

# Northern lights

The charms of the border country are no longer an out-of-the-way experience, discovers **Anne Z Cooke.**



A BONE-CHILLING rain swept over the moors on the October day we hiked to the top of the ruins of Hadrian's Wall, a few kilometres south of the Scottish border.

Gusts of wind, scouring the tumble-down ruins of the second-century Roman barracks on the summit drove most sensible people indoors. But the dark clouds and lowering sky, pelting the armory, shrine and sleeping quarters with rain, set the mood as nothing else could have done. Shivering in my summer-weight parka – a last-minute purchase – I realised how tedious a tour of duty on these barren earthworks must have been.

Our guide, Brian Posner, a history buff at the site now known as Housestead's Fort, agreed. "After a long day in these comfortable double-soled hiking boots, I can't help admiring the soldiers who marched for miles in flimsy sandals and defended the wall in all kinds of weather." A retired doctor, Posner shook his head, imagining it.

"They were a long way from home, but they did have their comforts," he added as we sipped hot cocoa in the Visitors Centre. "The Romans garrisoned here had not only a hospital and an indoor latrine, but a bathhouse with hot water tubs and heated stone floors."

With the 2012 Summer Olympics set for London this July, heritage sites throughout England are bracing for record crowds. Back in the day, it was the rare traveller who ventured this far from London, north to the Lake District, past the Peaks District and on to the rugged hills where the remains of the 117km wall, built in 123 AD, stretches from coast to coast.

But in recent years, the region's cultural and economic growth has made it a player, shifting industries, jobs and tourism northward. Along with a handful of other historic but out-of-the-way destinations, Hadrian's Wall



is a popular Unesco World Heritage Site. Nor will you have to tramp for miles to see it, as the Roman legions did. With visitors centres, guides, exhibits and facilities built at intervals, you can spend an hour or two here, or all day hiking along the northern-most frontier.

Skipping London altogether, we flew to Manchester's modern International Airport and rented a car, heading north to a hotel in Hexam, near the wall. Driving on the area's two-lane roads used to take forever. Not anymore. You can drive from Manchester to York in two to three hours on a fast, multi-lane freeway, with exits at any town along the way.

In minutes we were off and wandering along quiet country roads, feeling like horse-and-carriage passengers in a 19th-century period film.

Our typical day might start with a castle visit and a cathedral tour followed by a side-of-the-road trailhead and a path to a trout stream. Or it might include a sightseeing drive between farms divided by stone walls, views of heather-covered moors and hillside sheep pastures. Each noon we'd break for a pub lunch of shepherd's pie, fish and chips or a quiche, with a pint of beer on tap. By late afternoon we were ready for a hot soak in our hotel room, a good meal and a warm bed.

These were our A-list entries:

**One:** Durham, home of Durham Castle and Cathedral, also a World Heritage Site. The castle, a medieval fortress built by William the Conqueror in 1072, is still the heart of Durham University and more surprising, a student residence. The cathedral, built between 1080 and 1280 to house St Cuthbert's coffin, shamelessly mixes intricately painted and coloured columns with geometric designs and flamboyant carvings.

## Back in the day, it was the rare traveller who ventured this far from London.

A thin black marble line in front of the nave was the medieval glass ceiling: only males could cross it to approach the altar.

**Two:** Hadrian's Wall. Enough said. **Three:** Carlisle's stone-cold fortified castle where Mary Queen of Scots was imprisoned. Chilly and impregnable.

**Four:** A ride on the Carlisle-to-Settle Railway, running south through the Yorkshire Dales. A famously scenic trip, it crosses the North Pennine hills offering close-ups of every lumpy fell (hill) and dell (valley), sparsely dotted by tiny villages and shot-through by limestone caves. And what luck we had that day, finding ourselves sharing a pair of seats and a table with the Crabtrees, pensioners coming home from Scotland. As the train rolled south,

**Rugged and ancient: You can spend all day hiking along Hadrian's wall, built in 123 AD. Left, the Lindisfarne gospels are projected onto Durham Cathedral.**

Derek, a retired newspaperman, showed us things we would surely have missed, describing the geology and identifying Penyghent, the highest peak and the first challenge of the annual "Three Peaks" foot race. "It's a 'fell' race" and attracted competitors from a dozen countries, he said.

Passing the best-known of many limestone caves, Derek described the unnerving sensation of being lowered by rope and harness into a hole so deep that you touched bottom in total darkness. Marian pointed out an occasional village square or favourite restaurant. When the couple disagreed about the location of a particular statue, the discussion took a spirited he-said, she-said turn, until Derek saw the better part of valour. "All right, clever clogs," he said affectionately. "You tell us." **Five:** Two nights at the

wet limestone can be."

**Six:** Taking the mark of the ancient city of York and of its soaring gothic church the Yorkminster. Driving east, we reached York by late afternoon. The inner city, divided by narrow lanes, took us back a thousand years. It's also a-bustle with time-tested tourist enterprises: restaurants, gift shops and souvenirs stores selling T-shirts, teatowels and tea cosies.

But I won't forget waking up to the sun sliding down the cathedral's lacy towers and to hear the bells toll vespers. We were there in time to hear the choir sing evensong and fortunate to find seats beside them, in the stalls. Tour guide Wendy Brooks said the thousands of stones in this massive pile were not held together by conventional mortar but by gravity. Each layer holds the layer below in place, with nothing between but a soupy coat of pulverised stone. I still can't believe it.

York's most popular tour is the Jorvik experience, a Disney-style kid-friendly theme park channelling the first Viking settlement. The 45-minute narrated ride takes time travellers (that's you) back to 975AD to reveal dimly lit scenes of gritty Viking life, followed by a self-guided walk through a Viking village peopled by costumed docents. Simon Watt, 27, aka "Omagh the rafen," was sitting so still at his work bench we thought he was a mannequin. "It means I'm a coin striker," he said smiling. "This coin is a penniga, a Viking penny. If I cut it into quarters, each will be a fourth of a thing, or a farthing," he explained. "A week isn't enough," said Liz Clayton at the Devonshire Arms. "You'll miss more than you've seen. But like any good appetiser, it leaves you hungry for more. When you're ready, we'll be here."