevi Fountain

BELOW RIGHT Colourful murals recall an elephant-related incident in Cheltenham



US AND OUR 'VAN



Carol Kubicki...

and her husband, Anthony, use their camper to pursue their hobbies of walking and cycling while exploring the historical and natural environments



2015 Devon Tempest on a 2.3-litre Renault Master, our third blue camper. They've all been called 'Blue Bus'

Company (GAC) planes is run by keen volunteers. Apparently, the company changed its name from Gloucester as nobody outside England could pronounce it.

Starting out in Cheltenham and working with Frank Whittle, GAC built the WWII Meteor jet. We could even climb ladders to reach the cockpit of the Vulcan bomber. With five of us and our guide in this stuffy place it wasn't for the claustrophobic. We each had a crew member's seat and our guide described our roles, I was in the radar navigator's seat, responsible for coordinating bombing. Easier to get into and more comfortable was the BEA Trident, the first passenger aircraft with an automatic landing system.

Listening to our guide on the Highlights Tour at Gloucester Cathedral I appreciated the craftsmanship involved in its building and the importance of royal patronage. As the guide pointed out original mason's marks, she also mentioned the current master mason, bringing to mind skills passed through generations.

This cathedral city of the Cotswolds was a religious site in Anglo-Saxon times and, after 1066, the Normans chose to make an imposing statement of conquest and build an abbey. In the thirteenth century young Henry III was crowned here and, more

importantly, Edward II was buried here in 1327, his tomb free-standing so pilgrims could circumnavigate it on their knees.

These pilgrims gave donations that funded the remodelling of the Norman abbey into a building fit for a king, full of light and adopting the latest fashions. Our guide pointed out the different architectural styles, from butterfly tracery to fan vaulting, and brought the process of rebuilding to life.

Following Henry VIII's conflict with the Roman Catholic Church in the sixteenth century, it was Edward II's tomb that saved the building from demolition and it became a cathedral. Our group gazed in awe at the medieval east window, the size of a tennis court. This was removed during WWII and stored in the crypt with sticky labels marking each piece. The damp removed these labels, so a black and white postcard was used to help reassemble the window like a jigsaw!

I have visited many cathedrals, but Gloucester is exceptional and a few hours are needed to even begin to scratch its surface. The large Lady Chapel is full of light, with delightful Arts and Crafts stained glass. The cloister, popular with film makers, has an intricate ceiling and lines of monastic study carrels. After the tour we climbed the steps to the Tribune Gallery to

INFORMATION


Regency town renowned for its festivals

 visitcheltenham.com


The Wilson is currently closed – check the website for the latest updates

 cheltenhammuseum.org.uk

For the National Waterways Museum you will find the information listed under 'Places to Visit'

 canalrivertrust.org.uk

The whole top floor of this shop is a museum dedicated to Beatrix Potter

 tailor-of-gloucester.org.uk



LEFT Cheltenham's stunning Royal Crescent



get a fresh perspective on the building.

Earlier, we'd strolled among the large Victorian warehouses at Gloucester Docks, which tell a story of trade and wealth.

We peeked inside the intimate Mariners Church – a simple and welcoming place – before visiting the National Waterways Museum. Voices of skippers and deckhands brought the rich heritage and hard work to life as they described unloading cargo and steering lines of barges in the fog and along ice-covered waterways.

We were running out of time and only glanced at the charming museum to the much-loved Beatrix Potter book, *The Tailor of Gloucester*. Visitors can explore this building that inspired the story of a tailor, his cat and some grateful mice.

Walking back to the bus stop we stumbled upon Gloucester's New Inn, a stunning timber-framed building and rare example of a medieval courtyard inn with upper floor galleries. It is said that William Shakespeare performed here and that Jane Grey was proclaimed queen from the gallery, so it would have been remiss not to pop in for a swift half!

At Briarfields, an adults-only campsite, I could watch blue tits from our pitch in the mornings and see the sinister roofline of the doughnut-shaped GCHQ (Government

Communications Headquarters) over the cherry blossom. Were its staff watching me watching the birds? In the clear evenings the site is dark enough for stargazing.

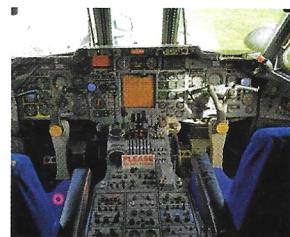
Cheltenham is easy to explore on foot and, with the help of David Elder's walking guide (see panel overleaf), we found quirky corners, pleasant parks and public art that told the town's stories. The Royal Crescent, dazzling white in the sunshine and decked with ornate wrought-iron balconies, is the backdrop to the bus station.

Nearby is a statue to Edward Wilson, a local naturalist and artist who sailed with Captain Scott in 1901 and on the 1910 South Pole expedition. Along with Scott and Bowers, Wilson died in 1912, just 11 miles from a food stash.

The Wilson, the renowned art gallery and museum named after Edward, exhibits paintings by local and international artists and has an extensive selection of Arts and Crafts furniture. I admired the beautiful pieces while Anthony pondered if he could knock up something similar at home.

