

Introduction

The Cotswold region is utterly distinctive. Visitors from all over the world quickly become familiar with the gentle hills and gorgeous stone villages that characterise the area. And these features combine to make the Cotswolds very attractive to walkers of all levels of experience. The landscapes are varied and multi-faceted. There are hills in abundance, high enough for awe-inspiring views and a workout, but none that are taxing to the point of exhaustion.

Among them nestle impossibly captivating English villages and historic small towns that seem to have grown out of the land on which they stand. These villages merit deeper exploration, from the detail of vernacular architecture to the surprising grandeur of their 'wool' churches and to the charm of their pubs and hotels. Take time to linger over the Arts and Crafts exhibits and stunning views from Broadway Tower, to enjoy the Holst and Corineum Museums in Cheltenham and Cirencester, to savour the unique wildlife of Cleve Common and Sapperton Valley, to ponder the neolithic burials at Belas Knap long barrow, and to visit Sudeley Castle and Batsford Arboretum. In this book we offer you a choice of routes, ranging from an eight-day grand tour full of contrasts, taking in the most interesting sections of the Cotswold Way, to shorter circuits that condense the character of the region into a few days. Without doubt, the best way to discover the Cotswolds is on foot.

Bourton-on-the-Water

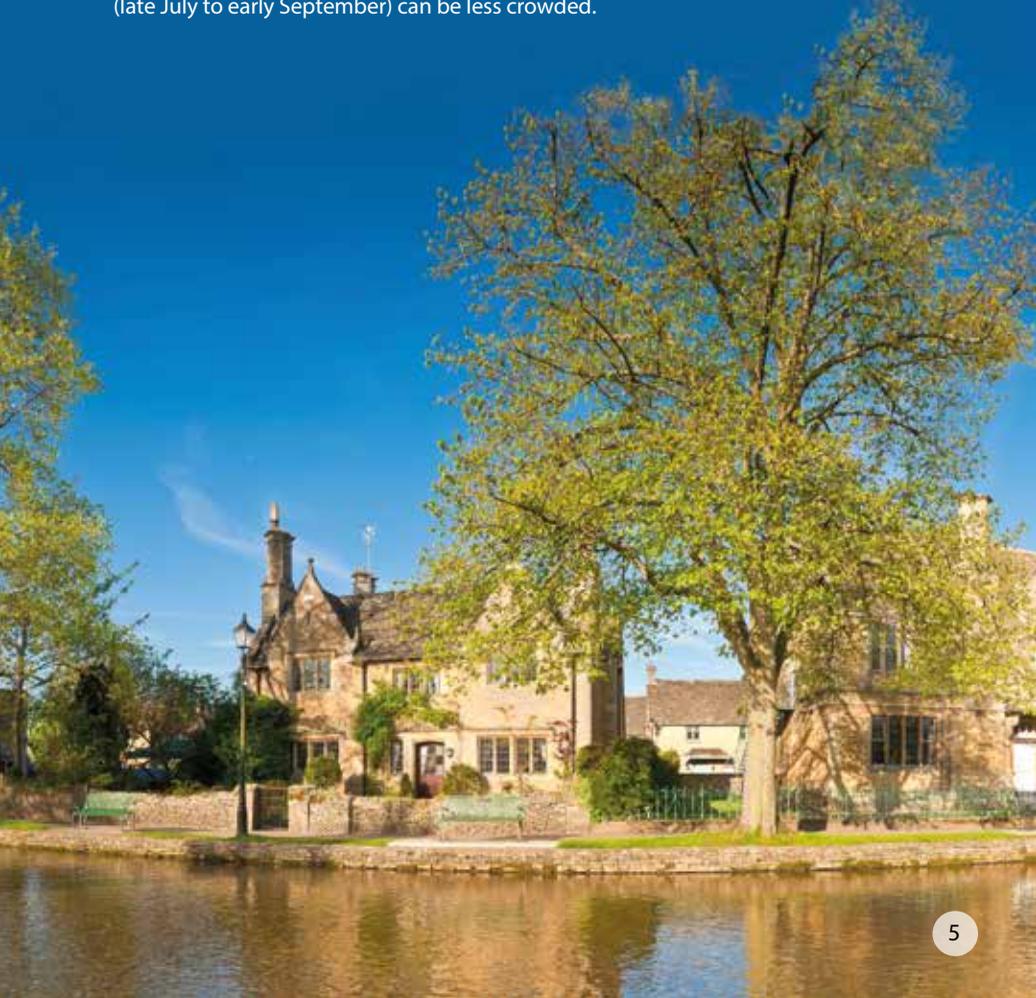


1 Best time of year

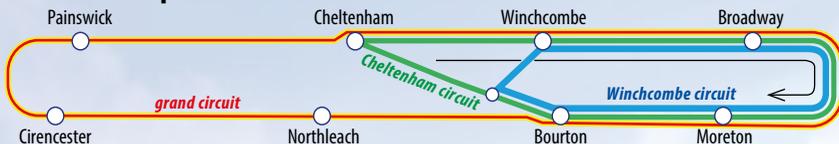
The best months for walking in the Cotswolds are generally April to late October. From November to March the daylight hours are restricted and the weather unpredictable, although cold, dry winter days can provide unexpectedly enjoyable walking. However, the going underfoot will be much better outside the winter months.

In spring and summer, birdsong and wildflowers are at their very best, and although the weather can be changeable at any time of year, the long hours of daylight in May/June offer walkers plenty of flexibility over when to set off. On average, the summer weather will be drier than in winter, but come prepared for rain. You may be lucky enough not to need your waterproof clothing, but you certainly need to have it with you, and your hiking boots should be waterproof.

