

The Marches



History buffs, hill-walkers and those hankering after a slice of rural England at its most charming will be well rewarded in the Marches. This tranquil border region with Wales ripples with dramatic hills and lush farmland, cider orchards and meandering rivers. Its inhabitants exude unfeigned warmth towards visitors, and a disarming balance between Welsh and English culture prevails.

While it may be peaceful today, the Marches has a gripping history. Its bucolic landscapes are littered with battle-scarred castles and timeworn ruins testifying to the ferocious fighting that rocked this region for many centuries. Picturesque black-and-white villages from the Middle Ages seem to nestle down every country lane, and venerable cathedrals grace Worcester and Hereford. World-changing events have also taken place in this quiet corner of England; Ironbridge Gorge in Shropshire was the scene of technological breakthroughs that poured rocket fuel on the first tentative flames of the Industrial Revolution.

But this region offers far more than simply a workout for your grey cells and camera batteries. It has more than its share of heart-pumping scenery and muscle-warming walks too, especially in the beautiful south Shropshire Hills and the soaring peaks around Great Malvern. The River Wye also snakes its way through Herefordshire, drawing canoeists from across the country. But whether you choose to explore the region on foot or by paddle, pedal or four wheels, you can be assured of some splendid and surprisingly under-visited

HIGHLIGHTS

- Being awed by the cradle of the Industrial Revolution, **Ironbridge Gorge** (p397)
- Seeing the world through medieval eyes at Hereford's **Mappa Mundi** (p389)
- Feeding your inner foodie in gourmet Mecca, **Ludlow** (p404)
- Donning your hiking boots and roam the lush **Malvern Hills** (p387)
- Getting lost amid the black-and-white streets of **Shrewsbury** (p394)
- Paddling your way down the River Wye from tranquil **Symonds Yat** (p392)



■ POPULATION: ONE MILLION

■ AREA: 2541 SQ MILES

History

The Marches has seen territorial scuffles and all-out battles rage for centuries. These conflicts took place between feuding kingdoms along what is today the border separating England and Wales. In the 8th century the Anglo-Saxon king Offa of Mercia built an earthwork barricade along the border to try to quell the ongoing tension. It became known as Offa's Dyke, and much of it is still traceable as a popular walking route today.

In an effort to subdue the Welsh and secure his new kingdom, William the Conqueror set up powerful, feudal barons – called Lords Marcher after the Anglo-Saxon word *marc*, meaning 'boundary' – along the border, from where they repeatedly raided Wales, taking as much territory as possible under their control.

Activities

The Marches is ripe with beautiful walking and cycling routes, snaking through pastoral idylls, wooded valleys and gentle hills. But not all the action is on terra firma – there are opportunities for fun in the water and sky too. See the Outdoor Activities chapter (p83) and county-specific Activities sections in this chapter for more information.

CYCLING

There are plenty of good reasons to get saddle-sore in the Marches. Shropshire in particular is ideal for touring, and you can rent bikes in Shrewsbury, Church Stretton, Ludlow, Ironbridge and Ledbury.

Areas apt for off-road biking include the woods of Hopton near Ludlow, as well as Eastridge near Shrewsbury. High-level riding on the Long Mynd above Church Stretton is also rewarding.

A COTTAGE OF YOUR OWN

To tour the countryside from your own base, try these websites for self-catering properties:

Eco Cabin (www.ecocabin.co.uk)

Farm Stay Worcs (www.farmstayworcs.co.uk)

Shropshire Cottages (www.shropshirecottages.com)

Shropshire Tourism (www.shropshiretourism.info/self-catering-accommodation)

Wye Lea (www.wylelea.co.uk)

In Herefordshire, you'll find the **Ledbury Loop** – a 17-mile rural circuit based around the town of Ledbury.

A pack of route maps and notes called *Cycling for Pleasure in the Marches* is available from tourist offices for £6. Tourist offices also stock many free route leaflets, and you can find info on newly opened stretches of National Cycle Route 45 through Shropshire and Worcestershire from the **National Cycle Network** (www.sustrans.org) or download leaflets from www.shropshire.gov.uk/cycling.nsf.

WALKING

One of many great routes on which to muddy your hiking boots, the glorious **Offa's Dyke** is a 177-mile national trail following an ancient earthen border defence. Running south–north from Chepstow to Prestatyn, it passes through some of the most spectacular scenery in Britain, but it's not for the inexperienced or unfit.

A less taxing option is the gentle 107-mile **Wye Valley Walk**, which follows the course of the River Wye from Chepstow upstream to Rhayader in Wales. Another firm favourite is the beautiful 100-mile **Three Choirs Way** linking the cathedral cities of Hereford, Worcester and Gloucester.

Shorter walks include the famous ridges of Wenlock Edge (p401) and the lovely Long Mynd (p401). These are in turn swallowed by the circular 136-mile **Shropshire Way**, which loops from Shrewsbury south to Ludlow.

One of the loveliest spots of all is the Malvern Hills (p387), offering easy paths and breathtaking views on the boundary between Worcestershire and Herefordshire.

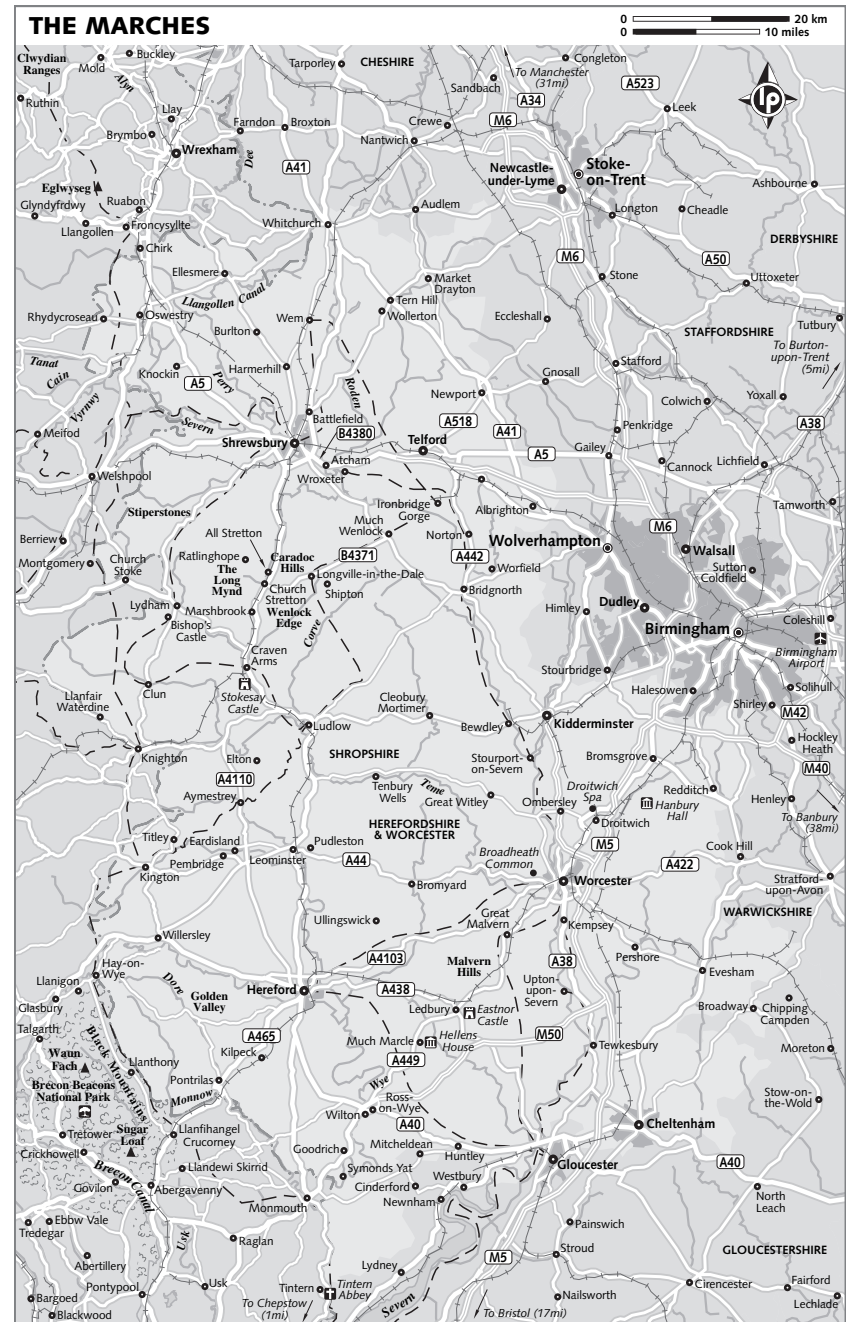
For more ideas, see the Activities sections of each county in this chapter.

OTHER ACTIVITIES

Both easy-grade canoeing and white-water fun can be had at Symonds Yat (p392) on the River Wye, while the river gorge's rocky butresses are also a popular rock-climbing spot. The Long Mynd is renowned for its gliding and paragliding, with facilities in Church Stretton. Or for something completely different, tourist offices can point you towards hotspots for mountainboarding.

Getting Around

Public transport can be a hit-and-miss affair in the largely rural Marches. Without your own wheels, getting to countryside attractions



take time, planning and patience. Tourist offices stock timetables for most rural routes, or you can consult **Traveline** (☎ 0870 608 2 608; www.travelinemidlands.co.uk).

Railway lines radiate from Shrewsbury, Hereford and Worcester, but they generally only serve larger towns.

The main bus operators:

Arriva (☎ 0870 120 1088; www.arrivabus.co.uk) An Arriva Go Anywhere ticket (£6.50) gives one day of unlimited travel.

First Travel (☎ 0800 587 7381; www.firstgroup.com)

A FirstDay Wyvern ticket (adult/child £4.50/3) offers the same deal on the first network in Worcestershire, Herefordshire and adjoining counties.

WORCESTERSHIRE

Verdant hills honeycombed with springs and crisscrossed by beautiful walking trails thrust up alluringly over the south and west sides of serene Worcestershire. Though the northern and eastern plains offer little to visitors, plump in its regional heart is the capital, Worcester, boasting a fascinating cathedral and the world-renowned Royal Worcester Porcelain works. The dignified hillside Victorian resort of Great Malvern and the rolling Malvern Hills (the Malverns) beckon just south.

Information

For online information check out www.worcestershire-tourism.co.uk and for news try www.thisisworcestershire.co.uk.

Activities

The longest riverside walk in the UK, the **Severn Way** winds its way through Worcestershire via Worcester and Upton-upon-Severn, while the **Three Choirs Way** links Worcester to Hereford and Gloucester.

Cyclists can pick up the handy *Elgar Ride Variations* leaflet from tourist offices detailing routes around the Malverns.

Getting Around

There are a few regular rail links from Worcester and Kidderminster is the southern railhead of the popular Severn Valley Railway. Buses to rural areas can be frustratingly infrequent.

WORCESTER

☎ 01905 / pop 94,029

An ancient cathedral city on the banks of the River Severn, Worcester (*woos-ter*) is

sprinkled with stark reminders of its eventful history, though postwar city planners have hardly set out to highlight them. Turn a blind eye to the chain stores and multistoreys that nuzzle its architectural gems, however, and you'll be rewarded with a magnificent cathedral, pockets of timber-framed Tudor and elegant Georgian architecture, riverside walks, and tales of the English Civil War, which finished here.

Information

The **tourist office** (☎ 726311; www.visitworcester.com; Guildhall, High St; ☎ 9.30am-5pm Mon-Sat) will organise 1½-hour **walking tours** (☎ 222117; www.worcestertalks.co.uk; adult £3; ☎ tours 11am Mon-Fri, 2.30pm Wed-Apr-Sep). Internet access is available at **Coffee Republic** (☎ 25069; 31 High St; per 20min/1hr £1/3; ☎ 7am-6pm), opposite the Guildhall.

