



Have a maritime adventure in Kent *Heroes, villains, boats and booty*

What more invigorating call to adventure than the sound of the sea whispering and crashing along Kent's coast? Over the centuries it has beckoned men to battle, smuggling, fishing and trade. Embark on your own rewarding odyssey exploring the diverse maritime influences that have shaped the county.

On The Maritime Heritage Trail

Discover thousands of years of naval and nautical heritage on **The Maritime Heritage Trail** from **Gravesend to Dungeness** (www.maritimeheritagetrail.co.uk). Sail, walk, drive, cycle, browse museums, castles and smugglers' haunts – the route is divided into sub-trails to suit your interests and length of visit.

Dip into some of the kaleidoscopic highlights now: at **Upnor Castle** find out how Queen Elizabeth I protected her warships at anchor in the **Medway**, historic capital of maritime Kent (the animated model of the Dutch Raid of 1667 shows what could go wrong!). **The Sailing Barge Museum, Sittingbourne**, meanwhile, is dedicated to the story of the Thames Sailing Barge – barges are still built in the traditional manner at the **Dolphin Yard, Milton Regis Creek**.

Fishermen love **Herne Bay**, and you could treat yourself to a cruise in England's only **Royal Harbour, at Ramsgate**. Then imagine what it was like for the hordes that raided Britain with Hengist and Horsa – there's a full-size replica of their **Viking Ship** at Pegwell Bay, sailed here from Denmark in 1949 to commemorate the 1,500th anniversary of the invasion. Imagine, too, the labour that went into building the **Royal Military Canal, Hythe**, to guard against Napoleon and move men and stores quickly. Nowadays it provides great opportunities for walking, fishing and boating.

Defence of England

The significance of Kent to the defence of the realm is clear from the **Confederation of the Cinque Ports** formed around 1050. By this arrangement five coastal towns – **Sandwich, Dover, Hythe, Romney** and Hastings – agreed to provide the king with men and ships in return for special privileges. Include them in your Maritime Heritage Trail expedition, or savour them individually: Sandwich, for example, is an atmospheric medieval town whose narrow streets and ancient buildings are a delight to look around.

Then plunge 2,000 years back in history at **Dover Castle and the Secret Wartime Tunnels**. Commanding the shortest sea crossing to the Continent, the fortress has always been on the frontline of defence against invasion. It was said if you unlocked Dover, the Key of England, the rest of the country lay wide open. Prepare for a dramatic tour tracing a turbulent past: from the

Roman pharos, or lighthouse, to the sound and light '1216 Siege Experience' and the medieval keep where preparations are underway for a visit from Henry VIII. But nothing quite prepares you for the compelling twilight world of the secret tunnels beneath the White Cliffs – the Command Centre where Churchill planned Allied Victory in World War II, where the evacuation of Dunkirk was masterminded, and where wounded servicemen were brought to the underground hospital.

Travel north along the coast and a further two imposing coastal castles await. **Walmer and Deal Castles** were hastily constructed by Henry VIII in the 16th century to repel attack by Spain and France. Walmer became the home of the Lords Warden of the Cinque Ports. Or you could shadow the coast in the wake of a number of 19th-century **Martello gun towers**, built to defend the south coast against French invasion during the Napoleonic Wars. The clifftop views from **Folkestone** across the English Channel are wonderful.

Sailing the high seas

Certain sights really do make you stop and think. One such is the unique **Bronze Age Boat at Dover Museum**, the world's oldest known seagoing boat. Dating from around 3,550 years ago and crafted from oak and yew, it was probably used to cross the Channel, carrying supplies, cargo and passengers. How would you have felt, one of 18 or so paddlers, setting off across the sea to a mysterious destination? Amazingly, this rare and priceless monument to ancient man's daring and courage was only uncovered in 1992, during roadworks between Dover and Folkestone.

Fast-forward several millennia to **The Historic Dockyard Chatham** and the story of vessels and men who sailed the high seas bursts into the modern era. The 80-acre naval heritage site, the most complete dockyard of the Age of Sail, spans over 400 years of maritime history and was the place where the ships that defeated the Spanish Armada and Napoleon's forces were built. You've five attractions in one and plenty of hands-on activity to enthuse the kids: try your skill in the working Ropery, meet boat builders from 1758 in Wooden Walls, climb aboard three historic warships and re-live daunting RNLi rescues in Lifeboat! You can even attempt to sink an invading fleet in The Museum of the Royal Dockyard.

While at Chatham, have a breezy cruise on the authentic coal-fired **Paddle Steamer Kingswear Castle**. Or drop into nearby **St George's Centre**, formerly St George's Royal Naval Church, to see memorials to men and ships that sailed from Chatham to fight in two World Wars.

Smugglers' haunts

Less noble but no less compelling are the adventures of smugglers in Kent. Half close your eyes on a beach, sniff the briny air and you can almost picture darting figures bringing ashore their booty of fine laces, wines and brandy. Gangs plied their 'free trade' all along the coast from the **Isle of Sheppey** to **Deal**, storing contraband in tunnels and caves.

Joss Bay is said to be named after the wily 18th-century Broadstairs smuggler Joss Snelling, who landed illicit goods here. In 1769 he and his Callis Court Gang were surprised by a preventive patrol as they unloaded cargo amid the awesome natural white pillars of **Botany Bay** and the running battle cost several lives. Today both places are in *The Independent* guide to Britain's top

50 beaches, the former ideal for surfing and the latter perfect for sandy family fun – get out your bucket and spade and dig for any buried treasure left behind.

Surprisingly, smuggling began not as an import business but as an export enterprise – and the southeast was in the vanguard. Massive taxation on wool exports from the 13th century made it worthwhile to smuggle fleeces to waiting weavers on the Continent and the famous **Romney Marsh** sheep provided thick profits for the locals. Sheep still graze the haunting, salty marshes today and you can have a great day out exploring this evocative landscape of erstwhile ‘owlers’, as the wool smugglers were known. Its isolated little churches are particularly intriguing – **Snargate Church** is believed to have been just one place where smuggled goods were hidden. Have a meal at the **Woolpack near Brookland**, an inn once popular with wool smugglers.

Deal, too, was notorious for a peculiarly Kent brand of smuggling, for it was here that ‘Guinea boats’ were built to ship gold across the Channel to pay Napoleon’s armies. The boats were rowed across the heaving waves – Kentish men were no slouches. Deal residents were also on the side of smugglers, sometimes helping them stow tobacco and fine cloth right under the noses of preventive forces. Wander the town’s maze of narrow streets and alleys and you quickly understand how easy it was to dodge unwanted attention.

But the smugglers didn’t have it all their own way, as you’ll appreciate at the **Custom House Museum, Gravesend**, where items confiscated by the ever-vigilant Custom Service are displayed. The best booty to take away is your experience of a thrilling maritime adventure.

To find out more about Kent’s exciting maritime heritage and attractions visit www.visitkent.co.uk