If you live or are staying within easy travelling distance of this part of England, you may have the luxury of going there at short notice, on a good weather forecast, and perhaps of doing the various circuits as a series of day or weekend walks. For most people, however, the decision has to be taken, and accommodation booked, long in advance; and, for most, the spring, summer and early autumn months will be preferable. The Cotswolds are busy generally, although surprisingly, the English school holiday period (late July to early September) can be less crowded.



Which route option?



This book covers not only the ambitious grand circuit that we describe in the eight sections of Part 3 (94 miles/151 km), but also two shorter circuits. You can sample many of the Cotswolds' finest villages in just four sections in our Winchcombe circuit (45 miles/72 km). Or, if you have time for six sections, you can experience greater variety in our longer circuit via Cheltenham (58 miles/94 km).

Whichever itinerary you choose, two points apply. First, the recommended direction for the circuit is clockwise: this provides the best views, and eases you into longer daily distances once you're into your stride. Second, any of the circuits can be started at any village that suits your travel plans. We start both the grand and Cheltenham circuits at Cheltenham because of its excellent public transport, but you can start and finish at any village. Most people who choose the Winchcombe circuit will actually start at Moreton-in-Marsh, rather than Winchcombe, because of its rail connection with London Paddington and Oxford.

This guidebook merely offers a framework and three proposed itineraries, together with the information that will help you to decide which one to adopt or adapt.

How long will it take?

Part 3 is divided into eight sections, each a manageable day's walk, starting with modest daily mileages. When reviewing the distances in the table, remember that inevitably you will walk much further in the course of reaching food, drink and accommodation. Also, there are many attractions and side-trips (shown in yellow panels in Part 3) along the way: you may want to reserve plenty of time to make such visits, and to check opening hours in advance.

