

TASTY GIFTS • WILLEM DAFOE • ENGLISH COUNTRY CHRISTMAS

UNITED 

A STAR ALLIANCE MEMBER 

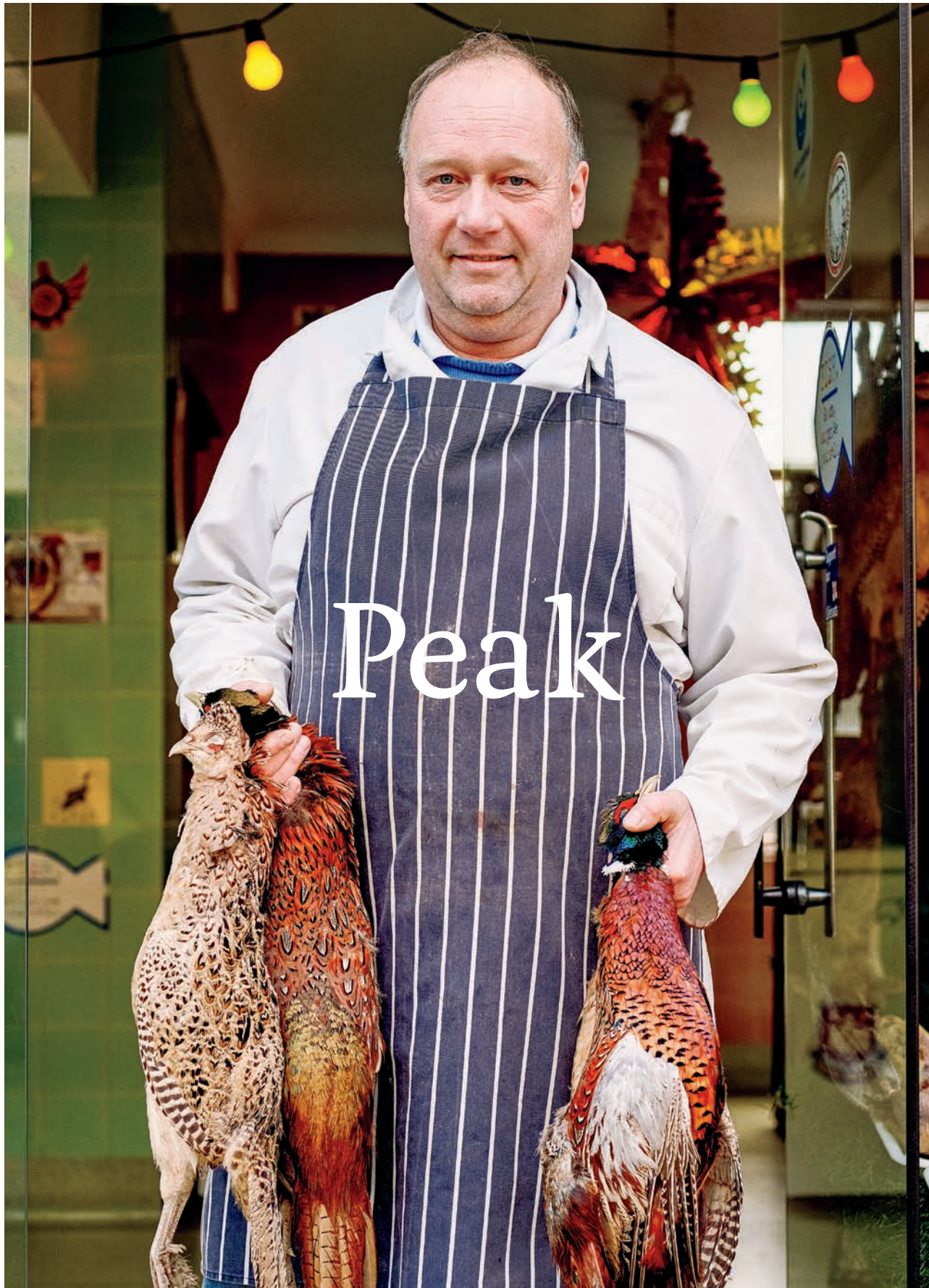
Hemispheres

DECEMBER 2018

