

Castles, Ghosts and England's Galapagos: Secrets of Northumberland

By Natali Lekka

Northumberland...a wild border region battered by tempestuous seas, home to hulking castles, wild moorland and the site of many ancient battles. About a quarter of Northumberland is a national park and the county offers outstanding “get away from it all” scenery. This is, after all, the most sparsely populated and unspoiled region of the United Kingdom.

It is here, at the edge of the Roman Empire, that Hadrian's Wall was built. One of the best-preserved man-made frontiers in the world, it stretched from sea to sea across 135 kilometres of undulating wilderness and was home to 15% of the entire Roman army. Today, its legacy is still very much alive.

With more castles than any other county in England, the best place to start a journey through history is at Alnwick Castle, the present-day residence of the 12th Duke of Northumberland. It's the second-largest inhabited castle in England after Windsor, open from March 31 to October 29. Inside its walls you will find the lavish state rooms that the 4th Duke of Northumberland restored in the style and aesthetics of the Italian Renaissance, complete with artworks by masters such as Canaletto, Titian and Tintoretto. Throughout the year numerous activities, craft workshops and medieval re-enactments take place around the castle, which featured as Hogwarts in *Harry Potter* and Brancaster Castle in *Downton Abbey's* Christmas special. An adult ticket at the gate costs £15.50 (\$27.10); 10% cheaper if bought online. (See: Alnwickcastle.com.)

For a separate ticket of £10.45 (\$18.17) you can gain access to the castle's elegant gardens. Visit the fairy-tale grand cascade, the bamboo labyrinth or the rose garden, but the highlight might just be the Duchess' Poison Garden. Dubbed the world's most dangerous garden, 80% of plants in this garden can kill you, if you touch, inhale them or eat them. For your own safety, you can only visit the garden with a guide. Elizabeth, our guide, took us on an interesting trip through history, revealing how Socrates drank a poisoned cup of hemlock, how belladonna (beautiful woman) was used in Renaissance Italy to make women appear more attractive and how daffodils are used today to treat dementia. It turns out that



Once home to a Victorian inventor, Craigside House is the perfect spot to indulge in a banquet.

the majority of the plants in our gardens are poisonous, so be very careful next time you go gardening.

For a unique dining experience, book a table at the castle's Treehouse restaurant. Venture across wobbly rope bridges and sky walkways to get to your table amidst twinkling lights and log fires. Sitting in the treetops, you can try the sirloin steak or the duck breast and sip the Duchess's very own cocktail “Deadly Jane” made with Alnwick rum, apricot brandy, freshly squeezed orange juice and grenadine. Finished with pineapple chunks, it's served in a poison bottle. A two-course dinner starts at £28.50 (\$49.83).

While exploring Alnwick, make a stop at Barter Books. A quaint second-hand bookstore that has taken space in a reformed Victorian train station, it hit the headlines in 2000 when its owners, Mary and Stuart Manley, discovered the WWII poster “Keep Calm and Carry On” in a box of old books. The slogan has since gone on to become a global phenomenon. The story behind it is too beautiful not to share. On the eve of WWII, the British Ministry of Information was tasked by the British government to create a series of motivational posters to boost the public's morale. While some posters were already on public display, over 2.5 million “Keep Calm and Carry On” posters remained in storage, waiting

“It has more castles than any other county in England.”

to be released in the event of a German invasion. The invasion never happened so the message lay forgotten until it was discovered again in Stuart Manley's box of books.

A 25-minute drive north of Alnwick and just 20 minutes from the seaside, you will find the 12th-century [Chillingham Castle](#), the home of Sir Humphry Wakefield and his family. A stronghold against Scottish hero William Wallace, it is steeped in murderous border history. Today, the castle is a favourite among ghost hunters and their ghost tour has been called the best in England. For £20 (\$35), you can explore the dungeons and torture chamber of the castle and there are midnight tours as well... if you dare. The tour lasts up to two hours and if you are lucky you may even see the ghost of Lady Mary in the corridors.

Cragside House, 32 kilometres away, is a Victorian estate with gardens straight out of a fairytale. In 1880, it was described as the "palace of the modern magician". The house of a Victorian inventor, it was the first building in the world to be lit by hydroelectricity. For £18.80 (\$33) you can live like a true Victorian by participating in authentic Victorian banquets, losing yourself in the rhododendron maze or admiring the incredible art collections and bizarre Victorian inventions. The house is closed during the English winter months. (See: [Nationaltrust.org.uk](#).)

If you fancy yourself as a bit of a Charles Darwin type, take a mini cruise to the nearby Farne Islands with Billy Shiel's Boats. Tours start at £15.00 (\$26.23) for two-and-a-half hours and you can

expect to see up to 23 nesting bird species, including arctic terns, guillemots and 70,000 puffins. The Farne islands are also home to one of the largest grey seal colonies in England with 1,500 pups born every autumn. English journalist Michael Buerk called the region "the closest thing England has to the Galapagos".

Northumberland is not only the coast, however. For a unique experience under the darkest, unspoilt skies, in England's most remote location, visit Kielder Forest and its nearby observatory to take part in one of the many star parties and camping events that are organised there. [Northumberland's Dark Sky Park](#) is Europe's largest area of protected night sky and one of the best places in England to go aurora hunting. Kielder Forest is also a key protection site for the endangered red squirrel.

There are many ways to explore and discover this magnificent region but perhaps the most scenic route of all is St. Oswald's Way. Named after the 7th-century king of Northumbria, who played a major part in bringing Christianity to the country, it is a 156-kilometre-long walking tour that lasts a week. It starts at Holy Island, named so for being the cradle of Christianity in England, and extends across the stunning Northumberland coast, past Bamburgh with its majestic sandy beach and castle and foodie paradise Craster village. While in Craster, stop at Jolly Fisherman to try the delicious local crab soup. Then head inland, past the lively market town of Rothbury to end at the ancient battleground of Heavenfield where King Oswald and his Northumbrians trounced a Welsh army. ■

"Stop at the Jolly Fisherman and try the local crab soup."

WALKING HADRIAN'S WALL

By Hauke Steinberg

Built on the orders of the emperor Hadrian, the wall that marked the north-west frontier of the Roman Empire for nearly 300 years is still visible and a dramatic way to explore the north. It's now possible to follow a national trail from coast to coast along its entire length (about 80 miles). See: [Nationaltrail.co.uk](#).

Walk the trail in the footsteps of the Roman legionnaires who, almost 2,000 years ago, dug the ditches and built the stone structures you'll see striking a line through today's landscape. The remains of milecastles, towers and forts are your constant companions and the wall is easy to follow, especially in the open countryside.

The trail section between Chollerford and Gilsland, in the Northumberland Nation Park, is the highest, wildest and most interesting part of the hike. It is here that the wall is best preserved and

dramatic and where you can find several important and well excavated Roman forts, such as Chesters, Housesteads, Birdoswald and Vindolanda. Vindolanda in particular is known for the wooden tablets found here which are among the most important finds of military and private correspondence found anywhere in the Roman Empire.

A good way to experience the walk is by doing a self-guided walking tour using an operator like [Hillwalk Tours](#) who will book your accommodation, get your luggage transferred and make sure you find your way. After your hikes I recommend you sample some of the delicious local ales—I know I enjoyed them.



Discover the wild places along Hadrian's wall as you walk in the footsteps of Roman soldiers.