



Somerset's seasonal delights

Somerset proves a revelation as a Christmas destination for **James Henry** when he embarks on a coach tour of the county and its attractions

Bath can match the Germans with stew in a box and mulled cider!



STEAM ROSE from the water of the Roman baths in the lights that were brightening against the incoming December evening. Floodlights picked out the magnificent tower of the abbey while below it the bustle and excitement of the Christmas market grew with the crowds.

It's not hard to see why Bath is rated as one of the best of Britain's Christmas markets.

The setting on the stone flags of the little streets and squares around the abbey and the baths could win that accolade on its own. It is sealed by the atmosphere of the stalls, radiating bright, warm colours out from the neat wooden chalets.

On display are crafts of all description, from wooden toys to woolly hats and jumpers, from handmade chocolates to Christmas tree decorations. Most of what's on offer is individual and just a

bit different from stuff you can buy in the shops.

Then there's the aroma of the food stalls, mulled wine mingling with baking potatoes and grilling sausages or the intriguing 'stew in a box'. There's even a West Country answer to Germany's Glühwein – mulled cider. It's just the job as the evening sets in and your breath begins to show as the temperature drops.

Bath's market opens on Thursday November 28 and runs for 18 days until Sunday December 15. This year it features more than 140 stalls. The market opens at 10am every day and closes at 7pm Monday to Wednesday, 8pm Thursday to Saturday, and 6pm on Sundays.

There's plenty more shopping, too, in the Georgian streets near the Christmas market.

As a break from shopping we took a tour of the Roman baths. Apart from that magical view at dusk across the great bath, you get to see how the Romans used the natural hot water spring to create this complex of mineral rich water and steam. The original drainage system is still working 2000 years on.

If you want to try out the properties of the waters yourself, the Thermae Bath Spa next door uses the same spring water that the Romans discovered and exploited. There's a full range of spa treatments



The Great Bath

including a pool at rooftop level. Full details are at its website: (www.thermaebathspa.com), tel: 0844 888 0844.

Bath was the first stop on a coach tour of Somerset, a popular destination all year round but perfect at Christmas.

Longleat House, although technically just over the border into Wiltshire, adds plenty of glitter for us Christmas visitors. From the giant Christmas tree outside the house to pantomime characters inside and a Santa train ride, the place is geared up for a festive day out, including the safari park and the animals around the house and lake.

There's added spice this year following the much publicised spat between Lord Bath and his son who now runs the estate. Some of the eccentric aristocrat's amazing 3D artworks have apparently been removed by son and daughter-in-law who now rule the roost. Details of Longleat's Christmas are on its website: (www.longleat.co.uk).

On the way to our overnight stop at Wells, our coach drove through Cheddar Gorge. Longleat also owns and runs the famous Cheddar Caves, a fascinating tour of these underground rock cathedrals decorated with centuries of lime deposits from the limestone rock of the Mendip Hills. The caves also have a store of hundreds of maturing Cheddar cheeses – one of those huge roundels would have been perfect for Christmas. Then it was



The spectacular giant Christmas Tree at Longleat



Left: Deep under the Mendips in Cheddar Caves and Rudolph, the Santa special at Longleat

on across the Mendips to the cathedral town of Wells. Late-afternoon sun was lighting up the façade of the beautiful cathedral when we wandered across the



Wells Cathedral's breathtaking façade

green for a guided tour. The interior matches the majestic exterior and we were in for an unexpected treat.

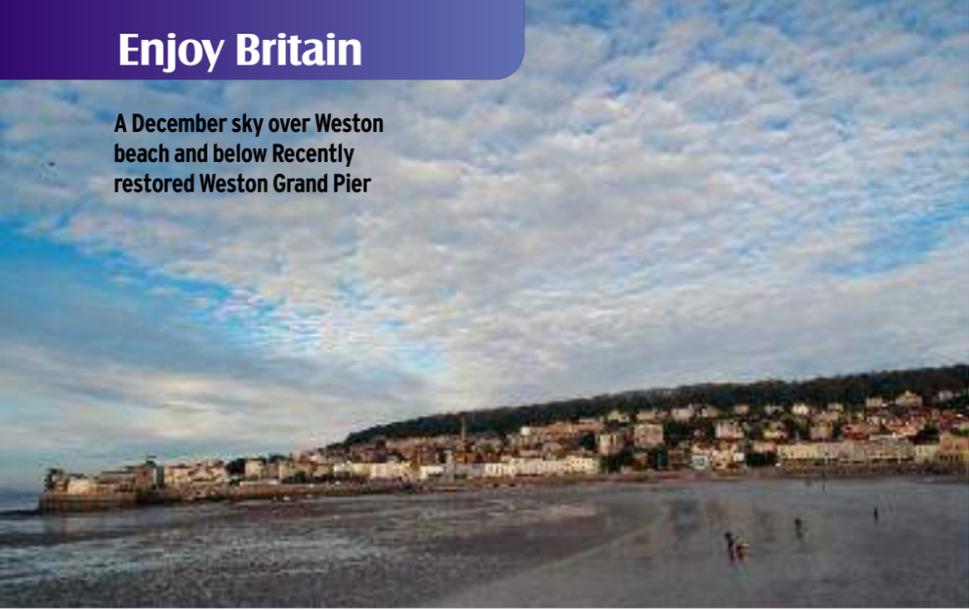
It was Saturday evening when our tour finished, just in time for choral evensong.

