

AMAZING Abergavenny

With its myriad of boutiques, independent shops and great places to eat, this thriving Monmouthshire market town is well worth a little visit, says HUGO BALL



Abergavenny and its surrounding countryside makes for a striking landscape

Daytripper



The town is great for mooching around

As much as we love the 'Diff's colourful splendour and infectious hubbub, sometimes it's good to take time out, recharge the batteries and explore somewhere new. Whatever your reason – family day-trip, relaxing break, a need for retail therapy – Abergavenny is a relatively quick jaunt, and well worth a good mooch around. Known as 'the gateway to Wales', pop legend Marty Wilde (father of 80s popstrel Kim) even wrote a titular song about it back in 1968 – check it out on YouTube and we guarantee it'll buzz around your head like a stray bee for hours.

Set in beautiful scenic countryside,



Quirky historic facts...

surrounded by gorgeous hills and the Sugar Loaf and Blorenge mountains, with the Brecon Beacons and the Black Mountains close by, the town is an idyllic base for keen ramblers. With such an incredible backdrop, it's no surprise that cycling is popular here too, with various professional competitions taking place throughout the year, including the Abergavenny Festival of Cycling.

Teeming with independent boutiques, cafés, restaurants and culture, there seems to be something interesting to see or do at every corner; amble leisurely through its streets, and you can pick up an eclectic range of gifts, luxury clothing, food, flowers and much more fabulous booty besides.

Lifestyle heaven

Abergavenny certainly punches above its weight as far as lifestyle boutiques go. A great place to start is Homes of Elegance, a wonderful furniture, lighting and homeware store, opened in 1961 by Eric Davies, and still going strong today. Now run by Eric's son Steve, it's a real treasure trove of vintage and contemporary style, selling everything from brushed steel dressers and Chesterfield sofas to characterful chandeliers and Andrew Martin's highly desirable range of upmarket wallpaper. It's no exaggeration to say that it's well worth a visit to Abergavenny on its own, and duly attracts

(Below) The popular Market Hall



visitors from far and wide.

Also worth a moment or two of your time is Lyn Morgan Furnishings, a family-run emporium with decades of experience in handcrafting bespoke furniture, curtains and blinds. Everything is made onsite, at the workshop alongside their impressive showroom – they'll even re-upholster existing furniture, too.

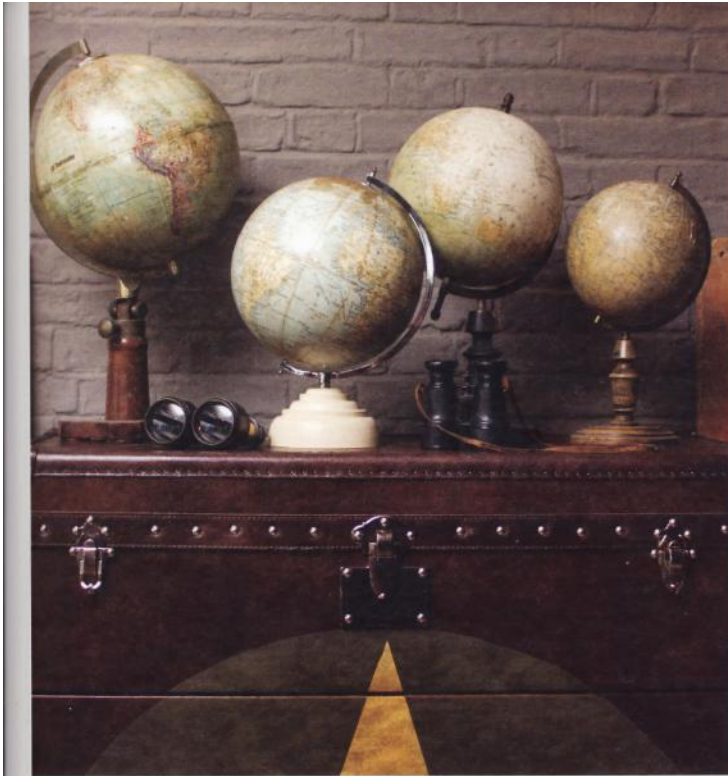
Statement shopping

Boutique shopping doesn't get much more funky than vogueish lifestyle shop Forty Six, where you'll find statement, design-led goodies and fun stuff such as slinky striped dresses, the coolest wireless speakers and a fetching citrus basket (no, we didn't think we needed one either, until we saw it). And mini department store Nicholls is an institution around here (there are stores in Brecon and Crickhowell, too), selling an eclectic mix of gifts, scents, homeware, clothing and jewellery; there's a fab little coffee shop to boot.

If you're in the market for a bit of flamboyant headgear, look no further than Alison Tod, an established and highly respected name in the world of millinery. Her off the wall and frequently brilliant creations are proper head-turners – turn up at a wedding in one of these and you'd be in serious danger of upstaging the bride. And while we're talking fashion for prestigious events

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(Below) Abergavenny's striking war memorial



Homes of Elegance is a real treasure trove of vintage and contemporary style

(weddings, race days etc). Baroque Boutique has all the bases covered, from lavish dresses for special occasions to sassy casual clobber; they even have a fantastic hair and beauty salon to finish off your look.

For retro threads, Vintage Vision is a lovely little vintage clothes shop that doubles as a social enterprise – they do regular vintage fayres (the Christmas one is on 1 December at the Market Hall, with stalls from all over the country) and fashion shows, as well as useful sewing workshops on how to upcycle and re-love vintage clothing.

