



A blaze of glory

This month, the Olympic Torch Relay starts an epic 70-day tour of the UK before its eagerly awaited arrival at the Olympic Stadium. Along the route there's plenty of action that'll light your fire, says **Annabelle Thorpe**.
Illustration by **Sarah Hanson**

Falmouth Cornwall

The torch arrives... Saturday 19 May

On the radar A bustling port town, Falmouth is the place for a weekend on, in or around the water. It's surrounded by spectacular beaches: Castle Beach is great for rock pooling, while sandy Gyllyngvase is ideal for families. Right on the harbour, the National Maritime Museum (nmmc.co.uk) gives an insight into the town's seafaring past, as does Pendennis Castle (english-heritage.org.uk), built by Henry VIII to defend England against invasion.

Below the radar Tiny, quirky and utterly unexpected, Pea Souk (+44 (0)1326 317 583) is a vegetarian restaurant specialising in Arab mezze. Don't miss the Om Ali (an Arabian take on bread and butter pudding).

Check in, chill out Sixteen Falmouth (sixteenfalmouth.co.uk) has four chic bedrooms with handmade furniture and luxe toiletries. From £70 a night B&B.

Abergavenny Monmouthshire

The torch arrives... Friday 25 May

On the radar Surrounded by the imposing peaks of the Black Mountains and the Brecon Beacons, Abergavenny has a lively market and >



one of the most interesting motte and bailey castles in Britain, as well as fab food shops such as Deli Delicious (deli-d.co.uk). Known as the Gateway to the Beacons, the town's Visitor Centre has plenty of ideas on how to make the most of the neighbouring national park. Many artists live around the town, and the Court Cupboard Gallery at nearby Llantilio Pertholey is a collective, where local craftspeople can show their work.

Below the radar The nearby town of Usk has its own ruined castle (uskcastle.com). Privately owned, the ruins are guarded by a pair of geese and the place has a wonderfully atmospheric feel.

Check in, chill out The gorgeous Angel Hotel (angelbergavenny.com) is a Georgian coaching inn in the heart of town. Even if you don't stay, pop in for the award-winning afternoon tea. Doubles from £121 B&B.

Carrickfergus County Antrim

The torch arrives... Sunday 3 June

On the radar Famous for the dramatic medieval castle that stands on the shores of the Belfast Lough, and the 16th-century walls that encircle the old town, Carrickfergus is steeped in history. Combine a stroll through the streets of the old town with a visit to the gleaming new marina. Pop in early evening for a cocktail or supper at

the Windrose (thewindrose.co.uk), which has superb views over the water. The town makes a great base for a golf weekend, with several clubs within an easy drive: Carrickfergus Golf Club (carrickfergusgolfclub.co.uk) is a challenging par-68 course, while Green Island (greenislandgolfclub.co.uk) is a nine-hole course that has been welcoming players for over a century.

Below the radar Pop into the Dobbins Inn (dobbinsinnhotel.co.uk) for a spot of live music and a pint of the black stuff – and keep an eye out for Maud the ghost.

Check in, chill out The Keep Guesthouse (thekeepguesthousecarrickfergus.co.uk) is a chic B&B with spacious bedrooms in muted, pastel colours. Doubles from £50 B&B.

Aviemore Highlands

The torch arrives... Monday 11 June

On the radar Who says the British countryside isn't spectacular? Aviemore lies at the heart of the Cairngorms National Park, where ancient forest and rolling moors link dramatic mountain peaks. Canoe along the River Spey, walk the Bridge of Brown gorge or get your kicks on a canyoning day at Laggan Canyon. To get an idea of the sheer scale of the landscapes, take a ride on the Cairngorm railway, which glides up to 1,097m above sea level and gives gobsmacking views across the peaks.

Below the radar Pop into the Cairngorm

Brewery (cairngormbrewery.com) to taste a selection of locally brewed Highland Ales.

Check in, chill out Perfect for outdoor types, the Hilton Coylumbridge (hilton.co.uk/coylumbridge) is set in 65 acres of woodland, and has a state-of-the-art spa. Doubles from £79 B&B.