The Promenade is lined with plane trees and expensive stores that continue up to Montpellier Gardens. White caryatids (sculpted armless women inspired by Greek architecture) decorate the shopfronts and add a touch of class. ➤

TOP TIPS



The Jet Age Museum can be popular and very large – motorhomes might struggle to fit into the car park, but the 94 bus passes near the entrance. The Jet Age Museum has parking for disabled and indoor exhibits are accessible on one level. jetagemuseum.org

Gloucester Cathedral has disabled parking outside and the Highlights Tour is fully accessible for wheelchairs and pushchairs

Briarfields has a bus stop at the gate with regular buses to Cheltenham and Gloucester

BELOW Gloucester Cathedral's cloisters have breathtaking fan vaulting

ESSENTIALS

HOW LONG

Three nights – that's the minimum you will need!



WHEN

We visited in February, but there is something interesting here at any time of year

HOW MUCH

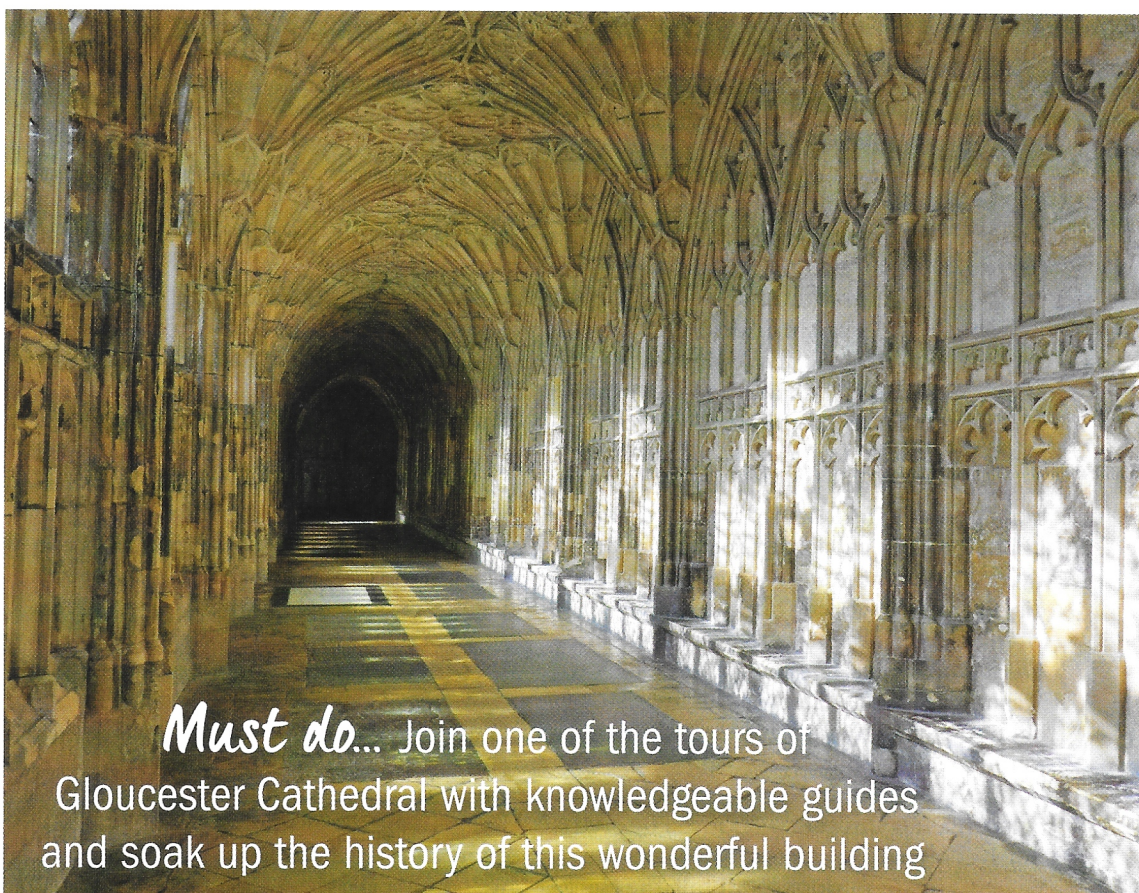
Fuel Average 34mpg (380 miles).....£66

Site fees.....£80

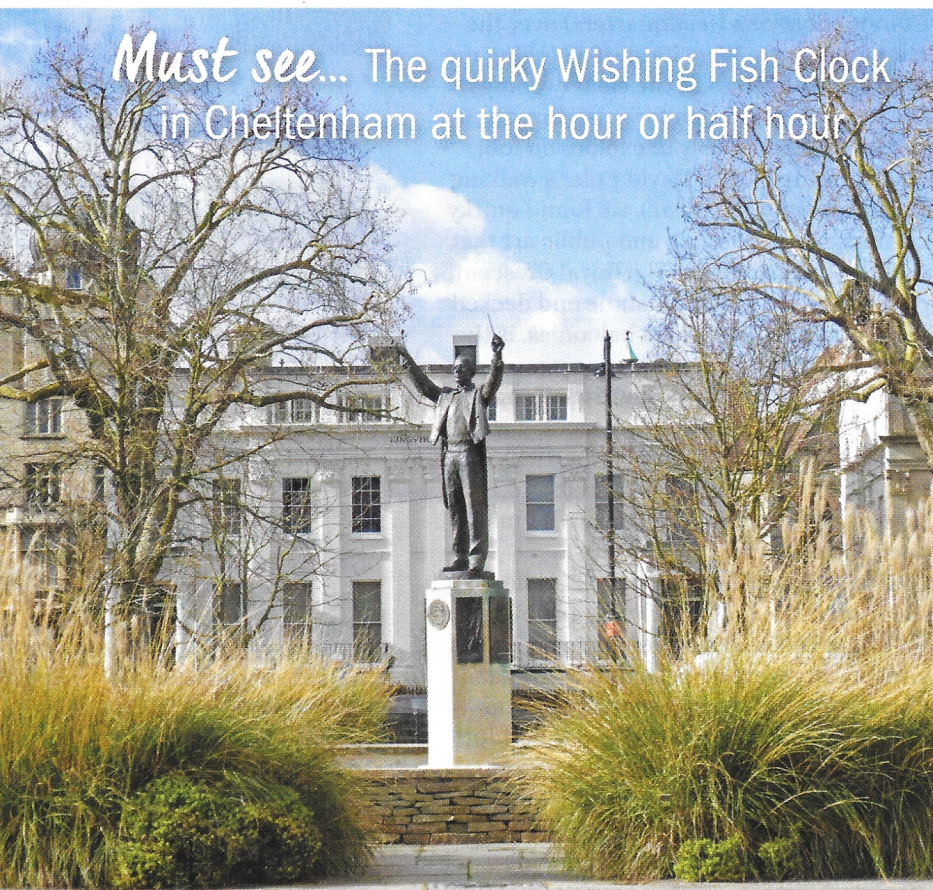
Entrance fees Two adults: Highlights Tour Gloucester Cathedral, National Waterways Museum (The Jet Age Museum and The Wilson are both free, although donations are welcome).....£27

Public transport Two adults: day bus tickets for Cheltenham and for Gloucester.....£27

TOTAL.....£200



Must do... Join one of the tours of Gloucester Cathedral with knowledgeable guides and soak up the history of this wonderful building



Like Gloucester, Cheltenham benefited from royal patronage. In 1788 King George III visited with his family to take the water, spending five weeks here. Tennyson lived here for a while and Walter Scott and Jane Austen were among other famous visitors.

Byron, another tourist, wrote, "By the waters of Cheltenham, I sat down and drank, when I remembered thee oh Georgina Cottage." No doubt Byron was referencing the psalm rather than the 1970s *Boney M* song, which features the line 'By the rivers of Babylon...'. But I was singing the latter as we reached Pittville Park, an elegant green oasis about 15 minutes' walk north of the town.

