

Hidden Gems: *Beyond cathedral, castle and cliffs*

Look beyond coastal Kent's well-known sights, its iconic cathedral, castles and White Cliffs, and you'll be surprised by what you find. Enriching attractions and experiences are everywhere. Head off the beaten track or just around the corner from the hotspots and you'll be richly rewarded.

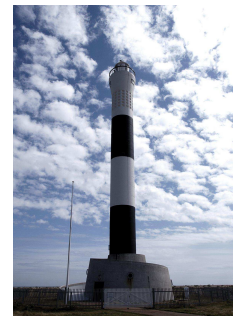


First up, **Canterbury**, whose cathedral stands on the world stage of 'must-sees'. After you've had your heritage fix in the church, amble through the city's pedestrianised heart and sample a few other delights. A picnic on a **chauffeured punt** is a bit different, or saunter the **14th-century city walls**. Hidden underground at the **Roman Museum** in Butchery Lane you can view the remains of a Roman town house at the city's original street level. Or maybe finding out what a 'murder hole' is at medieval **West Gate Towers** gives you a buzz. The **riverside gardens** here are simply perfect for relaxing and the **Goods Shed**, Canterbury's permanent farmers' market, makes a refreshing venue for lunch.

Few people know that the city has a **castle** – check out the ruins of the Norman keep. And even fewer think of **Canterbury's countryside**: but it's right on the doorstep, including **Blean Woods** and **RSPB Nature Reserve**. Listen for woodpeckers and catch the flutter of heath fritillary butterflies.

Attractive **villages** with oast houses and thatched cottages are scattered around, easily reached by bus, car, cycle or your own two feet. Just one mile west of Canterbury, **Harbledown** offers the most impressive views over the city, particularly from Golden Hill. Chaucer's last tale was told here as the pilgrims caught their first glimpses of the cathedral. To the east, the unspoilt villages of **Bishopsbourne**, **Bekesbourne** and **Patricbourne** are all on the **Elham Valley Way**. Walk to them and enjoy a pub meal or step the whole 22-mile route through ancient woodlands, byways, orchards and parkland to **Hythe** on Kent's south coast. For a diversion at Bekesbourne, drop into **Howletts Wild Animal Park** (safaris are such a hit with the kids!). **Elham Valley Vineyard** is also close to our route: fancy a tour and tasting?

Once you're at seaside **Hythe**, indulge in a little nostalgia and childhood magic with a trip on the **Romney, Hythe and Dymchurch Railway**, steaming 13.5 miles to **Dungeness lighthouse**. Return to Hythe for a short jaunt inland: **Kent Battle of Britain Museum** at **Hawkinge** opens your eyes to the wartime struggle for supremacy in the skies over Kent. The most important collection of its kind in the country features everything from aircraft to weapons and fine art prints.



Now the call of **White Cliffs Country** is loud and clear. Head up coast and discover what is on offer in addition to the castles at **Dover**, **Walmer** and **Deal**. The cliffs will always dazzle, but also seek out the wonderful nature reserves and breathing spaces en route. Between **Folkestone** and **Dover**, **Samphire Hoe** is truly amazing: made from material dug to create the Channel Tunnel, it

provides leisure activities for all, from stunning picnic spots to birdwatching and sea angling. Gentle walks are accessible to all.



Base yourself for a while in Dover: **Western Heights Local Nature Reserve and Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty** combines intriguing historic fortifications with waymarked walking routes – look out for chalkland wildflowers and wildlife. Take the family to **Connaught Park** or **Kearsney Abbey** to picnic or let off steam. And what about a trip with **Dover White Cliffs Boat Tours**? Children can take the helm with captain supervision, and that's a treat they'll remember for a long time!

Aside from its castle, Dover boasts some really great museums and buildings, among them **Dover Transport Museum**. Whiz through history from bicycles to buses, admire the model railway and tramway, visit bygone shops and a 1930s garage. Then travel farther back in time at the **Painted Roman House**, an exceptionally well-preserved Roman official hotel or 'mansio'. Original wall paintings and hypocausts (underfloor heating) plus insightful displays highlight life in Roman Dover.

Journeying north again, grab some more fresh air at the clifftop village of **St Margaret's-at-Cliffe**. The **Frontline Britain Trail**, an exciting circular walk, reveals local history and wildlife as you ramble. Have a snack afterwards in the tearoom of **The Pines Garden, St Margaret's Bay**. Not only are there a grass labyrinth, lake, waterfall and art installations to catch your eye, but also **The Calyx** – a new, award-winning events space described as one of Europe's most sustainable and healthy structures.