Sights

WORCESTER CATHEDRAL

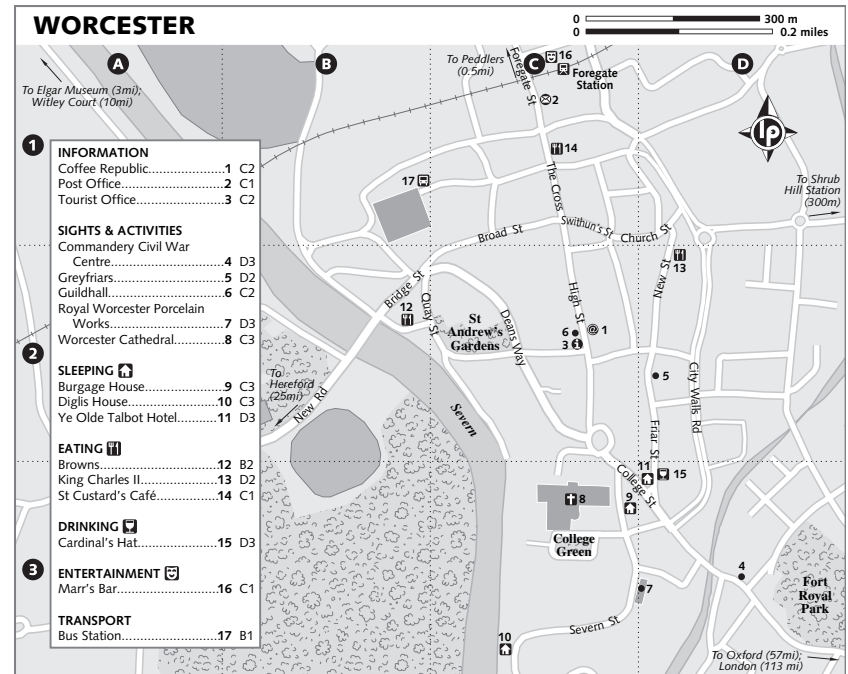
If there's one overriding reason to visit Worcester, *this* is it. A majestic edifice presiding over the city centre and river, **Worcester Cathedral** (☎ 28854; www.worcestercathedral.org.uk; suggested donation £3; ☎ 7.30am-6pm) amalgamates a rich medley of styles and eras, and is full of the stories and symbols of Britain's violent past.

The eerie Norman crypt is the largest in England and dates to when the cathedral was begun in 1084 by Saint Wulfstan, the only Saxon bishop to hang on to his see under the Normans. Other highlights include a striking 13th-century Lady Chapel and a lovely 12th-century circular chapterhouse.

You'll find the cathedral's most notorious inhabitant, King John, buried in the choir. Famous for his treachery towards older brother Richard Lionheart, and squabbles with the barons that forced him to sign Magna Carta, John left England in chaos and in a somewhat fitting break from tradition the stone lion under his feet is biting back. To boost his slim chances of passing the pearly gates, the dying king asked to be buried disguised as a monk.

The strong legged can tackle the 249 steps up the **tower** (admission £1.50; ☎ 10am-4pm Sat & school holidays Easter-Sep); once up top, spare a thought for the unhappy Charles II, who surveyed his troops from here during the Battle of Worcester.

One-hour long **cathedral tours** (adult/child £3/free) run from the gift shop at 11am and 2pm Monday to Saturday from April to Septem-



ber. Evensong is a splendid affair; it's held at 5.30pm Monday to Wednesday, Friday and Saturday, and at 4pm Sunday.

COMMANDERY CIVIL WAR CENTRE

Set to reopen after a major overhaul in early 2007, the **Commandery** (☎ 361821; www.worcestercitymuseums.org.uk; adult/child £4/3; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat) is a splendid Tudor building with a painted chamber containing important frescoes from the 15th century. It also houses exhibits detailing the ins and outs of the Civil War; the city was a key Royalist stronghold until defeat in the 1651 Battle of Worcester.

ROYAL WORCESTER PORCELAIN WORKS

This venerated old-timer of British porcelain manufacture has come a long way since founder Dr John Wall started making ornate bone china as a hobby in 1751. Granted a royal warrant in 1789, the factory still supplies Her Royal Highness (HRH) with some of her preferred crockery, and now runs an entire visitor complex to promote its wares.

Worth visiting even for those that aren't potty about pottery, the **Worcester Porcelain Mu-**

seum (☎ 746000; www.worcesterporcelainmuseum.org.uk; Severn St; adult/concession £5/4.25; ☎ 10am-5.30pm Mon-Sat, 11am-5pm Sun) enlivens its exhaustive collection of works with quirky asides detailing everything from the china's use by British Royals to the factory's sidelines in porcelain dentures and 'portable fonts' designed for cholera outbreaks. Entry includes an audio tour.

The enjoyable **Visitor Experience Tour** (adult/concession £5/4.25; ☎ 10am-5.30pm Mon-Sat, 11am-5pm Sun) walks visitors through the porcelain's design and manufacture. Combined tickets for the museum and tour cost £9/8 per adult/child.

You can browse the bewildering array of porcelain goodies in the on-site **shops**, from the daintiest traditional dinnerware to 'Cheeky Mugs' by Naked Chef Jamie Oliver.

HISTORICAL PROPERTIES

For more of Worcester's bulldozer-dodging buildings of old, stroll through the idyllic cathedral-side College Green, then amble down New St and Friar St, both lined with lovely Tudor and Elizabethan buildings.

You can duck inside a timber-framed merchant's house from 1480 at **Greyfriars** (NT; ☎ 23571;

Friar St; adult/child £3.60/1.90; ☎ 1-5pm Wed-Sat Mar-Dec), which is full of atmospheric wood-panelled rooms and backed by a pretty walled garden. Also peek into the pompous 18th-century **Guildhall** (High St; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Sat), the creation of a pupil of Sir Christopher Wren who died in poverty after the city dragged its heels on paying him his dues.

Sleeping

Burgage House (☎ 25396; www.burgagehouse.co.uk; 4 College Precincts; s/d £35/60; ☒) A well-camouflaged little gem, hidden on a narrow cobbled street facing up to the cathedral, of which several rooms have unbeatable views. It's run in a charming, refined manner and the four spacious and elegantly decorated en-suite rooms are up a spiral staircase. Family friendly.

Ye Olde Talbot Hotel (☎ 23573; www.oldenglish.co.uk; Friar St; s/d £65/85; ☒) Attached to a popular bar and bistro bang in the town centre, this thoroughly renovated period inn is pretty good value. Rooms sport rich fabrics, deep colours, modern gadgets and an occasional smattering of antique features. Discounted parking is available nearby.

Diglis House (☎ 353518; www.diglishousehotel.co.uk; Severn St; s/d Fri-Sun from £75/90, Mon-Thu £90/100; ☐ ☒ ☕) This polished 18th-century abode with a lovely terraced garden idyllically set by the river is surprisingly tranquil despite being a short stroll from town and close to a school. For name-droppers, the artist Constable was another visitor here.

Eating

In 2006 world-renowned 'chef's chef' Shaun Hill was poised to open a restaurant on Sidbury, on the corner of City Walls Rd: ask the tourist office for details.

St Custard's Café (☎ 26654; 4 the hop market; mains £6-7; ☎ lunch Mon-Sat) A cheery café run by foodies that believe in honest fare for an even fairer price, which cooks up blackboard specials for both vegetarians and carnivores. A simple interior is complemented by fair-weather tables in the hop market courtyard outside.

King Charles II (☎ 22449; 29 New St; mains £8-14; ☎ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) Rich in history and serving a fair Continental cuisine, this timber-framed building shelters an oak-panelled dining room with crimson carpet and lace tablecloths thought to be from the time when Charles II fled from Cromwell after losing the Battle of Worcester.

Browns (☎ 26263; 24 Quay St; mains £9.50-17, set dinner £33.50; ☎ Tue-Sun) Housed in a converted Victorian corn mill adjacent to the river, with a pleasantly airy atmosphere, this is a classic British restaurant with a few French flavours sneaked in. It's a great place to impress a date.

Drinking

Cardinal's Hat (☎ 22066; 31 Friar St) At first glance a traditional old-English pub, split into several snug old-world rooms, this atmospheric Worcester institution now has a decidedly Austrian flavour. It sells Austrian beers in traditional steins and flutes and a choice of Austrian food at lunchtime.

Entertainment

Marr's Bar (☎ 613336; www.marrsbar.co.uk; 12 Pierpoint St) The best live-music venue for miles around, Marr's still has its original sprung dance floors from its days as a dance studio and you can bounce on them to your heart's content most nights thanks to packed listings. Gigs range from hard rock to world music.

Getting There & Around

Worcester has two stations but most trains run to Worcester Foregate (the other is Worcester Shrub Hill). Trains run hourly to London Paddington (£29.90, 2¼ to three hours) and Hereford (£8.40, 43 to 50 minutes).

National Express has several daily coaches to London changing in Birmingham (£18.30, four hours). Bus 44 runs twice-hourly to Great Malvern (30 minutes), bus 364 goes to Upton (30 minutes) hourly, and bus 417 goes to Ledbury (50 minutes, five daily Monday to Saturday).

Bikes can be hired from **Peddlers** (☎ 24238; 46 Barbourne Rd; per day from £8).

AROUND WORCESTER

Elgar Birthplace Museum

Due pomp and circumstance is given to Britain's greatest classical composer at the **Elgar Museum** (☎ 01905-333224; www.elgarmuseum.org; Lower Broadheath; adult/child £5/2; ☎ 11am-5pm), partly housed in the humble cottage in which he was born in 1857, 3 miles west of Worcester. You can browse an engrossing collection of the walrus-moustachioed composer's possessions, ranging from his gramophone and musical manuscripts to endearing doodlings in the morning paper. Admission includes an

audio tour with musical interludes to appreciate what all the fuss is about.

Buses 310, 311 and 312 go from Worcester to Broadheath Common, a short walk from the museum (15 minutes, three daily Monday to Saturday).

GREAT MALVERN

☎ 01684 / pop 35,558

Tumbling picturesquely down the slopes of the Malvern Hills, which soar suddenly upwards from the flat plains of Worcestershire, this well-heeled Victorian spa town still seems to exude health and wellbeing courtesy of its lush hill views, wide tree-lined avenues, rosy-cheeked inhabitants, booted hikers and its pure spring waters that bubble up in unexpected places. Today the medicinal waters that first attracted overindulgent Victorians are harnessed for a thriving bottled-water business.

The **tourist office** (☎ 892289; www.malvern hills.gov.uk; 21 Church St; ☎ 10am-5pm) is brimming with walking and cycling information. Guided tours of the town (£3, 1½ hours) leave here at 10.30am on weekends. The **library** (☎ 566553; Graham Rd; ☎ 9.30am-5.30pm Mon, Fri-Sat & 9.30am-8pm Tue-Thu) has free internet access: bring ID.

In June the town goes music mad in the bi-annual **Elgar Festival** (☎ 892277; www.elgar-festival.com) to celebrate the life and works of the composer who lived nearby at Malvern Link.

Sights & Activities

MALVERN PRIORY

A treat even for those tired of England's draughty churches, the 11th-century **priory church** (☎ 561020; www.greatmalvern priory.org.uk; Church St; suggested donation £3; ☎ 9am-6.30pm Apr-Oct, 9am-4.30pm Nov-Mar) is lined by elephantine Norman pillars and shelters an entrancing collection of weird and wonderful 14th-century misericords under the tip-up seats of the monks' stalls. Every one a gem, depictions include three rats hanging a cat, and the mythological basilisk, and run through domestic labours of the months from the 15th century.

MALVERN MUSEUM OF LOCAL HISTORY

Straddling the pathway in the grand Priory Gatehouse (1470), the **Malvern Museum of Local History** (☎ 567811; adult/child £1.50/50p; ☎ 10.30am-5pm Easter-Oct, except Wed during term-time) offers a small but thorough exploration of the things for which Great Malvern is renowned, from hills' geology to Victorian water cures.

MALVERN THEATRES

One of the country's best provincial theatres, **Malvern Theatre** (☎ 892277; www.malvern-theatres.co.uk; Grange Rd) packs in a lively programme of classical music, dance, comedy, drama and cinema.

Occupying a strange parallel universe in a converted Victorian men's lavatory decked out in theatrical Italianate flourishes, the **Theatre of Small Convenience** (☎ 568933; www.wctheatre.co.uk; Edith Walk) is one of the world's smallest theatres, seating just 12 people for acts that range from puppetry to opera.

WALKING

The jack-in-the-box Malvern Hills, which pop dramatically up out of the innocently low Severn plains on the boundary between Worcestershire and Herefordshire, are made up of 18 named peaks; the highest of the bunch being Worcester Beacon at 419m. The hills are crisscrossed by more than 100 miles of paths; trail guides (£1.75) are available at the tourist office. More than 70 springs and fountains pouring out the famous medicinal waters are dotted around the hills, and the tourist office has a map guide (£3.95) to all of them.

Sleeping

Malvern Hills YHA (☎ 0870 770 5948; malvern@yha.org.uk; 18 Peachfield Rd, Malvern Wells; dm £10.95; ☎ Easter-Oct) Muddy boots are welcome at this 58-bed hostel in an elegant Edwardian building, 1.5 miles south of town.

