



Austen tea party

Bath celebrates the beloved author's 250th birthday

JANE CORNWELL

Retying the ribbon of my bonnet, smoothing down my Empire-line dress, I slide along an ornate garden bench so I can cosy up to Mr Darcy, who's wearing his flounced white shirt and tight breeches. "Smile," says my friend and I do, fluttering my lace hand fan. Mr Darcy keeps staring into the middle distance, enigmatic and dashing, if curiously pallid.

We're at the Jane Austen Centre in Bath, Somerset, where the beloved English novelist lived from 1801 to 1806, when the town was the height of fashion as a spa resort, gambling and entertainment hotspot, and a magnet for young women and their families out to nab rich husbands.

Born in Hampshire in 1775 – the cue for a wealth of festivities marking her big 250th birthday – Austen had twice visited Bath before her father, the Reverend George Austen, decided to retire here. The family's dwindling fortunes would see them downsize across several residences, which partly explains why Austen later deemed the city "the most tiresome place in the world".

Still, of the six novels for which she is best known, two – *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* – use Bath as a backdrop.

About 75 minutes by train from London, Bath itself is glorious: the entire city is a UNESCO World Heritage site. Its honey-coloured stone buildings with their orderly streets and squares are testament to the symmetry favoured by Georgian architecture and remain unchanged from when 18th-century socialites came to promenade, ballroom dance and "take the waters" at the hot thermal springs in the Roman baths from which the city gets its name.

Modern-day Bath is the setting for many a carriage wheel-clattering Austen screen adaptation, stills from which (Colin Firth as Mr Darcy in 1995 BBC series *Pride and Prejudice*, Anya Taylor-Joy in 2020's film version of *Emma*) line a wall at the Jane Austen Centre, a small museum with a tearoom close to where Austen lived for a year following her father's death. Costumed character actors encourage visitors to write with a quill, dress up in period attire, try parlour games such as spillikins (an early pick-up sticks), and take selfies with waxworks including Darcy and, indeed, Austen.

Created with the help of an FBI-trained forensic artist, the Austen effigy is said to be the author's closest likeness yet. Sporting a white mob cap and long-sleeved daytime dress, this waxwork is chestnut-haired and surprisingly tall, its inquisitive brown eyes befitting the image of an author known for observing the minutiae of



CAROL McDAID

Bath gets in the Regency spirit, main; Jane Cornwell meets 'Mr Darcy' in Bath, above right

human behaviour and for drawing her characters and places from life, as well as themes such as the over-dependence of women on marriage for social standing.

"They hastened away to the Crescent to breathe the fresh air of better company," says Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey*, a gift copy of which is in our deluxe suite at the Royal Crescent Hotel & Spa, a five-star haven tucked midway along the famous Royal Crescent, a row of 30 terraced houses laid out in a curving sweep with views across the lush Royal Victoria Park and fast-flowing River Avon. To promenade along the

MORE TO THE STORY

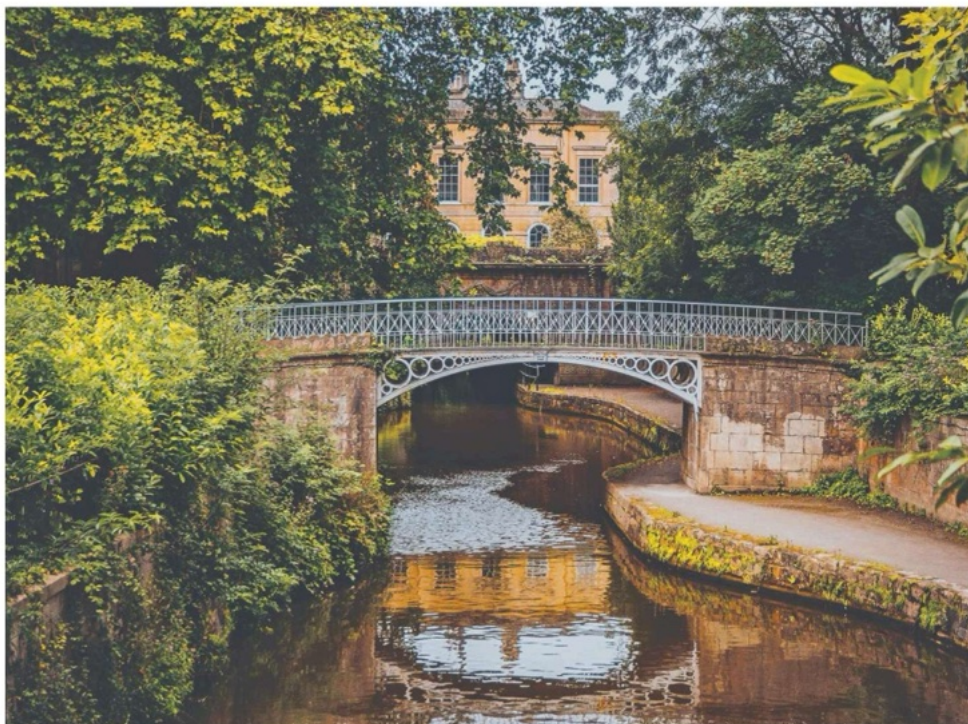
The Jane Austen Festival runs September 12-21, 2025

Visitors come to Bath year-round to walk in Austen's footsteps but September's annual 10-day festival turns the whole city Regency-mad, especially in this 250th-anniversary year. Minibus tours will take in the valleys and vistas Austen loved; Regency costume devotees can browse fans, gloves and bonnets at the Festival Fayre; the Pump Room will stage *Sense and Sensibility: The Musical*; and more than 2000 fans will join the Grand Regency Costumed Promenade.

