

WITH: NEW ENGLAND DESTINATIONS

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## STORMING THE CASTLE

A visit to Highclere and the wonderful world of 'Downton Abbey'

CHRISTOPHER MUTHER/GLOBE STAFF

CHRISTOPHER MUTHER

**'E**

LONDON  
xcuse me! Pardon me!"  
My cries were in vain. The crowd clogging the slick sidewalk did not part, or even budge. With no other option, I played the part of Oliver Twist — minus the petty theft — and dodged sharp elbows and backpacks as deftly as I could.

I was reckless, yes. But my recklessness had a purpose. I was precariously close to missing an opportunity to visit Highclere Castle, the stunning 17th-century manor in the British countryside where "Downton Abbey" was filmed. My bus to Downton, I mean Highclere, was leaving London's Victoria Station in less than five minutes. I needed to be on that bus, but I was running late.

I pumped my legs until I pulled a calf muscle and was wincing in pain. The drizzle turned to rain and I was soaked to the skin. Like a latter day Kerri Strug, I pushed through the pain. You see, I love "Downton Abbey." I was hooked on every season of the posh, sudsy drama, and I cannot wait to see the movie. I have dreamed of strolling the stately rooms where the Dowager Countess shot disapproving looks and traded icy bon mots with Isobel Crawley. I wanted to be surrounded by ancient tapestries and tufted velvet sofas.



As I ran, I rang the tour company and asked them to hold the bus, that's just how desperate I was.

The woman who answered my call was not amused. "You want us to hold a full bus for *you*?"

So I continued to run my entail off until I finally saw the bus. And then I saw it pull away.

I sat with a very soggy ticket and no way to get into Highclere Castle. There are other means of transport to Highclere from London, but to actually get into the castle, you need a proper ticket, and those tickets generally sell out as soon as they are offered to the public at the beginning of each season. I'm not a fan of bus tours, but this one included admission to the castle. So without the bus tour, I would be as welcome at Highclere as Nanny West, Sir Richard Carlisle, or Edna

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Dame Maggie Smith near Highclere Castle in "Downton Abbey."



CARNIVAL FOR MASTERPIECE

## A weekend of playing aristocrat in England



JAMES BALSTON

By Christopher Muther  
GLOBE STAFF

BUCKINGHAMSHIRE, England — I steadied the gun on my shoulder, carefully looked down the barrel, and pointed to the sky. There was no way this could possibly have a happy ending.

The reception area inside the Langley Hotel in Buckinghamshire, England.

comfort level with the gun was akin to holding a porcupine while balancing on a unicycle.

"Now!" he commanded. I shot, and, somehow, I hit it. We tried again, and once again it shattered in the air. It continued this way through the lesson.

"Are you sure you've never handled a gun before?"

Perhaps I really was cut out for the aristocratic identity I usurped for a weekend in the

"You're going to shoot just as the clay pigeon reaches its peak," my instructor told me. He stood back a bit because he could sense my

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## Inside

NEW ENGLAND  
FAMILY FUN  
FOR FALL

From the lakes to the seashore, try these three getaways

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# The race to see ‘Downton Abbey’ filming spots

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Braithwaite. Meaning I would quickly be shown the door.

Walk-up tickets are available, but I'm going to make an educated guess that they would be about as common as golden tickets in Wonka Bars. I could not take any chances.

I concocted a plan. I could rent a car and meet the bus when it reached Highclere that afternoon. If I timed it right I could hit all the other important “Downton” filming spots as well. I dried off as best I could, rented a car at a Hertz conveniently located next to Victoria Station, and set out on my drive to the country.

In much the way that Highclere Castle stands in as Downton Village, a modest town called Bampton serves as the fictional Downton Village. Before I intercepted the bus at Highclere, I pointed my GPS to the Oxfordshire Cotswolds to find Bampton. Do you recall how the Crawleys and their staff would walk into Downton Village from the main house to do 20th-century things such as place notices for lady's maids in the post office window, cure dropsy, or spy on Mrs. Patmore when she ran a clandestine soup kitchen? I don't recommend trying any of that, because you'd be walking for more than 11 hours. Bampton isn't near Highclere, it's about a 50-minute drive. Also, I don't think dropsy is really a thing anymore.

