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England's greener pastures

HISTORY | Country's far north is so full of sights, you can skip right over London

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July 5, 2009

BY ANNE Z. COOKE AND STEVE HAGGERTY

HEXHAM, England -- When Brian Posner's feet ache after a long day in boots, he thinks of his predecessors -- Roman soldiers clad in sandals -- here in Northumberland.

The retired doctor, a Roman history buff and official Britain guide, has spent almost as many hours tramping the top of Hadrian's Wall as did the recruits once stationed on Roman England's northernmost frontier.

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Yorkshire Dales National Park in northern England is one of the country's lesser-known treasures.

(Courtesy)

On the late September day we hiked the 1,900-year-old wall, a bone-chilling wind and driving rain swept over the moors. The storm drove most sensible people inside. But the dark clouds and lowering sky set the mood as nothing else could do. Shivering inside my summer-weight parka, I realized how cold, tedious and bleak a tour of duty must have been on these barren earthworks.

"These soldiers were a long way from home," Posner said over a hot cup of cocoa in the visitors center. "But you know, the Romans were civilized and they liked their comforts. The men garrisoned here had not only a hospital and an indoor latrine, but a bathhouse with heated stone floors and hot water tubs."

When I first came to England 30 years ago, few tourists ventured as far north as Hadrian's Wall. Built in 123 A.D., the 73-mile-long wall, stretching from the Irish Sea to the North Sea to repel Scotland's barbaric tribes, seemed impossibly far from London. But the recent resurgence of northern England's cities has opened the region to the world. Hadrian's Wall is a UNESCO World Heritage Site supported by exhibits, shops, snack bars and museums. With better roads and nearby lodging, both the wall and the region's other natural and historic attractions are comfortably within reach.

On our last visit to Britain, we did the unthinkable. We skipped London altogether and flew nonstop from Chicago to Manchester's revamped and efficient international airport. In minutes we'd rented a car and were on the road, heading north to the village of Hexham, an hour south of the wall.

If you look at a tourist map (not a driving map), you'll see that Northern England is awash in national parks. But these parks aren't what you'd expect. Established long after most open land had passed into private hands, the national parks' boundaries enclose a mix of private and public land, including open moors, pastures and farms.

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Narrow roads wandered between sheep pastures and heather-covered moors, meeting in wooded villages where local pubs served hot shepherd's pie lunches and lager on tap. By late afternoon we were heading back to our hotel for a hot soak, a four-course meal and a warm bed.

Previous trips through England's northern countryside had taken us to the Lake District in Cumbria, 885 square miles of lakes, craggy fells (hills) and green dales (valleys). We'd also toured the Peak District National Park as part of a Jane Austen-related trip. But we'd missed one of England's lesser-known treasures, the Yorkshire Dales National Park. So, after leaving Hadrian's Wall, we headed in that direction.

Stopping briefly in Carlisle to tour the gloomy stone castle where Mary Queen of Scots was once imprisoned, we headed to the train station to board the Carlisle-to-Settle railway for the ride south through the Yorkshire Dales. The railway, one of England's most scenic train rides, climbs over the North Pennine hills, a series of rolling, rocky moors laced with limestone caves.

On the train, by great good luck, we shared seats with Derek and Marian Crabtree, "pensioners" on their way home from a vacation. As the train wound through the hills, Derek, a retired newspaper journalist who knew every mile of the route to Skipton, offered his personal commentary, with Marian pointing out her favorite restaurant here and historic square there.

When the highest limestone peak, Penyghent, came into view, Derek described the annual Three Peaks foot race that sends runners up and over Penyghent and two adjacent summits. When we passed the best known of the area's deep limestone caves, accessible only by rope and harness, Derek recounted what it was like to be lowered down by rope into complete darkness.

When the couple disagreed about the location of a statue, the discussion took an animated he-said, she-said turn, until Derek finally sighed. "All right, clever clogs," he said, chuckling affectionately. "You tell us."

That night we checked into the Devonshire Arms Country Inn near Skipton in the Yorkshire Dales. We spent two nights in luxury and two days exploring the Dales by car.

On a hike to Malham Cove, the Dales' signature cliff-top trail, we met a climbing team rescuing a fallen hiker.

"We get a couple dozen of these every year," said the leader. "People don't realize how slick wet limestone can be."

Other highlights of our rambles included a visit to Durham and its castle and cathedral. The castle, a medieval fortress built in 1072 by William the Conqueror, now serves as housing for students at Durham University. Tour guides delight in showing off the 15th century kitchen, also still in use.

Durham Cathedral, built between 1080 and 1280 to house St. Cuthbert's coffin, is a cornucopia of intriguing corners, carvings, designs and colors, including a black marble line beyond which medieval women could not pass. Massive stone piers support both the rounded arches of the Norman nave and the pointed arches spanning the roof, England's first use of this Gothic device.

We finished our trip in the city of York, staying at the Dean Court, a boutique hotel inside the medieval walls.

York's inner city, small enough to explore on foot, is a strange mix of narrow lanes and modern shops. From our bed we could see the massive wood doors and towers of the majestic York Minster, the celebrated cathedral, 200 feet across the square.

We were there in time to hear the choir sing evensong and fortunate to find seats close by, on the choir stalls' rear benches.

Also within the city's walls was the "Jorvik" experience, a kid-friendly theme park recapturing York's Viking settlement. Reminiscent of Disney World's haunted house, the 45-minute visit to 975 A.D. starts with a bumpy ride past dimly lit dioramas of gritty Viking life, followed by a walk through village stalls manned by docents in costume.

Simon Watt, 25, a k a "Omagh the rafen, or coin striker," was sitting so still at his work bench that we thought he was a mannequin. Then he smiled and offered to "strike," or make a "penniga," (Viking penny) for us. "If I cut it into quarters, each will be a farthing, or a fourth of a thing," he said.

From York, it was a two-hour drive back to Manchester for our flight home. We were sorry to leave.

"You've missed more than you've seen," said Liz Clayton at the Devonshire Arms, "but like any good appetizer, you'll be hungry for more."

When you're ready, we'll be here."

Anne Z. Cooke and Steve Haggerty are California-based free-lance writers.

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