

Travel

MY HOLS ALEXANDER ARMSTRONG

I've got to know UK cities on the comedy circuit

The actor on family breaks by the North Sea, a hairy trip to Canada and the lure of Bhutan

Alexander Armstrong is an actor, comedian, broadcaster and singer. The 56-year-old hosts the BBC game show *Pointless* and presents a weekday morning show on *Classic FM*. He is also half of the comedy duo *Armstrong and Miller*, with Ben Miller. Armstrong, who has released four albums, lives with his wife, Hannah, and their four sons on a 26-acre farm in Gloucestershire.

“My childhood holidays were spent in Co Derry, Northern Ireland, where my mother’s family are from. We had this beautiful 1920s cottage in the sand dunes of Magilligan Strand, at the mouth of Lough Foyle.

It had green wooden shutters and a red-painted corrugated iron roof but no electricity or running water, so for a fortnight every summer my parents, two siblings and I lived by candlelight and camping lanterns to the sound of crashing waves. We’d load up a pushchair with jerry cans to collect water from a spring half a mile away. It was heaven.

Some of my happiest travel memories are of crisscrossing the UK in the Nineties and Noughties doing gigs with Ben Miller, my comedy partner. Grand old theatres swathed in red velvet, fleapits with rat-traps in the dressing rooms, some nights of triumph, others dying on our arses – all part and parcel of a life in comedy. But we got to visit places that would otherwise be for ever just names: Walsall, Bradford, Inverness, Lincoln. In most cases they were so much better than they sounded.

The holiday I always look back on and think “ahhhh” was with my girlfriend (now wife) in 2003. We went to Mauritius and it was very grown-up. We stayed at the Prince Maurice hotel and sailed, dived, windsurfed, ate and drank too much – we long to feel grown-up enough to go back.

Making travel documentaries, such as my *Alexander Armstrong in India* series on Channel 5, gives you privileged access and insight far beyond the normal tourist experience. Staying at the tea tycoon Thomas Lipton’s bungalow in Sri Lanka, and waking to see mile after mile of tea plantations, spread out like green corduroy, is just one of many standout memories. I’m about to head off to the United States to film another series.

We’ve had one or two hairy moments too. Trying to persuade security at an airport in Arctic Canada that the huge camera batteries we were carrying in our hand luggage (each the size of a brick, wrapped in neoprene and gaffer tape with trailing wires) weren’t the bombs they so clearly resembled, nearly caused us to miss our flight home.



Craster, on the Northumberland coast, is Alexander Armstrong’s summer bolt hole



We were filming there for ITV’s *Land of the Midnight Sun*. Our visit to Dawson City, a one-time gold rush town in the Yukon, was not without incident either. We had to leave one bar, where we were filming, as the mood of some of the locals was getting a bit tasty.

It was spring so we also did a bit of gold panning with a couple of grizzled prospectors. But they hit the beers at 11am and got steadily more drunk. By the time we got to their gun-packed wooden shack (for more beers), it all felt a bit *Yellowstone*. Later, they demanded double the fee we had agreed to pay them. Luckily, our director defused the situation.

When it comes to family holidays, we decided years ago that Europe in the summer was too hot for the children, so we established Northumberland as our family holiday base, and we’ve been going there for 13 years. It’s where I grew up, and we stay in a cottage by the sea near Craster. It’s a deeply romantic landscape, full of history and character – good for the soul. Going for a swim in the North Sea

before breakfast is one of our traditions, although now the boys are in their teens, they take a little bit more prodding.

We’re great walkers so never go anywhere without sturdy boots – there’s nothing like squelching through a bog to make you feel like you’ve earned your drink by the fire on your return. We occasionally fit in some fishing if we can.

And if it happens to pour with rain, I’m never happier than playing cards or board games inside. This is the great bonus of summer holidays in the UK: you learn to love every flavour of British weather.

Top of my bucket list? Bhutan strikes me as a fabulous place to visit. Dramatic Himalayan landscapes, monasteries, forests and not a single traffic light in the whole country. Oh, and a national commitment to happiness. Who wouldn’t want to go there?

