

Country roads



If driving around is your favourite way to see a place, exploring the lesser-known villages along the verdant English countryside may be just the thing for you.

Text & photographs **Rishad Saam Mehta**

▲ Stonehenge has been standing for centuries on the Salisbury plain, looking as enigmatic as ever.

I had the fast and heady Porsche 997 Turbo Cabriolet to try out for a few days when I was visiting Berkshire in England. The counties of Wiltshire and Dorset down south, on the way to the sea, had some lovely roads, and I'd set off early one bright sunny morning wilfully avoiding motorways. There was no particular place I planned to drive to; my intention was to just spend the day driving this very exciting 493 bhp car. It's on this unplanned directionless wander on little country B roads that I came to my first halt—the Cock Inn. I don't even remember in which village in Wiltshire I came across it, and when I tried searching for it on the Internet

scores of pubs named similarly popped up. It seems like a popular name for a pub. This particular one was a charming little place, and the staff immediately won me over, because even though they weren't open, the bustling lady of the inn rustled up some tea and fruit scones with jam for me.

It was a well-timed break with the sun shining and a slight nip in the air. Of course, I could've put up the hood but that would have dampened the throaty exhaust burble that the 3.6-litre engine was producing, and believe me, it is the ideal soundtrack to have on scenic country roads.

Historic encounters

I carried on, bursting out from a narrow country B road onto the A303. I remember driving along towards a crest on the road as the cheery lass on the radio stated that the sunny weather would continue throughout the day with just a smattering of clouds. As I topped the crest on the A303, my jaw dropped open—the road forks almost symmetrically, and sitting in the flat green plains between the two branches of the road is Stonehenge. Silent sentinels to history for over 5,000 years, Stonehenge remains a mystery. What purpose did this symmetric arrangement of stones serve? How did prehistoric man manage this feat of movement and arrangement of stones (weighing about four tonnes) without the help of modern machinery?

I'd never been to Stonehenge before so I stopped for a quick look around. The 20 minutes I spent there does no justice to the site, and as it faded away into the horizon in my rear view mirror, I promised myself I'd soon return for an unhurried visit.

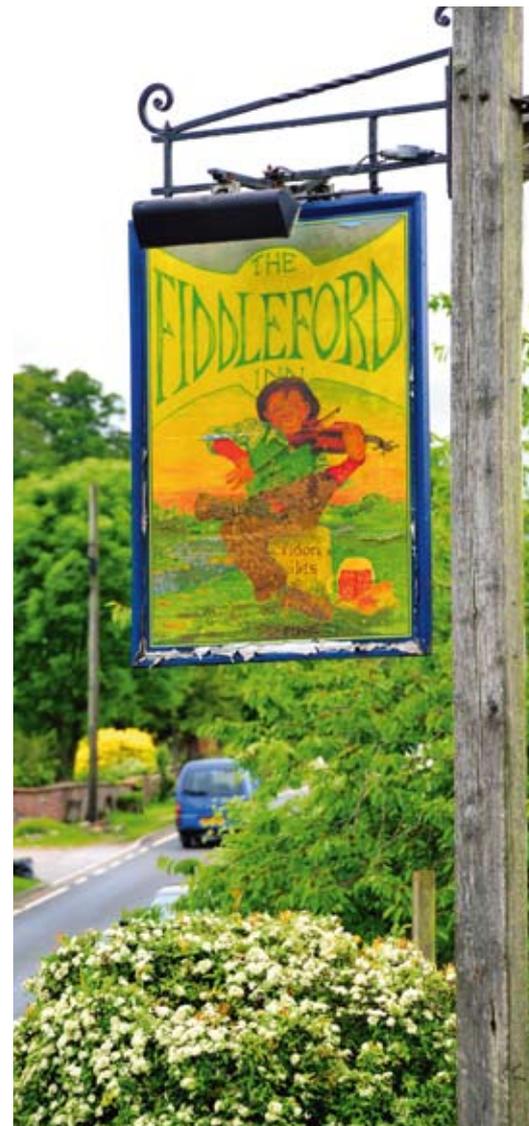
British hospitality

The Fiddleford Inn was discovered quite by accident. I'd crossed over from Wiltshire into Dorset and had entered the village of Fiddleford which straddles the A357. I'd turned into the Calf Close Lane since it was