Como House (☎ 561486; www.comohouse.co.uk; Como Rd; s/d £36/56; ☐ wi-fi) An explosion of lilac greets you to this handsome Malvern-stone converted schoolhouse. All three tastefully furnished rooms are south facing and the elaborate gardens, complete with a bridged pond and numerous statues, are a stunning feature. The owner picks guests up from the station and drops them at walking points.

Cowleigh Park Farm (☎ 566750; www.cowleighparkfarm.co.uk; Cowleigh Rd; s/d £45/65; ☐ ☒) This 13th-century timber-framed farmhouse on the far northwestern brink of town is surrounded by countryside and overflows with bonhomie. You'll be greeted by friendly family dogs, and led up to oak-beamed rooms with sloping floors, tasteful furnishings and plentiful home comforts.

Bredon House Hotel (☎ 566990; www.bredonhousehotel.co.uk; 34 Worcester Rd; s/d from £45/80; ☐ ☒) A short saunter from the centre, this genteel Victorian B&B has superb views and courteous

service. Rooms are decorated in a quirky but tasteful mix of new and old; one room even has a raised bath from which to enjoy the panorama while popping bubbles. Pets and children welcome.

Eating

St Ann's Well Cafe (☎ 560285; St Ann's Well; ☞ lunch Apr-Sep, Sat & Sun only Oct-Mar) The pick of Malvern's doily-and-tea-cosy brigade is in a handsome early-19th-century villa atop a steep 99-step ascent from town. It rewards the climb with great vegetarian and vegan food, wholesome salads and eye-widening cakes, which you can wash down with fresh spring water that bubbles into a carved basin by the door.

Anupam (☎ 573814; 85 Church St; mains £8-11; ☞ lunch & dinner) This stylish Indian restaurant, tucked just off the main road, is so passionate about flavours that it has its own range of blended spices. Walls coated in primary colours, and bubbly service put guests in a cheerful mood, and superb dishes such as *murg-e-nashilee* (chicken with onion and roasted poppy seed) keep them that way.

Getting There & Around

There are twice-hourly trains to Worcester (12 to 18 minutes) and roughly hourly trains to Hereford (£5.90, 30 minutes). Trains also go regularly to Ledbury (13 minutes).

National Express runs one bus daily to London (£18.60, four hours) via Worcester (20 minutes). Bus 44 connects Worcester (30 minutes) with Great Malvern hourly.

Handy for walkers, the Malvern Hills Hopper (five daily weekends and Bank Holidays mid-April to October) runs a hop-on, hop-off service through the hills to Upton-upon-Severn and Eastnor Castle.

HEREFORDSHIRE

An oasis of tranquillity, rural Herefordshire is scattered with quintessentially English villages of black-and-white timbered charm, a cherished sense of community and well-developed appreciation of the quiet life. Though it's challenging to get around, the effort is rewarded with bucolic landscapes of lush fields, twisting lanes and more than enough leafy orchards to whet your appetite for the county's famous ciders. The River Wye wiggles provocatively through the county, tempting canoeists from

across the country. County capital Hereford hosts the superb medieval Mappa Mundi, and tip-toeing into Wales is renowned kingdom of books, Hay-on-Wye.

Information

For online county-wide information on attractions, accommodation and events:

Visit Heart of England (www.visitheartofengland.com)

Visit Herefordshire (www.visitherefordshire.co.uk)

Activities

Herefordshire is a haven for walkers, with several established long-distance paths meandering through it (see p382). Offa's Dyke Path hugs the Welsh border, while the 107-mile Wye Valley Walk begins in Chepstow (Wales) and follows the river upstream into Herefordshire. The Three Choirs Way is a 100-mile route connecting the cathedrals of Hereford, Worcester and Gloucester, where the music festival of the same name has been celebrated for more than three centuries.

The newest addition to local long-distance tramps is the **Herefordshire Trail** (www.herefordshiretrail.com), a 150-mile circular loop linking Leominster, Ledbury, Ross-on-Wye and Kington.

Getting Around

Busy train stations with nationwide links can be found at Hereford, Leominster and Ledbury. To plan your way about, pick up a free *Public Transport Map & Guide* from tourist offices and bus stations, or go online through **Hereford Bus** (www.herefordbus.info) and **National Traveline** (☎ 0870 608 2 608; www.travelinemidlands.co.uk).

HEREFORD

☎ 01432 / pop 56,353

Home to one of the most extraordinary sights in England, the magnificent medieval Mappa Mundi, the dignified cathedral city of Hereford straddles the River Wye plump in the centre of its county. Known largely for its cattle, cider and connections with the composer Elgar, it has a relatively provincial feel but an increasingly youthful energy fizzles along its riverside and centre.

Orientation & Information

The triangular, pedestrianised High Town is the city's heart, just north of the River Wye. The cathedral is close to the river, while the bus and train stations lie to the northeast, on Commercial Rd.

BLACK-&WHITE VILLAGES

A lovely loop of Tudor England survives almost untouched in northwest Herefordshire, where higgledy-piggledy black-and-white villages cluster round idyllic greens, seemingly oblivious to the modern world. A wonderful 40-mile circular drive here follows the **Black & White Village Trail**, taking in the most handsome timber-framed buildings, old churches and convivial pubs. You can pick up a guide from any tourist office for 75p (there are also CD versions and an accommodation pamphlet available).

The route starts at Leominster and climaxes at chocolate-box perfect **Eardisland**. One of the prettiest villages is **Pembridge**, with its huddle of classic houses; it also makes a good base for touring the area, with lots of circular walks radiating from town and the Mortimer Trail just north of the village.

One superb place to eat and stay close by is the award-winning **Stagg Inn** (☎ 01544-230221; www.thestagg.co.uk; Titley; s £50-60, d £70-90; ☞ closed Sun evening & Mon). This cosy country inn was the first pub to be awarded a Michelin star, and is a wonderfully welcoming place with roaring fires and antiques, stylish touches and a contemporary menu (mains £11 to £16) but with a traditional soul. It offers a handful of lovely rooms, making the roll home with a full and happy belly all the easier.

The 3-mile Titley Loop Walk begins here and winds through gorgeous countryside, making it a good way to work up an appetite.

The **tourist office** (☎ 268430; www.visitherefordshire.co.uk; 1 King St; ☞ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat) is opposite the cathedral. **Guided walks** (walks £3; ☞ 11am Mon-Sat, 2.30pm Sun May-Sep) start from here. There's free internet access at the **library** (Broad St; ☞ 9.30am-7.30pm Tue-Wed & Fri, 9.30am-5.30pm Thu, 9.30am-4pm Sat) in the same building as the Hereford Museum & Art Gallery.

Sights

HEREFORD CATHEDRAL

After the Welsh torched the town's original cathedral, the new **Hereford Cathedral** (☎ 374200; www.herefordcathedral.co.uk; 5 College Cloisters; ☞ 7.30am-evening) was begun on the same site in the 11th century. The building has evolved into a well-packaged lesson on the history of English architecture: the sturdy south transept is Norman but holds a 16th-century triptych; the exquisite north transept with its soaring windows dates from the 13th century; the choir and the tower date from the 14th; while the Victorian influence is visible almost everywhere.

But the cathedral is best known for two ancient treasures housed here. The awe-inspiring 13th-century **Mappa Mundi** (adult/child £4.50/3.50; ☞ 10am-4.15pm Mon-Sat & 11am-3.15pm Sun May-Sep, 11am-3.15pm Mon-Sat Oct-Apr) is a large calfskin vellum map intricately painted with the vivid (to modern eyes, wacky) world vision of the era's scholars and an enthralling pictorial encyclopedia of the times. It is the largest and best-preserved example of this type of cartography

anywhere, but more than that it's a bewitching journey through the world as then envisioned, peopled by strange beings with eyes in their chest, roamed by basilisks and mythological monsters. Navigate your way through the barely recognisable mash of continents and you can even find Hereford itself.

The same wing contains the world's largest surviving **chained library**, hooked to its shelves by a cascade of long thin shackles. The unique collection of rare books and manuscripts includes a 1217 copy of the revised Magna Carta and the 8th-century *Hereford Gospels*, although the gospels' fragility means they aren't always on display.

The cathedral comes alive with evensong at 5.30pm Monday to Saturday and 3.30pm on Sunday, and every three years in August it holds the famous **Three Choirs Festival** (www.3choirs.org) shared with Gloucester and Worcester Cathedrals.

OTHER SIGHTS

Stranded alone amid a sea of bustling shops, the **Old House** (☎ 260694; admission free; ☞ 10am-5pm Tue-Sat year-round, plus 10am-4pm Sun Apr-Sep) is a wonderfully creaky black-and-white, three-storey wooden house, built in 1621, panelled and furnished in exquisitely carved wood.

The quirky collection at **Hereford Museum & Art Gallery** (☎ 260692; Broad St; admission free; ☞ 10am-5pm Tue-Sat year-round, plus 10am-4pm Sun Apr-Sep) includes everything from 19th-century witches'

curse to a two-headed calf. There are hands-on antiques boxes and dressing-up gear to keep kids engaged.

Don't forget to claim your free samples in the **Cider Museum & King Offa Distillery** (☎ 354207; www.cidermuseum.co.uk; Pomona Pl; adult/child £3/2; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sat Apr-Oct, 11am-3pm Tue-Sat Nov-Mar), which explores cider-making history. Look for the fine costrels (mini barrels) and horn mugs used by agricultural workers to carry and quaff their wages, which were partially paid in cider.

Sleeping

Charades (☎ 269444; www.charadeshereford.co.uk; 34 Southbank Rd; s/d £45/65; P ☒) This fine old Georgian gentleman's residence built around 1860 has five light, cosy rooms with slightly frumpy old-fashioned décor. The house itself has character in spades – look for the suspiciously familiar dolls house and old service bells in the hall. It's handy for the bus station, but a 1km walk from the cathedral.

Castle House (☎ 356321; www.castlehse.co.uk; Castle St; s £120, d £210-258; P ☒) This multi-award-winning and oh-so-refined Georgian town house, once the bishop's residence, is Her-

eford's best boutique hotel. Rooms have rich fabrics, classic décor with a modern twist, there's a lovely garden and riverside seating, as well as a seriously sophisticated restaurant with an innovative chef.

Eating

Café@All Saints (☎ 370414; www.cafeatallsaints.co.uk; High St; mains £4.75-6; ☎ lunch) Trade nods with the clergy and sit up among lofty stone arches as you sip Fairtrade coffee or wolf down superbly wholesome (mostly vegetarian) lunches in this natty two-level café at the rear of a working church. You can even enjoy a glass of wine – just remember, God's watching.

Floodgates Brasserie (☎ 349000; Left Bank Centre, Bridge St; mains £10-15; ☎ lunch & dinner) This sleek but ever-so-slightly soulless modern restaurant bags a privileged spot overlooking the river, complete with terrace; and if the sun's not shining the interior does a fair imitation, with vivid colours, polished steel and sunburst motifs.

Getting There & Around

Hire bikes at **Phil Prothero** (☎ 359478; Bastion Mews) for £12 per day.

There are hourly trains to London Paddington (£35, 3¼ hours) via Worcester (£8.40, 45 minutes); and to Birmingham (£11.80, 1½ hours). National Express goes to London (£18.60, 4¼ hours, three daily), Heathrow (£18.60, 3¼ hours, three daily), Gloucester (£5, 1¼ hours, three daily) and Ross-on-Wye (30 minutes, two daily) or Ledbury (25 minutes, two daily).

From the bus station, bus 420 runs every two hours to Worcester (1¼ hours). Bus 38 runs hourly to Ross-on-Wye (40 minutes, six on Sunday), and 476 goes hourly to Ledbury (30 minutes, five on Sunday) – both from the bus station on Commercial Rd.

AROUND HEREFORD Kilpeck Church

A passionate couple, Disney-esque animals and a famous spread-legged *sheila-na-gig* (Celtic fertility figure) are just some of the extraordinary 12th-century carvings that ring this enchanting gem of a church, buried deep in the Herefordshire countryside in the tiny hamlet of Kilpeck. Astonishingly, the church remains practically unchanged since the 12th century and is well worth the 1-mile trip south of the main A465 road that comes from Hereford. Kilpeck is 9 miles south of Hereford, off the A465.

ROSS-ON-WYE

☎ 01989 / pop 10,085

Snoozy little Ross-on-Wye, which perches prettily on a red sandstone bluff over a kink in the River Wye, is a placid place to rest before or after exertions in the beautiful countryside that surrounds it. The town sparks to life in mid-August, when the **International Festival** brings fireworks, raft races, music and street theatre.