At **Sholden near Deal** there's more innovation. The former Betteshanger Colliery site has been brilliantly transformed into **Fowlmead Country Park and Nature Reserve** featuring top-class cycling facilities and activity zones. And don't miss **The Secret Gardens of Sandwich**: 3.5 acres of ornamental and formal gardens by Sir Edwin Lutyens and Gertrude Jekyll. Previously unseen for nearly 25 years, white, yellow, spring, woodland, rose, kitchen, vegetable and herbaceous gardens plus lake have been restored to provide all-year colour. Now the secret is out!

From Sandwich, explore **Gazen Salts Nature Reserve**, or embark on **Sandwich River Bus & Seal Spotting Trips**. Bring your camera to capture the magic. Picturesque villages around the town, some linked by footpaths, add a jigsaw of options. **Barnsole Vineyard** near **Staple** offers free mini-tours and wine tastings.

We leave White Cliffs Country behind as we weave around Kent coast's eastern tip. You're probably lured to **Ramsgate**, **Broadstairs** and **Margate** by their traditional sunny sands. But tear yourself away from the beaches for a moment and open your eyes to their other gems. The talented Victorian Pugin family of architects did much to shape the townscape of **Ramsgate** – follow **The Pugins Town Trail** to view their work (leaflets from the Visitor Information Centre). You can even stay in **The Grange**, designed by Augustus Pugin and recently restored by the Landmark Trust. Next day, embark on a **wildlife boat trip** from the Royal Harbour, spot seals or sit back on a coastal mystery tour.

When we reach the winding streets and unusual shops of **Broadstairs**, it must be time for an ice cream and **Morelli's** is just the job. Pumpkin, truffle or simply chocolate ice cream for you? Boys large and small love **Crampton Tower Museum**, which is dedicated to Victorian engineer Thomas Crampton – all those drawings, interactive displays, working model railways plus a miniature railway for children to ride!

And how's this for contrast? A **Tudor House** and a **Shell Grotto**. Unlock the secrets of both in **Margate**. The Tudor House is the town's oldest domestic building, dating from the 16th century or even earlier – the investigation continues. Then get your head around the mystery of the Shell Grotto, discovered by chance in 1835: 70ft of winding underground passages leading to an oblong chamber, its walls decorated with strange symbols mosaiced in millions of shells. Is it an ancient pagan temple? A folly? You decide.



A bit of culture? **Turner Contemporary** celebrates JMW Turner's association with Margate and has a varied programme of exhibitions and events. Take in a show at the country's second oldest theatre, the **Theatre Royal**, reinvented and thriving right here. Meanwhile the entertaining **Margate Museum** showcases the town in all its diversity, including its colourful seaside heritage (just look at those Edwardian bathing costumes!) and Margate at War. Top a full day's entertainment with a visit to **Strokes Adventure Golf**, an 18-hole floodlit course incorporating rockscapes, plants and water features.



Exploring beyond the Isle of Thanet's main resorts is easy on footpaths, cycle tracks and quiet lanes to coast, countryside and village. Catch the open-top bus for a 90-minute tour from Margate, or cycle some or all of the circular 27-mile **Viking Coastal Trail**. Highlights en route include **Quex House and Gardens** and the **Powell-Cotton Museum, Birchington**: a magnificent Regency mansion and internationally acclaimed collection of 19th-century African and Asian treasures.

St Nicholas-at-Wade is an attractive village with pubs and a Norman church, and restored **Sarre Windmill** is a good place to stop, too – for a snack in the tearoom and maybe to buy high-quality stoneground flour. Or share a picnic at **Monkton Nature Reserve**. Then spin on to **Minster Abbey**, founded in 670 AD and one of England's oldest inhabited buildings. **The Spitfire & Hurricane Memorial Museum** and **RAF Manston History Museum** house fighter aircraft and reveal dramatic activities at the airfield from 1916 to the present, including the Battle of Britain.

Now we're back in Ramsgate. Cycle on via Broadstairs, climb **North Foreland Lighthouse**, and swoop into Margate. Or chill on one of the Isle of Thanet's 15 sandy beaches and bays – you deserve it!

For more information see www.visitkent.co.uk

