

BRITAIN

Great British Breaks: Malvern Hills

Elgar, hiking and a day's wallow in spa water. Our writer plans her tri-county stay

Jill Starley-Grainger

February 12 2017, 12:01am, The Sunday Times



Land of hope and glory: the Malvern Hills



Share

Save

Why?

Rising steeply out of flat pastoral landscapes, the Malvern Hills form a linear nine-mile ridge at the junction of Worcestershire, Herefordshire and Gloucestershire. Come here for easy-going rambles with views of all three counties, for lazy pints by the fire and to sample the modern take on the Victorian “water cure”.

1,394ft, the rounded cone is the highest point in the Malverns, with uninterrupted 360-degree views from the top, overlooking the hills where CS Lewis and JRR Tolkien would walk together. If you think they look exactly as you'd imagined the white mountains of Gondor in *The Lord of the Rings*, it's no coincidence. You can reach the summit from multiple paths; there's a gentle one-mile route from the car park at the Wyche Cutting, on Beacon Road.

A mile from the Beacon is **The Kettle Sings**, which was Elgar's favourite tearoom. It serves luscious pistachio, orange blossom and apricot cake (£2.75; thekettlesings.co.uk). Admirers of the composer should head to the National Trust's Elgar Birthplace Museum, due to reopen this spring. You'll be able to see the cottage where he was born, original manuscripts, his conductor's batons and the violin that he played as a child.

In the 19th century, the Malverns were riddled with spas offering "water cures" to everyone from Charles Darwin to Florence Nightingale. The only big one left is the **Malvern Spa**, which has direct access to the natural spring. These days, it's more calming than clinical: you wallow on bubble-jet beds in the indoor-outdoor pool, filled with Malvern water, and mooch through saunas, steam rooms and tropical showers. Prices start at £65 for a day pass, including lunch (themaalvernspa.com).



Hearty fare at Green Cow Kitchens

Up the hill in Great Malvern, you'll feel the presence of Benedictine monks as you stand beneath sturdy Norman arches in **Great Malvern Priory**. The stained-glass windows, among the finest in England, were added in the 15th century, long after the monks had left (free; greatmalvernpriory.org.uk).

Around the corner, in a Victorian WC on Edith Walk, you'll find the smallest theatre in the world. Just 12 people at a time can

Stop for a drink in another Victorian conversion: the **Nag's Head** was a cluster of cottages, a photographic studio and a boxing gym, but is now a rambling white clapboard freehouse with open fires, beamed ceilings and an oak bar offering 15 local beers and ciders on tap (nagsheadmalvern.co.uk).

The romantic ruin of **Witley Court** is worth the half-hour drive from Great Malvern. This sprawling Italianate mansion was gutted by fire in 1937, but the vast Jacobean entrance hall and 19th-century porticos, added by the Regency architect John Nash, survived the flames (£7.80; english-heritage.org.uk).

Where to stay

Rooms at the country-house hotel **Colwall Park** range from modest and comfy to boudoir glamorous, with velvet chaise longues and hand-printed floral wallpaper (doubles from £75; colwall.co.uk). In Great Malvern, **Treherne House** is a B&B with antique furnishings, a sunny conservatory and an award-winning breakfast (doubles from £99, B&B; trehernehouse.co.uk).

Where to eat

The area isn't packed with cutting-edge restaurants, but as well as chic rooms, **Colwall Park** serves up superb British classics, such as lamb shoulder faggot with lamb cutlet and roasted root vegetables, in a smart wood-panelled dining room (mains from £12; see above). Food doesn't get more "farm to fork" than at **Green Cow Kitchens**, on a working farm in Whitbourne. The chef used to work the land, and now serves gutsy dishes such as pheasant with liver, chestnuts and sprout tops (six-course dinner £39.50; greencowkitchens.co.uk).

Jill Starley-Grainger was a guest of visitworcestershire.org, visitengland.com and GWR (gwr.com), which has one-way rail fares from London Paddington to Great Malvern from £6