The salmon-pink 17th-century Market House sits atop its weathered sandstone columns in the Market Place. It still shelters the small market in a motherly fashion. It contains a **Heritage Centre** (☎ 260675; ☎ 10am-5pm Apr-Oct, 10.30am-4pm Mon-Sat Nov-Mar) with local history displays. The **tourist office** (☎ 562768; tic-ross@herefordshire.gov.uk; Edde Cross St; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat) has information on activities and walks.

Sleeping & Eating

Linden House (☎ 565373; www.lindenguesthouse.com; 14 Church St; s/d without bathroom £32/58, with bathroom £45/65; P ☒) Window boxes splash colour

WORTH THE TRIP

Ford Abbey (☎ 01568-760700; www.fordabbey.co.uk; Pudleston; r £125-180; P ☒) Character and history in spades, but with just as strong a suit in luxury, this stunning half-timbered medieval abbey has been beautifully converted into an upper-crust retreat. Set amid extensive wooded and waterside gardens, the hotel seamlessly blends antiques with contemporary style. The spacious rooms are thickly beamed, graced by antique furniture and four-poster beds, while the restaurant serves up exquisite installations of food sculpture, much of it hailing from the hotel's own farm. Pudleston is about 10 miles north of Hereford.

across this handsome 17th-century town house B&B. The beautifully furnished rooms are equally vivid, painted with cute stencilling and some sporting exposed beams and brass beds. It's run by a trained hypnotherapist who'll happily offer her services for a good night's sleep.

Nature's Choice (☎ 763454; www.natures-choice.biz; 17 Broad St; mains £4.50-6; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Wed, 10am-5pm & 6.15-9pm Thu-Sat) This bright little organic café in a Regency-style building has wholesome home-baked and light meals for carnivore, vegetarian and vegan alike. It also offers ecofriendly B&B (singles/doubles £42/60), with cute rooms in pastel shades; breakfast costs extra but it's worth it.

The closest hostel is 6 miles south at Welsh Bicknor (see p392).

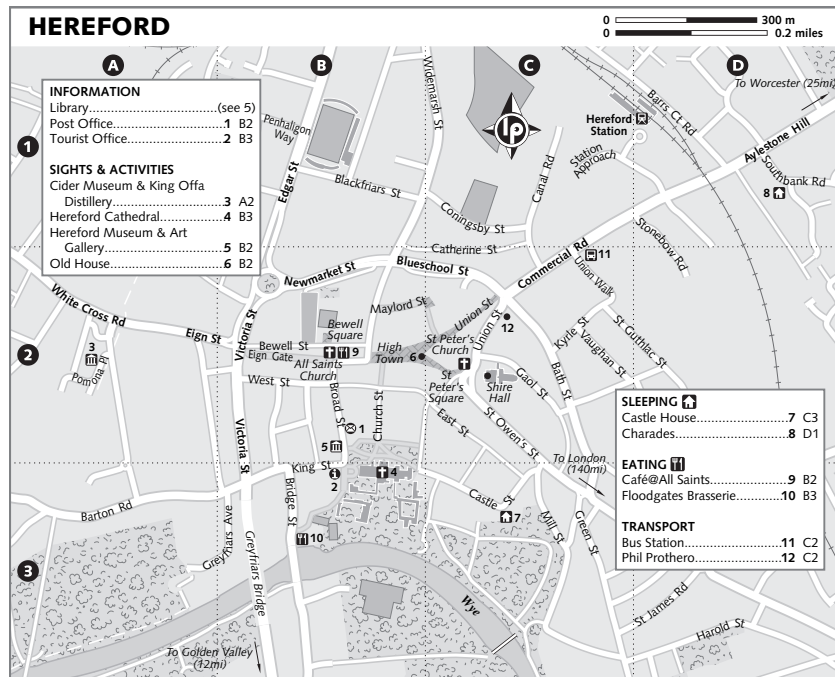
Getting There & Around

Buses 38 and 33 run hourly Monday to Saturday to and from Hereford and Gloucester respectively (40 minutes each way).

You can hire bikes from **Revolutions** (☎ 562 639; 48 Broad St; per day from £10).

AROUND ROSS-ON-WYE Goodrich

Seeming to sprout organically from its craggy bedrock, **Goodrich Castle** (EH; ☎ 01600-890538; adult/child £4.50/2.30; ☎ 10am-5pm Apr-Oct, 10am-4pm Thu-Mon Nov-Feb) is an exceptionally complete medieval castle, topped by a superb 12th-century keep that rewards the trek up tight winding staircases with spectacular views. Don't miss clambering around the ramparts or sticking



your head into 'Roaring Meg', the squat mortar cannon that breached these mighty walls during the Civil War.

Welsh Bicknor YHA (☎ 0870 770 6086; welshbicknor@yha.org.uk; dm £13.95; ☞ Apr-Oct; P ☒) is well worth the steep 1.5-mile ascent to reach it from Goodrich village. This former Victorian rectory enjoys glorious views and languishes amid 10 hectares of lovely riverside grounds. The Wye Valley Walk passes the hostel.

Goodrich is 5 miles south of Ross off the A40. Bus 34 stops here every two hours on its way between Ross (15 minutes) and Monmouth (20 minutes).

Symonds Yat

☎ 01600

A remote nook beautifully situated beside the River Wye, Symonds Yat is well worth a visit for water-babies, bird enthusiasts and those fond of a relaxed riverside pint. An ancient hand-hauled ferry (adult/child 80/40p) joins the two separate hill-hugging villages on either bank, usually with a few ducks stowing away in the back. There's an abrupt change of mood in upper Symonds Yat West, which hosts a big, sore-thumb fairground jingling to the sound of pocket change, slot-machines and carousels.

ACTIVITIES

This is prime canoeing and rock-climbing territory and there's good hiking in the nearby Forest of Dean. The **Wydean Canoe Centre** (☎ 01594-833238; www.wydean.co.uk) hires out canoes/kayaks from £20/16 for a half-day, £10 for an hour, and also organises multiday kayaking trips, white-water trips, caving and climbing. Note that the river has a strong current and is not suitable for swimming.

From Symonds Yat East, it's a steep but easy walk – at least on a dry day – up 504m to the crown of the region, **Symonds Yat Rock**, which provides tremendous views of the river and valley. You can catch a rare glimpse of the world's fastest creature doing aerial acrobatics here, as peregrine falcons nest in the cliffs opposite.

If that all sounds like too much hard work, **Kingfisher Cruises** (☎ 891063; adult/child £5/3) runs sedate 35-minute gorge cruises from beside the ferry.

SLEEPING & EATING

Old Court Hotel (☎ 890367; www.oldcourthotel.co.uk; Symonds Yat West; s £60, d £80-100; P ☒) This

grand 16th-century manor house will give history buffs a kick while also catering to comfort lovers. It's set in lovely gardens, complete with heated pool, and has character-filled rooms with exposed beams and frilly country-cottage décor. Children over 12 are welcome. Old Court is on the northern entrance to Symonds Yat West, across the river and roughly a mile's walk from the ferry.

Garth Cottage (☎ 890364; garthcot@yateast.fsnet.co.uk; Symonds Yat East; d £70; ☞ Apr-Oct; P ☒) The pick of accommodation on the east side, this friendly family-run B&B sits demurely by the riverside near the ferry crossing, and is spotlessly maintained. Breakfast is served in the conservatory or on the terrace; both overlook the water.

Saracen's Head (☎ 890435; www.saracensheadinn.co.uk; Symonds Yat East; mains £5-15; P ☒) This black-and-white traditional inn is Symonds Yat's principal focal point, next to the ferry crossing. It has some river-view rooms (singles/doubles from £45/64) sporting pine furniture, and two luxury suites in the boathouse. It's a popular spot to tuck into bar food and restaurant fare while waiting for the moment when the ferryman topples into the river.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Bus 34 can drop you on the main road 1.5 miles from the village. Bikes are available for hire from the Royal Hotel (Symonds Yat East) for £13 per day.

LEDBURY

☎ 01531 / pop 8491

This atmospheric little town is a favourite for day-trippers on account of its dense core of crooked black-and-white streets, which zero in on a delightfully leggy gingerbread-style market house.

The helpful **tourist office** (☎ 636147; tic-ledbury@herefordshire.gov.uk; 3 The Homend; ☞ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat) has details about a lovely 17-mile cycle route called the 'Ledbury Loop' (50p). To get online visit part ice-cream parlour, part internet café **Ice Bytes** (☎ 634700; 38 The Homend; per 15min £1).

Sights

Ledbury's showpiece is the gorgeous black-and-white **Market House**, a 17th-century, timber-framed structure precariously balanced atop 16 narrow wooden posts supposedly gleaned from the defeated Spanish Armada. From here, wander up the narrow

cobbled **Church Lane**, crowded with tilted timber-framed buildings, including the **Painted Room** (☞ 11am-1pm & 2-4pm Mon-Fri Easter-Sep), with jigsaw puzzle 16th-century floral frescoes.

Here too are several small museums, including **Butcher's Row House** (☎ 632942; Church Lane; admission free; ☞ 11am-5pm Easter-Sep), a pocket-sized folk museum stuffed with curios from 19th-century school clothing to an 18th-century communal 'boot' bath that used to be carted from door to door for the poor to scrub in. The **Heritage Centre** (☎ 260692; admission free; ☞ 10.30am-4.30pm Easter-Oct) sits in another half-timbered treasure opposite and has more displays on the town.

At the top of the lane lies the 12th-century church of **St Michael & All Angels**, with a splendid 18th-century spire and tower separate from the church.

Sleeping & Eating

Budget travellers may struggle to find accommodation in Ledbury.

Talbot Hotel (☎ 632963; www.visitedledbury.co.uk/talbot; New St; s/d £38.50/63.50; P) A black-and-white late-16th-century coaching inn with a lively little bar and dark oak-panelled restaurant (mains £8 to £15) complete with painstakingly carved overmantle and musket-ball holes, the Talbot also has a handful of simple but quaint floral rooms in what used to be the hay loft. Breakfast costs extra.

Verzons Country Inn (☎ 670381; www.theverzons.co.uk; A438, Trumpet; s £75, d £98-130; P ☒) The ultimate country-chic retreat, 2 miles west of Ledbury, this Georgian farmhouse has undergone a debonair makeover without sacrificing its rustic charm. Its 10 rooms are luxuriously appointed in tactile tweeds, seagrass and leather, and the brasserie's classic menu ranges from beer-battered cod to delicious duck (mains £10 to £17).

Feathers Hotel (☎ 635266; www.feathers-ledbury.co.uk; High St; s/d from £79.50/110; P ☒) The oldest part of this black-and-white Tudor building, which looms over the main road, has the kind of slanting floorboards, painted beams and rich colours that leave you in no doubt of its age. However, many of the modern rooms lack these charms.

Ceci Paolo (☎ 632976; www.cecipaulo.com; 21 High St; mains £6-7; ☞ lunch) This irresistible food emporium hooks foodies from the moment they wander into its wonderful deli, wine and kitchen shop downstairs, then reels them in

with its chic contemporary café above. Daily specials showcase the deli's produce, with everything from manchego cheese to exotic verjuice marinade.

Getting There & Around

There are roughly hourly trains to Hereford (15 minutes), less often to Great Malvern (11 minutes), Worcester (23 to 27 minutes) and Birmingham (£9.60, 1¼ hours).

Bus 476 runs to Hereford hourly (30 minutes, every two hours on Sunday); bus 132 runs hourly to Gloucester (one hour); and 675 to Great Malvern (30 minutes, every two hours Monday to Saturday).

You can hire mountain bikes at **Saddle Bound Cycles** (☎ 633433; 3 The Southend; per day £10).

AROUND LEDBURY

Eastnor Castle

Built more for fancy than fortification, the extravagant 19th-century medieval-revival folly of **Eastnor Castle** (☎ 01531-633160; www.eastnorcastle.com; adult/child £7/4, grounds only £3/1; ☞ 11am-5pm Sun & Bank Holidays Apr-Sep, plus Sun-Fri Jul & Aug) makes you half expect to see a fire-breathing dragon appear or a golden-haired princess lean over its walls. The opulent interior continues the romantic veneer, decorated in Gothic and Italianate features, tapestries and antiques. Even when the castle is closed, its maze, adventure playground and lakeside walks are worth a look. Its beautiful deer park is also stage to the **Big Chill** (☎ 020-7684 2020; www.bigchill.net; ☞ Aug), when campers, musicians, performers and artists round off summer festival season in relaxed fashion.

