WINDERMERE – *without wheels*

You don't need a car to experience the timeless grandeur of the Lakes



The breathtaking Windermere lake

Wildly beautiful and popular (over 18 million people visited last year), the Lake District is England's largest national park. While its imperious ice-carved peaks and glassy lakes seem remote and inaccessible, trains have ferried tourists here since the mid-19th century, when the track from Keswick to Windermere was laid. Today, you can catch a train in London and arrive at Windermere in a little over three hours; from Manchester, it's around half that time. Once here, bus routes 555 and 559 – the latter open-topped in summer – nip around the lake shores to connect towns, villages and beauty spots, opening up this exhilarating landscape to all.

Peak views

When you arrive in Windermere, shake off the journey with a hike to Orrest Head, perched above the town. A short, steep gravelled path winds through mossy groves to a 235 metre-high peak (there is a gentler, stile-free route too). At the top, you're rewarded with a dress-circle view of the lake, a gleaming ribbon snaking around wooded headlands and hugged by dark mountains.

Lake cruise

Head back down to the town and walk or take the bus to Bowness, where pleasure boats line up for jaunts around Windermere lake. On board the *Tern* (windermere-lake cruises.co.uk), built in the 1890s, you can appreciate Windermere's status as England's largest natural lake – a mile across at its widest and over 10 miles long. As you chug along, look out for the mansions that dot the shore – this was the bolthole du jour for wealthy northern industrialists in the 19th century. At the north end of the lake is Waterhead Pier, the jumping-off point for Ambleside.



Historic St Oswald's church in Grasmere

Culture hub

Ambleside is a handsome slate-grey town with a river, Stock Ghyll, galloping through it. It's a busy shopping centre where you can load up on walking gear or idle around gift shops. Its most photographed attraction is pint-sized Bridge House, once a snug home for a family of eight. Its buzz makes it a fun option for an evening out, either at Zeffirellis arthouse cinema and jazz bar (zeffirellis.com), or sampling local brews at the Tap Yard (tap-yard.com).



Bridge House stands over Stove Beck in Ambleside



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Ambleside is a popular destination on the shore of Windermere

Coffin route

Roam deep into Wordsworth country on the Coffin Route trail, which you can pick up on a 10-minute bus ride from Windermere. This two-mile, undulating path was once trod by coffin bearers ferrying the dead from outlying farms and villages for burial at St Oswald's church in Grasmere. Call in at Rydal Hall for a drink on the tea terrace and explore the formal gardens open to the public. Look out for the 'Grot', a one-room 17th-century building with a large window to frame the view of Rydal waterfall.

Wordsworth's Grasmere

Romantic poet William Wordsworth is inextricably linked to the Lakes. He and his sister Dorothy found their 'little nook of mountain ground' at Dove Cottage in Grasmere, where they lived for nine creatively rich years. Dip into the small museum (wordsworth.org.uk) for an insight to the siblings' world, before entering the cottage, warmed by a fire in the grate and lit by candles. Soak up the atmosphere in the small garden too, where Dorothy planted wild lakeland flowers and William paced while reciting poetry. Call in at St Oswald's churchyard to see the Wordsworths' final resting place. Then join the queue outside the Grasmere Gingerbread shop (grasmeregingerbread.co.uk), to try this famous local delicacy. Invented by Sarah Nelson, a Victorian entrepreneur, this spiced biscuit is still baked in her original kitchen.

Fellside pampering

Amid poetry, views and walks, make time for a treat-to-self. Take the bus from Windermere and hop off at Low Wood Bay Resort and Spa (dubbed the bus stop with the world's finest view). Here you can enjoy a different lake vista from a soothing outdoor pool, fellside sauna or hot tub, followed by a soul-restoring afternoon tea complete with plump scones and thick cream (englishlakes.co.uk/low-wood-bay).



BOOK IT

The Lamplighter is a family-run restaurant with rooms in central Windermere, a short walk from the station. Double rooms from £90; lamplighterdiningrooms.com. A North West 3 Day Explorer gives unlimited travel within the Lakes. £26 for an adult; a single bus trip costs £2.



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