

# All this and pudding too

**Peak District** Local boy Rufus Purdy can't get enough of the crags, valleys and sugary pastries of the UK's most accessible National Park. Photographs by James Reeve

**I**HAD TO LEARN TO LOVE the Peak District. As a child growing up on its borders, I was dragged there by my parents on long, arduous walks. My mum and dad would stride ahead, inhaling the chilly air and pointing out interesting rock formations, while I trudged behind with my sisters, trying not to get mud on my trainers and counting the minutes until we could get back in the car. It wasn't until late in my teens, on a walk at Burbage Rocks near Castleton, that I finally realised what drew my parents here every weekend. Cold and tired from being made to scale a particularly vertiginous crag, I plonked myself down on a rock and looked around. To one side, glinting in the sunlight, were streams and waterfalls coursing down the moors before disappearing into thick

forest at the base of the valley. There were cows and sheep in vivid green fields, and straight ahead were rock climbers in DayGlo Lycra, scrambling like spiders over the stormcloud-grey cliffs at Stanage Edge. I've loved the place ever since.

The Peak District National Park is within easy reach of some of the country's biggest cities: Leeds and Bradford to the north, Manchester to the west, Sheffield to the east and Birmingham to the south. London is only three hours' drive away. There are few areas of natural beauty so accessible and, ever since industrialisation, the Peaks have provided an antidote to urban living for millions. 'I may be a wage slave on Monday, but I am a free man on Sunday,' sang folkie Ewan MacColl in 'The Manchester Rambler', his tribute to

those who spent their weeks toiling in factories and mills, and their weekends strolling up the Pennines.

Bakewell, the area's principal town, is the traditional starting point for a journey into the Peaks. A pretty settlement of solid 19th-century gritstone buildings and ancient, bowed cottages dominated by an imposing church steeple, it is the kind of upmarket country town that stagecoaches rumble into in the early chapters of Victorian novels. It is the commercial hub of the Peak District for tourists and locals alike. I used to love visiting the Monday livestock market, held in the town for more than 1,000 years, to watch farmers struggling to keep hold of frisky bulls ➤

**Top, view from the Blue John Mine. Below, flora and fauna, and a reminder of dark days in Eyam**





is the result of a happy accident in the 18th century, when a kitchen maid at the White Horse Inn (now the Rutland Arms Hotel), was asked to prepare a strawberry tart for a group of visiting noblemen. She misheard the instructions and created the mixture of almonds and strawberry jam in a heavy, flaky batter that has been sold in the town ever since.

**T**HE OLD ORIGINAL Bakewell Pudding Shop is one of three establishments that claim to be the definitive purveyor of the dish. When I visited one midweek spring morning it was doing a brisk trade in pudding keyrings and tea towels. Upstairs is a quiet tearoom where signed photographs of one-time pudding purchasers Phil Oakey from The Human League and David Dickinson of TV's *Bargain Hunt* are given pride of place, and the menu offers custard or squirty cream with your Bakewell pudding. Mine was marvellous, its lightness and subtle flavour a surprising contrast to its solid, heavy appearance.

The village of Eyam, a few miles north of Bakewell, has a village green complete with waddling ducks, a haunted inn and a beautiful medieval church. It is so pretty it could have been the subject of a Constable painting. However, its parish register details the gruesome deaths of some 260 of its inhabitants over 14 months in the 17th century. It was here, in 1665, that the Great Plague arrived in the Peaks, carried in a box of cloth delivered from London to George Viccars, a local tailor. He dried the damp fabric in front of his fire and within a few days he was dead, infected by the germs incubating in its folds. When Viccars's neighbours fell ill, villagers realised there was a problem. The local priest, William Mompesson, decided Eyam should isolate itself to prevent the plague spreading. Provisions supplied by the Earl of Devonshire at Chatsworth House were left at a boundary stone outside the village; coins to pay for the goods were deposited in specially

➤ and rams as they paraded them in front of potential buyers. But the market has since moved to a £6-million Agricultural Business Centre on the edge of the town. With its small, round parade ground and seats rising steeply in concentric circles around it, the auction arena differs from an 18th-century dissection chamber only in the fact that its subjects are not carved up there and then. I sat there for a while, watching cattle change hands for both sensible and silly money, depending on whether they were classed as 'dairy' or 'fat', and listening to the auctioneer (who sounded as if he had the gift of tongues) as he noted bids from all sides of the ring.