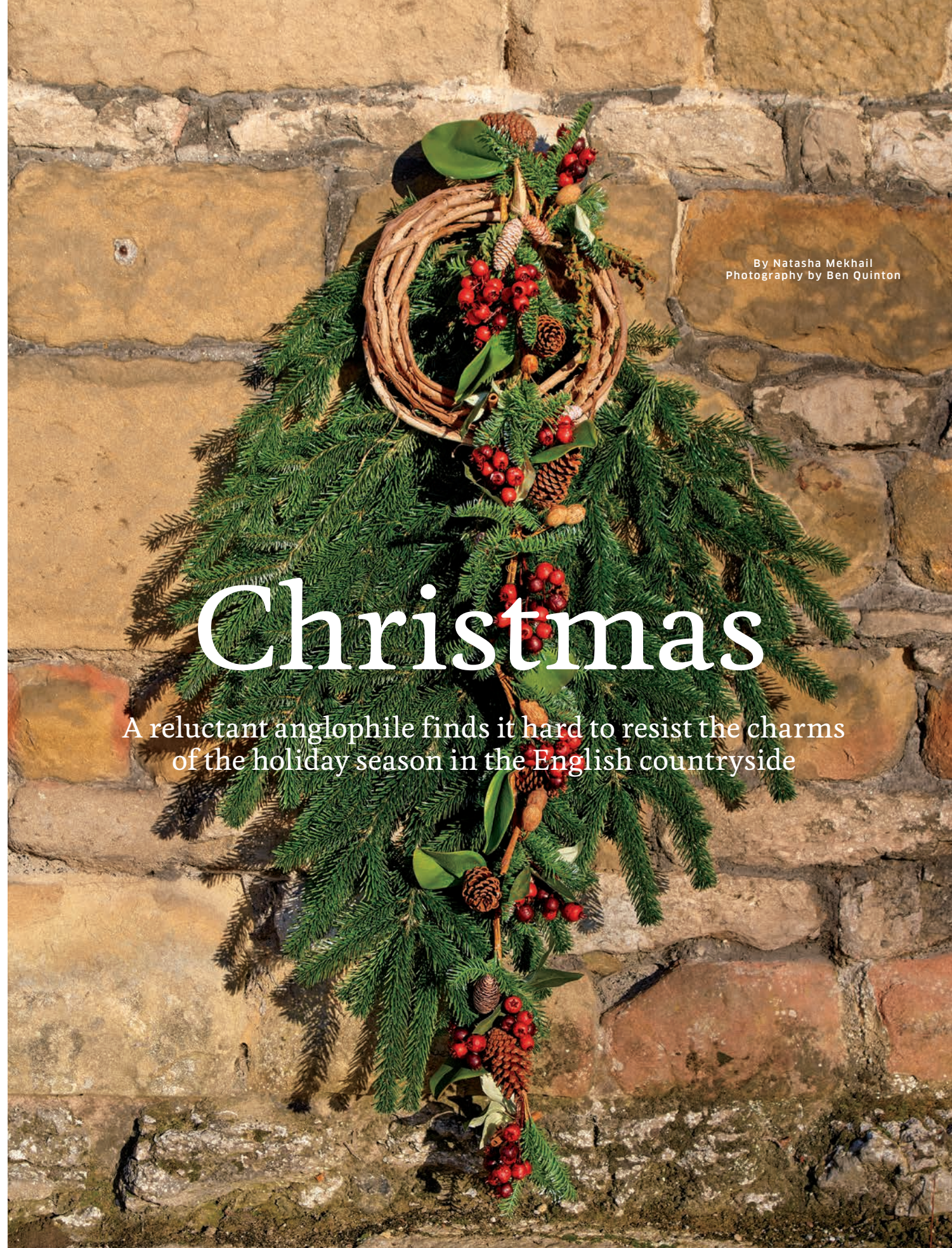
Three
Perfect
Days

Riviera Maya

Where you can dine
beneath a rainbow of
handmade tortilla baskets
in Playa del Carmen



