

# Travel



Clockwise from above: Lion Street in Hay-on-Wye; Barter Books, Alnwick, Northumberland; Hatchards in London; Much Ado Books in Alfriston, East Sussex



# Seven of the best bookshops in the UK

The top stores for weekend-break browsing – plus crafts, cafés and a “reading spa”

**MUCH ADO BOOKS, ALFRISTON, EAST SUSSEX**  
This Sussex stalwart is run by the antiquarian book enthusiasts Cate Olsen and Nash Robbins, who love to champion new talent and introduce readers to forgotten classics. As well as a two-floor shop, where the steps are decorated with book spines, there's a barn with craft workshops offering everything from collage sessions to felted slipper workshops – and a shepherd's hut for Prospero's Project, the bookshop's social enterprise. It's the perfect place to shop for presents too.

The owner Cate's book wrapping incorporates vintage ribbons along with a fancy teabag for a cuppa to enjoy while reading (muchadobooks.com). Stay down the road at the Star Inn, a charming 15th-century pub with a library that has a secret behind-the-bookshelf door. **Details** B&B doubles from £220 (thepolizzi collection.com)

**BOOKBUGS & DRAGON TALES, NORWICH, NORFOLK**

The idea for this yellow and blue-gable roofed bookshop in Timberhill came from a pub chat between Leanne and Dan Fridd who wanted to create a bookshop to suit all ages. Now their concept is a reality, where young readers can enjoy bounce-and-rhyme toddler sessions, an arts and crafts space and walls covered in dragon illustrations. And

older book lovers can make the most of the in-store café. The vibe is so relaxed you're allowed to sip hot chocolate while browsing the latest titles (bookbugsanddragon tales.com). Stay at the Assembly House, which hosts regular literary events and offers top-notch afternoon teas. **Details** B&B doubles from £170 (assemblyhousenorwich.co.uk)

“There's a clawfoot bathtub packed with bestsellers”

**RICHARD BOOTH'S BOOKSHOP, HAY-ON-WYE, POWYS**

The world's first book town is packed with bookshops – 14 at the last count – found in the castle, the fire station and even an old cinema. Richard Booth's on Lion Street is the OG of them all – it still bears the name of its former owner who planted the seeds for the world-famous Hay Festival. Behind a

crimson and white-tiled façade, the three-floor shop has shelves lined with new and second-hand books, striped chairs to lounge in underneath a palm tree, and an indie cinema (boothbooks.co.uk). Check in at Baskerville House, a former coaching inn that Arthur Conan Doyle is said to have frequented. **Details** B&B doubles from £112 (baskerville-house.com)

**BARTER BOOKS, ALNWICK, NORTHUMBERLAND**

Barter Books is one of Britain's largest second-hand book stores and it would be easy to spend a day riffling through its collection of 350,000 pre-loved beauties or tucking in at the on-site ice-cream parlour. It's housed in Alnwick's former Victorian railway station and you'll see nods to that heritage everywhere – most charming are the miniature trains that chug above the bookshelves. There's also a barter system, so you can bring your old

books for a chance to trade them in for tokens to spend in store, plus a giant authors' mural featuring Charlotte Brontë and Edward Lear (barterbooks.co.uk). Make a weekend of it with a stay at the Tempus, which has *Alice in Wonderland*-inspired interiors and a fun jungle-themed cocktail bar. **Details** B&B doubles from £100 (charltonhall.co.uk)

**MR B'S EMPORIUM OF READING DELIGHTS, BATH, SOMERSET**

Mr B's is a riot of creativity: there's a clawfoot bathtub packed with bestsellers, brightly coloured books displayed next to vintage typewriters and a kids' area where jungle animals festoon the walls. Guests book ahead for the “reading spa”, which involves a one-to-one chat over coffee and cake with one of the team who'll recommend a stack of books to take away (£105, including a £60 voucher to spend in store). Sign up to a two-month book subscription



for £95 and you'll be sent six new reads, chosen by a bibliotherapist (mrbsemporium.com). With its cosy, pastel rooms and huge courtyard (lovely in summer), the Yard is a great place to flick through your favourites. **Details** B&B doubles from £150 (theyardinbath.co.uk)

**THE MAINSTREET TRADING COMPANY, ST BOSWELLS, SCOTTISH BORDERS**

The husband-and-wife team Rosamund and Bill de la Hey have transformed this former auction house in the village of St Boswells into a haven for book lovers. As well as hosting events with star writers – former guests have included Michael Morpurgo – it has a deli, homeware shop and café. Here younger readers can discover the Book Burrows: two listening dens inspired by Beatrix Potter and Roald Dahl where audiobooks play. The café serves a changing menu of inventive dishes from the “Cookbook of the Moment” (mainstreetbooks.co.uk). Most of the visiting authors – and readers – choose to curl up at the charming five-bedroom