The castle is just over 2 miles east of Ledbury on the A438. The Malvern Hills Hopper runs here from Upton-upon-Severn and Great Malvern on summer weekends and Bank Holidays.

SHROPSHIRE

Jewel in the Marches' crown, the charming county of Shropshire ripples with heather-tickled hills, beautiful moorland and gushing rivers. It's a large pastoral region whose sparse population prizes the good life filled with fine food, health, peace and quiet. The county capital of Shrewsbury is one of England's loveliest Tudor towns, and nestled nearby is the fascinating industrial-heritage site of

SOMETHING FOR THE WEEKEND

Kick off your weekend with a night of loved-up escapism and fine food at the pleasantly potty **Hundred House Hotel** (p402). Next morning, nip over to **Ironbridge Gorge** (p397) for a stroll across the world's first iron bridge, then roll down to the beautiful **Long Mynd** (p401) to build up an afternoon appetite on its stunning walking trails. Hold onto your hunger pangs just long enough to put them to good use in the region's gourmet capital, **Ludlow** (p403), where **Hibiscus** (p405) and **Mr Underhill's** (p405) are just two of the superb restaurants to choose between. Sleep off your excesses in the stunning timber-framed **Feathers Hotel** (p404), then on Sunday morning head south for a quick tour through the picture-postcard **black-and-white villages** (p389). For a final fling, linger over an indulgent Sunday lunch at the **Stagg Inn** (p389) and book yourself a trip to the gym on Monday.

Ironbridge Gorge. Peppered with pretty villages, the beautiful southern Shropshire Hills undulate southwards and make wonderful walking territory. And at the county's base you'll find gourmet hub Ludlow, with its handsome castle and fanaticism for food.

Information

For online county information:

North Shropshire (www.northshropshire.co.uk)

Secret Shropshire (www.secretshropshire.org.uk)

Shropshire Tourism (www.shropshiretourism.info)

Virtual Shropshire (www.virtual-shropshire.co.uk)

Visit South Shropshire (www.visitsouthshropshire.co.uk)

Getting Around

You can hop on handy rail services from Shrewsbury to Church Stretton, Craven Arms and Ludlow. The invaluable *Shropshire Bus & Train Map*, available free from tourist offices, shows public transport routes. **Shropshire Hills Shuttle Buses** (www.shropshirehillsshuttles.co.uk) also drops off walkers along popular hiking routes on weekends and Bank Holidays. Call **Traveline** (☎ 0870 608 2 608; www.traveline.org.uk) with any queries.

SHREWSBURY

☎ 01743 / pop 67,126

It takes just seconds to fall in love with the spaghetti-bowl tangle of medieval streets in the heart of Shropshire's most picturesque town. Time-worn Tudor buildings tilt their ponderous frames over mysterious passageways; dusky-red sandstone warms an ancient abbey and castle, and sweeping gardens run down to the River Severn.

Nestled in a horseshoe bend of the river, Shrewsbury was for many centuries a critical defensive point to help keep the Welsh in line. Then in medieval times the town grew

fat on the wool trade. It is also the birthplace of Charles Darwin (1809–82), whose theory of evolution left the world reeling.

Orientation

Shrewsbury's near-island status helps preserve the Tudor and Jacobean streetscapes of its centre and protects it from unattractive urban sprawl. The train station is a five-minute walk northeast of the centre and is as far as you'll need to venture.

Information

Royal Shrewsbury Hospital (☎ 261000; Mytton Oak Rd)

Shrewsbury Library (☎ 255300; Castle Gates; ☎ 9.30am–5pm Mon, Wed, Fri & Sat, 9.30am–8pm Tue & Thu, 1–4pm Sun) Free internet access.

Tourist office (☎ 281200; www.visitshrewsbury.com; Music Hall, The Square; ☎ 9.30am–5.30pm Mon–Sat, 10am–4pm Sun May–Sep, 10am–5pm Mon–Sat Oct–Apr)

Guided walking tours (adult/child £3.50/1.50, 1½ hours) leave the tourist office at 2.30pm from May to September and at 2.30pm Saturday only from November to April.

Sights

SHREWSBURY ABBEY

Most famous as a setting for monastic who-dunits the *Chronicles of Brother Cadfael* by Ellis Peters, this lovely red-sandstone **abbey** (☎ 232723; www.shrewsburyabbey.com; Abbey Foregate; donation adult/child £2/1; ☎ 10am–4.30pm Mon–Sat, 11.30am–2.30pm Sun) is what remains of a large Benedictine monastery founded in 1083, its outbuildings mostly lost and its flanks unceremoniously chopped. It's graced by a mix of Norman, Early English and Victorian features and there's an exceptional 14th-century west window of heraldic glass. The abbey is renowned for its acoustics and a notice board gives information on recitals.

SHREWSBURY MUSEUM & ART GALLERY

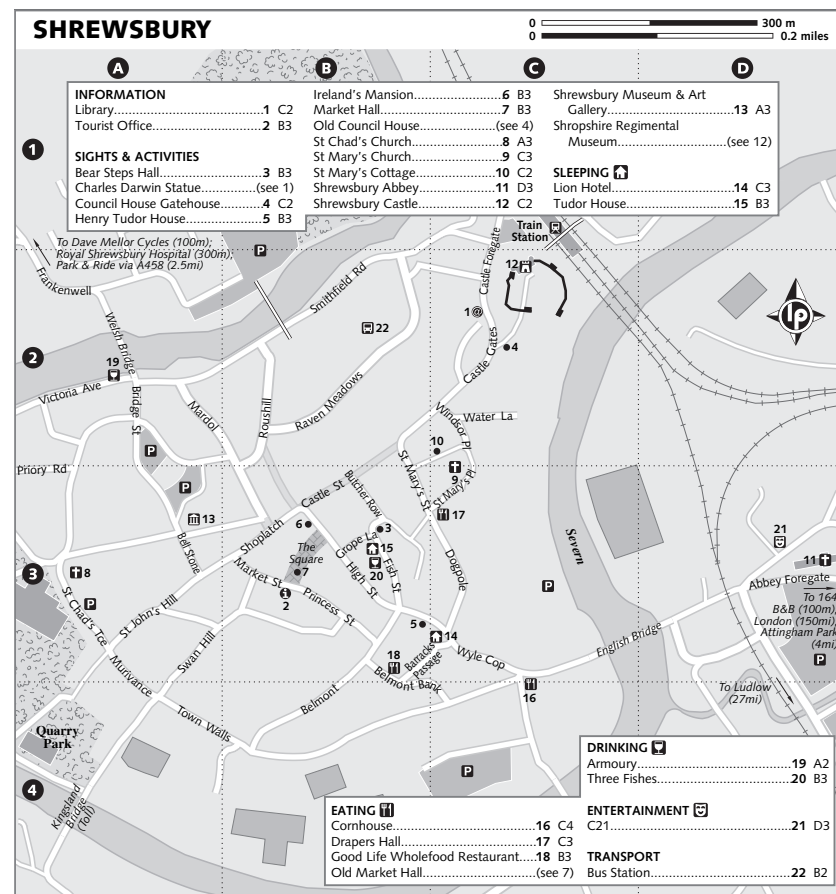
The stunning timber-framed Tudor merchant's mansion and warehouse in which **Shrewsbury Museum & Art Gallery** (☎ 361196; www.shrewsburymuseum.com; Barker St; admission free; ☎ 10am–4pm Tue–Sat Oct–May, 10am–5pm Tue–Sat & 10am–4pm Sun Jun–Sep) is housed are as much of an attraction as its exhibits, which range from Roman finds to Darwin's times.

Walking Tour

Start at the tourist office. The mellow-stone building balancing on chunky legs opposite you is Shrewsbury's 16th-century **Market Hall**, hub of the historic wool trade. A few pillars are still dented by rows of holes used to count how many fleeces were sold.

One of Shrewsbury's most magnificent black-and-white beauties, the lordly timber-framed **Ireland's Mansion** grabs attention to your left as you step up to High St. Turn right and cross over into the charmingly named and almost claustrophobically narrow **Grope Lane**, with overhanging storeys that seem to close in around you. You'll emerge into atmospheric **Fish Street**, and see some steps leading to the 14th-century **Bear Steps Hall** (☎ 10am–4pm), now home to a small exhibition space. On the hall's other side is **Butcher Row**, home to more half-timbered lovelies.

Head another street north for a peek inside medieval **St Mary's Church** (St Mary's St; ☎ 11am–4pm Fri–Sun May–Sep), which has one of the highest spires in England and the astonishingly



vivid Jesse window of rare mid-14th-century glass.

Pass the tilted 17th-century **St Mary's Cottage** and turn left into Windsor Pl, before taking the second right into Castle St. You can't miss the entrance right to terracotta-coloured **Shrewsbury Castle**, which houses the stiff-upper-lip **Shropshire Regimental Museum** (☎ 358516; adult/child £2.50/1.25; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sat & 10am-4pm Sun-Mon May-Sep, 10am-4pm Wed-Sat Feb-Apr) and has wonderful views.

Back near the entrance is Jacobean-style **Council House Gatehouse**, dating from 1620, and **Old Council House**, where the Council of the Welsh Marches used to meet.

Opposite the castle is the rather ostentatious **library**, with a **statue** of Shrewsbury's most famous son, Charles Darwin. Returning to St Mary's St, follow it into Dogpole and turn right into Wyle Cop, Welsh for 'hilltop'. Henry VII stayed in the seriously overhanging **Henry Tudor House** before the Battle of Bosworth. At the bottom of Wyle Cop is the graceful 18th-century **English Bridge**, which takes you across to **Shrewsbury Abbey**.

Sleeping

164 (☎ 367750; www.164bedandbreakfast.co.uk; 164 Abbey Foregate; s/d £45/58, without bathroom £35/54; ☎ wi-fi) A breath of fresh air, this B&B eschews chintz and celebrates its lovely 16th-century timber frame, rough walls and lopsided floors with vivid colours, contemporary fabrics and a quirky mix of artwork. And as a cherry on the top, breakfast is served in bed.

Tudor House (☎ 351735; www.tudorhouseshrewsbury.com; 2 Fish St; s/d from £69/79; ☎) For a more rose-tinted picture of the past, this gloriously creaky medieval building is festooned with floral window boxes and its handful of traditional oak-beamed rooms are turned out in high-shine fabrics, some with spindly metal-framed headboards entwined with flowers. Not all rooms have an en suite.

Lion Hotel (☎ 0870 609 6167; www.corushotels.com/thelion; Wyle Cop; s/d from £60/79, stn from £108; ☎) A cowardly lion presides over the doorway of this grand old coaching inn, which has hosted many a luminary through its 400-year history. Although the three-score standard rooms have a bland style with faded leafy motifs your granny would pick, the suites are the real deal, with bags of character and oodles of antiques.

There are plenty more B&Bs huddled around Abbey Foregate.

Eating

Good Life Wholefood Restaurant (☎ 350455; Barracks Passage; mains £3.50-7; ☎ lunch Mon-Sat) Run by a dietician and devotee of good honest vegetarian food, this cute little refuge off Wyle Cop is a great place for hearty and wholesome salads, hot bakes and delicious desserts. Takeaway is available.

Old Market Hall (☎ 281281; Market Sq; mains £5-7; ☎ 10am-late) Hobnob with the local arts brigade in this posh café-bar in the old drapers hall, underneath a stunning timbered roof; it's styled to combine city chic with cosy rustic touches. As well as speciality teas, soul-restoring coffees and wines, it serves up a range of sandwiches, wraps, and calorific pastries. It's based in a lively film and media centre.

Cornhouse (☎ 231991; 59a Wyle Cop; mains £8-14; ☎ lunch & dinner) This classy but relaxed wine-bar and restaurant successfully mixes contemporary style with period features from its working corn-house days. Its consistently good British food is served up in the shadow of a superb cast-iron spiral staircase.

Drapers Hall (☎ 344679; St Mary's Pl; mains £12-17.50; ☎ lunch & dinner) The atmosphere is thick with history in this well-fossilised 16th-century hall, fronted by an elegant Elizabethan façade. Dining is divided between dark oak-panelled rooms decked out in sumptuous fabrics and antique screens. The sophisticated Anglo-French menu and connoisseur's wine list are also well worthy of a special occasion.

Drinking

Armoury (☎ 340525; www.armoury-shrewsbury.co.uk; Victoria Ave) There's an irresistibly infectious bonhomie to this converted riverside warehouse. Towering bookshelves, old pictures and curios help straddle the divide between posh restaurant and informal pub, while a plethora of blackboard menus invite you to sample wines, guest ales and hearty British dishes (mains £8 to £14).

