



GLASTONBURY TOR

GO WEST!

ROGER WHEELER VISITS SOMERSET

A week in **Somerset**, based in the county town **Taunton**, sounded like a great idea, particularly when I was going with my partner, Mike, who was working there. So arriving early on a Sunday evening we checked in to the **Corner House Hotel** – a very nice, modern redesign of some lovely period houses – and set off to explore Taunton. It is a nice, normal town with the standard identical shops, a large church – great ceiling – and a castle that is closed until 2010 for restoration. Five days in Taunton felt like rather a long time when five hours would have sufficed. From a choice of the usual chain restaurants, we ate in a branch of **Zizzi**. OK is about all one can say about it, quite pricey; for chicken for me and a steak for Mike with a shared salad and a bottle of the cheapest house wine the bill was £40.

Taunton is a good place to base yourself to explore Somerset, so the next day, while Mike was slaving over a hot laptop in his local office, I jumped on a bus to **Wells** via Glastonbury. Only an hour or so away, Wells is quite a surprise. A beautiful medieval city, it has a massive cathedral and some fine ruins of the **Bishop's Palace**. The main street is full of tourists, as it is on the main Bath West Country tourist trail, but is certainly worth a couple of hours of anyone's time.

Next stop, **Glastonbury**, and in Bill Clinton's famous words, "*I did not inhale*". Arriving in this extremely pretty town is like revisiting the 1960s only I wasn't wearing flowers in my hair. It exists in something of a parallel world. The biggest event was coming soon – no, not the famous music fest that hardly gets a mention in the town, but **The Goddess Conference** in late July. This truly weird event 'celebrates the **Wild Maiden Goddess at Lammas**', with contributors like **Anique Radiant Heart**, a 'supersongstress' from Australia, and **Ra-el Corsini**, a flying lotus activist, not to mention **Starhawk**, an international inspiration from the US, and **Vixen Dreamwalker**, a Kuramengrodrom shaman, whatever that is. I could go on, as there are about 60 different contributors with equally exotic names.

I wandered into the tourist information office to find two very down-to-earth ladies who, when asked about this truly unusual place, smiled and said yes, well, it's 'NFG' ('normal for Glastonbury'). The only drug

problem they have was when it runs out; I have never seen so many happy people seeking something, but no one knows what. I nearly forgot the famous **Abbey** ruins – they are spectacular but still ruins. At the **Tor**, legend has it that **Joseph of Arimathea** brought his young nephew, Jesus, for a visit and returned years later to found Christianity in Britain and planted a thorn from 'the true cross', which grew into a thorn tree. The Glastonbury Thorn is still there.

As if that were not enough, in addition to all this they say that **King Arthur** and **Guinevere** were buried in the grounds of the Abbey. Hence there are many stores selling the Avalon myth, along with witches, dragons and related healing teachings. Believe what you will, Glastonbury is quite fascinating and certainly worth a visit. Whether you leave the same person is entirely a matter for you – it must be something they put in the water.

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After all that excitement, my next trip to **Minehead** was a shock in every sense of the word. Minehead, on the north Somerset coast, has been living with her ugly sister for more than 30 years, but this sibling has brought enormous wealth and prosperity to this pretty little fishing village, now a thriving town, at a price. I refer, of course, to **Butlins** and its 10,000 happy campers (sorry, 'guests' – Butlins stopped calling its centres 'holiday camps' many years ago, they are now 'resorts' and the residents are now 'guests'). Without Butlins, Minehead would be a charming but lifeless fishing village, but big business has brought all the money, jobs and opportunities and their attendant blight. You can't have one without the other, it seems.

Without doubt they provide unbeatable value for money for families with two or three children under ten, but it's not everyone's cup of tea. I would suggest that a visit to Somerset offers great places to visit: **Wells**, **Glastonbury**, **Somerton**, **Watchet**, and of course **Exmoor** with **Lynton** and **Lynmouth** as outstanding areas of natural beauty. But avoid Minehead.

Somerset has some interesting military connections. The skies over **Yeovil** and **Ilchester** host daily flying displays, as the **847 Naval Air Squadron** is based in Yeovilton, and **40 Commando Royal Marines** are based just outside Taunton. I'll leave the rest to your imagination.

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www.visitsomerset.co.uk
www.glastonbury.co.uk
www.somerset-accommodation.co.uk
www.corner-house.co.uk



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