Whitehouse Country House. **Details** B&B doubles from £190 (whitehousecountryhouse.com)

**HATCHARDS, PICCADILLY, LONDON**

This five-floor bookshop, established in 1797, is the oldest in the capital and stands out with its green Georgian façade, books displayed in bay windows and flowing calligraphy script signage. It also has a plum location on Piccadilly and draws visiting authors from Charles Cumming to Sofia Coppola like bees to a honeypot. Thanks to being mentioned in *Mrs Dalloway*, it's a favourite among Virginia Woolf fans, and more recently the shop has captured the imagination of TikTok trend BookTok with Gen Z-ers stopping in to reenact a scene from the film adaptation of Cassandra Clare's *The Mortal Instruments* (hatchards.co.uk). Stay a short walk away at Amano Covent Garden and you can take to the gilded bathtubs with – what else? – a good book. **Details** B&B doubles from £185 (amanogroup.de) **Ianthe Butt**



This week, book a seven-night bargain escape to Malta – or push the boat out with a trip to Gozo



**F**or three years running, the first week of March has delivered lots of sunshine and temperatures of 20C on Malta's northwestern coast. Which is heaps warmer than you can expect here in the UK, where temperatures rarely scraped into double figures in 2023.

So a week in Qawra (pronounced “ow-ra”), kicking off on March 2, will give you a fighting chance of beautifully balmy weather. By the dinky, 17th-century watchtower on Qawra Point is a blue flag beach, a rocky bay of smooth flat rocks, with sunloungers and calm, clear turquoise water that's good for snorkelling if you're brave enough or visit later in the season. There are also lidos just south and, eight miles away on Mellieha Bay, a vast, classically Mediterranean curl of toffee-coloured sand.

Qawra isn't just convenient for swimmers, either. The neighbouring resort town Bugibba is built for tourism and comes with a bevy of distractions: the National Aquarium, which is home to rays and sharks; a classic car museum; and water sports centres that can arrange diving, jet-skiing and canoeing. Shaded by palms, a two-mile promenade is effortlessly romantic come sunset.

Rooms at the AX Odycy are available in the easyJet Holidays sale, which runs until February 5 (you'll need the discount code “BIGSALE” to claim your week for £362pp at easyjet.com; book separate

£10 return airport-bus transfers direct to the hotel; maltatransfer.com). Refurbished, rebranded and restyled in 2023, the hotel is now a haven of sleek timber. There's an adults-only pool on the 11th floor rooftop, facing St Paul's Bay, while kids will love the on-site waterpark. It's far more Zen in the adjacent spa (treatments from £85; carismaspa.com).

Food-wise, the 452-room hotel's restaurants include an Italian trattoria and a rooftop perch serving à la carte dishes from around the Med (mains from £12.50). You might also venture out to enjoy a drink and live music in the Cheeky Monkey gastropub before exploring the cheaper eats along the no-getting-away-from-it Tourist Street.

Seeing more of Malta is equally easy. From a bus stop outside the AX Odycy, it's just £1.70 for services that run to the hushed, honey-stone city of Mdina (40 minutes), whose ancient bastion walls afford far-reaching island views; to Valletta and its museums, baroque palaces and cathedral (about an hour); or to Mellieha Bay (20 minutes).

**Richard Mellor**

**WHAT YOU GET FOR YOUR £372PP**

- Return Gatwick-Malta flights
- 23kg hold luggage
- Seven nights' B&B, based on two sharing
- Return bus transfers

## FEELING FLUSH?

If you're inspired and have a bit more cash to splash, try these other options

**THE £550 HOLIDAY**

**db Seabank Resort & Spa**  
Seabank claims to be Malta's best all-inclusive hotel. It may or may not be, but it certainly has the country's biggest swimming pool. A glass-walled indoor alternative keeps swimmers happy even if the weather isn't playing ball, while other on-site attractions range from a bowling alley to seven restaurants, including a Brazilian steakhouse. Rooms are bright with a blue theme. The main reason to go, however, is the sandy Mellieha Bay beach opposite. **Details** Seven nights' all-inclusive from £527pp, including flights and transfers, departing on March 2 (tui.co.uk)

**THE £1,000 HOLIDAY**

**Kempinski Hotel San Lawrenz**  
Out on the Maltese archipelago's snoozy island of Gozo – accessible by ferry from Cirkewwa (£8 return; gozochannel.com) – the Kempinski Hotel San Lawrenz reopens on March 27. Free shuttles run to the fortress-crowned capital of Victoria and the beaches at Marsalforn and Ramlà. Then again, you could just stay put, enjoying the three pools and the large spa. Rooms have balconies overlooking the gardens or surrounding countryside. **Details** Seven nights' B&B from £950pp, including flights, departing on March 30 (britishairways.com)