

## Miracle off the M5

adapted from an article by Tim Hayward

1 **T**he names of UK motorway service areas are gorgeously lyrical. I grieve that the poet Sir John

Betjeman passed on before immortalising Tibshelf, Chieveley or Watford Gap. Magor, Lymm, Heston. Newport Pagnell, Woolley Edge and Forton.



2 But their promise to the pilgrim motorist is rarely borne out. I admit that stopping to drink amphetamine coffee slurry after 200 miles of staring at tarmac may astigmatise the critical eye but I'm convinced that Thurrock is a test community for a future rightwing dystopia and that everyone at Knutsford has a leaking bin liner of body parts in the boot. Prepare, then, to weep tears of joy as you pull off the M5 (southbound) between Junction 12 and 11a, for Gloucester Services is very heaven.

3 The car park is set out on a gentle slope, curving around the central building like an amphitheatre — and the building itself is spectacular to behold. Circular, part sunk into the earth, bastioned with the butter-coloured local stone and covered with a grass dome, it looks like a bucolic spaceship. This is the second production from Westmorland Ltd, the innovative company that blessed us with Tebay Services in Cumbria, and they have outdone themselves.

4 A normal service station smells like men who have sat long miles in a plastic seat. Gloucester smells of fresh baking. The "Farmshop" has a butchery counter selling meat so organic, grass-fed and humanely reared that I swear I saw a kilo of mince that was actually smug. Where normal service stations offer a range of irradiated pasties, Gloucester has hand-raised pies and a bookshop. There are bacon rolls but they sit alongside breakfast pastries from the estimable Bertinet Bakery in Bath.

5 The M5 isn't officially on the spice route but it joins Birmingham and Bristol, two cities with a strong appreciation of such things, so one might expect the curry menu to be pretty good. I plunged into a muscular chicken dhansak (£9.25) served with artisanal chutneys and a freshly made raita. Spice flavours were distinct and considered, though I'd like to take this opportunity to deplore the use of handfuls of whole cardamom in rice. Crunching in to one assaults the mouth like some powerful cleaning product.

6 Fish and chips, *de rigueur*<sup>1)</sup> at British service stations of all classes, came in a trucker-sized portion (£10.95). The chips showed all signs of having

been hand-fettled although the fish (unspecified but doubtless worthily sustainable) suffered from a slight oiliness of batter.

7 I sat in a sort of beach hut at one end of the vaulted dining space and wondered what the two Polish drivers I'd seen climbing down from their 18-wheelers in the car park would make of this. Then I took my leaf tea and home-baked scone with raspberry jam and clotted cream (£2.75) out to the terrace by the pool and sat, enjoying the sunshine while children disported themselves decoratively in the shallows.

8 I looked out over the manicured parkland and any reservations evaporated. This, I had to keep reminding myself, is a British motorway service area, usually a circle of hell too deep for Dante to have counted. To be treated humanely in one of these places is unheard of but to be fed well on locally sourced food, to buy at a farm shop that would shame the most fashionable farmers' market, and to sit in the sun slathering cream on a scone . . . it's almost too much to believe.

9 It's just been announced that for the next three weeks, customers will also be blessed with Gloucester Cathedral Choir singing Compline at 6.45 each evening – truly "Gloucester Services".

10 As I drove on, I watched Gloucester Services diminish in the rear-view mirror and wink out of existence. Did that actually happen? If you're driving that route any time soon, please do check it for me. I fear I may have imagined the whole incredible thing.

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noot 1 de rigueur = demanded by custom