



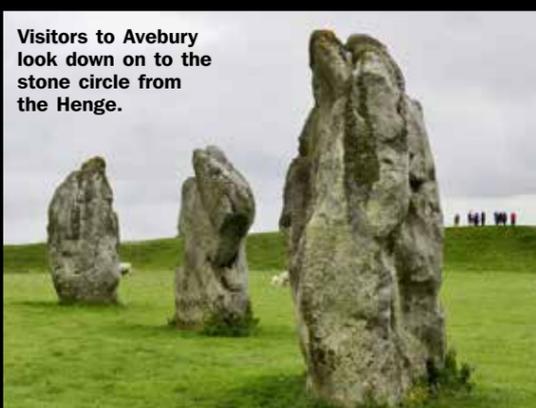
Above: Sheep and stones, Stonehenge.



Right: Period house in Lacock village.



Below: Salisbury Cathedral.



Visitors to Avebury look down on to the stone circle from the Henge.

'See what can be found within a two-hour drive,' we invited **Mark Windsor**, handing him a ticket to Poole on Condor Ferries' Liberation. For him and partner Kate it was a no-brainer: they headed straight towards the mysteries of Stonehenge and Avebury

**B**RITAIN'S two most famous stone circles are perpetually intriguing. Millions of people visit them every year but nobody knows with absolute certainty quite why or how Stonehenge and Avebury came about. For 5,000 years or more these monuments have inhabited the Wiltshire skyline, demonstrating our prehistoric ancestors' uncanny ability to leave their mark on the landscape in ways that defy latter-day architects. Today they are Unesco World Heritage sites. We based ourselves at Rolleston Manor, a grade two listed historical home near Shrewton in Wiltshire. An 80-minute drive from Poole, the lovely B & B is perfect for visits to Stonehenge, just two miles away. I set off in semi-darkness at 4.45 the following morning, intending to take photos of the monument as the sun came up and when I arrived the air was cool, blue stratus clouds hanging above the distant horizon. The only signs of life were sheep grazing on the plain and a couple of security men guarding the stones. The sun came up between the clouds and the horizon, spilling golden light on to a slightly misty Salisbury Plain. A mother and her grown-up daughter emerged from a vehicle to photograph the moment. Later, Kate and I returned for our pre-booked and supervised visit to the stones' inner circle – a permit is required from English Heritage. Stonehenge is impressive close up. The logistics of transporting and erecting such massive stones and the level of 'finish' obtained on the major ones confounds modern perceptions of our ancestors' technical abilities, adding to Stonehenge's mystery. Wiltshire's landscape is strewn with Neolithic sites – henges (circular mounds and ditches), barrows (burial mounds) and cursus (parallel banks and ditches), suggesting that on a massive scale our ancestors

had a deeply religious and ritualistic relationship with the earth. It also boasts a number of white horses, carved more recently out of the chalk downs.

**N**ext we visited nearby Woodhenge, Durrington Walls and the less imposing Cuckoo Stone menhir. All these sites are within walking distance of Stonehenge visitor centre. Boasting its own Neolithic village – a virtual Stonehenge experience – a museum containing artefacts found at the henge, a café and a good gift shop, the centre not only educates visitors about Wiltshire's Neolithic past but controls flow in and out of the world heritage site. That's necessary: 1,300,000 people visited Stonehenge last year. We passed Old Sarum, Salisbury's predecessor, on our way to the cathedral city for lunch, arriving in time for the bustling Saturday market. Tucking into a hog roast offering from one of the friendly vendors, we sat down in the sun to take in the atmosphere. The succulent pork roll with trimmings was a treat, as were a beer and a G&T outside one of the nearby pubs. The market is clearly a vital and integral part of local life, with a Royal Charter going back centuries. A wide range of fresh local produce is available – fruit and vegetables, meats, baked goods, cheeses, cooked meats and sausages – and exotic world foods besides. Add to that clothing, fashions, haberdashery and you have a sizeable market full of interest. We were touched when one kindly stallholder filled passing pensioner Arthur's bag with bread and the 90-year-old's favourite buns, refusing to take a penny for them. Salisbury Market takes place every Tuesday and Saturday (except the third Tuesday in October when the Charter Fair comes to the city). Salisbury is a lovely town. Its cathedral boasts the tallest spire in Britain (with stunning views of the surrounding countryside), the



A jovial stall-holder gives nonegenarian Arthur some free bread and buns at the market in Salisbury.

largest cloisters and the largest cathedral close, covering 80 acres. It is also home to the finest of the four original 1215 copies of Magna Carta, whose 800th anniversary is being celebrated this year. The elegant cathedral close has several places worth visiting including Salisbury Museum, Arundells, once the home of former British Prime Minister Ted Heath, and Mompesson House, a Queen Anne period mansion in the care of the National Trust which was used in the filming of Sense and Sensibility.

**L**ate afternoon we drove to Ogbourne St George, near Marlborough and well situated for the following morning's trip to Avebury, just 20 minutes distant. We stayed at The Sanctuary, a B&B run by Rebecca and Keith Macdonald. One of the perks of staying in the Wiltshire countryside is that farm fresh produce gets put on the table. The following morning a delicious full English breakfast was served with fresh eggs from Rebecca's hand-reared chickens, with honey for our toast from the MacDonalDs' bee-hives. The Sanctuary is an ideal base for those visiting Avebury. A friendly couple, Rebecca and Keith have clearly captured a niche market and have stories to tell of the wide variety of people curious to visit this megalithic monument – including a visiting Druid or two. Dinner that evening took place in the cosy ambience of the Inn With the Well, a pub just 70 yards up the road. Good food, friendly host and



# Romance of

travel



Silbury Hill. Europe's largest Neolithic man-made mound.



