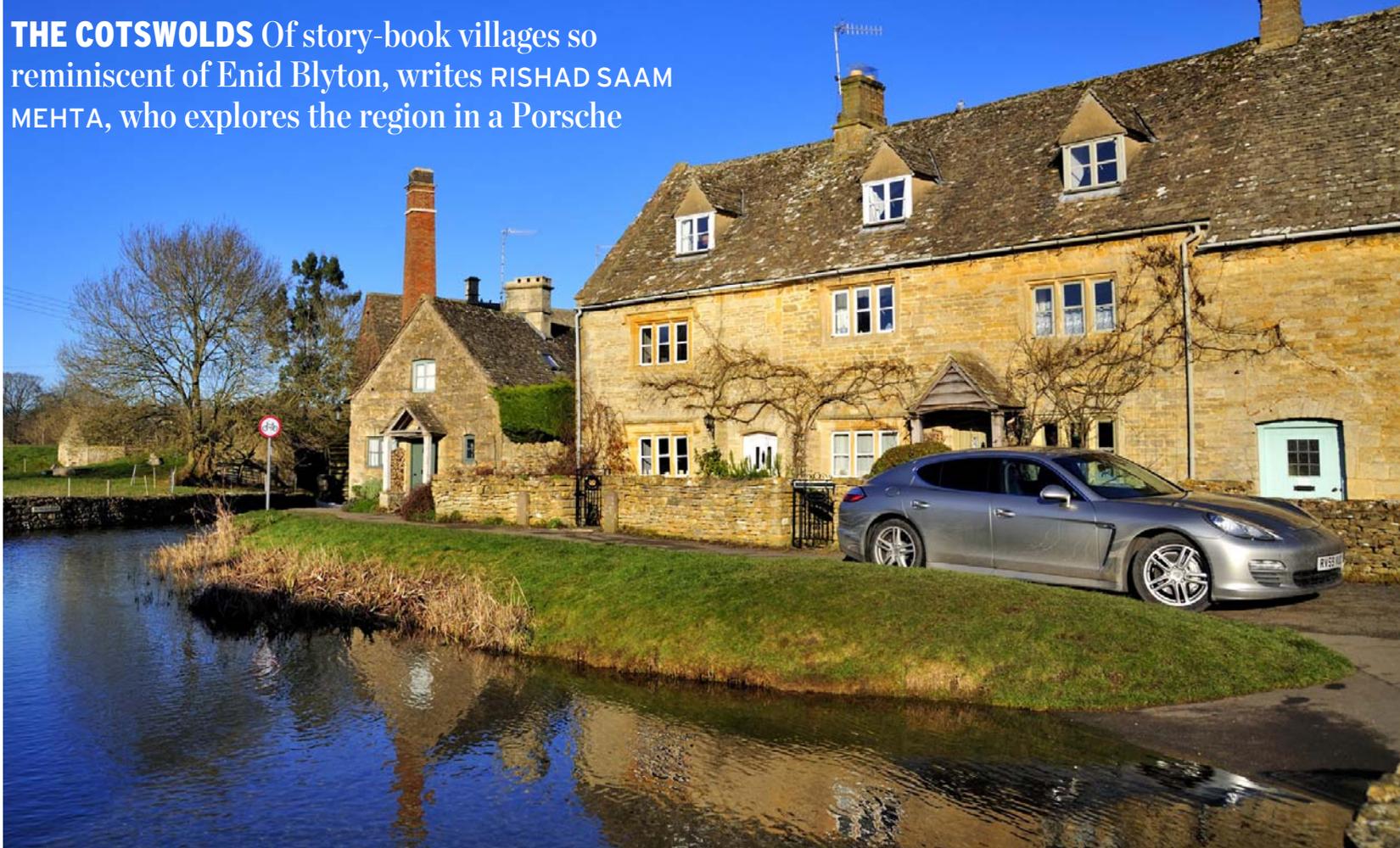


Living a childhood dream

THE COTSWOLDS Of story-book villages so reminiscent of Enid Blyton, writes RISHAD SAAM MEHTA, who explores the region in a Porsche



PERFECT DRIVING HOLIDAY (clockwise from top left) Scenic roads in the Cotswolds, the quintessential British Public House or Inn and the Cotswolds countryside PHOTOS: RISHAD SAAM MEHTA

Remember those Enid Blyton books that most childhoods have been filled with? Besides enthralling adventure and fairy tales, they present a pretty picture of rural England.