Edinburgh Midlothian

The torch arrives... Wednesday 13 June

On the radar Begin with a walk along the Royal Mile, which stretches from Edinburgh Castle (edinburghcastle.gov.uk), which dates back to the seventh century, to Holyrood House (royalcollection.org.uk), the Queen's official Scottish residence. Settle in at one of the pavement cafés in Grassmarket, a marketplace for centuries, or drop into Peter's Yard (petersyard.co.uk) for restorative tea and cake. If it's a chilly day, visit the Scotch Whisky Experience (scotchwhiskyexperience.co.uk) for a nip of something traditionally Scottish.

Under the radar Escape the crowds with a stroll to Dean Village, a tranquil oasis with period houses and old watermills set on the Water of Leith. Pop into the nearby Modern Art Museum (nationalgalleries.org) to see the re-creation of Eduard Paolozzi's studio.

Check in, chill out Pack your shiniest slingbacks or sharpest suit and book the Missoni Hotel (hotelmissoni.com), where the über-hip rooms start at a surprisingly reasonable £90 (room only).

Alnwick Northumberland

The torch arrives... Friday 15 June

On the radar Pack fleeces, walking boots and a camera because this corner of England is all about the great outdoors. The medieval market town of Alnwick makes a great base, latticed with alleys and cobbled streets that open out onto a wide marketplace, dotted with cafés and shops. Beyond the town, the tranquil Northumberland coast stretches north to Scotland, dotted with spectacular ruins such as Bamburgh Castle (bamburghcastle.com) and Holy Island (lindisfarne.org) while inland, two of England's best gardens – Howick Hall (howickhallgardens.com) and Alnwick Garden (alnwickgarden.com) are ablaze with colour throughout the year.

Below the radar We may all love ebooks but there's still something to be said for a long, slow browse in a second-hand bookshop. Barter Books (barterbooks.co.uk) is one of the largest in the country with more than 250,000 volumes.

Check in, chill out Blackmores (blackmoresofalnwick.com) has 13 sleek, comfortable rooms above one of the best restaurants in the area. Doubles from £120 B&B.

Grasmere Cumbria

The torch arrives... Thursday 21 June

On the radar Most famous as the home of the poet William Wordsworth, Grasmere

is a classic Lakeland village with dark-stone cottages opening out onto a small village green and lush hills rising behind the rooftops. Pay homage to Wordsworth at his former home, Dove Cottage, and the adjoining museum (wordsworth.org.uk), which has an outstanding collection of manuscripts relating to British romanticism. Grasmere was also home to the less well-known Sarah Nelson, who first made the town's famous gingerbread – visit the shop (grasmeregingerbread.co.uk) to try her recipe.

Below the radar The Heaton Cooper Studio (heatoncooper.co.uk) has been in Grasmere for more than 70 years and specialises in local watercolours.

Check in, chill out Eco-travellers will love Mossgrove Organic (mossgrove.com), an 11-room luxe hotel where the emphasis is on sustainability, from local food in the restaurant to organic paint on the walls. Doubles from £114 B&B.

Stratford-upon-Avon Warwickshire

The torch arrives... Sunday 1 July

On the radar Most visitors to Stratford come to see the houses that William Shakespeare called home: Nash's House, New Place and his birthplace (shakespeare.org), and to watch one of his plays at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre. But there is more to Stratford than the Bard. The town itself dates back to the 12th century

and streets such as Henley and Sheep Street are dotted with half-timbered buildings and one-off boutiques and gift shops. History fiends should make the short drive to nearby Warwick Castle (warwick-castle.co.uk), one of the most complete medieval castles anywhere in the world.

Below the radar Carriages 5344 and 34644 are two former railway carriages converted into cafés, located along the Stratford Greenway – a walking route that starts in the city.

Check in, chill out The Church Street Townhouse (churchstreettownhouse.com) has a deliciously boudoir feel, with lush velvet drapes, in-room baths and *belle époque* furniture. Doubles from £110 B&B.

