

# Lake banks and lyrical ballads

Meher Marfatia succumbs to romance and remembrance in literary Cumbria

WORDSWORTH TRUST



Exterior - Dove Cottage, Grasmere: "The loveliest spot that man hath ever found..."

I confess. To being a keen explorer of vibrant cities, serene backwoods don't quite beckon the same way. But exceptions like the iconic Lake District never fail to enchant and educate.

Earlier visits to gentle English countryside acres have always proved pleasing enough. This time we decide to delve into the cool literary core of Cumbria. For a rediscovery of Beatrix Potter's charmed display of animal characters at Windermere, followed by a short drive north to William Wordsworth's world of the Romantics in Grasmere.

Bowness-on-Windermere slides into tourist territory even easier than the poet's paradise. Popular Windermere Lake cruises, Beatrix Potter museum and the author-illustrator's Hilltop Farm attract family hordes, kids especially regaled by the adventures of Peter Rabbit and Gemima Puddle Duck. Weekends dawn to 'No Vacancies' signs blowing in the wind outside bed and breakfast cottages. Quaint shops and tearooms traditionally lining the village strip now rub shutters with casinos and a movie multiplex.

Still, cosy inns and eateries from

tapas bars to dimsum diners make Windermere a good base leading off to Rydal, Keswick, Penrith and Grasmere, where Dove Cottage stands. Wordsworth's residence from 1799 to 1808, the hub of simple living and high thinking prompted Queen Victoria's poet laureate's most memorable verses. Wordsworth and his friend Samuel Taylor Coleridge assumed experimental tones, chal-

lenging accepted ideas of poetry.

## THE PRELUDE

The first version of *The Prelude* completed in this home, ranks among the greatest works of the Romantic period. It embodies the qualities defining Romanticism: description of personal experience, the quest for spiritual enlightenment and celebration of powers of the imagination.



Wordsworth's cutlass chair: so known because it allowed men wearing swords to sit



A guided tour of the beautifully conserved property offers unusual glimpses into the rustic, creative life from 200 years ago. The sole predictable detail greeting us in each room? Vases of yellow daffodils spilling forth in an abundance catch one softly mouth, "Ten thousand saw I at a glance/tossing their heads in sprightly dance..."

## DOVE COTTAGE

Have your fill of roaming through bedrooms, fireplaces, mantelpieces and cupboard shelves arrayed with the poet's pen, overnight valise, silk umbrella, straw hat and scarf. Then, it's a slow walk around Dove Cottage garden where Wordsworth, his wife Mary and his sister Dorothy spent hours amid the refreshing green of the "little nook of mountain ground".

Indoors again, rare notebooks exhibited in the museum gallery of Wordsworth Trust treasures exude a sensuous musicality. Some hold added excitement, such as the draft of *Lyrical Ballads*, considered a turning point in the history of English poetry.

As I surprise myself intoning cadences of *The Prelude* - "It was an act of stealth and troubled pleasure..." - I feel the manuscript sheets transport me magically to the growing up years. Mine were shaped by interesting family influences. Among them the privilege of reading aloud to an uncle, a professor of English Literature, who turned blind as he aged. Passionate about poetry, Phiroze Dustoor—also, incidentally, mentioned in Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy*—feared he'd forget his favourite lines by the Romantics. Quoting them from gilt-bound texts he handed me, I memorised whole tracts without trying.

## NOSTALGIA

It all floods back when we wear the headphones at listening posts here. That I remember almost entire, sonorously recorded *Tintern Abbey* and Coleridge's *Kubla Khan* fills me with

## TRAVEL

### Going off track

Those who go off the beaten track, write for us.



## HOW TO GO

WINDERMERE/GRASMERE (45 minutes-1 hour north of Windermere) by train: Journey time 4 hours, starting from London's Euston Station with a change at Oxenholme

Windermere/Ambleside/Grasmere by coach: Journey time 8 hours, starting from London's Victoria Coach Station

## VISITOR INFORMATION

- » Cumbria Tourist Board official website: [www.golakes.co.uk](http://www.golakes.co.uk)
- » The World of Beatrix Potter Attraction (Bowness): <http://www.hop-skip-jump.com>
- » Windermere Lake Cruises (Bowness/Waterhead/Lakeside): <http://www.windermere-lake-cruises.co.uk>
- » Hill Top (near Sawrey): <http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk>
- » Millennium Lake District Tours (1-day/half-day trips): <http://www.lakedistricttours.co.uk>
- » The Wordsworth Trust, Dove Cottage South of Grasmere village on the A591 Kendal to Keswick road. [www.wordsworth.org.uk](http://www.wordsworth.org.uk)

amazement. Equally incredulous, my daughter asks, "After 30 years?"

She brings me down to terra firma, wonderfully reversing roles - practical child calming exuberant mother. In the gift shop I get carried away, clutching piles of Lake Ullswater postcards. Daughter Dear bans buying colourful cans labelled Inspiration Tea. And interrupts my visions of typing out prolific pages after brewed cups of this concoction, with a sobering sentence: "There was just one Wordsworth."



This painting is displayed in the upstairs gallery of the Wordsworth Museum