They tell of old mills made of honey-coloured stone, open meadows and deep-blue ponds lapping against grassy embankments. The houses had tiled or thatched roofs with pretty picture-frame windows.

When she described a sunny day in a place such as this, I remember wishing I could jump into the book and be there.

My childhood wish came true recently when I drove to the Cotswolds. Besides being gorgeously attired with story-book villages and pretty flower gar-

dens, the Cotswolds also feature some superb driving roads. So, when I had the Porsche Panamera 4s for a driving holiday, this is where I headed without hesitation.

Village vistas

The scene you see above is one of the most magnificent vistas of a village called Little Slaughter. Despite the gory name, it is a quaint and charming place. A wetland, upon which this village lies, was called 'slough' or 'slothre' in medieval English — hence the name. This picturesque village sits beside the little Eye stream, and as I was taking the picture above and admiring the simple rusticity of it all, I realised that I was indeed

inside an Enid Blyton story.

The stream running through the village is crossed by two small bridges and the local attraction is a converted mill (with the chimney) with an original water wheel, selling local crafts. To give you a geographical fix on this region that has been officially designated as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, the Cotswolds extend across a narrow band of land east of the M5 motorway, stretching as far as Oxford at their widest point.

Little Slaughter is beautifully bucolic and the Lower Slaughter Manor (www.lowerslaught-er.co.uk) — the place to stay here — is wonderfully traditional and envelopes you in old-world charm. This is the kind of country house hotel where a decanter

of sherry is placed in your room with compliments, and the hotel itself is filled with ornate furniture, log fires and rich fabrics.

From Lower Slaughter, I headed to Stow-on-Wold, another Cotswolds town at a distance of three miles, driving along lovely country roads on which I thoroughly enjoyed the Porsche as it eagerly turned into corners and powered out of them like a race horse with its heart set on crossing the finish line first.

Stow-on-the-Wold was an old market town during the height of the wool industry. The fetching market square would see as many as 20,000 sheep sold at one time during its huge annual fairs. A remnant of the time is a medieval cross at the south of

the square that stood to remind traders to be honest while brokering deals. Today, Stow-on-the-Wold has plenty of antique shops and art galleries. It is also a good base from where to take off on walking holidays around the Cotswolds.

But with a 400bhp brute at my disposal I really wasn't too much into walking this time. So, I drove to Bledington on the B4450, five miles south east of Stow-on-the-Wold.

Here stands the 16th Century Kings Head (www.kingsheadinn.net), a traditional English inn. The sumptuous rooms are tastefully decorated, and the food in the traditional bar is mouth-watering. The ingredients are locally sourced and they have some good vegetarian

options too. My lunch stop here was a groaningly delicious affair.

My afternoon touring consisted of driving along little country roads through villages with quintessential English names such as Milton-under-Wychwood and Little Rissington to get to Bourton-on-the-Water. During the summer tourist season, Bourton-on-the-Water is immensely popular, overcrowded, and best seen in the evening when the coachloads of day trippers have left.

But right now, during winter, I had the place all to myself. It's a very attractive little village with the Windrush River passing beneath a series of low bridges in the village centre and an array of handsome houses in that famous Cotswolds honey-

coloured stone lining its narrow lanes.

Finally, for my night halt, I drove to yet another village called Broadway 12 miles from Bourton-on-the-Water. Using this as a base, tomorrow I would set off to see Warwick Castle, Stratford-upon-Avon and Blenheim Palace. But for today, I parked the Porsche and settled down for a comfortable evening at the Lygon Arms (www.lygonarnms.co.uk) with rooms and lounges that ooze character and elegance.

I'd seen one of England's prettiest regions at the wheel of one of the world's most cherished sports cars. Today, I had lived the dream!

(Visit www.visitbritain.co.in for information on Cotswolds)