Three Fishes (☎ 344793; 4 Fish St) The quintessential small English alehouse, with a jolly owner, mellow regulars and hops hanging from the 15th-century beamed ceiling. No music here, just real ales on tap and the refreshing atmosphere of a pub that has long been sending smokers outside.

Entertainment

C21 (☎ 271821; 21 Abbey Foregate; admission after 10pm £5-5; ☎ 8.30pm-3am) A polished city-chic club for over-

25s to indulge in late-night cocktails and dance-floor acrobatics. Also home to Shrewsbury's main lesbian and gay night on Monday.

Getting There & Around

BIKE

You can hire bikes at **Dave Mellor Cycles** (☎ 366662; www.theycleshop.co.uk; 9 New St; bikes/tandems per day from £15/25).

BUS

National Express has two direct buses to London (£16.50, 4½ hours) and two more via Birmingham (£16.50, five hours). Bus 96 serves Ironbridge (30 minutes) every second hour Monday to Saturday. Bus 435 travels to Ludlow (1¼ hours) via Church Stretton (45 minutes) eight times daily and bus 553 heads to Bishop's Castle (one hour) 10 times daily.

TRAIN

There are no direct trains connecting Shrewsbury and London – you must change at Wolverhampton (£38.70, 2½ to three hours). There are twice-hourly trains to Ludlow (£7.70, 30 minutes).

Shrewsbury is a popular starting point for two scenic routes into Wales: one loop takes in Shrewsbury, northern Wales and Chester; the other, **Heart of Wales Line** (☎ 0870 9000 772; www.heart-of-wales.co.uk), runs southwest to Swansea (£20, 3¾ hours, four daily).

AROUND SHREWSBURY

Attingham Park

Shropshire's finest stately home is Palladian-style **Attingham Park** (NT; ☎ 01743-708123; house & grounds adult/child £6.50/3.25, grounds only £3.30/1.65; ☎ house 1-5pm Fri-Tue mid-Mar-Oct, grounds 10am-dusk year-round), built in the late 18th century and reminiscent of many a corset-and-lace drama. Behind the high-and-mighty neoclassical façade is a picture gallery by John Nash, and two wings respectively decorated into staunch masculine and oh-so-pretty feminine Regency interiors. The landscaped grounds shelter a herd of deer and pleasant walks along the River Tern.

Attingham Park is 4 miles southeast of Shrewsbury at Atcham. Buses 81 and 96 (18 minutes) run six times Monday to Friday, less frequently on weekends.

Wroxeter Roman City

An engrossing tale of Roman Britain can be traced through the stubby foundations of

Viroconium, at **Wroxeter** (EH; ☎ 01743-761330; adult/child £4/2; ☎ 10am-5pm Mar-Oct, 10am-4pm Wed-Sun Nov-Feb). Geophysical work has revealed a Roman city as large as Pompeii underneath the lush surrounding farmland, though for now you'll have to content yourself with exploring the public baths and marketplace. Note the hastily filled-in outdoor swimming pool, optimistically built before the Romans realised their miscalculation of the northern English climes.

Wroxeter is 6 miles southeast of Shrewsbury, off the B4380. Bus 96 stops nearby, and runs six times Monday to Friday, less on weekends.

IRONBRIDGE GORGE

☎ 01952

It can be hard to fully grasp the world-rocking events that took place in this tranquil river gorge as you wind your way through its wooded slopes and sleepy villages. But the Industrial Revolution was dramatically kick-started here in the 18th century. Three generations of the pioneering Darby family set about transforming their industrial processes and in so doing irreversibly changed the world.

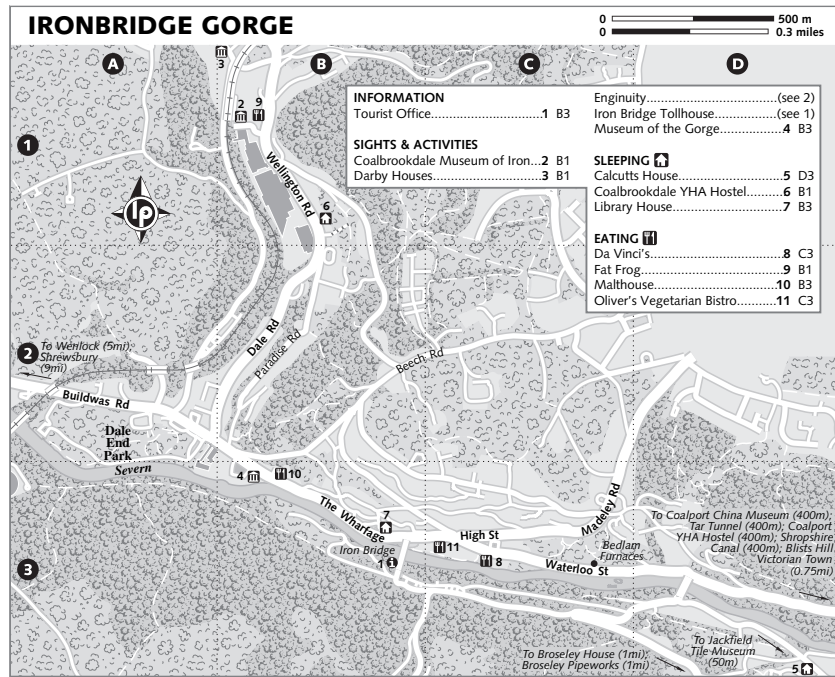
The story began quietly in 1709, when Abraham Darby determinedly set about restoring an old furnace to prove it was possible to smelt iron ore with coke. After much trial and error he was proved right, and his breakthrough paved the way for local factories to mass-produce the first iron wheels, rails and steam locomotives. Abraham Darby II's innovative forging process then enabled the production of single beams of iron, allowing Abraham Darby III to stun the world with the very first iron bridge, constructed here in 1779. The bridge remains the valley's showpiece and dominates the main village, which is a jumble of cottages sliding down the gorge's steep bank.

Now written into history books as the birthplace of the Industrial Revolution, Ironbridge is a World Heritage Site and the Marches' top attraction. Ten very different museums now tell the story in the very buildings where it all took place.

Orientation & Information

Driving or cycling can make life easier, as the museums are peppered throughout the long gorge. See p400 for public transport options.

The **tourist office** (☎ 884391; www.visitironbridge.co.uk; Tollhouse; ☎ 10am-5pm) is by the bridge.



Sights & Activities

You can buy a passport ticket (adult/child £14/9.50) that allows year-round entry to all of the sites at any of the museums or the tourist office. The museums open from 10am to 5pm unless stated otherwise.

MUSEUM OF THE GORGE

A succinct overview of the site is on offer at the **Museum of the Gorge** (The Wharfage; adult/child £2.50/1.50), making it a good spot to start. Housed in a Gothic warehouse by the river, it's filled with touchscreens, fun exhibits and details of the horrific consequences of pollution and environmental hazards at the cutting edge of industry (Abraham I and III both died at 39). An absorbing video sets the museum in its historical context.

COALBROOKDALE MUSEUM OF IRON & DARBY HOUSES

Coalbrookdale is the gorge's key site, as it was here that trailblazing Abraham Darby first smelted iron ore with coke. You can even peer into the very furnace he used, which sits in a wacky sculpture garden beside the **Museum of**

Iron (adult/child £6/4); the museum is in turn set in the site's sprawling iron foundry, where an army of men and boys once churned out heavy-duty iron equipment and later, ever more fancy ironwork castings. The excellent interactive exhibits chart the company's history and showcase some extraordinary creations.

The early industrial settlement that surrounds the site has also happily survived, with workers cottages, chapels, church and graveyard undisturbed. Just up the hill are the beautifully restored 18th-century **Darby Houses** (☎ 433522; adult/child £3.50/2; ☹ Apr-Oct), which housed generations of the industrial big cheeses in gracious but modest Quaker comfort. Rosehill House is furnished with much original furniture and, next door, Dale House includes the wood-panelled office in which the third Abraham Darby pored over his bridge designs.

IRON BRIDGE & TOLLHOUSE

The gorge's defining image, this flamboyant arch was the world's first such iron bridge and a triumph of engineering that left contemporaries flabbergasted by its apparent flimsiness.

It still impresses visitors more than 225 years on as a fitting symbol of the pioneering success of this remote Shropshire town and of its visionary creator Abraham Darby III's own technological prowess. The **tollhouse** (admission free; ☹ 10am-5pm) houses a small exhibition on the bridge's history.

BLISTS HILL VICTORIAN TOWN

To immerse yourself in 19th-century Britain, hear the pounding of steam hammers and the clip-clop of horse hooves, or knock a coconut off its stand, head to the vast open-air Victorian theme park, **Blists Hill** (☎ 433522; Legges Way, Madeley; adult/child £9/6; ☹ 10am-5pm). This ambitious project does a remarkably good job of reconstructing an entire village, encompassing everything from a working foundry to bank and sweet shop. Costumed staff explain displays, craftspeople demonstrate skills, and if it all gets too much you can grab yourself a stiff drink at the Victorian pub.

COALPORT CHINA MUSEUM & TAR TUNNEL

When ironmaking moved elsewhere, Coalport china slowed the region's decline and the restored works now house an absorbing **China Museum** (adult/child £5/3.50) tracing the region's glory days as a manufacturer of elaborate pottery and crockery. Craftspeople demonstrate china-making techniques and two enormous bottle kilns are guaranteed to awe even if the gaudily glazed chinaware leaves you cold.

A short ramble along the canal brings you to the 200-year-old **Tar Tunnel** (adult/child £1.50/1; ☹ Apr-Sep), dug as a water-supply channel but halted abruptly when natural bitumen unexpectedly started trickling treaclelike from its walls. You can still don a hard hat and stoop in deep enough to see the black stuff ooze.

JACKFIELD TILE MUSEUM

A kaleidoscopic collection of Victorian tiles, faience and ceramics can be found at the **Jackfield Tile Museum** (adult/child £5/3.50), displayed through a series of gas-lit period-style galleries reconstructing lustrous tiled interiors of everything from pubs to churches and tube stations to remarkably fancy toilets. Kids especially love the fairy-tale friezes for children's hospital wards.

BROSELEY PIPEWORKS

Tobacco-smoking was the height of gentlemanly chic in the late 17th and early 18th

centuries, and a vast range of clay pipes from short-stemmed pipsqueaks to arm-length 'church wardens' were produced in the **Broseley Pipeworks** (adult/child £3.50/2; ☹ 1-5pm mid-May-Sep), once Britain's most prolific pipe manufacturer. The factory finally closed in 1957, but has now reopened for visitors to explore its time-capsule contents, which are largely unchanged since the last worker turned out the lights. It's a mile-long walk to get here, signposted from the bridge.

ENGINEUITY

Championing Ironbridge's spirit of brains before brawn, the fabulous interactive design and technology centre **Enginuity** (adult/child £5.50/4) invites you to move a steam engine with the flick of a wrist, X-ray everyday objects, power up a vacuum cleaner with self-generated electricity and basically dive headfirst into a vast range of hands-on, brains-on challenges, games and gadgets that explore design and engineering in modern life. If you have kids with you, allow at least two hours.

Sleeping

Coalbrookdale YHA (☎ 0870 770 5882; ironbridge@yha.org.uk; Paradise Rd, Coalbrookdale; dm £13.95; ☹) The rather imposing former Literary & Scientific Institute, a grand blue-grey building from 1859 sitting high on the hillside behind sturdy iron gates, now houses a comfortable hostel within easy walking distance of the Museum of Iron. It has several en-suite family rooms.

Coalport YHA (☎ 0870 770 5882; ironbridge@yha.org.uk; High St, Coalport; dm £15.50; ☹) This historic former china factory, a big bluff industrial-looking building mere paces from the China Museum and the canal, and close to pleasant countryside walks, now houses an 83-bed hostel. The plain, modern rooms betray little of their long history, however.

Calcutts House (☎ 882631; www.calcuttshouse.co.uk; Calcutts Rd; s/d/f from £40/60/85; ☹) This former ironmaster's pad built in the 18th century is tucked away a few strides from the Jackfield Tile Museum. Its traditionally decorated rooms have bags of character, quality furniture and furnishings and are each named after a celebrated former owner or visitor to the house. It's also family friendly, as testified by a trampoline and goalposts in the garden.