Peak



By Natasha Mekhail
Photography by Ben Quinton

Christmas

A reluctant anglophile finds it hard to resist the charms
of the holiday season in the English countryside

I feel like I'm cheating on North American Christmas. It's the same guilty thought that strikes me every time my partner, David, and I visit the U.K. for the holidays. This year, it comes as I return a missed call from my parents while staring at a row of plump pheasants in the window of the A.L. Hulme shop. With the phone to my ear, I catch a shopkeeper's eye through the glass—and he catches me gaping at the birds like a Dickensian street urchin.

David and I are a few days into our biannual Christmas visit, which stretches from mid-December to the New Year, and Hulme's is a regular stop of ours for window-gazing and photo-taking. It's one of the many festively decorated storefronts that line Church Street in Ashbourne, a town in northern England's Peak District.

We've just left St Oswald's, the street's namesake church, where tombs topped with the alabaster likenesses of their occupants—men in armor, women in crespine headdresses—date to medieval times. It's the church where David's parents were married, where he was christened. Today volunteers are busy filling the aisles with dozens of paper lanterns (stars, snowmen, elephants) that will illuminate an evening candlelight procession.

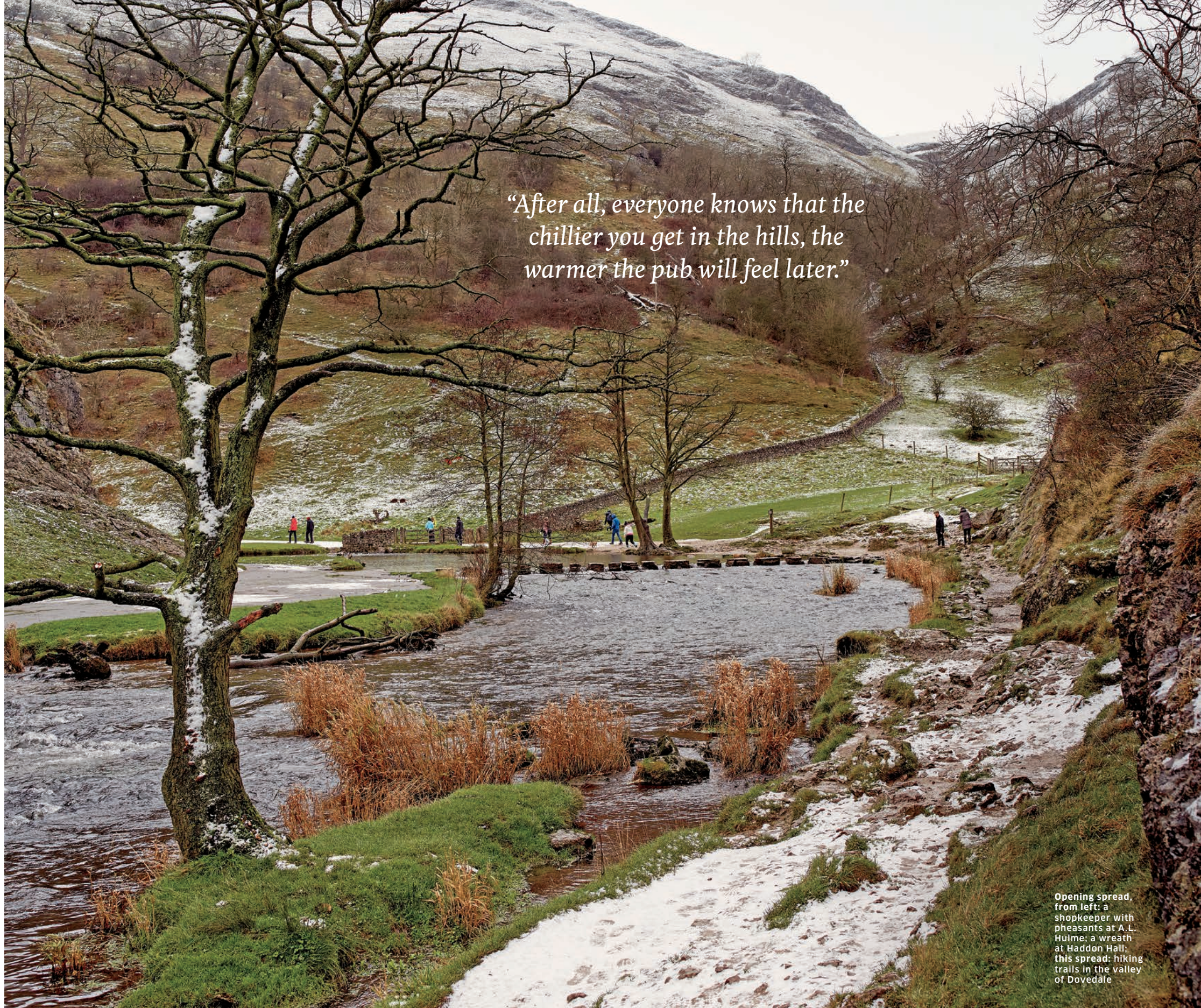
"How's England?" my mother asks from her home, near Toronto, when my return call connects.