You didn't have to be religious to appreciate the ritual of the choir arriving in their traditional robes and the quality of their singing, then the procession of the clergy to the lecterns for the sermon and lessons. I have to say the sermon was a bit doom-laden that day but the choir soon lifted the service as their sweet voices filled the magnificent vaulted spaces of the cathedral and graced the ancient carved wooden surrounds.

Emerging suitably uplifted, we found that night had taken over with a similar breath-frosting nip to the previous evening in Bath. By now the façade was lit electrically, but what a sight against the backdrop of a clear night sky.

It did feel very Christmassy walking back across the green in overcoats and scarves. Our hotel, The Swan, kept up the

A December sky over Weston beach and below Recently restored Weston Grand Pier



atmosphere with some tastefully lit Christmas tableaux.

We boarded the luxury coach the next morning to be whisked from the Christian to the pagan as we drove past the New Age shops of Glastonbury. We were on the way to the Clark's Shopping village at nearby Street.

On the site of the famous Clark's shoe factory, it was one of Britain's first outlet villages and now has more than 90 stores offering brand-name bargains direct from manufacturers and big-name retailers.

Then it was off to the coast and one of the most traditional of seaside towns – Weston-super-Mare.

We arrived to find one of those huge December skies that dwarfed the wide sand beaches and promenade.

The fairly recently renovated Grand Pier was a great place to enjoy the view, strolling down the boards over flat sands with the tide far out.

Entering the pier building at the end was like stepping into a funfair. There are rides, lights, machines and even a go-kart track... ideal for energetic grandchildren or energetic grandparents.

If you prefer something quieter, a step

through a door takes you into the Edwardian tearoom right at the end of the pier. Over afternoon tea we enjoyed the sea view and took some sea air on the boarded terrace outside.

At a time when Britain's piers often fall into disrepair, the owners of the Grand Pier have done a grand job.

Somerset proved quite a revelation as a Christmas venue, providing a good mix of history, tradition, shopping and entertainment. The coach travel added a lot to the mix with a friendly atmosphere aboard, a chance to see some lovely scenery as we travelled around, and the freedom to sample a glass or two of that mulled cider without worrying about driving.



Christmas by coach

Get in the festive spirit on coach tours and shopping trips to more than 350

Christmas markets in towns and cities – as well as castles and stately homes – across the UK and on the Continent.

Departures from anywhere across the UK are now on offer with dozens of coach companies, which can be found on the website: (www.findacoachholiday.com).

Despite Oliver Cromwell banning Christmas markets in the 17th century, they made a comeback about 30 years ago and today there are more than 150 in the UK alone.

The examples below give an idea of the typical cost of Christmas market tours on offer. Outside the festive season, there is an even bigger choice of tours to Bath and Somerset for next summer.

❑ Newmarket Promotions, operating from throughout the Midlands, has a two-day/one-night B&B trip to Bath Christmas Market for £80pp, tel: 0121 647 4211

❑ Parrys International Tours has a three-day/two-night DBB tour to Bath, Bristol and Worcester for £145 tel: 01922 414576, website: (www.parrys-international.co.uk)

❑ Chesterfield and Derbyshire: Andrews of Tideswell features Bristol and Bath Christmas Markets on a three-day/two-night DBB tour for £199pp, tel: 01298 871222, website: (www.andrews-of-tideswell.co.uk)

❑ East Anglia: Galloway European has a three-day/two-night DBB tour featuring Bath, Bristol and Gloucester Christmas Market for £189pp, tel: 01449 618077, website: (www.galloway-european.com)

❑ From north Kent, Jay & Kay Coach Tours has a day trip to Portsmouth Victorian Christmas Market for just £34pp as well as seasonal tours to Somerset featuring Clark's Village, Cheddar Gorge and Glastonbury (from £229pp for five nights' DBB), tel: 01322 522400, website: (www.iayandkaycoachtours.co.uk)

❑ National operators have a huge choice of Christmas market tours. For example, Grand UK, with its own Daunceys Hotel in Weston-super-Mare, features Bath, Minehead and Dunster by candlelight on a four-day/three-night DBB tour (£189pp), tel: 01633 619933, website: (www.grandukholidays.com).

Passport to Somerset

Where to stay

❑ We stayed at the traditional stone-built Swan Hotel in Wells, dressed beautifully for Christmas. Tel: 01749 836300, website: (www.swanhotelwells.co.uk).

Find out more

❑ Longleat website: (www.longleat.co.uk)

❑ Clark's Village, tel: 01458 840064, website: (www.clarksvillage.co.uk)

❑ Wells Cathedral website: (www.wellscathedral.org.uk)

❑ Weston Grand Pier website: (www.grandpier.co.uk)

❑ Visit Somerset tourist information: (www.visitsomerset.co.uk).