Bampton — particularly the area of town that serves as Downton Village — is just a sliver of a place. Sneeze and you'll likely pass by it. However, for those of us who adore all things “Downton” (and I'm going to assume you do if you've made it this far into the story without falling asleep), Bampton is magical.

The centerpiece of the town is St. Mary's Church, which is called St. Michael's in the show. The church dates back to the 12th century, with gothic flourishes added in later centuries. When I approached the familiar spires the memories came flooding back. Those moments may have come from the mind of creator Julian Fellowes and the creative team behind “Down-

ton,” but I'd say in the almost 10 years since the show debuted, those memories now belong to all of us.

I wasn't so much taken with the architecture of the church. It's what it represents. Outside the church I walked through the cemetery where Matthew and Sybil Crawley were buried. I can't count the number of conversations that took place here, because for some reason everyone on the series liked to walk through the cemetery in nearly every episode.

I held my breath when I opened the door to the church. It was empty, except it wasn't. I could practically see poor Lady Edith standing at the altar as the knavish Sir Anthony Strallan sprinted on cowardly legs toward the door. I could see Lady Mary's happy wedding day, and the heartwarming union of Mr. Carson and Mrs. Hughes. So much history. I sat in a pew to collect myself.

Downton's hospital, which is actually Bampton's Community Archive, sells some “Downton” goods and other souvenirs, but otherwise you'd be hard-pressed to find much else to do here except walk with your heart in your throat and butterflies in your stomach. The town is more of a set piece. There's no Grantham Arms or Dog & Duck Pub, but you will see Churchgate House, an old rectory used for the exterior shots of Isobel Crawley's house. There's a small path nearby where I distinctly remember Matthew walking his bike with Lady Mary at his side.

I could have sat here all day marveling at it. But there was the matter of meeting a bus and getting into a castle.

I arrived at Highclere before the bus tour and waited as patiently as possible. But there it was! The titular castle standing grand, majestic, and incredibly imposing. This was my Universal Studios and Disney World moment wrapped up in one classy package. I'm not above admitting that I may have watched a few episodes of Downton on my phone while I waited for the tour bus. All the while I was sweating like a hooker in church, fearful that I had missed the bus again.

At last I saw the bus that would al-



CHRISTOPHER MUTHER/GLOBE STAFF



NICK BRIGGS/CARNIVAL FILM & TELEVISION LIMITED 2015 FOR MASTERPIECE

St. Mary's Church is the centerpiece of Bampton, England. Left: Phyllis Logan and Jim Carter in a scene from “Downton Abbey” (on which the church is called St. Michael's).

quite different than watching them on PBS (or your streaming service of choice). They appear slightly smaller and more lived in. The same goes for the salon. But now we were in the dining room, and all I could imagine was having gravy spilled on me by Mr. Mosley or getting stuck sitting next to Evelyn Napier (yawn). I nearly shushed a couple who wouldn't stop talking, primarily because they weren't talking about “Downton Abbey.”

There was also an Egyptian exhibition, but I hadn't come to Highclere for mummies. I went out to explore the distinctive gardens and park designed by Capability Brown. Despite the fact that I had been through the castle, this part of the tour is what felt most authentic. Here I could sit with Highclere in the background, away from the selfie-obsessed crowds and pretend, at least for a little while, that my last name was Crawley.

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low me passage into the mansion. After a lot of explaining to the woman leading the tour, I was allowed to join the group. I was shocked that my half-baked plan actually worked.

Inside, one of the first things we were told was that photos are not allowed. I was more than happy to oblige. Finally, I'd have an excuse to leave my phone in my pocket and just enjoy. The request prompted a fair amount of groaning, and I could tell that there were some people who were pretending to text, but taking photos.