"It's OK," I lie.

My mother tries her best to guilt me about not being home, even though she knows it's David's year to see his parents and sister. He and I live in Montreal, and we've been alternating families at the holidays for almost a decade. My parents do the normal North American holiday stuff—turkey dinner, presents, decorations—and I love Christmas at home, but I have always felt ill at ease about the season's excesses. Too much to eat and too little physical activity. Too great a focus on consumption and too little on experience. Too many decorations, and too much of it plastic. When David introduced me to the English countryside, I found my holiday sweet spot.

I can't tell my mother this, but Christmas is just *Christmassy* here. Everything is the genuine article. The pine wreaths on the old wooden cottage doors are real. The sprigs of mistletoe over the entrances to the little country shops are real. The fires that spark and crackle in the low-doored pubs are real. Homes aren't covered in flashing red-and-green laser lights, and there aren't any twerking Santa dolls in front yards. When it comes to decking the halls, the Peak District keeps it real.

"After all, everyone knows that the chillier you get in the hills, the warmer the pub will feel later."



Opening spread, from left: a shopkeeper with pheasants at A.L. Hulme; a wreath at Haddon Hall; this spread: hiking trails in the valley of Dovedale



Clockwise from left: Christmas revelers in Ashbourne; the dining hall at Chatsworth House done up for Miss Havisham's wedding feast; preserves at the Chatsworth Farm Shop

“I can’t tell my mother this, but Christmas is just Christmassy-er here.”

“Of course, it’s not really Christmas without the snow,” I say, trying to preserve my mother’s feelings. But in reality, the gray and drizzly English weather, so mild compared with the frigid winters I grew up with in Canada, is what allows David and me to get out each morning into the emerald countryside. I’ve grown to love donning my waxed canvas Barbour coat and thick-soled wellies to head out for a brisk morning walk. It’s the thing people do during the holidays in the Peak District (so named for its rolling upland hillsides). And, after all, everyone knows that the chillier you get in the hills, the warmer the pub will feel later.

The U.K.’s “right to roam” law means you can trek over private land provided you stick to a footpath and don’t interfere with livestock. Drystone walls, stacked without mortar, separate the properties. On my first Christmas here, David (an engineer and therefore an admirer of all good engineering) pushed on one of the immovable stones and told me, “There’s a real art to fitting these together, and they last for centuries.”

