

The Weird, Mystic Pull of Southwest England

The area is a place of pilgrimage for late-model would-be knights of the Round Table, as well as mystical seekers of many stripes.

By Rosie Schaap
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Go ahead, say their names: Avalon and Tintagel. Believe deeply enough, and they might emerge from the mouth as through an enchantment-induced vapor, as though borne on the breath of a dragon. (Especially after at least four people have corrected your pronunciation of Tintagel: Be gentle with that “g,” it’s tin-TAJ-l.) And, indeed, these two sites in the southwest of England are epic and romantic, the stuff of myth and mystery. For the sort of person who watched “Excalibur” countless times as a child, and carried a tattered copy of Marion Zimmer Bradley’s “The Mists of Avalon” tucked under her arm as an adolescent, these places are also familiar enough that a first visit may feel like a homecoming.

I am just that sort of person, and my plan was to bookend a recent trip to the region with those two sites steeped in Arthurian lore (accepting that the place we call Glastonbury was, in hazy long-ago times, part of the Isle of Avalon). It was in Avalon, the legend goes, that the sword Excalibur was forged, and Glastonbury Abbey is purported to be where King Arthur was buried. In the pseudohistorical but influential 12th-century telling of Geoffrey of Monmouth, it was at Tintagel Castle that Arthur was conceived. Between Glastonbury and Tintagel, I would also stop in Totnes, in Devon, and Padstow, a Cornish seaside town that hosts a remarkable May Day festival. The English southwest has emerged, over the past several decades, not only as a place of pilgrimage for late-model would-be knights of the Round Table, but as a homing ground for seekers of many stripes: Aquarian acolytes of the new age, devotees of the Great Goddess, witches and wizards, practitioners of a wide range of therapeutic methods and those who submit to their ministrations. What strange spell would it cast on me?

Avalon/Glastonbury

My quest began in Glastonbury, the Somerset town known for its annual music festival. Seen from the top of Glastonbury Tor, the hill that rises above the town, the Somerset Levels — a great swath of wetlands and plains — stretch out like a patchwork quilt of green cotton squares pulled over the bodies of soundly sleeping giants. Even the National

Trust’s normally restrained website promotes the tor as a seat of sacredness: “Glastonbury Tor is known as being one of the most spiritual sites in the country,” it claims, adding mysteriously: “Its pagan beliefs are still very much celebrated.”

After I descended, I headed for the town’s High Street, and underwent a second, less literal comedown. One shop after another offered the same goods: crystals, incense, divining cards of many kinds. The coven-commerce vibe was a little depressing. But within 24 hours, Glastonbury had worked its charms on me.

The turnaround started over breakfast with Heloise Pilkington, a London-born-and-bred singer. “The land is extremely powerful. There’s a reason why it’s a sacred place,” she said, over very good coffee at a cafe called Hundred Monkeys. She added that “many ley lines converge at the tor,” referring to what John Bruno Hare, the creator of the Internet Sacred Texts Archive, described as “alignments on the landscape of natural and artificial features, some of which follow perfectly straight tracks for miles.” She’d come to Glastonbury to take a priestess training course, and thought she’d stay for a year. Eight years later, she still lives in the place she calls Avalon. She described the moment she knew she would remain there: “I stood between two ancient yew trees,” she told me, and received guidance that “something deep will come out of you here.” Now, in addition to making music — she titled her second album “Lady of Avalon” — Ms. Pilkington teaches what she describes as “courses in healing using sound and goddess archetypes.”

After our breakfast, I checked into the Covenstead, a witchcraft-theme bed-and-breakfast. I braced myself for a kitschy spectacle. I found instead a comfortable and painstakingly designed house with a witchcraft and magic library containing more books about corn dollies than ordinary lodgings offer. My room was replete with a four-poster bed, a fainting couch and red velvet drapery. Over the top? Right at the brink — and perfect. I tore myself away from the Covenstead’s cabinet of curiosities and crossed the street to Glastonbury Abbey. During the reign of Henry VIII, the abbey was a casualty of the Dissolution of the Monasteries. Its ruins and grounds are strikingly serene. I walked among fragments of walls, ancient trees and a recreated abbot’s kitchen, and felt the strongest tug of Glastonbury magic since I’d arrived. I ended my visit in a small chapel, where I lit a candle and sat quietly as though waiting for a sign.