Cheltenham reputedly has a tree for every two residents and many of these trees are in Pittville Park. We skirted the duck pond and boating lake and walked up the hill to the classical domed-roof Pump Room. Byron declared the waters "sufficiently disgusting", so we didn't try it.

Searching out more public art, we found *The Minotaur* and *The Hare*. This is like Marmite: Anthony didn't see anything to like about the large metal sculpture, while I found it entertaining.

In comparison, the Wishing Fish Clock is colourful, fun and genuinely loved by pretty much everyone. As the centrepiece in the Regent Arcade at around 45ft tall, the clock

has a goose, golden eggs, peeking mice, a snake and a wooden fish that blows bubbles every half an hour to the tune of 'I'm Forever Blowing Bubbles'.

In an alley we found a series of colourful mosaics recalling when three circus elephants being paraded through Cheltenham ran amok. One wriggled into the seed merchants, another wedged itself in the door and together they scoffed dog biscuits and seed potatoes.

In both Gloucester and Cheltenham we found sights we would have missed if we hadn't been on foot. We finished our trip with a walk around Cheltenham's Sandford Park, south of the centre. In this lovely green space the traffic noise was just a whisper.

Water is never far away in Cheltenham and here there is an old mill, a gurgling stream among flowering daffodils and *The Weathered Man*, a bronze prone figure that decorates a huge flood-prevention drain.

With none of the grandeur of Pittville, this park is perfect for strolling and among attractive specimen trees we found our final statue, *The Friendship Circle*. The large shell-like sculptures, at a meeting of paths, celebrate the town's international twinning links. To me they were a cast-iron expression of Cheltenham's rich history of welcoming visitors. www.cheltenham.gov.uk

BOOK

Cheltenham Heritage Walks
by David Elder (Amberley Books)
ISBN: 9781445622439

ABOVE LEFT TO RIGHT
Gustav Holst's statue stands in Imperial Gardens, Cheltenham; The Wishing Fish Clock, Cheltenham

THE CAMPSITE

PREMIER Briarfields
PARK 2010 Motel and
Touring Park, Gloucester
Road, Cheltenham GL51 0SS
☎ 01242 235324
📧 briarfields.net
📅 All year
£ Two adults, pitch and electric: From £20 (adults only)