Over the last few years, our wanders have taken us up misty peaks and into deep vales. We’ve walked along a decommissioned viaduct over Monsal Dale, roamed past herds of curious sheep to the Roman lead mines near the village of Brassington, and stood atop the ancient pagan ritual site at Arbor Low, where we had the stone circle entirely to ourselves. (To reach it, visitors must put £1 in a tin box at the end of the farmer’s drive before walking past his kitchen window.)

Today, we’ve chosen one of the most popular Peak District hikes: to the top of Thorpe Cloud hill and into the valley of Dovedale. The trailhead is a 40-minute drive south from our hotel, The Peacock at Rowsley, which was once the dower house for the stately 12th-century Haddon Hall. Thorpe Cloud stands just under 1,000 feet tall, and the summit affords a view of the valley from which you can trace the path of the River Dove,



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Swans float past
Haddon Hall

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which divides the counties of Staffordshire and Derbyshire. As we make our ascent, something unusual happens: Fat snowflakes begin to drift to earth. I think of my mother and wince. The reward for our morning ramble is, of course, lunch at a pub near the trail's end. We arrive at The Old Dog flushed from the cold, but inside it's blissfully warm, more like a friend's living room than a restaurant. Children's hats and mittens dry by the fireplace, while their pint-size proprietors siphon the whipped cream off the tops of hot chocolates. Parents and grandparents in heavy sweaters squeeze onto wooden benches strewn with caribou pelts. This is the stuff Christmas carols are made of. The sweet perfume of a (real) Christmas tree, trimmed in dried citrus slices and bundles of cinnamon tied with string, reaches us at the bar as we procure a porter for David and a steaming mug of mulled wine for me. The pub keeps track of food orders with a

system of numbered cow bells, and a few minutes later our bell is swapped for a pair of thick-crustured pork pies, each stuck with a stubby knife and plated alongside hot mustard and chutney. As we warm up and our bellies fill, one mulled wine turns into two, then three. The snow is still falling outside, but it's hard to see it now, through the fogged windows. In the merry cacophony of the pub, time seems to stand still. The right to roam also means that the grand estates of the nobility that dot the Peak District are fair game for ramblers. The next day, we set off for Chatsworth House, just a 10-minute zoom down winding backroads from The Peacock. The seat of the Duke of Devonshire—set on an estate nearly the size of Washington, D.C.—is one of the most spectacular great houses in England. You may think you don't know the legacy of this house and the Cavendish family, but trust me, you do. Chatsworth is thought



Clockwise from top left: a pint by the fire at the Peacock at Rowsley; a shop window in Bakewell; carrots at the Chatsworth Farm Shop



sizes to create different hydroacoustics), and the Hunting Tower (erected in 1582 for Bess of Hardwick, so the ladies could follow the progress of the hounds). The Cavendish family still lives here, in a private section of the house, but much of the building is open to visitors during the holidays, its annual Christmas decor being the major draw.

This year's theme is Charles Dickens, and the house has been transformed into a Victorian winter fantasy. One hall is Fagin's orphan house; the dining room is Miss Havisham's wedding feast; a bedchamber is the scene of Scrooge's ghostly visitations. We gaze at a series of first editions of Dickens novels on display in the bookcases. Next to them, David scans the signatures on a page of the Chatsworth House guest book and exclaims, "Look here: It's the man himself." I cast my eyes over the tilted script and find the name: Charles Dickens. I grew up watching



to have been the inspiration for Pemberley in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. The 18th-century fashion icon and political activist Georgiana Cavendish was portrayed by Keira Knightley in *The Duchess*, and both Fred Astaire's sister, Adele, and John F. Kennedy's sister, Kathleen, married into the family. You've also likely seen the estate and nearby Haddon Hall on-screen—they have a film résumé that Meryl Streep would envy, including *The Princess Bride* and *Pride and Prejudice*. And even if you missed all that, the Cavendish bananas that most of the world eats today are descendants of a cultivar perfected right here by Sir Joseph Paxton, gardener to 6th Duke William Spencer Cavendish.