Cambridge Cambridgeshire

The torch arrives... Sunday 8 July

On the radar One of England's most beautiful small cities, Cambridge is defined by its universities and elegant college buildings. One of the best ways to see them is from the river Cam. Scudamores (scudamores.com) hire out punts (long, slim boats). Back on dry land, the Fitzwilliam Museum (fitzwilliam.cam.ac.uk) is crammed with exhibits from ancient Egypt, Rome and the Middle East, while the glorious Botanic Gardens (botanic.cam.ac.uk) is a great spot for a picnic on a hot day.

Below the radar Meat-lovers should reserve >



a table at the popular Cambridge Chop House (cambridgechophouse.co.uk), which specialises in steak dishes.

Check in, chill out Keep to the university theme by booking in at the Hotel du Vin (hotelduvin.com), which is housed in a former college building, parts of which date back to medieval times. Doubles from £145 (room only).

Henley-on-Thames Berkshire

The torch arrives... Tuesday 10 July

On the radar It doesn't get much more English than a town like Henley. Set amongst the leafy Chiltern hills on the banks of the Thames, it's most famous for its summer regatta but retains a feeling of old-fashioned style year round. The River and Rowing Museum (rrm.co.uk) covers the history of rowing (including Britain's recent Olympic victories) and fictional river dwellers – a particular highlight is the exhibition on the children's classic *Wind in the Willows*.

Below the radar A short drive from town, the Chiltern Valley Winery (chilternvalley.co.uk) produces award-winning wines and offers tours of the vineyard and tastings.

Check in, chill out It's all about location at Milsoms (milsomshotel.co.uk), situated on Market Place in the heart of town. Double rooms – all muted colours and soft, squishy beds – cost from £75 B&B.

Winchester Hampshire

The torch arrives... Wednesday 11 July

On the radar Compact and elegant, Winchester is the perfect choice for a sightseeing-and-shopping combo. Start with the spectacular cathedral and the neighbouring Great Hall, which houses the legendary Round Table (although it dates to the 13th century rather than Arthurian times), before strolling across the green to the Square. A cobbled area and former cattle market, it now houses some great one-off shops including swanky deli Cadogan and James (james-martin-at-cadogan.co.uk), The Hambledon (no 10), which does a fine line in 'beautiful things', one-off clothing and Cath Kidston goodies, and Woodruffs (no 32) – great for Diptyque candles and Molton Brown goodies.

Below the radar For an upscale dinner, locals swear by the Chesil Rectory (chesilrectory.co.uk), which specialises in modern British cuisine.

Check in, chill out The Wykeham Arms (fullershoteles.com) is a lovely 18th-century coaching inn, tucked away in the back streets of town with cosy doubles from £94 (room only).

Arundel West Sussex

The torch arrives... Monday 16 July

On the radar Dominated by a Norman castle that looks like it's straight out of a children's storybook, Arundel is ridiculously picturesque.

The steep high street, which leads from the banks of the River Arun to the castle, is lined with antique shops and tearooms, while Tarrant Street has some lovely shops and galleries, including Sparks Yard (sparksyard.com). Kids will love scrambling over the battlements at the 11th-century castle (arundelcastle.org). There are motor boats to hire and a nice walk along the river to the Black Rabbit pub (theblackrabbitarundel.co.uk).

Below the radar Swanbourne Lake, tucked away on Mill Lane on the way to the Black Rabbit, is a beautiful place to walk. It's great for kids: there's a café booth selling duck food and rowing boats for hire.

Check in, chill out The Townhouse (thetownhouse.co.uk) is a converted Regency building on the high street with four cosy rooms above a chic restaurant. Doubles from £95 B&B. ■ Annabelle Thorpe is author of *52 Great Weekend Breaks* (£14.99, New Holland).

WAY TO GO

British Airways flies to Inverness, Newcastle, Newquay, Belfast and Edinburgh. Visit ba.com.

COMPETITION LONDON 2012

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