Interview by York Membery

Alexander Armstrong is working with HP on a campaign for its Smart Tank printer (hp.com)

COMPETITION

WIN A LUXURY COTSWOLDS BREAK WORTH UP TO £1,530 AT THE MANOR HOUSE

WHERE WAS I?

“A-ha! This must be it,” I tell my friend as we approach a former café site 50 yards east-northeast of a railway station that opened in 1863. Forty-one years ago the café was the scene of a musical-comic-book encounter that has been watched more than two billion times.

It’s the perfect introduction to a district with impeccable pop-culture credentials. I am, for example, determined to find the place where – more recently – an actress (mother: Sarie) used to live. It’s in one of two main hubs of the district, at the eastern end of a roughly triangular park that, confusingly, used to host a Scottish festival.

But Friend has other ideas and, in common with the comic-book encounter, grows suddenly animated. “I’m not going on the heritage trail of some Hollywood Barbie doll,” he huffs – an unacceptable thing to say were it not accurate. His

goal is an occasional boxing venue, in the second main hub, a mile and a half west-southwest of the former café.

Maybe later, I say. After all, in pop’s heyday the venue also hosted a galaxy of stars. But the actress comes first – along with a barrage of Friend’s complaints.

“I want to go, now!” he wails like one of the Banshees who once played at the venue.

“No way, you Blockhead,” I tell him, even though Ian Dury also graced its stage.

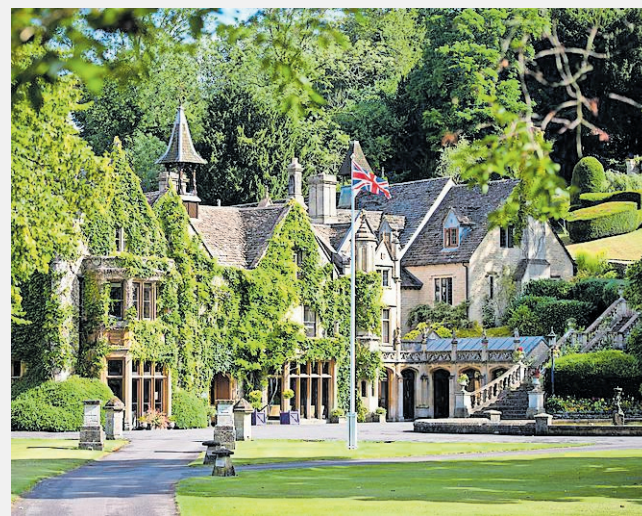
At this point Friend’s temper snaps and he turns angrily towards me. Clearly he wants to take me on – and not in the style of a 1980s pop-video tryst.

I run away faster than a speeding omnibus.

Sean Newsom

THE QUESTIONS

- 1 What is the name of the railway station?
- 2 What is the surname of the actress?



THE PRIZE

The winner and guest will stay for two nights, B&B, in a Luxe room with a view at the Manor House – a country house hotel on the edge of Castle Combe in the Cotswolds. Dating from the Middle Ages, this member of Exclusive Collection is home to 50 bedrooms, suites and

mews cottages, in a 365-acre estate that includes broad lawns, leafy riverbanks and an Italian garden.

From Wednesdays to Sundays, dinner is served at the Michelin-starred Bybrook restaurant, where the chef Robert Potter champions seasonal local ingredients. Alternatively, the Castle Inn pub is the place for informal

dining. For more see exclusive.co.uk.

One dinner for two at Bybrook (excluding drinks) is included in the prize. It must be taken before March 1, 2027, subject to availability and excluding May 2-5 and 23-26, August 29-September 1 and December 23-January 1.

HOW TO ENTER

Answer the questions and complete the entry form at thetimes.com/travel/where-was-i by the end of Thursday, April 23. One entry per person. Full terms and conditions apply and your information will be used in accordance with our privacy policy at newsprivacy.co.uk.

LAST WEEK’S PRIZE

The answers are Greystoke Castle and Glenridding. Natalia Wiewiorka from Lancashire wins a break in the Italian Dolomites worth up to £2,340 at Hotel Saltus.