Three itineraries with distances

	miles	km
Cheltenham Spa		
3-1	8-5	13-7
Winchcombe		
3-2	9-3	14-9
Broadway		
3-3	11-8	19-0
Moreton-in-Marsh		
3-4	11-1	17-8
Bourton-on-the-Water		
3-5	11-3	18-2
Northleach		
3-6	14-0	22-5
Cirencester		
3-7	14-1	22-7
Painswick		
3-8	13-5	21-7
Cheltenham Spa		
<i>grand circuit</i>	93-6	150-6
Winchcombe		
3-2	9-3	14-9
Broadway		
3-3	11-8	19-0
Moreton-in-Marsh		
3-4	11-1	17-8
Bourton-on-the-Water		
4-1	6-6	10-6
Guiting Power		
4-2	5-9	9-5
Winchcombe		
<i>Winchcombe circuit</i>	44-7	71-8
Cheltenham Spa		
3-1	8-5	13-7
Winchcombe		
3-2	9-3	14-9
Broadway		
3-3	11-8	19-0
Moreton-in-Marsh		
3-4	11-1	17-8
Bourton-on-the-Water		
4-1	6-6	10-6
Guiting Power		
4-3	10-9	17-5
Cheltenham Spa		
<i>Cheltenham circuit</i>	58-2	93-6

Whichever circuit you choose, some walkers will wish to split certain sections, for example taking two days over Broadway to Moreton-in-Marsh so as to overnight in Chipping Campden, and/or to split Moreton to Bourton with an overnight at Stow-on-the-Wold, thus adding a day or two to the circuit. Conversely, although the grand circuit takes eight days for most long-distance walkers, some will wish to shorten that to seven by completing Cheltenham to Broadway in a single long day (17.8 miles/28.6 km). Part 4 has only three sections, and many Winchcombe walkers will combine 4.1 with 4.2 to make a single day from Bourton (12.5 miles/20.1 km). However, for those doing the Cheltenham circuit, we recommend an overnight at Guiting Power for a six-day circuit. Energetic walkers may wish to squeeze it into five days, at the price of a long final day (17.5 miles/28.2 km).

Avoid committing yourself to overlong daily distances. You risk turning your holiday into an endurance test, and time pressure may make you miss interesting visits or feel too rushed to enjoy the views. Walking cross-country is always slower than people expect, especially in sections with steep gradients, stiles and gates.

Terrain and gradients

The going underfoot varies from riverside and field paths to tracks and minor roads, with roadside verges and some tarmac sections and also some trod paths across fields and open hillside. Several places can be muddy or boggy, and during or after rain the soil in sodden fields can turn into sticky clay. So waterproof hiking boots are essential, and gaiters may prove useful, even in summer when conditions underfoot are better.



Although the walk never goes above 330 m/1083 ft, there are some stiff climbs and protracted descents. For the altitude profile, please see inside the back cover. If you complete the grand circuit, you will make a total ascent (and descent) of 2930 m (9600 ft). Although there are sections with gentle gradients, the need to climb a number of stiles makes the route slightly slower and more strenuous than you may expect, especially if you are carrying your own loads.

Waymarking, navigation and experience

These routes have been devised over the last 20 years of experience by local walking experts. None of the three circuits is waymarked as such, but in places there are waymarks belonging to other routes, including the Cotswold Way, and also a raft of lesser routes, including the Gloucestershire, Heart of England, Holst, Macmillan, Monarch's, Thames and Severn, Wardens, Winchcombe, Windrush and Wysis Ways. The Cotswold Way is a 100-mile National Trail (waymarked with an acorn symbol) linking Chipping Campden with Bath. Its most scenic stretches are included in this book, and it is the basis of a couple of scenic detours.

In places you follow simple 'Public Footpath' yellow arrow, sometimes on a well-defined trod path across open hillside or field. But beware: not all trod paths are the one you want, and you need to know both when to leave, as well as when to follow, the various waymarkers. Follow our directions very carefully and check your position against our mapping. A compass is not essential, but may be useful to people who like and know how to use them. The directions have been tested carefully over the years, and the mapping inside the book shows both main route and some options, with north at the top of each page. A sense of how far you have come is always useful: the grey grid lines show km and there are red blobs along the route line to show cumulative mileage from Cheltenham. You may also wish to carry a larger-scale map such as Ordnance Survey's OL45: see page 82 for details.

If you are new to long-distance walking, this is a good choice. We recommend that you consult our *Notes for Novices*: see page 82, where you'll also find definitions of terms such as *stile*, *kissing-gate* and *fingerpost*. It's safer, as well as likely to be more enjoyable, to go with somebody who already has navigational experience, but if you decide to go alone, practise with map and compass before you go.

