

QX30

# ESCAPE TO THE COUNTRY

James Fosdyke leaves the hustle and bustle of city life behind as he takes the INFINITI QX30 crossover for a pleasure drive through the land of Shakespeare



The West Midlands is a region famed for many things. From accents to football teams and from chocolate to Spitfires, it's got the lot. But above all else, this part of the world is really famous for making cars.

Longbridge, Brown's Lane and Castle Bromwich are all among the most famous names in the motor industry, and though many of the big British car companies have long-since gone, Jaguar and MG are still plying their trades locally.

Despite that, the area's road network is more notorious than notable, home to one of Britain's most populous cities and the confluence of motorways including the ever-clogged M5, M6 and M40, as well as any number of arterial A-roads.

All of which made it a challenge when my editor dragged me into his office and asked me whether I knew a picturesque driving route nearby.

"You've got that INFINITI out there and two hours," he said, waving his hand in the general direction of the office car park. "Where are you going to go?"

After a lot of umming and ahing, I settled on a small corner of Warwickshire that has largely escaped the ravages of

motorways, bypasses and bus lanes. Wedged into the apex of a corner created by the convergence of the M40 and M5 motorways is 'Shakespeare Country', a tranquil rural area that rose to fame long before Karl Benz even imagined the automobile.

As the nickname suggests, the area is the hometown of the famous playwright William Shakespeare. This year marks the 400th anniversary of the Bard's death (that's one of the very few things about him we know for sure), but that isn't what brings me here.

No, the great thing about this part of the world is its comparative emptiness. It's hardly desolate – picture-postcard towns are dotted all over the place – but there's a definite sense of space that sits in stark contrast to the hustle and bustle of the city that lies just 20 miles further north.

So, after a hurried lunch, I find myself inching someone else's box-fresh QX30 out of what felt like Alcester's tightest parking space and into the early-afternoon drizzle. Alcester is an old Roman town, although like everywhere in this neck of the woods, it looks more Tudor.

Half-timbered buildings are ten a penny, and some of the streets pre-date cars – and even fat people, for that matter – by quite some time.

I swing the QX30 around the old Roman town's Globe roundabout, so named because of the landmark sculpture in the middle of it, towards Arrow.

As the black globe disappears in my rear-view mirror, I wonder whether it has anything to do with the local wordsmith whose plays were regularly performed at the Globe Theatre in London.

### ELEGANTLY SIMPLE

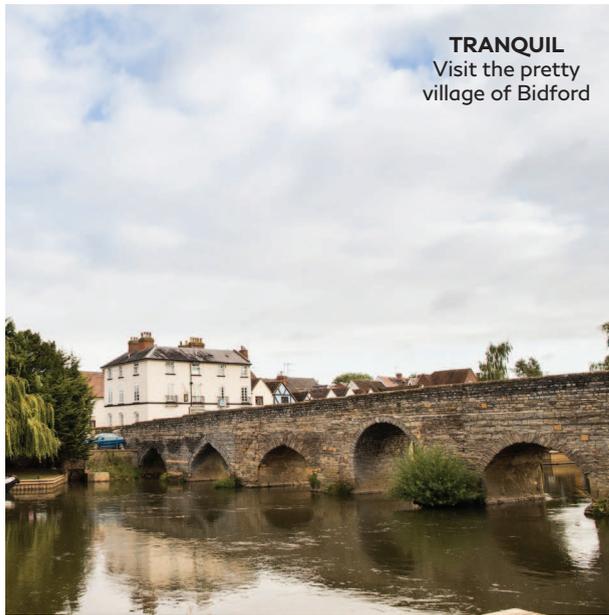
Within minutes, I'm out of the town, and there are few signs of human habitation, the Warwickshire countryside seeming peaceful and empty as it endures a summer's soaking.

The road soon brings me across the River Arrow on an elegantly simple red-brick bridge and into the little village of Wixford, which seems to have more pubs than people. I'm not complaining – I'm all for village pubs and the witches' brews they purvey – but it seems strange to me that villages with such a tiny number of houses can support them.

Still, the navigation system tells me that the relatively sizeable town of Bidford is fast approaching, although first



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PICTURE-POSTCARD  
TOWNS ARE DOTTED ALL  
OVER THE PLACE



**TRANQUIL**  
Visit the pretty village of Bidford



**FAST FORWARD**  
Empty roads were perfect for testing the QX30



**EXPLORE**  
There are plenty of sights to see



impressions aren't brilliant. The outskirts are a mess of small industrial estates and the sort of housing that is neither old nor modern, but just a bit depressing.

The old town centre is an improvement, and I could have had time to admire it thanks to the traffic lights that police the bridge across the River Avon. But instead of looking at Bidford's mix of Georgian and Tudor architecture and haphazard road network, I stew in a jam, endlessly checking my watch as if fearing that the minute hand may suddenly accelerate and my allocated two hours will be ended by an angry phone call from the boss.

When the lights change, I zip the QX30 across the bridge and a chance glance in my passenger-side mirror betrays what I've missed. A row of colourful terraced houses peek from behind the tree-lined bank, and a couple of hardy pleasure boats dawdle along the murky river.

### ROAD WITH A VIEW

After a couple of hundred yards though, I'm following the river on the other bank, blasting along the empty road that almost matches the Avon turn for turn.

