



Books Bring People Together

Hay on Wye Literary Festival 25 May – 4 June 2017

For nine days in May and June thousands of people will join some of the most influential writers and thinkers across the arts, politics and science in a tiny town in Wales. The Hay on Wye Literary Festival, or “the Woodstock of the mind” as former US President Bill Clinton famously dubbed it, started 30 years ago as an annual celebration of culture and ideas in the picture-perfect town of Hay on Wye on the edge of the Brecon Beacons. Legend has it that the festival was started around the kitchen table of founder Peter Florence in 1987 and is now a global event with satellite festivals taking place in locations as far-flung as Cartagena and Segovia. It is fair to say that the events at Hay dominate culture headlines in May and June every year because there are always provocative and challenging ideas emerging from the talks. Past speakers include novelist Margaret Atwood, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, film director Sam Mendes, actress Judi Dench, Astronomer Royal Martin Rees and Nobel Laureate Mohammed El-Baradei.



The Festival

Morning sessions start around 10am and the first talks of the day are usually popular ones. The main tent serves as a meeting point and is a real hive of activity with everyone getting coffee and picking up tickets from the main box office. Entry to the main festival site is free as are some events, but many are ticketed. Advance booking for most events is important but some tickets, if available, can be bought right up to the moment the talk starts. Prices are reasonable and there is always a good mix of locals and those from further afield. Students can attend all events for free, but must book in advance. Talks range from 40 minutes to about an hour, often with Q&A sessions, after which people usually head to the main bookshop tent for that author's book signing. Every hour the talks rotate with people dashing between tents to get to the next event; don't be surprised if at the end of the day you have made new acquaintances. The only queues are when waiting to get into an event tent and even those move fast. The children's festival, Hay Fever, with a full programme of authors and activities, runs on site at the same time.

One of the festival's big draws is the second-hand book tent run by Oxfam. The shelves are constantly replenished and the sight of people leaving with armloads of books is a familiar one. Around the festival site are deck chairs where between talks people eagerly dive into their new books and you will find plenty of refreshments including

bars and pop up restaurants. Some of the talks finish quite late and musical events tend to be in the evening, but by about 10pm the festival is usually wound down and guests have headed out. The site never feels swamped or overcrowded, despite thousands of people descending on the festival every year.

The town

Hay on Wye is situated on the Welsh-English border with the River Wye running through it. Unsurprisingly, it is full of second hand books stores as well as pubs and restaurants offering everything from traditional pub lunches to Spanish tapas. Outdoor clothing stores are plentiful too because Hay is located within the Black Mountains and hikers, mountain bikers, canoers and kayakers abound. The town has a very warm welcoming atmosphere during the festival when the world comes to its doorstep.

Getting there

It is easy to visit the festival by car if you are not staying in the town of Hay. Poor public transport links combined with very affordable parking rates make going by car a better

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HAY FESTIVAL
Talking about Shakespeare

option. The journey from London on the M4 towards Abergavenny takes approximately 3.5 hours. At the festival there is plenty of public car parking priced at approximately £5 a day. There are no direct trains to Hay on Wye. Instead visitors travel to Hereford. Hay on Wye is a 20-minute taxi ride away. Trains from London take about 4 hours. Local shuttle buses operate from the centre of Hay on Wye to the festival site. Be prepared for mud if it rains because all parking and the festival itself is in a field. The weather, while warm, is changeable so pack accordingly remembering that you'll be spending the day in a field. The flexibility of the schedule of speakers, the ease of parking and leaving, and the fact that there is no entry fee allows people to come and go throughout the day.

Places to stay

There is a great variety of places to stay during the festival from stately homes to humble but hip B&Bs, and campsites with yurts for the more adventurous. Booking early is essential and be prepared to not stay in Hay itself. Brecon, a lively market town, is 16 miles away from Hay on Wye and takes approximately 20 minutes by car to reach. Here festival-goers can find a variety accommodation to suit all tastes and budgets.

Langoed Hall, an Edwardian former stately home, is located on the outskirts of Brecon, approximately a 15-minute drive from the centre of Hay. The house is owned

by Sir Bernard Ashley and is decorated with furnishings from his designer wife Laura Ashley in traditional English style. In May, the house is full of festivalgoers and can accommodate late bookers because of its size. Hugh Bonneville, better known as Downtown Abbey's Earl of Grantham, was spotted staying there when speaking at Hay in 2014.

On the other end of the price scale there is the **Wellington Hotel** in the centre of Brecon. The Wellington is a small hotel with its own pub dating back to the early 1800s. It has reasonably priced, no frills en-suite rooms, a pay-and-display public car park attached and provides a good base for festival goers.

Westbrook Court B&B is a bit of a hidden gem and ideal for festival goers looking for a balance between a well-run B&B and a hip, individual space. The B&B is run by a couple from London who have brought a little slice of metropolitan minimalism to a cosy country retreat with stunning views over the rolling hills. Festival goers share stories and compare itineraries over the friendly, communal breakfast table. The rooms are individual units with galleried bedrooms and front doors opening out onto a communal courtyard. **For further information go to: www.hayfestival.com**

Gary Griffiths is a bibliophile and regular visitor to the Hay Festival



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