After stopping at the Chatsworth Farm Shop for marmalade and oat cakes, we stroll across the grounds toward the house, visiting the gravity-powered Emperor Fountain (built to impress Tsar Nicholas I), the Cascade (which flows over steps of various

PEAK OFFERINGS

Stay

The Peacock at Rowsley

The former dower house to Haddon Hall is now a 15-room boutique hotel. Its antique artwork and furnishings take you back centuries, and the restaurant's seasonal menu (partridge with pear, anyone?) will put you in the spirit. From \$260, thepeacockatrowsley.com

Dine

The George Hotel, Hathersage

The restaurant at this 500-year-old former coaching inn is devoted to local products and modern twists on traditional British cuisine. Try the pea and mint soup with a pressed rabbit leg or the beer-glazed pork belly. george-hotel.net

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the black-and-white version of *A Christmas Carol* with my parents on TV—it was our tradition—but the realm of “Bah, humbug,” Tiny Tim, and the three spirits seemed so far away. Now here a piece of it is, right in front of me.

Back at The Peacock at Rowsley, a fire is roaring on the hearth when we enter the inn’s bar, with its stone walls, leaded windows, and festive combination of (real) pine boughs and peacock feathers. Much of the oak furniture was crafted by Robert “Mouseman” Thompson, who carved his signature rodent somewhere on each piece of furniture he designed.

We order gin and tonics that arrive garnished with cucumber spears and juniper berries. Conscious of our muddy boots, we decline to move into the dining room, instead taking our meal fireside. Sunday lunch is the star on the English dining calendar, and we indulge in all the essentials—thick cuts of pink roast beef; perfect sides of parsnip, carrot, cauliflower, and artichoke; and mashed potatoes and Yorkshire pudding—all doused in gravy.

“Classic food, done well—it doesn’t get better than this,” David says. He’s a sucker for English tradition but the first to admit he didn’t realize how special it all was until he left. Later, as he stokes the fire, he says, “When I was growing up, I was bored of all these old places. I only wanted to see new things. But now I appreciate their history. Can you think of a single pub back home that still has a wood-burning fireplace?”

I laugh. “Nope. Although sometimes you see the yule log playing on TV.”

It’s a 40-minute drive north from The Peacock to Castleton, through the market town of Bakewell and past the twisted spire of Chesterfield (built with lead tiles and unseasoned wood, it warped into a swiveled end). Castleton gets its name from the ruins of Peveril Castle, set on a commanding outcrop overlooking



the village, but what really defines it is the Peak Cavern, known locally by its nickname: “The Devil’s Arse.” The approach is dramatic, especially during the holidays, when colored spotlights illuminate the limestone overhang and cave mouth.

“It’s like walking into Mordor,” David notes. But inside it’s far from ominous, what with the 100 or so people gathered at the cavern entrance in Christmas jumpers and Santa hats. A greeter takes our tickets and hands us each a cup of mulled wine and a mince pie.

We’re here to participate in the annual Carols in the Cavern, a first for us and for David’s parents and sister, who we spot waving from seats at the northern edge of the cave-turned-auditorium. As we join them, a (real) brass band launches into a spirited rendition of *Jingle Bells*. Soon, the whole crowd is singing along from printed songbooks. The joy in the voices is also real—and it’s infectious.

Back home, the closest I come to caroling is watching my mother pour herself an eggnog, crank Bing Crosby on the stereo, and belt out an off-key “Winter Wonderland.” I always wave her away—but I do it with a smile. Now, singing with David’s family in the cavern, I think that perhaps next year my folks could join us in the U.K. English Christmas would be even Christmassy-er if we were all together.

Outside, as if in response to that thought, the snow starts falling again.



Carolers in Peak Cavern; above: the road approaching “The Devil’s Arse”

Dickens delight: Let the ghosts of U.K. Christmases past fill you with warmth. United offers daily nonstop flights to London and Manchester this holiday season. Visit [united.com](https://www.united.com) or download the United app for schedule details.

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