

Mistress of the Manor

THE 16TH-CENTURY
SLAD VALLEY MANOR
HOUSE IS IDEAL FOR
A LUXURY RETREAT IN
THE COTSWOLDS

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS **BY PRACHI JOSHI**



The Slad Valley Manor (left) sits amidst a landscaped garden, surrounded by a stone-flagged terrace. The manor's master bedroom boasts a king-size four-poster bed (top right). Vintage chairs (bottom left), chaise longues, and cheval mirrors deck the interiors.



I grew up on a steady diet of Agatha Christie and P. G. Wodehouse novels, where everything exciting—romantic interludes to gruesome murders—took place at grand houses scattered around the English countryside. Naturally, I jump at the chance to spend a few days at a manor house in the Cotswolds, possibly the prettiest nook of England.

MANOR MAGNIFIQUE

Our host Joe Campbell whisks us (husband and I) from London. Within a couple of hours, we are driving past sleepy hamlets, picturesque houses, and rolling green fields dotted with sheep. We arrive at **Slad Valley Manor** late in the afternoon to a champagne reception by our smiling hostess (and Joe's wife) Angharad Jones. One look at the place and I know that my English manor house fantasies are about to come true—hopefully minus the body in the library. Built with honey-coloured giting stone (a type of limestone) typical to the Cotswolds, the manor house sits pretty amidst a landscaped garden, a sprawling lawn and an outdoor pool surrounded by a stone-flagged terrace.

Jones gives us a tour of the house starting at the main reception room, which is the oldest portion of the manor with original 16th-century wooden beams on the ceiling. The house has four luxurious en-suite bedrooms; we have the master suite, an elegant cream and eggshell-blue room with a king-size four-poster bed, a comfy chaise longue, a vintage dresser, and a full-length cheval mirror. We take a quick whirl around the state-of-the-art open kitchen where Chef Joseph Robertson, who's worked at several Michelin-starred kitchens, is prepping for our dinner. Since we have the evening free, we decide to amble down to the farm—making our way across unpaved country roads surrounded on all sides by acres of greenery. The manor is part of a larger farm, and on our way, we meet some fluffy sheep.



A WALK THROUGH TIME

"These are the looms that made England great," says Richard Martin of Cotswold Woollen Weavers. It's day two and we are in the village of **Filkins**, an hour's drive from the manor, where Martin is showing us a Dobcross loom with a side of history lesson. The Cotswolds built its wealth in the Middle Ages on the back of the local sheep (dubbed 'Lion of The Cotswolds') whose wool was prized for its superior quality. While the wool merchants' heydays came to an end in the 19th century, some scale of wool trade continues. Martin, for instance, is reviving the traditional method of weaving. It's no surprise that his woollen cloth is being used in the costumes of British time-travel drama, *Outlander*.

After bidding goodbye to Martin and the two Cotswolds lions in the paddock outside, Campbell drives us to the nearby market town of **Burford** for a peek inside the historic 12th-century **St. John the Baptist Church**, built to almost cathedral-like proportions. This is one of the so-called Cotswolds 'wool churches'—extravagant edifices built

Richard Martin of Cotswold Woollen Weavers (inset) is reviving the traditional method of weaving; A 30-minute drive from the manor lies Cirencester Park Polo Club, U.K.'s oldest (top left); Slad Valley Manor's Resident chef Joseph Robertson's version of Pimm's cup (top right) was amped up with passion fruit and a generous dash of gin; The Cirencester Church (bottom left) is marked by Perpendicular Gothic architecture; The manor is a part of a larger farm, where you can run into sheep (bottom right).

thanks to the largesse of the wealthy wool merchants. We wander down Burford's **High Street** that sweeps downhill, lined on either side by attractive Tudor and Georgian stone facades. They house quirky shops, charming tearooms, and restaurants. On day three, we drive about 30 minutes to **Cirencester**—the capital of the Cotswolds—with its own medieval wool church that boasts striking Perpendicular architecture, an English Gothic church style, characterised by vertical lines and enlarged windows. The Romans called the town Corinium, and in the fourth century, it was second only to London in terms of importance. At the Corinium Museum, we see a jaw-dropping collection of Roman mosaics and other excavated artefacts found in and around the town.

GAMES PEOPLE PLAY

Before we return to the manor house, we head to **Cirencester Park Polo Club**, U.K.'s oldest polo club dating to 1896. Princes William and Harry play here often, we are told. While we don't get a glimpse of royalty, we do manage to catch an exciting club polo match. An elderly local gentleman explains the rules of the game as we watch the magnificent beasts (steeds, not their riders) in action.

Back at the manor, we find Jones and Chef Robertson setting stage for a game of croquet on the lawns. I had only ever read about croquet in Enid Blyton books—turns out it's somewhat like golf, but with mallets. After whacking the ball around for a bit under a scorching summer sun (thanks to a heat wave), I am ready for a cool glass of Pimm's, that quintessential English summer drink. Jones had amped it up with passion fruit and a generous dash of gin, and served it with a tier stand loaded with finger sandwiches and freshly baked scones with jam and clotted cream. Could life get more Blyton-esque?

Speaking of the food, Chef Robertson has a deft hand at whipping up gourmet meals like Bloody Mary lobster, miso-glazed scallops, quail confit, and more. All meals are accompanied by a selection of fine wines and followed by an exquisite cheese platter and dessert. We eat al fresco on the lawn, amidst elaborate place settings. As we wind up dinner, the cool breeze brings with it the sound of sheep bleating down in the farm. There's blue Stilton (cheese) on my plate and a French red in my glass. Much like (Wodehouse's) Lord Emsworth, I find that all is well with the world. ●

ESSENTIALS

Slad Valley Manor is located near the village of Bisley in Gloucestershire, England, 160 km/2.5 hr from central London (bargeladcruises.com/barge-cruises/cotswolds; doubles from \$7,250/₹500,000 per person for 6N/7D, including meals, excursions, and chauffeured transfers to and from London).

LUCAS M. PETERS