At breakfast at the Covenstead, I mentioned that my next stop was Totnes. “Oh, you’ll like Totnes,” someone at the table said. “It’s like Glastonbury, but for grown-ups.” I wondered if he meant much the same thing Ms. Pilkington had, when she said, “Glastonbury is shamanic; Totnes is therapeutic.”

Totnes and Dartington

During the 85-mile drive southwest to Totnes from Glastonbury, Somerset’s plains and soft hills gave way to something wilder, more wooded, more forbidding. Before hitting the town itself, I had an appointment on its outskirts to meet Tom Cox, citizen folklorist and naturalist, author of best-selling books about his cats, for lunch at the Riverford Field Kitchen.

I arrived at the field kitchen — an airy, relaxed restaurant on the grounds of a large working farm — wearing a floral headband. I note this only because it is rare that I meet anybody, least of all a man, who shares my enthusiasm for floral headbands, but Mr. Cox is such a man. We sat down to a huge, wholesome lunch served family-style, and dug into miso-glazed eggplants, piles of freshly picked greens, carrots and broccoli, a homely but luscious fish pie crowned with a cloud of buttery mash, and two puddings with custard. Mr. Cox’s new book, “21st Century Yokel” comes out this fall, and he said it’s about “being a walker and a lifelong country person, but it goes off into many other areas: folklore, family, little comedies of everyday life.” He moved to Devon in 2014, and feels “very spiritually at one with the landscape here” — a landscape he described as “rugged and rainy,” a “psychedelic countryside” and “the greenest place I’ve ever lived.” I apparently had come at the best possible time: “The explosion of colors is such a huge orgasm here in spring,” he told me.

Our bellies full, Mr. Cox drove us to the Dartington estate. Dating to the 14th century, Dartington was bought in the 1920s by Dorothy and Leonard Elmhirst (she, an American heiress; he, a landowning Yorkshireman) who aimed to establish a new model of rural life, community and education. Today, the Dartington Hall Trust is an independent charity and social enterprise with a focus on arts and ecology, supported by a range of businesses (shops, a restaurant, a pub) whose profits are reinvested in the community. Mr. Cox recommended that I spend some time walking its lush grounds and gardens — and urged me to seek out one of Dartington’s newer enterprises, a dairy managed by a philosophical farmer named Jon Perkin.

Three Jack Russell terriers greeted me at the farm, barking like mad as they circled my feet. I bought a cup of goats’ milk ice cream (an extra-zingy mint chocolate chip) made at the dairy, then sat down with Mr. Perkin within view of a good number of the dairy’s 180 goats. He spoke candidly of his challenges with depression and anxiety, and about how working with animals helps him cope.

“Animals are the most mindful creatures on the planet,” he said, the dogs clambering all over him. The area’s therapeutic tendency extends to its farms: He hasn’t fully formulated it yet, but Mr. Perkin is developing his own kind of mindfulness practice - goats included. I pressed him about how goats might help ease anxiety and depression. “Sit down in a pen of goats,” he said, “and you can’t help but smile.”

That evening, I drank strong local cider, a Devon specialty, in the back garden of a Totnes pub and listened to locals talk about Dartington and art, therapy and community. As the sun descended over the River Dart, I rested by its banks and thought about what I’d seen, whom I’d met, what I’d tasted and drunk and felt so far in the southwest: its beauty, sure, but also the openness of its spirit, the potent pull to which so many had succumbed. Still, nothing prepared me for what I’d see the next day at the Timehouse Muzeum: The Time Travellers Museum and Narnia Totnes Shop. The unwieldy name put me off (and why that “z” in Muzeum?). But I’m glad I went. Housed in an 18th-century building on Fore Street — the lower half of Totnes’s steep main drag, which slopes sharply toward the river — the museum is entered through the Narnia shop, which has little to do with the books by C. S. Lewis, and sells cool records, gifts, T-shirts and postcards. (A sign at the edge of town announces that Totnes is “twinned” with Narnia. The connection abides, and the creator of the Timehouse, Julie Lafferty, an artist and designer, recognizes that it is a draw.)

Exit the shop, and the museum begins. It is the most hallucinatory experience I’ve had since I gave up actual hallucinogens a long time ago. You start below ground and work up to the top floor, through a series of rooms designed to evoke major eras in recent history; many also include Ms. Lafferty’s hypnotic films. I didn’t feel so much that I was going back in time, but rather that time was suspended.

