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LIFESTYLE | TRAVEL

# A Walking Tour Worthy of a Jane Austen Novel

Inspired by the ‘Pride and Prejudice’ author, an eight-day trek through the English countryside from Oxford to Bath wasn’t all warbling birds and historic churches. But, blisters and nettles aside, it yielded many charms.

*By Julia Flynn Siler*

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A literary walking tour from Oxford to Bath. ILLUSTRATION: MARTIN HAAKE

“I prefer walking,” declares Anne Elliot, the heroine of Jane Austen’s “Persuasion.” To celebrate the 250th anniversary of Austen’s birth, my husband and I decided to channel her characters’ love of country strolls, walking from Oxford to Bath, the resort town where Austen lived from 1801 to 1806. A visit to her house in Chawton we’d save for another trip.

To make the same pilgrimage to Bath by train takes just over an hour. By foot, it is eight arduous days. [Macs Adventure](#), a tour planner headquartered in Glasgow, mapped out our “easy-to-moderate” route, arranged our accommodations and

transferred our luggage each day. We felt we could easily average about 13.8 miles a day, even while chatting.



A view of Bath, a city in Somerset, England, where Jane Austen lived from 1801 to 1806. PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES



Before heading out from **Oxford**, we studied up on the university town's own Austen connections, discovering that Jane and her beloved older sister Cassandra briefly attended school there. Today, Austen scholars visit the Bodleian Library, to which a major collection of her letters was donated in 2022.

Our literary journey began along the city's canal, past Port Meadow to Woodstock. We took a practical—no parasols—approach, carrying day packs filled with lunch, water, snacks and first-aid supplies, our smartphones at the ready for navigational advice. We clambered over stiles, wandered in 12th-century churches, conversed with locals, stomped through cow and sheep dung, and occasionally dashed across busy roads holding hands.



We felt sure the green pastures, thatched cottages and honeyed stone villages reflected what the area looked like during Austen's lifetime. The rolling hills reminded us of the **screen adaptations** we'd watched of "Pride and Prejudice," "Emma" and "Persuasion." Our trip coincided with lambing season, blooming daffodils, the arrival of chiffchaffs (an olive-brown warbler from warmer climates) and the first buds of hazel trees. We met mostly locals on the public footpaths. We slept well at the Marlborough Arms in Woodstock that night after a lovely day.

The next morning, we visited the grounds of Sir Winston Churchill’s birthplace, Blenheim Palace. As red kites soared overhead, we startled pheasants from the hedge rows. We rested on a wooden bench carved by a chain saw out of a 500-year-old oak. Setting off on our walk again, we disconnected from the news, slowed down and listened to the birdsong. I had “Persuasion” on my mind, tuning into the audio version on our slow-paced walk.



At [the Lamb Inn](#) in Crawley, we received a warm welcome and sat by a table near the fireplace, for what turned out to be our trip’s best meal—a blood orange and burrata salad, sea bream and a game pie. Over dinner, we had a gut-check moment: Could we really make it six more days? We’d had only minor mishaps. I’d been stung by nettles. My husband had walked into a calf-height barbed wire fence. But the hikes would get longer, and we were tempted to look into bus schedules.



On day four, the writer and her husband stayed at the Swan Hotel in the village of Bibury in Gloucestershire. PHOTO: MACS ADVENTURE



Instead, we soldiered on, paying close attention to the Macs Adventure app to find the way. After 13.5 miles, we reached the [Close Hotel](#), a 16th-century townhouse in Tetbury, where we stayed in the Nightingale room with window seats overlooking a garden. The highlight: sinking into the soothing warm water in the **large bathtub**.

And so it went. After strolling through [Westonbirt, the National Arboretum](#) at the start of day seven, we came to Luckington, a village whose parish church was the



setting for the double-wedding scene of the BBC's "Pride and Prejudice" adaptation with Colin Firth and Jennifer Ehle. I looked around for the lake where Firth, as Mr. Darcy, emerged, startling his love interest, Elizabeth Bennet. Silly me, that swoon-worthy scene was shot in Cheshire at the National Trust's Lyme estate.



On the menu at the Regency Tea room in the Jane Austen Centre is 'Mr. Darcy's Afternoon Tea' with cakes, finger sandwiches and scones served with Dorset clotted cream and seasonal jam. PHOTO: THE JANE AUSTEN CENTRE/VISIT BATH

Our final day would take us to Bath, where the heroine of Austen's "Northanger Abbey" exclaims, "Oh! Who can ever be tired of Bath?" We'd shed our rain gear to lighten our load for the 15.5-mile trek, estimated to take about seven hours.

So much for estimates. Some nine hours later, we arrived in Bath too knackered to fully enjoy the last light of the day. In my exhaustion, I thought, "Oh! Who wouldn't be tired walking to Bath?" But my grumpiness vanished once I tucked into vegetable pakora and chicken bhutuwa at Nepalese restaurant [Yak Yeti Yak](#).

The next morning, we set out to explore Bath's Roman origins, sauntering down the Limestone Link trail and the Kennet & Avon Canal along which the Austens ambled when living there. We spied the **Roman baths**, where Jane's brother Edward took the waters for his health, and saw [Bath Abbey](#), where the Austen family attended services.





We promenaded on the Jane Austen Trail at Sydney Gardens and visited the [Jane Austen Centre](#), filled with enough images of Colin Firth to satisfy Mr. Darcy fans.



This year's Jane Austen Festival in Bath celebrates the 250th anniversary of her birth. PHOTO: THE JANE AUSTEN CENTRE/VISIT BATH



In one of my favorite passages of “Pride and Prejudice,” its heroine, Elizabeth Bennet, defies upper-class convention to tramp through the mud to visit her ailing sister Jane at a nearby estate. “The distance is nothing,” she declares. “Only 3 miles.” I tapped into that plucky spirit whenever I slumped, bemoaning my **blistered feet**, on our 110-mile path. Our walk from Oxford to Bath had offered us “the air, the liberty, the quiet of the country,” as Marianne Dashwood says in “Sense and Sensibility.”

—*Illustrations by Martin Haake*

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## Videos