Library House (☎ 432299; www.libraryhouse.com; 11 Severn Bank; s/d £55/70; ☹ wi-fi) A lovingly restored Georgian library building hugged by vines,

nudged by a beautiful garden and elegantly decorated with deep leather sofas, light colours and plentiful frills. There are extra home comforts and welcoming hosts. It's set back from the road on a tiny curving street close to the iron bridge.

Eating

Malthouse (☎ 433712; www.themalthouseironbridge.com; The Wharfage; mains £9-15; ☎ lunch & dinner) Doubly popular for its buzzing atmosphere and huge portions, this former malting house turned vibrant gastropub and jazz bar sits by the riverfront and serves some seriously good traditional dishes. The terrace is a big plus in summer. Stylish contemporary rooms (£63) are also available.

Fat Frog (☎ 432240; www.fat-frog.co.uk; Coalbrookdale; mains £10-17; ☎ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat, lunch Sun) A quirky French bar-bistro cluttered with toy frogs and showbiz memorabilia, with a rustic candle-lit basement and playing nostalgic music from the ebullient Gallic proprietor's prime. The food is excellent, and as you'd expect, there's a great wine list with plenty of half-bottles.

Other spots to consider:

Oliver's Vegetarian Bistro (☎ 433086; 33 High St; mains £8.95; ☎ lunch & dinner) Stylish meat-free food beside the bridge.

Da Vinci's (☎ 432250; 26 High St; mains £11-18; ☎ dinner Tue-Sat) Gourmet Italian food served in a classy wood-panelled dining room.

Getting There & Away

The nearest train station is 5 miles away at Telford. Bus 96 runs every two hours (Monday to Saturday) between Shrewsbury (40 minutes) and Telford (15 to 20 minutes) via Ironbridge, stopping near the Museum of the Gorge. Bus 39 runs from Much Wenlock (30 minutes, three daily).

Getting Around

The Gorge Connect bus connects nine of the museums every half-hour on weekends and Bank Holidays only. It costs 50p per journey.

Midweek your only options are to walk or hire a bike from **Broseley House** (☎ 882043; www.broseleyhouse.co.uk; 1 The Square, Broseley; per day £10), a mile and a half south of the bridge; booking is advised. You may also like to look into **Tandem Experience** (☎ 0845 60 66 456; www.tandeming.co.uk; tandem per day £50), based at the Coalport YHA; the price includes tuition for tandem riding.

MUCH WENLOCK

☎ 01952 / pop 1959

A spider's web of narrow streets flanked by Tudor, Jacobean and Georgian buildings, an arresting timbered guildhall and the enchanting remains of a 12th-century priory make this little town a big hit with visitors. It can also justifiably claim to have jump-started the modern Olympics (see the boxed text, opposite).

The **tourist office** (☎ 727679; muchwenlock.tourism@shropshire-cc.gov.uk; The Square; ☎ 10.30am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Sat Apr-Oct, plus Sun Jun-Aug) shares a 19th-century building and opening hours with the local **museum** (admission free).

Sights & Activities

The tourist office provides a 10p map to the town's sights of historical interest, as well as copies of *The Olympian Trail*, a pleasant 1.5-mile walking tour of the town exploring the link between the village and the modern Olympics.

Or you can skip straight to the town's highlight, the evocative 12th-century ruins of **Wenlock Priory** (EH; ☎ 727466; adult/child £3.30/1.70; ☎ 10am-5pm May-Jun, 10am-6pm Jul-Aug, 10am-5pm Thu-Mon Apr & Sep-Oct, 10am-4pm Thu-Sun Nov-Feb), surrounded by neatly snipped grounds studded with kooky topiaries of squirrels and teddy bears. The remains include part of a finely decorated chapterhouse and an unusual carved lavabo. In July and August the ruins make a stunning backdrop for Shakespearean plays.

Sleeping & Eating

The closest hostel is Wilderhope Manor YHA (see opposite).

Talbot Inn (☎ 727077; www.the-talbot-inn.com; High St; s/d £47.50/70; ☎ P ☎ X) Through a flower-dappled archway, this wonderfully atmospheric medieval inn with colossal beams, cavernous fireplaces and good home-style fare (mains £10 to £15) also has six rooms in a converted 18th-century malthouse, with whitewashed walls, exposed beams and wood furniture.

Raven Hotel (☎ 727251; www.ravenhotel.com; Barrow St; s/d £75/110; ☎ P ☎ X) Much Wenlock's finest, this 17th-century coaching inn and converted stables has thick oak beams, open fires and rich country-chic styling throughout. The excellent restaurant overlooks a flowery courtyard and serves up classic British and Mediterranean fare (bar food £7 to £13, two-course meal £20.50).

GRANDDADDY OF THE MODERN OLYMPICS

All eyes will be on London when the Olympic Games arrive in 2012, but they will not be the only Olympics taking place in Britain at that time. The altogether more modest annual games at tiny Much Wenlock were instrumental in the rebirth of their big fat Greek brother.

Local doctor and sports enthusiast William Penny Brookes fused his knowledge of the ancient Olympics and rural British pastimes to launch the Much Wenlock Olympic Games in 1850. Begun as a distraction for the beer-swilling local youth, the games soon pricked the interest of Baron Pierre Coubertin, who visited Much Wenlock in 1890 to see them for himself.

He and Brookes became firm friends, with the shared dream of reviving the ancient Olympics. Coubertin went on to launch the modern Olympics in Athens in 1896; the games featured many of the events he had seen in Much Wenlock (although wheelbarrow racing and chasing a greased pig around town never really caught on). Brookes was invited to the event but he died, aged 86, before the games opened.

The good doctor never really got his share of the Olympic limelight until almost a century later, when International Olympic Committee President Juan Antonio Samaranch visited his grave to 'pay tribute and homage to Dr Brookes, who really was the founder of the Modern Olympic Games'.

The Much Wenlock Olympics are still held every July, with events that range from the triathlon to bowls. You can find details at www.wenlock-olympian-society.org.uk.

Getting There & Away

Bus 436 runs from Shrewsbury (35 minutes) to Bridgnorth (20 minutes) hourly (five on Sunday).

AROUND MUCH WENLOCK Wenlock Edge

This spectacular limestone escarpment swells up like an immense petrified wave, its ancient oceanic rock rich in fossils and its flanks frothy with woodland. It stretches for 15 miles from Much Wenlock to Craven Arms and makes for wonderful walking and dramatic views. The National Trust (NT) owns much of the ridge, and there are many waymarked trails starting from car parks dotted along the B4371. There are no helpful buses along this route.

For a bite, a beer or a bed en route, the snug 17th-century **Wenlock Edge Inn** (☎ 01746-785678; B4371, Hilltop; s/d £50/70; ☎ P) is a firm favourite with hikers and locals alike. It's a down-to-earth place with walls of Wenlock stone, low beams and a handsome Inglenook fireplace and dishes up hearty sustenance for the road ahead (mains £7 to £9). It also has three rustic rooms available, and showers fed by the well. The pub is about 4.5 miles southwest of Much Wenlock on the B4371.

For top-value budget accommodation, ramble out to the remote **Wilderhope Manor YHA** (☎ 0870 770 6090; wilderhope@yha.org.uk; Longville-in-the-Dale; dm £13.95; ☎ Fri-Sat & school holidays; ☎ P ☎ X), a gloriously atmospheric gabled Elizabethan manor,

with oak spiral staircases, wood-panelled walls and an impressive dining hall. The hostel is set deep in lush countryside and adjoins a picturesque if pongy farmyard.

You can catch buses from Ludlow and Bridgnorth to Shipton, a half-mile walk from Wilderhope.

CHURCH STRETTON & AROUND

☎ 01694 / pop 3841

Cradled in a deep valley between the beautiful Long Mynd and the Caradoc Hills, this scenic if restrained little town is the ideal base from which to venture into the glorious surroundings. It also shelters some interesting old buildings, including a 12th-century Norman church most famous for its weather-beaten but still undauntedly exhibitionist *sheila-na-gig* (quasi-erotic stone carving) over its north door.

The **tourist office** (☎ 723133; www.churchstretton.co.uk; Church St; ☎ 9.30am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Sat), adjoining the library, has abundant walking information as well as free internet access.

Walking

Shropshire's most famous mountain, the glorious hogs-back hill of **Long Mynd** heaves its bulk up above Church Stretton. This is one of the best walking areas in the Marches, dubbed 'Little Switzerland' by the Victorians, who flocked here for its healthy climes and spring waters. The entire area is webbed by walking trails with memorable views.

WORTH THE TRIP

Hundred House Hotel (☎ 01952-730353; www.hundredhouse.co.uk; A442, Norton; s/d £85/99; (P) (X)) For escapism at its barniest and best, make a beeline to this wildly romantic and unabashedly wacky hotel. This historic place is crammed with flamboyant décor, heart motifs and antique beds, and seven out of 10 rooms sport suggestive velvet-covered swings entwined with ribbons. Shampoo comes in carafes and pillows are sprinkled with lavender water. The quirky herb gardens are another adventure and include a trail to the teddy bears picnic. The owners devote just as much passion to their food; the excellent menu (mains £13 to £19) uses local produce to perfection. Hundred House is 6 miles southeast of Ironbridge Gorge.

You could start with the **Carding Mill Valley Trail**, which starts just outside Church Stretton and leads up to the 517m summit of the Long Mynd. This trail can get very busy at weekends and in summer, so you might prefer to pick your own peak or cross the A49 and climb towards the 459m summit of Caer Caradoc.

You can drive part of the way up the Carding Mill Valley, although the NT would rather you took the **Long Mynd Shuttle bus** (🚏 weekends & Bank Holidays only Apr-Oct) from Beaumont Rd over the station.

Sleeping

Bridges Long Mynd YHA (☎ 01588-650656; www.yha.org.uk; Ratlinghope; dm £10.95; (P) (X)) Built as an 18th-century village school, this is now one of the country's longest-running YHA hostels. Tucked deep in the Shropshire Hills, on the doorstep of the Shropshire Way and walks to Long Mynd and Stiperstones, it has basic but comfortable dorms. Boulton's bus 551 comes here from Shrewsbury on Tuesday only. On weekends from April to October the Long Mynd shuttle runs hourly to Church Stretton.

Brookfields (☎ 7232314; paulangie@brookfields51.fsnet.co.uk; Watling St North; s/d/f £30/59/65; (P) (X)) A short stroll east across the A49 from town, this substantial red-brick Edwardian family home retains much of its period character, has pristine and thoughtfully appointed ensuite rooms in muted colours and a terrific breakfast served companionably with other guests around a large dining table.

our pick **Jinlye Guest House** (☎ 723243; www.jinlye.co.uk; Castle Hill, All Stretton; s/d £50/70; (P) (X) (S)) The Long Mynd is your back garden and sheep your neighbours at this beautifully restored crofter's cottage on the hilltop, and graced by old beams, log fires and leaded windows. Bedrooms are bright and elegantly furnished with antiques and butter-wouldn't-melt floral fabrics. Expect a good old-fashioned welcome.

Eating

Berry's Coffee House (☎ 724452; www.berryscoffeehouse.co.uk; 17 High St; meals £5.50-7; 🍷 lunch Wed-Sat) A delightfully gossipy café in an 18th-century building with alfresco courtyard just off the main street. Berry's cherishes its organic free-range and Fairtrade ethos and proffers wholesome locally sourced dishes, though the halo slips when confronted with the scandalous desserts.

Studio (☎ 722672; 59 High St; meals £14-16.50; 🍷 dinner only Tue-Sat, lunch Sun) A converted artist's studio, still littered with interesting works, sets the scene for this, the town's best and most intimate restaurant. The award-winning menu jumps confidently between modern British and traditional French food, and uses plenty of local game and fish.

Getting There & Around

There are hourly trains to Shrewsbury (20 minutes) and bus 435, which runs between Shrewsbury (45 minutes) and Ludlow (40 minutes) six times daily, stops here.

You can hire 24-speed mountain bikes with front or full suspension and cheaper, simpler bikes from **Shropshire Hills Bike Hire** (☎ 723302; 6 Castle Hill, All Stretton; bikes per day £10-17.50).

BISHOP'S CASTLE

☎ 01588 / pop 1630

Stress seems an alien concept in this languorous little border town, home to an enchanting medley of renowned breweries, contorted half-timbered buildings, secondhand bookshops and eclectic boutiques that endear it to day-trippers. At the top of High St sits the adorable Georgian **town hall** and delightfully crooked 16th-century **House on Crutches** (☎ 630007; admission free; 🍷 1-5pm Sat & Sun), which also houses the town **museum**.

