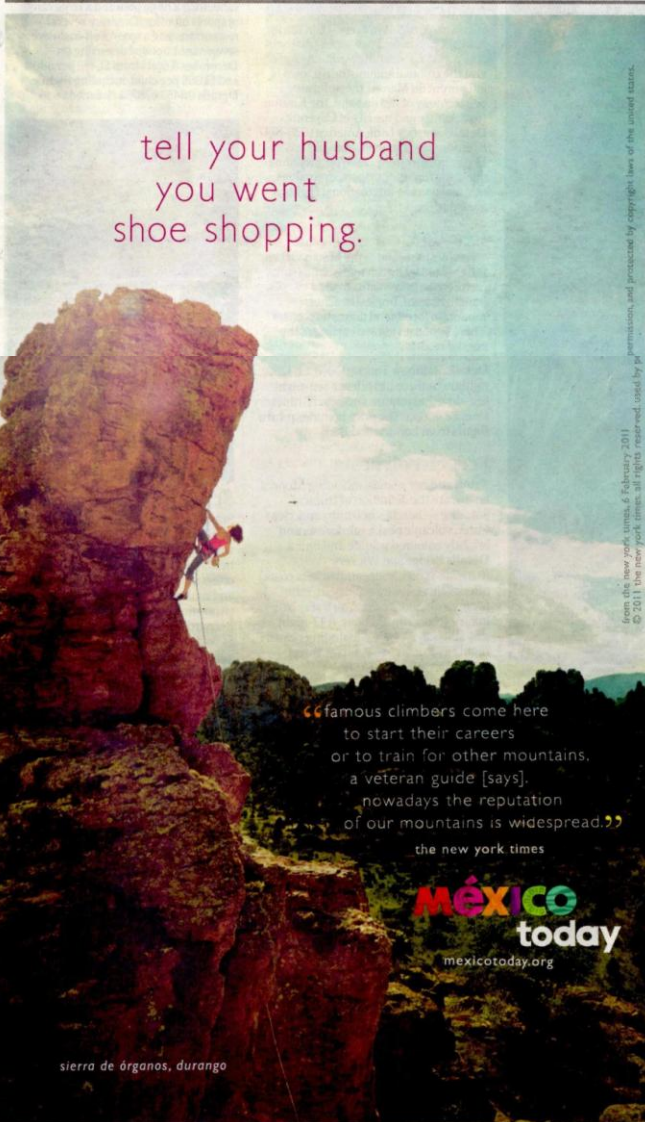


28 Travel



The Old Harbour in Torquay



tell your husband  
you went  
shoe shopping.

“famous climbers come here to start their careers or to train for other mountains, a veteran guide [says]. nowadays the reputation of our mountains is widespread.”

the new york times

**México**  
today  
mexicotoday.org

sierra de órganos, durango

The great British weekend  
Torquay, Devon

Torquay is famous for two things: Basil Fawley and prehistoric man, and no, they aren't the same. The resort hit the headlines last week when a jaw bone dug up in 1927 in Kents Cavern, near the town, was re-examined and found to be the earliest fossil evidence of modern human beings in Europe.

These early folk embarked on a hazardous journey through a land populated by Neanderthals, woolly rhinos and mammoths to get to the Devon seaside resort, which is now the third largest town in the county.

We knew how they felt after a Friday journey on a heaving First Great Western train from Paddington to Exeter. There wasn't room to swing a sabre-toothed cat.

But once off the cattle truck and on to the sweet, rickety coastal service, the last twentysomething-mile stretch from Exeter to Torquay was stunning. The schoolchildren in the carriage may have been blasé, but we were glued to the views.

We crossed the town to the pretty, red

“The town has been busy reconnecting with its more elegant Victorian past”

sandstone cliffs of Babbacombe Bay, our base for the weekend. I had read that Babbacombe had been Queen Victoria's favourite cove (Albert aside) and, thinking that she had quite a bit of choice, figured that this one must be a bit special.

It was our first trip to Torquay, which we had, admittedly, previously known only through the lens of Fawley Towers. So we did as our ancestors would have done and found somewhere safe to lay our spears before resting our heads.

In the morning, a little woolly-headed thanks to the Devon sauvignon, we headed for a mega walk along the cliffs to Anstey's Cove. It's a spectacular coastline, particularly beautiful in the autumn half-term when the leaves are turning. However, the sandstone is so fragile and the geology so unpredictable that many of the coves can be appreciated only from the coastal paths above, because it is too dangerous to climb down.

One of the delightful things about Torquay is that a coastal walk can become an incredible trip through exotic flowers and fauna (sometimes the sheer number of palm trees made us sooty Londoners feel like we were in the South Seas), culminating in a journey to the centre of the Earth. After a cliff-top walk we

eventually hit Kents Cavern, brought to prominence by the news wires as home of the old guy's jaw bone, but it has been used by people and animals for thousands of years and visited by interested travellers since 1571, according to records.

Sure, it's a cave, but it's a very special one (recent winner of Cave of the Year). In the pre-tour era it was home to large carnivores: hyenas making a den in the cave and bears using it for hibernation and winter breeding. Palaeolithic man also used to squat there from time to time. I particularly liked a wonderful 1890s snap of Beatrix Potter sitting outside the cave. The guides are entertaining experts and if your idea of a good time is comparing the lengths of stalactites and stalagmites, then this is your bag. There is also a decent café and a shop with enough interesting tat to entertain young children to teens. And until November 19 there's a *Romeo and Juliet* production down there.

Blinking into the sunlight we resumed our walk, this time heading along a beautiful path atop Hope Cove and Brandy Cove and back to Babbacombe Bay and our hotel the *Cary Arms*, the latest venture of Lana de Savary, the wife of the entrepreneur Peter de Savary. It was bought by the family in 2009 and is for people who like a bit of luxury with their seaside fun. It's about as far from Fawley Towers as you can get. Jutting out of a cliff near the beach, the building alone, with its hardy white pebbledash exterior, gardens and satellite cottages (one pink and thatched) made me think of 1950s holidays I'd never had, and the bay itself was straight out of Enid Blyton's mystery stories. I can't think of a better landscape for intrigue. No wonder Agatha Christie lived in Torquay.

We planned to ride the Babbacombe Cliff Railway — one of only 16 funicular railways still functioning in the UK. It opened in 1931 and at its peak carried 250,000 people a year. It was closed for renovations which, in a sense, sums up the new Torquay, a town dedicated to refreshing its best features. Since Fawley painted the town incompetent and intolerant, it has been busy reconnecting with its more elegant Victorian past, when it was the jewel of the English Riviera.

In fact, rather than experiencing Manu's idiosyncratic approach to silver service, there is a recent generation of excellent restaurants, including The Elephant, the first place in town to be awarded a Michelin star. The chocolate pudding was absurdly good and the owner looked absolutely nothing like John Cleese.

Alex O'Connell

Need to know

Where to stay

The *Cary Arms*, Babbacombe Beach (01803 327110, [caryarms.co.uk](http://caryarms.co.uk)) is the perfect hotel for people who want luxury with their British beach experience. The eight nautically themed rooms all have sea views. The food is excellent and locally sourced. It has its own natural bathing pool and a plastic pod that looks out to sea — great for watching the sun go down.

Where to eat

The Elephant Restaurant (01803 200044, [elephantrestaurant.co.uk](http://elephantrestaurant.co.uk)) is the first Torquay restaurant to have been awarded a Michelin star. It is run by head chef Simon Hulstone and his wife, Katy. The taster menu included a heavenly mushroom risotto. Number 7 Fish Bistro in Beacon Terrace is also good (01803 295055, no7fish.com).

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