Lacock Abbey.



Shopping in Salisbury.



Neolithic Village at Stonehenge Visitors' Centre.

**'One of the perks of staying in the Wiltshire countryside is that farm fresh produce gets put on the table...'**

atmosphere. I drove to Avebury at 4am the following day over windswept, rain-soaked roads, passing Silbury Hill, Europe's largest Neolithic man-made mound, West Kennet Long Barrow, a great burial mound, and passed the Ridgeway Walk at Overton where three burial mounds stand out on the brow of the hill. Passing the closed tourist car park, I turned the corner into Avebury to be confronted immediately with the amazing sight of the rain-drenched village, dotted with the enormous rocks that comprise the largest stone circle in Europe. In fact there are three stone circles, bound by a massive circular earth mound with ditch – a monumental engineering feat in itself considering the very limited tools with which our Neolithic ancestors are believed to have worked. Avebury's stones are unworked, but huge. The biggest, the Swindon,

weighs 65 tons. Of the 600 stones believed to have been erected originally, only 76 remain. That they are still there is largely thanks to the efforts of amateur archaeologist Alexander Kieller, heir to the Marmalade Empire, who partially restored the area in the 1930s after years of depletion and deterioration. Conditions weren't great for photography but the rain only added to the mystical atmosphere. During the day tourists are shepherded through Avebury's official entrance in a more organised way. However, once inside the circle you can explore at leisure, unlike at Stonehenge. Avebury Manor and museum are part of the experience. Heading through another warp in archaeological time, we drove to Lacock Village, famed not only for its abbey and the Fox-Talbot Photographic Museum but for its historic dwellings, some dating back to the 13th century, which have been exploited on TV in Downton Abbey. We stayed at the Old Rectory, a fine Victorian Gothic building last used as a rectory two generations ago. Owned now by the Sexton family who run it as a guest house, it has several rooms – some with four poster beds. It also includes a family

room and two self-catering units, the latter perfect for group/family holidays. Lacock has several pubs offering good eating. We had an enjoyable Sunday dinner at the George Inn. Before departing on Monday morning – a one and three quarter hour journey from Lacock to Poole – we were primed for the trip with another fine English country breakfast, served this time by our hostess's son, Will. It's hard to do justice to what Wiltshire has to offer. The county provides much besides its awe-inspiring Neolithic sites, boasting lovely towns and any number of outdoor activities and great days out, including one of its most famous family attractions: Longleat Safari Park. It has numerous picturesque towns, like Marlborough (which has a Sunday market), Castle Combe, Devizes (which is home to the Wiltshire Museum), Chippenham, Warminster (home to Ufology), Bradford on Avon, Amesbury, Pewsey, Lacock and Swindon, home of the Great Western Railway Museum – good on any day but particularly useful on wet days. Swindon also has the McArthurGlen Designer outlet, a shopper's discount paradise featuring 90 leading designer brands. Wiltshire has a lot to offer. Give yourself time to appreciate it.

What's it all about?

NOBODY has determined the exact uses of Avebury or Stonehenge, but the consensus seems to be that Stonehenge was most likely a temple to the sun and an astronomical calculator of the procession of the seasons. It is believed to have been a site for rituals honouring nature's birth/death cycles. In recent years the cremated remains of Neolithic people pre-dating the erection of the stones have been found nearby.



On the other hand, the shape of Avebury Henge and Silbury Hill and their relationship to the rivers Kennet and Avon is, according to some, more indicative of fecundity, spring fertility rituals and earth-mother worship.



Al fresco drinking and dining in Salisbury Market Square

Find out more

- [www.visitwiltshire.co.uk](http://www.visitwiltshire.co.uk)
- Information on Stonehenge visitor permits: [www.english-heritage.org.uk](http://www.english-heritage.org.uk)
- Longleat Safari Park: [www.longleat.co.uk](http://www.longleat.co.uk)
- Travel: Condor Ferries has daily sailings to Poole throughout the summer. For more information and timetables go to [condorferries.co.uk](http://condorferries.co.uk).

Where Mark stayed

**Rollestone Manor:**  
Tel: 01980 620216 or go to [rollestonemanor.com](http://rollestonemanor.com)

**The Sanctuary:**  
Tel: 07850 325344 or email Rebecca Macdonald. [www.the-sanctuary.biz](http://www.the-sanctuary.biz)

**The Old Rectory (pictured right):**  
Tel: 01249 730335 or email [sexton@oldrectorylacock.co.uk](mailto:sexton@oldrectorylacock.co.uk). [www.oldrectorylacock.co.uk](http://www.oldrectorylacock.co.uk)



● Thanks to Condor Ferries, Florence Wallace of VisitWiltshire for our itinerary, and to all our excellent hosts.

WIN tickets to Poole for a car and two passengers...

CONDOR FERRIES is giving one lucky reader the chance to win tickets to Poole on Condor Liberation for a car and two people. To be in with a chance, call 240241 or email [newsroom@guernseypress.com](mailto:newsroom@guernseypress.com) and leave your name, contact details and the answer to this:



How many people visited Stonehenge last year?

Competition closes on Wednesday 15 July. Prize is subject to availability. Travel must be completed by 4 November 2015. Prize is not transferable or negotiable and cannot be exchanged for cash.

the stones

