

Ten great reasons to come to Kent
Unique highlights from city, coast and countryside

Be uplifted by the centuries-old heritage of Canterbury Cathedral, romanced by ‘the loveliest castle in the world’, charmed by the favourite seaside resort of Charles Dickens. These are just a few of the unique experiences that make Kent such an alluring destination. Sample the following ten and you’ll want to come back for more.

1. Canterbury Cathedral

As soon as you step into the magnificent interior of this cathedral, part of the Canterbury World Heritage Site, you can sense the deep stirrings of history and worship stretching right back to AD 597. The Mother Church of the Anglican Communion has a rich tradition of welcoming visitors, ever since medieval pilgrims were drawn to the spot where in 1170 Thomas Becket was murdered. Today the site still sends a tingle down the spine, while the 14th-century perpendicular nave and glorious medieval stained glass take away the breath.

Unlock more of England’s ancient religious past in the country’s second-oldest cathedral, at Rochester.

2. The Loveliest Castle in the World – Leeds Castle, Maidstone

Lord Conway described Leeds Castle as ‘The Loveliest Castle in the World’ – and it’s easy to appreciate why: wandering through 500 acres of stunning parkland and grounds to the magical, moated jewel in their midst. Now you’re on the threshold of 1,000 years of history, the royal residence of six medieval queens, a treasure trove of furnishings, paintings and antiques. Afterwards drop into the colourful aviary housing over 100 species of birds and have fun in the yew maze, spiralling towards a grotto of myths and legends.

Kent has more stately homes and castles than anywhere else in the UK – tour a few while you’re here, from bristling fortresses to handsome rural retreats.

3. The White Cliffs of Dover

Amazing but true: it took 80 million years to form the White Cliffs of Dover from the crushed remains of billions of tiny sea-dwelling plants and animals. This dazzling natural bastion now provides the habitat for many species of flora and fauna, including some that are rare, and it has been designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). Bring your binoculars, your camera and limitless curiosity. With a visitor centre, shop and café, the White Cliffs make a fabulous family day out. The deserved winner of the BBC’s Vote for the Coast.

Why not blow away the cobwebs on an exhilarating coastal break, rambling the miles of public footpaths in White Cliffs Country.

4. Sissinghurst Castle Garden

Explore one of the world’s most celebrated 20th-century gardens, the spellbinding creation of writer/poet Vita Sackville-West and her husband, diplomat/writer Harold Nicolson. It’s an

aromatic, colourful stroll through ten individual 'garden rooms', whisking you through different ambiances and moods: the spring effect of the Lime Walk, for example, hot reds, oranges and yellows in the Cottage Garden, cool combinations of white, greys and greens in the iconic White Garden. The quietest time to visit is after 3pm.

Inspired by Sissinghurst Castle Garden? Then refresh your senses in some of Kent's 180-plus other gardens open to the public.

5. Kent Downs AONB

Escape! Walking, wildlife-spotting, relaxing in a wonderful Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. The eastern half of the North Downs is known as the Kent Downs and they stretch 878 sq km (339 sq miles) across nearly a quarter of the county, from the White Cliffs at Dover to the Surrey and London borders. Fill your lungs with fresh air as you step out along footpaths to glimpse the flowers, rare orchids and butterflies that thrive here. Potter along tiny lanes, past picturesque hedgerows and through ancient woodlands, to traditional orchards and distinctive little villages. Escape. Pure and simple.

Some 6,876 km (4,273 miles) of footpaths criss-cross the Kent countryside, from tranquil valleys to breezy open spaces: perfect for an invigorating break.

6. Chapel Down Sparkling Wine

Indulge! Treat yourself to a genuine taste of Kent with a tour of award-winning Chapel Down Winery at Tenterden Vineyard, home to this sparkler and the country's largest producer of English wines. At the forefront of the modern renaissance in home-grown tipples, Chapel Down uses top quality grapes: from its own 25-acre vineyard, planted with varieties as diverse as Chardonnay, Pinot Blanc and Bacchus, as well as from nearby Lamberhurst. After whetting your appetite on the history and production of English wines, sample some of Chapel Down's finest (apple juice available for drivers and under-18s). Stay for lunch in the bistro.

The Garden of England is renowned for its fruit production – tours of orchards and vineyards, to discover the secrets of cider and wine, make absorbing days out.

7. Whitstable Oysters - www.visitwhitstable.co.uk

Enjoy some more good living: seductive Whitstable Oysters by candlelight are the perfect mood-setters for that romantic break you deserve. They're in season from April until September and, after your meal in a restaurant or pub, take a stroll arm-in-arm by the sea. The importance to local heritage of these potent little shellfish is celebrated at the town's annual summer oyster festival with tastings and a blessing of the fishing boats (July 22-30, 2006). You can learn more about the oyster industry in the history museum on the High Street – according to an old Kentish tradition, it was the succulent reputation of Whitstable's oysters that enticed Julius Caesar to Britain.

Be tempted by Kent's other fresh seafood specialities like Dover Sole. Nothing quite compares with the taste of fish eaten within sight of the sea where it was landed.

8. Broadstairs Beaches

What more refreshing way to spend a sunny day than at the coast in Kent? Head for the captivating sandy bays of Broadstairs, Charles Dickens' favourite holiday resort, wind down, have bucket-and-spade fun, flex your limbs pursuing watersports. Charming Joss Bay is popular with the surfing fraternity, while the safe, secluded environment of Viking Bay is perfect for families, swimming and watching Punch and Judy. Botany Bay, a winner of a seaside award for rural beaches, is tucked away among high cliffs and chalk stacks, creating a blissful retreat.

Broadstairs has seven bays – come for a week and enjoy a different one each day!

9. Hop Farm Oast Houses

Kent has long been associated with the growing of hops, and oast houses – the quirky, conical buildings used in drying them – have become emblematic of the county. Delve into interesting tales of this traditional industry in the Hop Story Museum at The Hop Farm Country Park, Paddock Wood, where you can also wander among authentic Victorian oast houses. An animal farm and play area keep the kids amused and there's the chance to do some hop picking, among other lively activities, at the hop festival (September 4-15, 2006, weekdays only).

Find out more about hop traditions at the Museum of Kent Life, near Maidstone. And do toast your visit with a glass of hop-filled Kentish beer in a local pub.

10. Shopping

Gift-hunting or simply browsing? Discover Kent's full range of retail temptations from high street to bespoke. While away the hours in Royal Tunbridge Wells in the antique shops and designer boutiques of Old High Street and The Pantiles. In Canterbury, spend a morning in the specialist shops of traffic-free medieval side streets, an afternoon looking at fashions and much more in the 70-plus stores of the new Whitefriars centre. Have a whole day at Bluewater, near Gravesend, exploring 330-plus outlets – you can always have a breather and a snack in one of 40 cafés, bars and restaurants.

Kent is home to more than 20 farmers' markets. They're great places to pick up fresh local fare, for picnics, self-catering, or to take home.

To find out more about Kent's unique highlights and attractions, see www.visitkent.co.uk