Bakewell will forever be linked in the popular imagination with the almond-flavoured dessert that bears its name. However, be warned: here it is known as a pudding, not a tart, and only the brave would dare utter the words 'Mr Kipling' within earshot of the locals. The pudding



Above, entrance to the Peak District on the B6012. Top, the gatehouse of Hassop Hall Hotel. Top right, authentic Bakewell puddings



The ballroom and, below left, the Italian garden at Hassop Hall Hotel. Below right, Chatsworth House

► drilled holes filled with vinegar to act as a disinfectant. The long months spent in Eyam's 'wide green prison' are described in Geraldine Brooks's 2001 novel *Year of Wonders*. 'The plague is cruel,' her heroine Anna Frith says. 'Its blows fall and fall again upon raw sorrow, so that before you have mourned one person that you love, another is ill in your arms.'

As I walked through the steep, winding village streets on a sunny afternoon, it

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was hard to imagine the horrors that once visited Eyam. The majority of the villagers are well beyond retirement age and most seemed to be outside in their gardens, making the most of the sunshine and pruning back the honeysuckle and wisteria clinging to the walls of their cottages. Yet quiet reminders of the plague are



everywhere. If it weren't for the small, white placards next to each gate, listing the names of those who died there more than 300 years ago, you could easily be in Tilling, Market Blandings or some other imagined hamlet where nothing more distasteful than an over-competitive whist drive ever takes place.

There are plenty of villages like that in the Peak District. Baslow, on the edge of the lush Chatsworth estate, is a good place to stop for tea and home-made scones. From nearby Calver, a few miles south of the reservoir where

Barnes Wallis tested his bouncing bomb in World War II, there is a beautiful walk through fields and along riverbanks thick with wild garlic. Hathersage, where the supposed grave of Robin Hood's comrade Little John lies in the churchyard, is a charming collection of ramshackle stone cottages and country pubs. Surrounded ►



### GETTING TO THE PEAK DISTRICT

You will need a car to explore the Peak District National Park properly, as local bus and train services are erratic. The region is easily accessible as it is close to the M1 motorway. Come off at junction 29 and take the A617 and the A619 to Bakewell.

### WHERE TO STAY

The best high-end accommodation in the area is at the 14th-century **Hassop Hall Hotel** (01629 640488; doubles from £79), a beautiful castle-like building in the village of Hassop, and **The Peacock at Rowsley** (01629 733518; www.thepeacockatrowsley.com; doubles from £130), the stylishly redesigned former dower house of Haddon Hall. Those who wish to stomp around moodily and indulge their *Jane Eyre* fantasies should head straight for **North Lees Hall**, where two apartments owned by

the **Vivat Trust** (0845 090 0194; www.vivat.org.uk) are available to rent, the smaller from £485 per week and the larger from £620. But if you want to stay in the sort of place where you won't feel guilty about tramping mud and sheep dung through the hall, then either rent a property from **Peak Cottages** (0114 262 0777; www.peakcottages.com) or stay in one of the hundreds of hospitable pubs in the area. It's worth phoning ahead to check on availability, especially in summer.

### WHERE TO EAT

**The Maynard Arms** in Grindleford (01433 630321; dinner about £50 for two without wine), **Fischer's** in Baslow (01246 583259; dinner £130 for two without wine) and **The Peacock at Rowsley** (see above; dinner about £70 for two without wine) run it close, but the finest dining in the Peak District is to be found at **Hassop Hall Hotel** (see above; dinner ►

## In Britain

From left: window at The Maynard Arms hotel; a pub sign in Beeley. Bottom, Winnats Pass

➤ by fields and rock-studded moorland, it is the starting point for many of the area's best walks. Hathersage is also the nearest village to North Lees Hall, which Charlotte Brontë visited in 1845 and used as her model for Thornfield Hall, Mr Rochester's home in *Jane Eyre*. Walk up to the heather-carpeted plateau that surrounds the house, listen to the wind screeching as it buffets its turreted walls, and you will see exactly why it appealed to her