Period furniture and artifacts and original paintings, also by Ms. Lafferty, combine to tell a complex story about life and society, war and peace, art and music. Some sections — like the Moroccan tearoom, awash in rainbow light beaming through multicolored window panes — are achingly beautiful. Others, like a chamber next to the tearoom, loaded with imagery and memorabilia from World War II, are unsettling. The museum is essentially an art installation forged by a single creative spirit who might just be a genius. A little dazed, I stepped out of the museum into blazing sunlight. Still, I walked up the long stone stairway that coils around the mound on top of which the ruins of Totnes Castle sit, and surveyed the Devon countryside from its heights, breathing it in, steadying myself after the dizzying effects of the museum and the sunshine.

Padstow

From Devon, I set out for Padstow, a picturesque town on Cornwall's north coast, with pastel-painted houses, world-renowned seafood — and an unusually spirited May Day tradition. Documentation of it goes back at least to the early 19th century, but it is likely much older. I'd longed to visit since the early 1990s, when I first saw Alan Lomax's 1953 documentary, "Oss Oss, Wee Oss." Scenes in it reminded me of the cult 1973 British horror film, "The Wicker Man," and I wanted in.

In his 1981 book "Rites and Riots: Folk Customs of Great Britain and Europe," the British folklorist Bob Pegg describes the festivities: "The main attraction at Padstow May Day ... is the Obby Oss, a heavy construction built around a six-foot-diameter hoop, covered in black canvas and supported on the shoulders of a man whose head is covered by a grotesque mask resembling a bishop's miter in shape." He goes on to describe how two such osses (horses) dance, egged on by a figure called the Teazer. The music stops, the horses sink to the ground, the Teazer strokes them tenderly until they revive — and the whole thing is repeated all along the route.

The action had kicked off the night before, in the low-ceilinged Golden Lion pub, whose stable houses the older of the two hobby horses. The pub was packed, steaming and sweaty and pulsating with anticipation. At midnight, the music struck up: a rough, ready opus on accordions and drums, and we all sang the occasion's traditional song, whose words I knew, more or less, from the Lomax film. It begins:

Unite and unite and let us all unite,
For summer is a come unto day,
And whither we are going we will all unite,
In the merry morning of May.



The harbor at Padstow. Andy Haslam for The New York Times

We kept at it as we poured into the narrow street outside the pub in a crush of collective effervescence, in which both a strong sense of community spirit and a faintly electric undercurrent of criminality came through, as though anything could happen. When a stranger's elbows pressed into my kidneys, I briefly regretted my presence there. But soon, we were moving through the town, waking those who didn't make it to the pub, but who turned on their lights and waved from their windows.

In the morning, the two osses are released from their stables, and process with their respective parties through the town, over and over. The weather was poor; I was told that normally the turnout is much higher. By the time I'd followed the old oss on its first circuit, I was soaked and chilled. But rain can't stop the old oss, the blue oss and their people from making their rounds.

At lunch the day before, at the Seafood Restaurant, I asked a waiter about what I might expect come May Day. He gave one piece of advice: "Don't wear white." I was puzzled, but by the end of the festival I understood. The locals wear white, with blue or red scarves and other accessories, depending on one's team. For a tourist to follow suit would be to playact as a Padstonian. "It's very focused on the people who live in Padstow, and have family in Padstow," Kate Neale, an ethnomusicologist who concentrates on Cornish music, and who grew up about 10 minutes from the town, told me. Although it attracts many tourists, "It's for the locals, by the locals."

I wasn't disappointed, but my perception of the festival had changed. More than one Padstonian told me that, to them, May Day is bigger than Christmas. What may look arcane, pagan or alien — that "Wicker Man" vibe I thought I wanted — is largely a celebration of "community, history and localism," Ms. Neale says. I did not feel unwelcome, but was very much an outsider. Still, I had achieved a life goal — to sing in the spring with the people of Padstow — and was satisfied as I moved farther up the Cornwall coast to Tintagel.