Most balls and tours sell out early. On the program is a Regency-themed Sung Eucharist service at Bath Abbey, and a free guided garden walk (in Regency dress) at the National Trust's Prior Park Landscape Garden overlooking the city.

Visitors can also join the free, BYO-picnic (in Regency dress) in the Sydney Gardens. Check out "The Most Tiresome Place in the World" at No. 1 Royal Crescent (until November 2), an exhibition of letters, responses and the only manuscript Austen wrote in Bath, revealing the highs and lows of her time here.

janeausten.co.uk



Crescent in one's finery was to "accidentally" bump into a potential suitor; at parties and dinners there, hosts displayed their wealth through food and tableware.

"Careful, even the muffin has a sensor," jokes a gallery assistant inside the beautifully restored townhouse and museum No. 1 Royal Crescent – furnished as it might have been from 1776 to 1796 – when I peer at the extravagant (fake) table spread in its dining room laden with portraits and silverware.

While the nearby Bath Circus, a ring of townhouses surrounding a grassy disc with four huge plane trees, was designed by architect John Wood the Elder, the Royal Crescent was completed by his son, John Wood the Younger. The John Wood suite at the Royal Crescent Hotel is one of 18 (among 45 rooms), named after notable Bath individuals; our third-floor suite, the Waldegrove, has a drawing room and a view of the green manicured lawn, cobbled footpaths and wooden tables with white canvas umbrellas. But it's the Jane Austen Suite – with its antique armoires and drape-covered doors opening on to wafting lavender and wild roses, modern sculptures and gardens within gardens – that is an Austenite's dream.

At Montagu's Mews restaurant and bar – pastel-hued but hipster-edgy – we enjoy a Jane Austen cocktail, a mix of gin, vermouth, raspberry shrub and rosewater with a pleasingly frothy top. "It is a truth universally acknowledged ..." we recite, clinking glasses, improvising alternatives, as a jazz trio led by UK saxophonist Iain Ballamy plays John Coltrane, whom Austen might have loved.

Among inclusions in the hotel's Jane Austen Anniversary Package is a two-hour private walking tour. Our expert guide, Theresa Roche, from Strictly Jane Austen Tours, meets us wearing a long green dress and matching bonnet and twirling a white parasol. We follow her along the Crescent and around the Circus (Austen had friends at No. 11) to No. 13 Queens Square, where the au-



thor stayed in May 1799 on her second visit to Bath with her rich brother, Edward, and his wife, who'd come to take the waters.

Their landlady, wrote Austen to her sister, Cassandra, was "a fat widow in mourning, and a little black kitten runs about the staircase." Roche recites the lines as we gaze at the house's facade, betting that Austen scraped her muddy boots on the ancient iron scraper on the landing by the front door.

We stroll past the colonnaded rear of the Theatre Royal, whose interior features in *Northanger Abbey*, then come to the Pump Room overlooking the Roman baths. Built in 1709, and extended in 1790, this cavernous restaurant with its Corinthian columns was once the social hub of Bath, when professional gambler and master of ceremonies Richard Beau Nash presided over the city.



Sydney Gardens, top; afternoon tea at The Royal Crescent Hotel; Nikki Amuka-Bird and Dakota Johnson in the Netflix film adaptation of Persuasion, above left; putting quill skills to the test, below

IN THE KNOW

Rooms at the Royal Crescent Hotel & Spa start at £435 (\$A892) for a classic room with breakfast; the Jane Austen Anniversary Package in a classic room is £660. Bath's closest airport is Bristol International, 45 minutes away by car; London Heathrow 90 minutes; trains from London take 75 minutes.

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"Every creature in Bath was to be seen in the room at different periods of the fashionable hours," noted Austen. We sip the sulphurous water, with its 43 minerals, from the ornamental King's Spring urn, which Austen drank from, too.

Later we'll bob about in the heated rooftop pool of the historic and newly renovated Thermae Bath Spa, steam rising from the water before a vista of chimney pots, rolling hills and the 221-steps-high tower of Bath Abbey. Now, hungry, we visit Sally Lunn's Historic Eating House, one of Bath's oldest buildings, to try its famous brioche-like buns and see the kitchen museum dating back to the 1680s. "(I'm) disordering my stomach with Bath buns," wrote Jane to Cassandra. We fall for The Bath Bun Tea Shoppe, whose sweeter, smaller (and, for us, nicer) buns are served from a historic house with outside seating under a gnarly plane tree. Warning: Bath's swooping seagulls love Bath buns too.

Crossing the 1774-built Pulteney Bridge – both its sides are lined with shops – we head along the stretch of Great Pulteney Street to the Holburne Museum, a colonnaded building with a fine collection of bronzes, porcelains and paintings. Austen lived opposite when this was the Sydney Hotel, the site of many a lavish Regency Ball. In the hall on the first floor, under a crystal chandelier, we imagine the swell of strings and click of heels as couples danced the minuet.

Then, descending the striking contemporary staircase, we head through the modernist rear of the building to the wooded slopes of Sydney Gardens, Bath's oldest park, around which Austen loved to walk, and which once had a maze.

Outside, in the green, my friend offers an arm for me to take and issues a simple invitation. "Promenade?"

"Let's," I say. "Who knows who one will meet."

Jane Cornwell was a guest of Visit Bath and Visit Britain.
visitbritain.com