

Pottering in glorious Lake District countryside

BEATRIX Potter, creator of the Peter Rabbit children's stories, was an active environmentalist long before the term became trendy.

She lived in the UK's Lake District, a rural area in northwest England most famous for its lakes and mountains, and its associations with poet William Wordsworth and of course Potter. She had a deep concern for the preservation of the landscape and traditional fell farming here, so much so that she bought up as much land as possible to ensure it remained unspoiled.

Also a farmer of the Lake District's own curious breed of Herdwick sheep, when she died in 1943 she left 14 farms and 4,000 acres of land to the National Trust (a charity independent of government), which were tenanted out to local people dedicated to traditional farming.

Now her land lies within the Lake District National Park, a beautiful region of spectacular lakes and mountains and vista after vista of rolling green countryside, well stocked with quaint hotels, holiday homes, campsites, bed and breakfasts. People from this area rely heavily on tourism, so there are thousands of tour options on offer in the Lake District.

A typical tour for a Beatrix Potter fan would be loosely based around the following. A must is to be armed with a knowledgeable guide, such as those from Mountain Goat who negotiate mini coaches skillfully through precarious narrow one way roads and deliver tourists safely at the other end.

Another must is to see Hill Top, the 17th century house where Beatrix Potter wrote many of her famous children's stories. The house has been left as it was in her time; the cottage garden contains the same unconventional mix of flowers, herbs, fruit and vegetables.

En route is the Tower Bank Arms pub, which featured in her story *The Tales of Jemima Puddleduck*. Accommodation is available here – for a twin bedroom or



Lake District, home of author Beatrix Potter

Picture: Cheryl Mandy

a double room en suite it costs £83 per night per room including breakfast, and from November 1 to December 17 the rate is £55 per room per night.

The higgledy-piggledy village of Hawkshead is worth stopping at, and for a peaceful gentle walk there is a scenic lake called Tarn Hows. A bed and breakfast, Yew Tree Farm, which was bought by Potter, featured the 2006 movie *Miss Potter*, based on Potter's life.

But there's more to the Lake District than just Beatrix Potter. It has 10 lakes set in mountains and valleys to explore by foot, car or bike; 4,000 year old ruins plus the Hardknott Roman Fort, the Ravenglass and Eskdale Railway, a miniature steam railway at kept alive by ardent ferroequinologists: trains run daily from March 21 to November 1, but are also open most winter weekends, and throughout the Christmas holidays and February half term.

Not far from here are some of the Lake District's many stately homes, which are

either half open (as the owners still reside there), or completely given over for public perusal. The impressive historic houses of Holker Hall in Cark-in-Cartmel and the 14th Century Levens Hall and are all stuffed with history, but no more so than Muncaster Castle, which is also, according to its owner Patrick Gordon Duff-Pennington (who could well be attending to the rhododendrons when you visit), home to several ghosts. Not surprising really, in a castle that has housed the Pennington family since 1208. In fact ghost sits are available to visitors, where about six people (over 17 years) can stay overnight in the Tapestry Room and hear – and possibly see – the legends of Muncaster. Costs range from £425 to £495 per group.

Then there is the Lake District food – sticky toffee pudding, Grasmere gingerbread and Flookburgh shrimps are among the favourite and famous gastronomic delights. Roll on summer holidays. ■

By Cheryl Mandy