When we finished the tour I sat in

the gardens with the intention of describing what I had just seen. But instead I started writing down feelings. I'll spare you my “Downton Abbey” word association. Instead, this is what you'll see on the tour: The library, which is Lord Grantham's preferred hangout, although I don't recall seeing him ever reading during the show. The great hall is as gorgeously ornate as what you've seen in the series.

The tour continued to Lady Grantham's bedroom, Sybil's bedroom, Edith's bedroom, and Mary's bedroom. Seeing these rooms in person feels

# Playing aristocrat for a weekend in England

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English countryside. I was at Holland & Holland, the shooting club where both Prince Harry and Prince William learned to skeet shoot. My instructor told me that Princess Diana would come with her sons because a shooting club was the one place the paparazzi would not bother her.

I thought coming to a shooting range was a logical thing to do because I was staying at a nearby 18th-century hunting lodge that reopened this summer as a hotel. The Langley — properly called the Langley, a Luxury Collection Hotel — was built for the 3rd Duke of Marlborough, and I decided I needed to stay there after visiting Blenheim Palace, which also belonged to the Marlborough family.

Blenheim is a ridiculously opulent Baroque palace that requires several hours to explore. Some may think it's a bit over the top, perhaps even gaudy. But honestly, if you're going to build a palace, shouldn't it be over the top? I don't think restraint should be a word allowed on the grounds. The gardens, designed by the gentleman who also designed the gardens at Highclere Castle, are slightly more subdued.

By comparison, the Marlborough family's hunting lodge-turned-hotel is a marvel of modern elegance infused with just enough cues to remind you that you're staying at a place where Winston Churchill came to unwind. With rooms starting at \$362 a night, the Langley isn't necessarily a bargain, but it is a fun splurge if you visit Windsor Castle or any of the other nearby estates and suddenly develop a taste for an English aristocratic experience topped with a healthy dollop of clotted cream. Because it's 2019 you also get a 17,222-square-foot subterranean spa and a 53-foot, marble-lined indoor swimming pool, plus an outdoor pool and a tennis court.

Before opening, the Langley under-



JAMES BALSTON



The Marlborough family's hunting lodge-turned-hotel is a marvel of modern elegance. Above: The Langley's grand exterior. Left: One of the rooms modernized during a six-year, multimillion-dollar renovation.

London and Windsor Castle. I've already been to the castle a few times before, so I decided to try something different, and far more tame than shooting a gun at slabs of clay hurtling toward the sky. There are 40-minute cruises on the Thames that run from Windsor to Boveney. I happened to be there on an evening that was nothing short of perfect. Sun reflected off the water as children fed a bevy of hungry swans on the riverbank.

A cruise on the Thames in Windsor is very different from the London river cruise. Here, the river is narrower and lined with colorful barges of holiday makers who kindly wave as you cruise along. I love walking through the town of Windsor, but the river cruise, especially if you're able to experience it on a perfect summer night, is absolutely

sublime. Particularly when the staff begins circulating to take drink orders.

I suspect that when the Marlborough family came to the hunting lodge in the 18th and 19th centuries the main purpose of the trip was leisure. Coincidentally, that's the one activity I'm quite good at. So I went to tea (the Langley serves high tea every afternoon), and enjoyed the civility of finger sandwiches and petit fours. It was my personal Belle Époque and I made sure to savor every drop of peppermint tea I could before being torn from my temporary Anglophony existence and dropped back into a world where castles and palaces primarily exist in fairy tales and high tea refers to beverages infused with CBD oil.

The Langley, Avenue Drive, Uxbridge Road, Iwer, Buckinghamshire. 011-44-20-7236-3636, [www.marriott.com/hotels](http://www.marriott.com/hotels)

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went a six-year, multimillion-dollar renovation. I tried to find out exactly how many millions, but I think the question may have been a tad too American because the staff would politely point out the renovations rather than talk numbers. My room was modern, but in a way that didn't belie the history of the mansion. The over-

size headboard gave the room a feeling of grandeur.

I had a view of the 40 acres of parkland where the hotel sits. Downstairs, I had the same view on the night I sat outside on the terrace of the hotel's restaurant and watched the sunset over dinner.

The Langley is located between