The 'make and mend' trend is big at boutique wool shop The Wool Croft too, which stocks designer yarns and Welsh wool, and runs various knitting, crochet and stitching workshops.

Up the road, there's a great pair of florists: Love, Lily specialises in luxurious

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floral bouquets and bespoke wedding flowers, while Hilary's Floral Design won a Best Wedding Florist in Wales award last year – the aroma of fresh flowers as you walk by is lovely.

There are sadly all too few good toyshops around these days, but family-run Fable on Cross Street is definitely worth a peep. The independent children's toy and gift shop sells all manner of quality traditional wooden toys, games, puppets, science kits and more, with plenty to fuel your child's imagination. They do a great selection of gifts for newborn babies, too.

Arts and music are also well-served in the town. Abergavenny Music boasts an extensive selection of classical, jazz and world music CDs, while The Art Shop stocks an array of art books and materials; at the time of writing, it had a wonderful exhibition of artwork celebrating 'the garden', featuring painters, printmakers, ceramicists, jewellers and sculptors.

Culture vultures will love the 338-seat Borough Theatre, which hosts an impressive bill of theatre, music, dance and other live performances throughout the year; comedy looks especially good in the next couple of months, with Mark Thomas and Phill Jupitus both scheduled to appear.



And film fans will no doubt appreciate the rather lovely and bijou Baker Street Cinema, which shows the latest releases. Beautifully converted from the old Drill Hall and opened in 2010, it boasts two screens, Dolby surround sound and luxury seating – not bad at all.

Food, glorious food

As the host for the wonderful Abergavenny Food Festival, food is obviously big news around here. Featuring speciality and artisan foods, masterclasses, and talks with notable chefs, you'll need to be super-quick to catch this year's event (21-22 September), but you should absolutely pencil this foodie pilgrimage into your diaries for next year.

One of the food festival's main venues is the bustling Market Hall, situated right in the centre, and arguably the town's beating heart. As well as various craft, antique and flea markets throughout the year, it also hosts a vibrant farmers' market with plenty of stalls selling local produce, held on the fourth Thursday of each month.

Blessed with fantastic restaurants, either in the town or a stone's throw away, gastronomes are truly spoilt for choice. Arguably the best of them is

Daytripper



The Angel Hotel does a mean afternoon tea (photo courtesy The Angel Hotel)

The Hardwick restaurant, with head chef Stephen Terry at the helm. Having represented Wales in the BBC's *Great British Menu* series, his food is a joy, with an à la carte menu that'll have you dribbling into your napkin with anticipation. His 'Rabbit, rabbit, rabbit' dish sounds sublime: rabbit burger on grilled sourdough, with rabbit faggot, carrot slaw, braised shoulder and pea pie. Rabbit splendour, we'd wager.

The legendary Walnut Tree, too, at nearby Llanddewi Skirrid, offers excellent dining and drinking in an informal

setting, with a wonderfully eclectic menu (fish and game is especially good), overseen by chef extraordinaire Shaun Hill. Just a few miles away at Nantydyrry, The Foxhunter is another safe bet. Owned by renowned telly chef Matt Tebbutt, the cooking here is fantastic. Try the crab risotto or the home-made pappardelle with Longhorn beef bolognese.

If you're looking to make a night of it, with fine food and somewhere to lay your head, The Angel Hotel in the town centre should be one of your first ports of call. As well as lunch and dinner, the chic contemporary coaching inn serves an award-winning afternoon tea with cakes, scones and sandwiches presented on tiered stands, and a selection of over 20 teas (or a glass of quality fizz, if you feel like it) to choose from. Discreetly tucked away in the basement, its plush, newly-opened cellar is a great spot for special occasions, intimate lunches, elegant dinner parties and even corporate entertaining. Enjoy a refined cocktail or two in the stylish Foxhunter Bar while you're at it.

Equally good is The Kings Arms, just a short walk from the ruins of Abergavenny Castle. Enjoy a lazy weekend lunch or indulgent dinner – the crispy Penrhw Farm duck salad caught our eye, served with duck crackling, new potatoes and

(Below) Typical flamboyance from milliner Alison Tod



soy and sesame dressing. Their modern en-suite rooms look properly cosy and welcoming, too.

For less formal fare, family-run Italian pizzeria and restaurant Pizzorante looks highly tempting, with reasonably priced Italian pastas and pizzas on the menu – how could you resist a warming plate of home-made squash ravioli in brown butter and sage?

The cafés, meanwhile, are top-notch: Eat Your Heart out does salads, sandwiches, toasted sandwiches and bagels, and is open until 8pm every night – there's a cute terrace at the back if you can brave the autumn chill, while Hoffi Coffi is great for light bites and milkshakes. And the quaint Cwtch Café does snacky things, filling all-day breakfasts and great sweet stuff; we can personally vouch for the moist rhubarb cake with a thick layer of frosting.

For foodie supplies, Deli Delicious sells traditional, specialist and world foods, ranging from good old Welsh farmhouse butter and home-made tiramisu to exotic meats (camel, wildebeest and springbok – yikes!) and frogs' legs.

And if you need knives, saucepans and gadgets to knock up your own delish dishes, the nearby Cooks Galley shop is an Aladdin's cave of kitchenware.

So, that's Abergavenny in a nutshell. We could wibble on about more of its various advantages, but limited space dictates otherwise; we like to think we've given you a decent starting point. Anyway, the beauty of visiting the town yourself means discovering fantastic gems of your own. Who knows? You might even bump into Marty Wilde. **GL**

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Voguish lifestyle shop Forty Six

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