



Land of rivals and royals

Explore the world of a hit television drama in the Cotswolds

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Trotting across one of the lush green playing fields at Cirencester Polo Club, deep in the Gloucestershire countryside, I keep my eye fixed on the ball as I manoeuvre my polo pony, Dash, into position. I draw back my mallet and swing. Air whooshes. Damn. I miss. “Try again,” shouts my Kiwi instructor, a polo champ named Lachie, who canters over and – thwack! – sends the ball arrowing down the green. Off I go in pursuit, imagining myself facing an elite team of opponents led by the dashing Rupert Campbell-Black from hit television drama *Rivals*, resplendent in white jodhpurs and polished black riding boots.

When I finally connect and send the ball spinning away, I glance around in triumph. The only spectator, however, is the white wooden practice horse on which I’ve learned the basics of the sport, stationed under a distant beech tree.

Polo plays a starring role in the second season of *Rivals*, a 12-part adaptation of Jilly Cooper’s steamy novel.

Clockwise from above: polo in Cirencester; St John the Baptist church in the town’s centre; The Fleece



The series follows the scandalous, bonk-busting lives of a wealthy circle of friends and frenemies in 1980s Rutshire, Cooper’s fictional county inspired by the Cotswolds. This picturesque region of southwest England straddles six counties including Gloucestershire – where I’m visiting the neighbouring towns of Cirencester and Tetbury, primary backdrops to Cooper’s world of privilege, passion and rivalry.

Cooper, who died last year aged 88, lived in the Cotswolds for four decades and once described the area as “heartbreakingly beautiful”. It’s easy to see why. Rolling hills, ancient woodlands and river valleys are dotted with postcard-pretty villages, historic churches and grand manor houses, all largely fashioned from the region’s honey-coloured limestone. The huge popularity

of *Rivals* – think *Dynasty* with mallets – has inspired a new wave of visitors keen to explore the country estates and filming locations associated with the show.

The fictional town of Cotchester is really Tetbury. Here, Berkeley House – home of *Rivals*’ television executive Cameron Cook – is available as a luxury holiday rental, and Chavenage House, the magnificent Elizabethan property that doubles as the O’Hara family residence, offers private tours. Tetbury looks like a movie set anyway, with its pristine Georgian frontages, the yellow-painted 17th-century Market House and collection of independent galleries, jewellery shops and antique dealers.

Tetbury Pet Shop has framed oil paintings of distinguished-looking dogs on display in its window.