The pleasingly potty **Old Time** (☎ 638467; www.bishopscastle.co.uk; 29 High St; 🍷 10am-10pm Mon-Sat, 10am-2pm Sun) offers limited tourist information.

Walking

Walk along the **Shropshire Way**, which runs through the town and joins up with Offa's Dyke Path to the south; the Kerry Ridgeway to the south; or head north and risk the forbidding ridges of the **Stiperstones**, where Satan is said to hold court.

Sleeping & Eating

Castle Hotel (☎ 638403; www.thecastlehotelsbishops castle.co.uk; The Square; s/d £40/70; (P) (X)) Haughtily perched in an elevated square, this handsome 18th-century coaching inn has lovely terraced gardens and six relaxing beamed rooms furnished with antiques and strait-laced floral designs. Room eight is especially atmospheric. The oak-panelled restaurant (mains £6 to £10) dishes up classic British food.

Poppy House (☎ 638443; www.poppyhouse.co.uk; 20 Market Sq; s/d £45/70) Sweetly stylish rooms with an air of simple elegance, adorned by luxurious red textiles, timber-framed walls and sloping floors, as well as a complimentary breakfast-in-bed service win this B&B much praise. Poppy motifs colour the reliable restaurant (mains £5 to £9; open 10am to 5pm and 6.30pm to 11pm) downstairs.

Drinking

Three Tuns (☎ 638797; Salop St) One of Shropshire's most famous alehouses is a surprisingly ordinary place but for the fact that it sits next door to a Victorian four-storey tower brewery, close enough to smell the roasting malt. Though they're no longer run by the same folk, you can still sample the brewery's best at the Three Tuns bar.

Six Bells Inn (☎ 630144; Church St) This historic 17th-century coaching inn buzzes with loyal locals and serves ale from its adjoining brewery on tap. The pub also has a reputation for good ol' English comfort food (mains £7.50 to £13 open lunch and dinner Tuesday to Saturday and lunch Sunday) like Big Nev's bangers made with local ale and Shropshire fidget pie.

Getting There & Away

Buses 552 and 748 run to and from Shrewsbury (one hour) seven times daily.

LUDLOW

☎ 01584 / pop 9548

All those bracing walks in the Shropshire Hills may come to naught once you reach the gourmet capital of England's northwest, Ludlow.

This beautiful town has the twin attractions of being a crucible of culinary excellence, with more Michelin stars per head than anywhere but Paris, and boasting a rich historical core that fans out from its fine Norman castle. Its lovely muddle of narrow streets is flanked by half-timbered Jacobean and elegant Georgian buildings, many hosting independent butchers, bakers, grocers and cheesemongers all vying to whet your appetite for dinner. Our advice: book ahead and punch a few extra holes in your belt.

Ludlow's helpful **tourist office** (☎ 875053; www.ludlow.org.uk; Castle St; 🕒 10am-5pm) is in the 19th-century assembly rooms, now a lively arts and community centre. There's also a small back-to-front **museum** (☎ 813666; admission free; 🕒 10.30am-1pm & 2-5pm Easter-Oct) on the town and surrounding area here.

Internet can be tracked down at the **library** (☎ 813600; 7/9 Parkway; 🕒 9.30am-5pm Mon-Wed & Sat, 9.30am-7.30pm Fri) and clothes can be washed, dried and pressed at **Ludlow Laundry** (Tower St; per bag £4.80; 🕒 9am-6pm Mon-Sat).

Sights & Activities

With seductive delicatessens and distracting antique dealers around every corner, the best way to explore Ludlow is to simply surrender to getting pleasurable lost on foot.

The town's crowning jewel is its splendid **castle** (☎ 873355; www.ludlowcastle.com; Castle Sq; adult/child/senior & student £4/2/3.50; 🕒 10am-5pm Apr-Sep, 10am-4pm Oct-Dec, Feb & Mar, 10am-4pm Sat & Sun only Jan), which snags an ideal defensive location atop a cliff above the river's elbow. One of a line of fortifications built along the Marches to ward off the marauding Welsh, it is now a great castle for hide-and-seek, with myriad nooks, ruined rooms and mysterious stairwells. The sturdy Norman keep was built around 1090 and has wonderful views. The castle was transformed into a 14th-century palace by the notorious Roger Mortimer, who was instrumental in the grisly death of Edward II. The round chapel in the inner bailey was built in 1120 and is one of few surviving.

The waymarked 30-mile **Mortimer Trail** to Kington starts just outside the castle entrance. The tourist office can provide a free leaflet on en route services, or a more thorough booklet for £1.50. Also see www.mortimercountry.co.uk.

Some delightfully cheeky medieval misericords lurk in the choir of **Church of St Laurence** (☎ 872073; www.stlaurences.org.uk; King St; requested

donation £2; ☎ 10am-5.30pm Apr-Sep, 11am-4pm Oct-Mar), one of the biggest parish churches in Britain. These painstakingly carved 'mercy seats' show scenes of domestic 15th-century life both pious and profane, including a beer-swilling chap raiding his barrel.

Guided walks (£2) run from April to October, leaving the Cannon in Castle Sq at 2.30pm on Saturday and Sunday. You can also take the **ghost walk** (www.shropshireghostwalks.co.uk; adult/child £3.50/2; ☎ 8pm Fri) from outside the Church Inn on the Buttercross.

You can hire **rowing boats** (per 30min/1hr £3.50/6.50) to splash about on the river below the castle.

Festivals & Events

Markets are held every Monday, Wednesday, Friday and Saturday. The town's busy calendar peaks with the **Ludlow Festival** (☎ 872150; www.ludlowfestival.co.uk), a fortnight of theatre and music in June and July that uses the castle as its dramatic backdrop. It's no surprise that most of the other events are foodie affairs. The renowned **Ludlow Marches Food & Drink Festival** (☎ 873957; www.foodfestival.co.uk) is one of Britain's best, and takes place over a long weekend in September.

Sleeping

Mount (☎ 874084; www.themountludlow.co.uk; 61 Gravel Hill; s £30, d £50-60; ☎) Its hillside location secures this attractive Victorian house a glorious sunset view over town and hills, alone worthy of the modest price tag. Walkers and cyclists are well

catered to, despite unforgivingly crisp white bed linen and cream carpets, and the welcoming hostess offers lifts from the train station.

Bromley Court (☎ 876996; www.ludlowhotels.com; 73 Lower Broad St; d £75-110) In Ludlow's heart, these three gorgeous stone-walled Georgian cottages form carefully furnished split-level suites complete with lounge and kitchenette. The balance of period features and modern luxury is spot on. Breakfast is served in a connected cottage, and there's also a communal patio.

Feathers Hotel (☎ 875261; www.feathersatludlow.co.uk; Bull Ring; s/d £75/100; ☎) Three storeys of stunning black-and-white timber-framed façade serve to introduce this famous Jacobean inn. Not all rooms are in the wonderfully atmospheric original building, so make sure you're getting the real McCoy when booking. Newer rooms follow the usual bland template with antique-styled trimmings. The modern restaurant (set lunch/dinner £15/25) is recommended.

Other options:

Mill House (☎ 872837; www.virtual-shropshire.co.uk/mill; Squirrel Lane, Lower Ledwyche; s/d £25/60;

☎) Converted mill within walking distance of town beside the Shropshire Way.

Dinham Hall Hotel (☎ 876464; www.dinhamhall.co.uk; s £95, d £140-240; ☎) Resplendent 18th-century country manor with superb traditional restaurant.

Eating

If you can afford to splurge on food, this is unquestionably the place to do it. While we've cherry-picked our favourites, you needn't go far for more epicurean delights.

Olive Branch (☎ 874314; 2-4 Old St; mains £5-8; ☎ 10am-3pm) A healthful and mostly vegetarian lunch stop with seasonal menu.

Courtyard (☎ 878080; www.thecourtyard-ludlow.co.uk; 2 Quality Sq; mains £6.50-9; ☎ lunch) A wholesome affair and antidote to too much extravagance, this staunchly old-fashioned café spills out onto a tranquil courtyard and has a faithful local following for its lightning service, good seasonal food and simple snacks.

Koo (☎ 878462; 127 Old St; 3-course set menu £18.95; ☎ lunch & dinner Tue-Sat) The simple flower-dotted décor mirrors the crisp clean flavours of this authentic little Japanese cubbyhole, which is both a culinary and a cultural experience to savour. Favourites include sushi, gyoza dumplings and, during the festival, takeaway bento boxes (£8.50) for impromptu picnics.

Hibiscus (☎ 872325; www.hibiscusrestaurant.co.uk; 17 Corve St; set lunch/dinner menu £25/45; ☎ lunch & dinner Tue-Sat) This ground-breaking twice-Michelin-starred restaurant serves modern French cuisine with inventive flavour fusions. The serious business of eating is conducted within the oak-panelled and exposed-brick walls of a 17th-century coach house.

Mr Underhill's (☎ 874431; www.mr-underhills.co.uk; Dinham Weir; 6-course set menu £40; ☎ lunch & dinner Wed-Mon) Ludlow's other Michelin-rated big cheese is set in a converted corn mill that dips its toes in the river. Expect exquisite modern British food, though there's little choice before dessert, so make any dietary requests beforehand. It also offers stylish rooms (singles £100, doubles £115 to £160).

Getting There & Around

Trains go twice-hourly to Shrewsbury (£7.70, 30 minutes) and Hereford (£5.90, 21 to 24 minutes), and hourly to Church Stretton (16 minutes). Slower buses also go to Shrewsbury (bus 435; 1½ hours, eight daily) and radiate to nearby towns.

You can hire bikes from **Wheely Wonderful** (☎ 01568-770755; www.wheelywonderfulcycling.co.uk;

WORTH THE TRIP

Waterdine Inn (☎ 01547-528214; www.waterdine.com; Llanfair Waterdine; s/d with dinner & breakfast £80/160; ☎) A flower-traced 16th-century longhouse nestled well and truly in the back of beyond, with the River Teme border with Wales trickling in the back garden the only reminder of an outside world. Expect a warm welcome that's helpful to a fault, and lovely cottage-style rooms with low ceilings, wooden furniture and springy beds. The restaurant also has a just-like-home atmosphere divided between several rooms, while the excellent modern Anglo-French menu (mains £11 to £16) focuses on organic meats and wild game. Llanfair Waterdine is about 12 miles west of Ludlow.

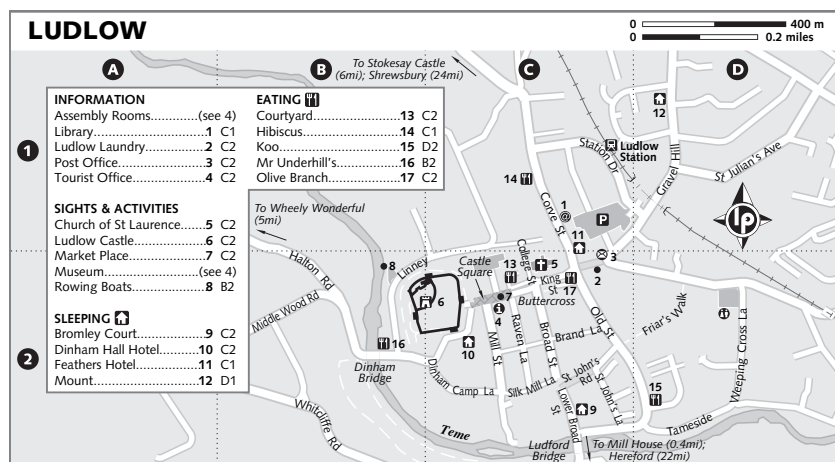
Petchfield Farm, Elton; bike/tandem per day £15/28), 5 miles west of Ludlow.

AROUND LUDLOW

Stokesay Castle

The wonky timber-framed tops and stunning Jacobean gatehouse of **Stokesay Castle** (EH; ☎ 01588-672544; adult/under 5yr/5-15yr £4.80/free/2.40; ☎ 10am-6pm Jun-Aug, 10am-5pm Thu-Mon Mar-May & Sep-Oct, 10am-4pm Fri-Mon Nov-Feb) give this fortified 13th-century manor house a fairy-tale glow that is hard to shake off. Built by Britain's most successful wool merchant, Lawrence of Ludlow, it has changed little since it was completed in 1291 and boasts a cavernous Great Hall, original timber staircase and gabled windows, and an enchanting garden that's hardly been touched since the original owners first pitched their medieval forks.

Stokesay Castle is 7 miles northwest of Ludlow, just off the A49. Bus 435 runs five times daily between Shrewsbury and Ludlow. Alternatively, catch the train to Craven Arms, just over a mile away.



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