A handful of gauges remind me that the road is liable to flooding, and I hope the rain hasn't already saturated the ground and spilled onto the impermeable tarmac. With the lengthy wait in Bidford fresh in my mind, a diversion would be an unwelcome surprise.

The road soon lifts my spirits though, with the river occasionally visible through the trees and the wide, open stretches of road proving a pleasant place to unwind.

Welford almost passed me by, such is the way its buildings slowly grow around the road before ebbing away to nothing. Its bridge, though, is a landmark. It's actually surprisingly long, given the diminutive width of the river at that point, but it's a pretty thing, built in the style of the old London bridge, before

that was moved to the USA.

Crossing the bridge brings me back onto main roads, but despite the proximity to Britain's second city, I'm merely driving down another country road, albeit better-marked, marginally busier and slightly wider than those that have gone before. It's better signposted, too, and I can't help but notice the sudden appearance of hundreds of little brown signs, all of which seem to be pointing towards something Shakespeare-related.

In a bid to avoid the middle of Stratford, I find myself following the brown signs to Shotton, a former village now swallowed up by the town's urban sprawl.

The typically chaotic road layout betrays a quaint British village, but the buildings that give it its character sadly seem long gone.

Only Anne Hathaway's Cottage stands as a vision of how things once were. It isn't really a cottage – Shakespeare's in-laws added a pretty substantial extension at some time in the 17th century – but the thatched roof and timber frame give it a fairy tale image. I wouldn't be surprised to see Little Red Riding Hood joining the throng of tourists that crowd the driveway.

If you want to see the ultimate in bizarre juxtaposition though, this area is surely a contender. Just a few yards away from the cottage is an ugly council estate.

After successfully navigating the handiwork of Warwickshire Council circa 1964, I was back on a comparatively open road, but the A3400 is no Highway One. Instead it's a fast, sweeping road that takes in two of Warwickshire's most photogenic villages.

The approach to Wootton Wawen is nothing special. There's a nondescript pub on the right and an industrially ugly aqueduct over the road, but once I'd passed these I was back in a world of classic Georgian architecture, half-timbered



REAL HISTORY  
Anne Hathaway's  
Cottage

cottages and stunning country houses.

They say Kent is the garden of England, but the evidence here suggests otherwise.

Just a couple of miles up the road, the better-known town of Henley-in-Arden continues the theme, greeting me with another row of picturesque cottages. It's a far larger place than Wootton Wawen, and there's a much more obvious town centre. The main street is lined with never-ending terraces, some of which have been turned into shops, but almost all of which feature crooked roofs and hanging baskets by the door. Almost every one would have been worthy of a picture alongside these words.

There's no time to stop though, because time is short and some of the best driving roads on the route are still ahead of me. I carry on following the A3400 north, until spearing off towards Tanworth.

## ROUND THE BEND

The road gets a touch narrower as I leave Henley further behind, but for the most part it's a really pleasant drive. In places, the tall hedges give it a slightly claustrophobic feel, but it soon opens up and really starts to flow.

All too soon though, the road winds its way into the village of Tanworth-in-Arden, commonly known as Tanworth and not to be confused with the not-too-distant town of Tamworth. Not that anyone who has visited both towns is likely to do so.

Tanworth is a typical English village, complete with a minute green and a modest war memorial, as well as the kind of chocolate-box houses that have become monotonously frequent on this drive.

At the top of the village, I turn down Bates Lane, which oozes promise and driver appeal. A handful of tight, technical corners later, I'm indicating to veer off towards Ullenhall. Forde Hall Lane is not without its attractions, such as its lack of

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traffic and abundance of tight corners, but it's tight and the tall hedges conspire to block out most of the scenery.

Eventually I join the main road to Ullenhall, which is far less enclosed, but far less exciting. I didn't come out here to trawl around the countryside's A-roads, but to explore a little. With that in mind, I'm soon turning off again, almost doubling back on myself as if towards Redditch, but staying on the more scenic roads.

## REAL DRIVING PLEASURE

I cut the corner, though, and head towards Studley, following another narrow lane that opens up just enough for the odd few seconds of real driving pleasure. After about 15 minutes of alternating between immense enjoyment on the more open stretches and buttock-clenching fear as I meet something coming the other way, the road spits me out onto the A435.

Turning left back towards Alcester, I pass the grandiose Coughton Court. Home to the Throckmortons – one of the oldest Roman Catholic families in the country – the house has played a central part in more than one scandal.

After opposing King Henry VIII in his dissolution of the monasteries, one family member was a key player in the plot to assassinate Queen Elizabeth I, and the gunpowder plotters

of 1605 fled to Coughton when their plan to blow up the Houses of Parliament was uncovered.

Today it's a National Trust property, boasting a huge estate with a popular walled garden, but it's still inhabited by a Throckmorton.

As I crawl back into Alcester, the temptation to carry on and keep driving is great, but the world of pressing deadlines, inevitable late nights and early mornings is calling me. That I have been able to escape for a few hours, though, is something very special.

That escape is one of many great things about motoring. Very few of us ever drive for the sake of driving – we spend too much of our time hurtling from pillar to post as we try to cram everything into our busy schedules – but there's something isolating about a remote, engaging road.

The fact that you have to concentrate solely on the business of driving, that you can't answer emails or phone calls, is a fantastic way of escaping the stresses and strains of modern life.

Like everyone else, I'm often too busy to just go for a drive, but a place like this within striking distance of the city is something well worth exploiting. Now to find time for a second loop... ■



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