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An Historic Christmas in Winchester

BY ALEX LARMAN ON DECEMBER 10, 2018

TRAVEL

The cathedral city of Winchester, an hour or so's journey by train from London, is many things. It is a place of enormous historic significance, with its world-famous public schools, legendary cathedral, reputed site of King Arthur's Round Table, St Cross almshouse and much more besides. All of these things are enormously appreciated by the legions of visitors who come to the city every year. It's also one of the most popular places for the well-heeled workers of the capital to live in; the mixture of Georgian and Victorian houses that accommodate them are well-appointed and bedecked in every hue of Farrow and Ball imaginable; purchasable, naturally, from their well-appointed shop in The Square, adjacent to the cathedral.

Yet there is another Winchester as well. Never counter-cultural or edgy, the growth of the University of Winchester has seen a younger population creep into the city over the past couple of decades, less privileged than the Winchester College schoolboys – or 'Wykehamists' – who throng the streets around Kingsgate, but with their own interests. There are now more good restaurants, bars and pubs in the city than probably ever before, and the influx of film crews wishing to immortalise the cathedral and college (most recently in *Push* and *Les Misérables*) have brought their own glamour with them. And this is before we get onto the legendary Christmas market, which arrives, as if by magic, in mid-November by the cathedral, and offers a cornucopia of stalls, mulled wine and entertainment. There's even an ice rink.



The first place to visit when you arrive is, of course, Winchester Cathedral. Unlike its near-neighbour and great rival Salisbury, there is no spire here. Instead, there is a building that dates from the late 11th century that was reassembled and rebuilt from the next millennium, it still retains the air of a place of great spiritual contemplation; it is an inevitability that the present-day pilgrim will find themselves contemplating another worship of sorts, in the form of keen Jane Austen admirers, who flock here to see her memorial. Amusingly, the original text makes no reference to her being a writer, praising her instead for 'the benevolence of her temper [and] the sweetness of her heart.'

It's a five minute walk north to the Great Hall, the main point of interest in which is the 13th century recreation of the Round Table of King Arthur. Winchester has traditionally been described as the location for Camelot, and even if this smacks of a medieval attempt to draw visitors, it's still a hugely impressive object. After that, it's a good idea to walk down through the town and through the Cathedral Close to what is now described as the 'Kingsgate Quarter', a few elegantly appointed Georgian streets that are home to the oldest boys' private school in the country, known simply as 'Winchester' to its students.



It's closed to the public, inevitably, but there are twice-daily tours of its historic heart, in which one visits the cloisters, the chapel, the old 'college' area – which still houses its black-gowned scholars – and the historic School building, which was said to have been designed by Christopher Wren and has the intimidating words 'Aut discite, aut discite, manet sors tertia caedi' emblazoned on one wall. The literal meaning of these is 'Either learn, or leave; there remains a third option: to be beaten.' One can't imagine this going down very well with Ofsted these days.

After one has walked the Water Meadows by the College, or even perhaps attempted to go for a walk towards the beginning of the South Downs, one of the great treats of travelling here en famille is a visit to Marwell Zoo, a few miles outside the city. This spacious and rightly famous establishments offers a chance to get close to a range of weird and wonderful beasts, including the incongruous sight of seeing penguins, rhinos and giraffes roaming freely – up to a point – round the Hampshire countryside.



As with all the best zoos these days, the emphasis is firmly on conservation and animal welfare rather than simply offering the many thousands of annual visitors a show, but if you're looking for spectacle, there are all the monkeys, marsupials, leopards and lemurs that you could ask for. Even the gift shop sells things that you might actually want, rather than the usual tat.

Upon your return, take a pint at the Royal Oak, reputedly the oldest inn in England, and after that it is probably time to find somewhere to stay. If you're looking for ready convenience, the Mercure, immediately by the Cathedral, offers fantastic views and comfortable rooms, starting at £87 for a classic double, although with the inevitable uniformity that a chain offers.

Yet the most famous place to stay in the city is undoubtedly the Hotel du Vin, the first in the group, and by most accounts the best. Opened in 1994 by Robin Hutson (now founder of the equally beloved Pig group), it underwent a dip in its fortunes after Hutson left and it was taken over by various equity firms who did not seem to have a clue what to do with it, but now it's back on firing on all cylinders. And with prices starting at a mere £109 for a standard double, it offers excellent value as well.



We stayed in a well-appointed 'garden room' just outside the (extended) Georgian body of the main hotel itself, which offered a large and comfortable bed, plenty of space for an excited small child to run around in, and the metro-tiled bathroom of our dreams, complete with walk-in shower. We were pleased to be at the end of the row; the possibility of upsetting the guests with noise was thus heavily reduced. Although the bar was closed for refurbishment during our stay – thus removing the opportunity to try one of the apparently much-regarded single malts – we visited the restaurant for a splendid lunch.

Everything we had – mushrooms on brioche toast and a rich duck and sausage cassoulet for me, smoked salmon and lemon sole for my wife, and sausage and chips for our daughter – was truly excellent, as was a carafe of Italian white that made a Tuesday lunchtime whizz by all the more enjoyably.

Which, of course, reminds me. I mentioned earlier that Winchester, while not traditionally a foodie city to rank with Ludlow or Abergavenny, now has some exceptionally fine places to go and eat (and drink), as you may have discovered in an earlier piece in these pages...

To find out more about Winchester at Christmas and at other times of the year, visit www.visitwinchester.co.uk. Find further details at www.winchestertouristguides.com.

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