▲ Clockwise from above: The Frampton Arms pub where the bartender told me about Moreton's association with Lawrence of Arabia; The Fiddleford Inn is a typical English country club with great food and good service; The Cock Inn in the county of Wiltshire, the one with the sweet bartender.

a narrow hedged path, and I knew that the car would sound growly and mean, the exhaust burble bouncing off the hedges. The lane went in a loop and came back out to the A357, and it was here that the Fiddleford Inn was tucked away. What drew me in was the aroma of fish and chips, and their lovely breaded wholetail scampi with chips and salad became my early lunch. The landlord told me that they also hire out two rooms which come with a hearty,





in London, I had feasted my eyes over the 1000cc Brough Superior SS100 Motorcycle on display on the ground floor. It was while riding this very bike that T. E. Lawrence, popularly known as Lawrence of Arabia, had a terrible accident on May 13, 1935. It would claim his life six days later.

Besides mentioning that it was the seventh Brough Lawrence owned and was tailor-made by George Brough himself, it also stated that Lawrence had said that 'it is the silkiest thing I've ever ridden'. But what had rung the bell in my mind was the last paragraph on the plaque that said that Lawrence was riding the Brough back home from Bovington to his nearby cottage at Clouds Hill when he swerved to avoid two

◀ Left: A typically greasy English pub spread—thick-cut fries, a burger and onion rings.

Below: As the day wears on, pubs start to pick up more customers with afternoons normally seeing very little rush. It's a great place to catch up on some reading.

full English breakfast. Since Fiddleford is such a quaint village set amidst lush fields bordered by woods, coming back here to stay also became a part of my list, along with leisurely checking out Stonehenge.

I was so taken up with aimlessly roaring through the country in the yellow Porsche that before I knew it, I'd crossed into the county of Dorset and reached the south coast of England and the sea.

Lawrence of Moreton

It was on the way back that my eye caught the name Moreton on a milestone. It rang a bell but I couldn't pin it down. I drove towards it and parked outside the Frampton Arms Pub.

"So what is Moreton famous for?" I asked the lady behind the bar. "Why, for our Hungry Man's Meal, of course, love", she answered with a twinkle in her eye. What she was talking about is a sumptuous offering on their menu consisting of an eight-oz sirloin steak and a barbecued rack of ribs served with a basket of fries.

"And of course there's the Bovington Tank Museum, Moreton Church and Clouds Hill Cottage", she continued. The last name rang a bell. Clouds Hill Cottage. I remember it being associated with Lawrence of Arabia. Two years ago, when I'd visited the Imperial War Museum on Lambeth Road



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boys on bicycles. This spot was hardly four miles away, and is marked with a plaque that says, 'Near this spot, Lawrence of Arabia crashed on his motorcycle and was fatally injured. 13th May 1935'.

I drove to the Moreton Church, and outside it, there's an informative plaque telling interested visitors about him and his association with Dorset and Moreton. Lawrence was buried in Moreton and his grave can be visited at the cemetery that's a short distance from the church. His funeral was attended by many important people of the day including Winston Churchill and his wife. In fact, you can see scenes from the occasion in the Lawrence Room of the Moreton Tearooms at the Old School in Moreton.

This charming little Dorset village with stone houses featuring thatched roofs, much like how it is described in Enid Blyton books, was my last stop before I started back towards Berkshire.

It had turned out to be quite an interesting day for one that had started off as an unplanned drive through the English countryside.

Tailor-made by George Brough himself, Lawrence of Arabia's 1000cc Brough Superior SS100 Motorcycle was 'the silkiest thing he'd ever ridden'.

► Right: Lawrence of Arabia's final resting place.

Below: A good summer day is always good for a trot on village roads such as the ones in Moreton.

Fact file

Getting there

Jet Airways has daily flights to London from Mumbai and Delhi.

Getting around

You can hire a Porsche or another fancy car from Prestige Car Hire.

Log on to www.prestigecarhire.co.uk.

For more information

Log on to www.visitbritain.co.in