Equally blustery – and Gothic – is Winnats Pass, just outside Castleton, where a steep road winds between high limestone cliffs and enormous boulders behind which sheep huddle for protection from the elements. Channelled down this tight gully, the wind produces a high-pitched howl, said to be the screams of a young couple murdered in the pass by lead-miners in the mid-18th century. Even in broad daylight it is a haunting place. The climb is so steep that drivers have to negotiate it in first gear. Once inside, the sky can be glimpsed only by craning your neck and staring directly above your head, and the rock faces appear to close in.

**C**ASTLETON ITSELF is one of the Peak District's most gorgeous towns. Crooked stone buildings huddle together in the base of the valley, encircled by the same tall limestone crags that give Winnats Pass its atmosphere of foreboding. The intimate streets are lined with enticing pubs and tiny shops, some no bigger than a pantry, which sell antiques and jewellery, secondhand books and handicrafts.

Just off the main road a steep, narrow path leads to the entrance of the Devil's Arse. This huge, natural cavern was

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known until recently by the more polite moniker of Peak Cavern, but since it reverted to the name used until Victorian times it has seen a huge rise in visitor numbers. The loud farting noises produced when water drains from the cavern's chambers reduced me to hysterical laughter when I was 11, but I was reluctant to part with £6 to experience it again.

Speedwell Cavern, at the base of Winnats Pass, is one of many subterranean caverns in Castleton that are open to the public (the more famous Blue John Mine is at



the other end of the pass). Speedwell is a former lead mine that was allowed to flood when its seams stopped yielding. For £6.50 a guide will lead you into a tiny chamber and down 105 slippery steps to a small quay beside the treacherous waters of Speedwell's underground canal. From here, a long metal boat, spanning almost the entire width of the passage, will take you along the dark tunnels, stopping at eerie, echoing caves. Guides must memorise and complete an alternative route out of the tunnels, a journey taking more than 24 hours, in case a rockfall prevents them from taking the usual way out.

Aside from drifting 200 metres below the ground, one of the greatest pleasures of the Peak District is simply to motor along country lanes with green and yellow fields criss-crossed by dry-stone walls reflected in the rear-view mirror. A drive across the rugged moorland of the high peak, before coming down into the valley and

taking the pastoral B6012 through the Duke of Devonshire's Chatsworth estate, is the aesthetic equivalent of a long, hot bath after a particularly gruelling bout of mud wrestling. At sunset, when the rosy light falls on the pastures and the grazing sheep, deer and cattle send out shadows several metres long, when the forest that covers the hillside behind Chatsworth House looks like a collage made from every possible shade of green cloth, I take some convincing that there is a more beautiful place in the world. 

➤ about £60 for two without wine on a weekday, and about £85 for two on a Saturday). An extensive menu, making use of locally sourced meat, fish and game, will lead to plenty of agonised decision-making. On the night I was there, the Sheffield Wednesday goalkeeper and his family were enjoying a meal at the next table. Posh and Becks it ain't, but away from the bright lights of London that counts as a celebrity endorsement. However, this is meat-and-two-veg country, and pubs tend to favour ingredients that fill you up rather than amuse your *bouche*. **The Cheshire Cheese** (01433 620381) in the village of Hope has a good vegetarian menu and a no-smoking area

(both virtually unheard of in rural Derbyshire). Non-vegies should try the enormous Yorkshire pudding filled with local sausages, onions and rich gravy – you even get a spoon to eat it with. Other pubs worth dropping into include **The Chequers Inn** near Calver (01433 630231), **The Miners Arms** in Eyam (01433 630853) and the **Rutland Arms Hotel** (01629 812812) in Bakewell. No one should visit the Peaks without going to the **Chatsworth farm shop** (01246 583392), which sells produce from the estate and fine organic goodies from elsewhere. Its meat counter, offering such delights as wild-boar-and-venison sausages and rare-breed pork chops, is worth the trip alone.

