

Market Place marries luxury shopping with the historic delights of the towering Church of St John the Baptist



PHOTO: © PAUL WESTON/ALAMY

CIRENCESTER

With its meandering streets of honey-stone houses, lush green spaces and magnificent central market square, it's easy to see why Cirencester – dubbed “the capital of the Cotswolds” – is popular with those seeking history, character and charm.

During Roman times it was the second largest town in Britain, and you can spend a happy few hours tracing that history, starting with a visit to the Corinium Museum, which includes some truly beautiful ancient mosaics. A visit to the Park Street venue is also the starting point for further discoveries; ask to borrow the keys to the Cirencester lock-up, a restored two-cell building that housed criminals in the 19th century. It was dismantled and moved to its current site in 1837, when it became part of the workhouse.

For further history, the Corinium Museum has produced a ‘Romans’ app (downloadable

The “capital of the Cotswolds” bursts with historic charm that dates back to Roman times

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from the App Store and Google Play) that will take you on a walking tour of the town, whose Roman remains include a large amphitheatre, now covered in grass but still clearly discernible. There is also a section of Roman wall in Cirencester Abbey's park, the restful grounds of the former Augustinian abbey, where you can pause by the lake amid mature trees and greenery. The abbey itself was demolished in 1539, but a Norman arch remains in one corner of the grounds.

In contrast to the peaceful abbey grounds, the central Market Place is a hive of activity, especially on Mondays and Fridays, when it's

fun to trawl from stall to stall soaking up the atmosphere. The market is dominated by the golden, towering Parish Church of St John Baptist. The largest parish church in Gloucestershire, it dates from 1115 and sports Gothic flourishes on its south porch plus beautiful fan vaulting inside. The building's grandeur reflects the wealth of the wool merchants who funded it, and whose crests can be spotted on its pillars.

On any day of the week, Cirencester is a shopper's paradise: from upmarket chain stores on Market Place to one-off boutiques, cafés and delicatessens in the narrower, winding streets, the town repays several hours of wandering. Black Jack Street is good for independent shops and eateries; duck into Jesse's Bistro in the adjacent Stableyard for award-winning modern British food served against a backdrop of exposed stonework and timeworn beams. ▶

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Typical Cotswolds buildings at Cecily Hill, the entrance to Cirencester Park
Below: Roman mosaic at the Corinium Museum



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On the subject of old-meets-new, don't miss the 1862 Corn Hall, which was refurbished in 2009 to create a small, stylish shopping centre, in whose heart you'll find a wonderful deli-restaurant called Made by Bob. Dishes are prepared in a smart open kitchen, many using ingredients from the in-house delicatessen.

Another repurposed old building is the former Victorian brewery, which now houses New Brewery Arts, a contemporary gallery, craft shop and a clutch of arts and crafts studios. From glassblowing to ceramics and from weaving to silverwork, there is no shortage of traditional crafts to explore.

If you feel weary after all that browsing, there's a café too – but for a truly indulgent afternoon tea, head to the Kings Head Hotel for top-class treats amid boutique styling. It is arguably one of the most luxurious places to stay in the area too. The exact age

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of the building itself is unknown, but it was certainly there in the 14th century, and in 1642 it was the site of a bloody clash between royalists and parliamentarians. The incident was immortalised in a famous painting by John Beecham, a copy of which can be seen in the hotel's reception area. Other beautiful places to stay include the Corinium Hotel, a petite hotel and restaurant on one of the oldest streets in the town. Built in the 16th century as a wool merchant's house, it has undergone sympathetic refurbishment in recent years.

No visit to Cirencester would be complete without a stroll in its beautiful park, which sits at the west end of the town and includes a grand country house – the family seat of the Earl of Bathurst, and closed to the public. At the entrance stands a castellated building from 1898. Once the headquarters of the 4th Battalion of the Gloucestershire Regiment, it is open to visitors.

Beyond the barracks is the park itself; a feast of geometrically arranged trees, avenues

and green spaces that owes its good looks to the 18th-century landscape designers Stephen Switzer and Alexander Pope – the latter perhaps better known as a satirical poet. Their vision lives on magnificently; even if your time in Cirencester is limited, be sure to take a stroll up the long avenue that begins at the end of Cecily Hill. It has an almost otherworldly beauty and is popular with everyone from dog walkers to horse riders. Strolling here, one can lose oneself in a beautiful and timeless landscape – one that perfectly sums up Cirencester's special magic: here is a historical town that will never grow old. **B**

THE PLANNER

GETTING THERE

By train: The nearest railway station is around five miles away at Kemble. Trains run regularly to Stroud, Gloucester, Cheltenham and Swindon, and there are three direct services to London Paddington each day. www.thetrainline.com

WHERE TO STAY

The Fleece at Cirencester is a former coaching inn, set in the heart of town. www.thefleececirencester.co.uk For a treat, try The Kings Head across the Market Place. www.kingshead-hotel.co.uk

FURTHER INFORMATION

www.cirencester.co.uk

