

North by northwest

There's no need to fly far to learn something new. **Katie McGonagle** discovers hidden histories on our doorstep

It started out as a gentle journey along the River Dee on a pleasant, sunny day – but now we're in the midst of an interactive history lesson, getting an introduction to Chester through the ages. And it's better than anything a textbook could teach.

As we drift along at a snail's pace, the commentary steers our attention to the site of an ancient Roman villa whose foundations are still visible along the water's edge, and the spires of Chester Cathedral, which has towered over the city for more than 900 years.

We move to medieval times on the way past Earl's Eye island; hear grisly tales of the executions on Gallows Hill and the frenzied witch trials of the 1650s and 1660s, which suggest Chester could give Salem a run for its money; and see the stamp left by the city's most influential architect, John Douglas, responsible for more than 400 buildings across Chester.

This history-filled city makes a fitting start for a flight-free tour that is all about delving into the many

different eras that have shaped the cities and market towns of England's fascinating northwest.

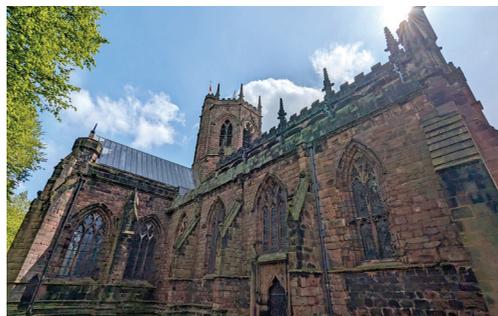
SILVER SURFERS

We're here to test out a new itinerary, Delights of Cheshire at Alvaston Hall, part of Leger Holidays' Silver Service Signature Collection, which features 26 new trips around the UK. The escorted tour operator has always been known for its Europe itineraries, but its most recent brochure revealed a much-expanded UK and Ireland programme, listing more than 80 domestic holidays ranging from fully guided tours to self-drive hotel-based breaks.

I'm sampling the Silver Service escorted tour alongside my 70-year-old mum and we are picked up just outside London by a 'feeder coach', then transfer to our tour coach at Rugby. Here, we meet the tour leader and driver who'll be leading our way around the northwest and get our first glimpse of ➤

DESTINATIONS

MATURE TRAVEL | CHESHIRE & SHROPSHIRE



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Chester Cathedral; Market Drayton; St Mary's Church, Nantwich; River Severn, Shrewsbury PREVIOUS PAGE: Chester PICTURES: Leger Holidays; Shutterstock/Stu22; Katie McGonagle

the Silver Service vehicle, which includes a small lounge at the rear where passengers can stretch out.

There's plenty of good-natured banter at the front of the coach – and it doesn't take long to learn that our guide and driver, Annemarie and Jon King, are in fact a couple. They swap roles each day between being on the microphone or behind the wheel, and with many of the guests also travelling in couples (along with a few pairs of friends and solo travellers), their familiarity immediately lends a laid-back, friendly vibe to the tour.

PAST TIMES

That relaxed nature extends to the itinerary as well, with daily departures at 9.30am – a welcome change from some tours that require a much earlier alarm call – and the choice to opt out of excursions if guests fancy a quiet day enjoying the hotel grounds instead.

The first full day takes us to Chester, where Jon offers a brief

history of the city along with tips on what to see – from admiring the Victorian-era Eastgate Clock and the covered shops along the Rows, to the grand facade of Chester Cathedral and the leisurely boat trip along the Dee (30 minutes; tickets £9 adults/£8.50 seniors). There's plenty of time to explore the landmarks and still have a relaxed lunch before heading back to the pick-up point.

The next day combines two smaller stops. First, Market Drayton, home of gingerbread for more than 200 years and full of charming Georgian and Victorian half-timbered buildings as well as a thriving market. Second comes Nantwich, where medieval St Mary's Church dominates the town centre and is dubbed 'the cathedral of South Cheshire'. The Grade II listed Crown Hotel – rebuilt following a fire that destroyed much of this market town in 1583 – and 17th-century almshouse-turned-hotel The Cheshire Cat both offer a pleasant place to pause

for a drink and soak up the town's history along the way.

The final full day takes us back over the Shropshire border to Shrewsbury, another heritage-filled spot that was the home town of naturalist Charles Darwin and poet Wilfred Owen and today boasts more than 600 listed buildings. Its castle and abbey still dominate the skyline, an echo of the era when the town was a powerful centre of the wool trade. The tour is another welcome reminder of some of the hidden histories in many of the UK's towns and cities, not least in the northwest, for travellers who want to explore heritage closer to home. **TW**

BOOK IT

Leger Holidays' five-day tour, Delights of Cheshire at Warner Alvaston Hall, departing July 29, starts from £599 with coach transfer, local joining points, excursions and four nights' half-board hotel accommodation. legerholidays.co.uk

ASK THE guides



Husband-and-wife team Jon and Annemarie King lead Leger Holidays tours in the UK and Europe

Jon: "This is our third season with Leger Holidays, but Annemarie has had her licence for 15 years and I've had mine for 25. I think having a guide enhances the experience and atmosphere; we like to try and make things flow."

Annemarie: "There are a few other couples who guide together on Silver Service and Leger's Luxuria tours – people really like it because I think they can relate to you, and we try to be jolly and upbeat. Our typical age bracket is 60 to 90. Some older people want to enjoy themselves but don't want the hassle – so [with a tour] there's someone there to look after their luggage and offer little tips on how to get around. We've had a few tours with people in their 90s. You just have to make sure people have that extra bit of support."

Jon: "We love going to the lakes and mountains in Austria and Switzerland, because we used to live right in the heart of the mountains. Next, we're running tours to Normandy for the anniversary of the D-Day Landings, then to Lake Como and Austria."