Tintagel and Boscastle The landscape rethinks itself again: the skies open wide, high cliffs stretch up to touch them and dip down to the sea, the light is generous, the shadows long. I walked up Tintagel's pub-lined main street toward the path that leads to Tintagel Castle, the cliffs and the cove below, where a cave may or may not have been home to Merlin. (Sometimes, the Arthuriana pushes hard here. A spectral statue depicting a kingly figure with a large sword was unveiled last year near the castle, to the dismay of some locals who resisted the "Disneyfication" of the town.) The sight of the sea from that castle on the cliffs made me stop and be still: The water is palest aquamarine, lapped by darker greens at the coastline, framed by rock and ruin, indelible.

Equally enchanting in a different way is St. Nectan's Glen — a vivid valley of woods and waterfalls just outside Tintagel, where it is believed the sixth-century saint had his hermitage. When I stopped for lunch en route to the glen, the innkeeper told me to keep my eyes open for "orbs." He did not go into detail.

I saw no magical orbs, but I felt the same enveloping peace I'd known at Glastonbury Abbey. I started to wonder if I, too, were being guided to stay. And that night, in the pub in the small hotel where I was staying, when members of the Tintagel Orpheus Male Voice Choir drifted in after a rehearsal nearby and serenaded me with Cornish song, the tug pulled even tighter.

My final scheduled stop was Boscastle, a small fishing port about a 10-minute drive north of Tintagel, and home to the Museum of Witchcraft and Magic. The museum and the village are both deeply charming. Sure, the museum includes a life-size model of the Horned God, beside

which I gleefully posed. But it is also a trove of delightful, unusual objects, displayed with thoughtful commentary and enough humor to temper the seriousness. Its holdings include images of cats and brooms and caldrons, plants used in folk remedies, implements for divination, witches' garments and tools, and items related to Cornish lore and sea witchcraft.

On the last night of my journey, back at the hotel in Tintagel, there was a farewell party for a staff member. There was karaoke. There was dancing. There was toasting and hugging. I was made to feel at home, completely included. It was one of the best nights I've had in a pub — and I've had a few. English eccentricity is a cliché, and I say what follows aware of the perils of stereotypes. I also say it with affection, even awe: There are no weirdos like English weirdos. No hippie can possibly outdo an English hippie for hippiness. I should know — I've been trying for 30 years.

I didn't want to leave the southwest, but I knew I would return. To Glastonbury for a weekend of goddess education. To Totnes to tour Timehouse again, to linger longer at Dartington and see how it's going with Jon Perkin and his goats. I'd be back to Boscastle's Museum of Witchcraft and Magic. And to Tintagel, for the restorative view of the sea, another shot at seeing those orbs in the glen, another warm, sweet night in a friendly pub. Believe in ley lines or not. Practice mindfulness (or witchcraft) or don't. Commune with goats and hug trees as your heart guides you. This, I think, is the region's most potent magic: You can come as you are, and it will take you in, exactly like that, or as you wish to be.

If You Go

Museums

Museum of Witchcraft and Magic, the Harbour, Boscastle, Cornwall, museumofwitchcraftandmagic.co.uk.

Padstow Museum, Market Place, Padstow, Cornwall; padstowmuseum.co.uk.

Timehouse Museum: the Time Travellers Museum and Narnia Totnes Shop, 69 Fore Street, Totnes, South Devon; narniatotnes.co.uk.

Where to Stay

Armsyde B & B, 10 Cross Street, Padstow, Cornwall. Rooms start at 102 pounds a night (about \$130); armsydebandbpadstow.co.uk.

The Covenstead, Naish House, Magdalene Street, Glastonbury, Somerset. Rooms start at 50 pounds per night; covenstead.co.uk.

Where to Eat

Prawn on the Lawn, 11 Duke Street, Padstow, Cornwall; prawnonthelawn.com.

Riverford Field Kitchen, Buckfastleigh, Devon; riverford.co.uk/restaurant.

Where to Drink

The Bay Horse, 8 Cistern Street, Totnes, Devon. A friendly pub with good cider and a large back garden, bayhorsetotnes.com.

The bar at the Tintagel Hotel, Fore Street, Tintagel, Cornwall. Warm, welcoming staff (and locals). If you're there on the right night, you may be lucky enough to be sung to by members of the Tintagel Orpheus Male Voice Choir; tintagel-hotel.co.uk.

What to Read

"Dart" by Alice Oswald. A chorus of voices narrates the story of the River Dart, in this hypnotic, inventive book-length poem by the Devon-based poet. "The Death of King Arthur" by Simon Armitage. A fine contemporary poet's dynamic reworking of the tale of King Arthur.

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