



Leeds Castle

Castles and country pleasures in Kent

The English county of Kent has long been known as *The Garden of England* and those luring visitors to the county are determined to retain and, indeed, justify this moniker.

And while many may look towards the county's coastline and White Cliffs of Dover, Kent's rural swathes offer an equally enjoyable experience.

Gentle rolling hillsides and rich farmland grazed by sheep and cattle, quintessential English villages and castles and historic manor houses with stunning gardens can be enjoyed via the peace and quiet of country back roads, footpaths and cycle routes.

Given the *Garden of England* tag, it is no surprise to find flourishing vineyards and small breweries and an abundance of fresh local produce on menu's throughout the county.

Kent's county town, Maidstone, is located at the very heart of rural Kent.

www.visitmaidstone.com

Ashley Gibbins
Commissioning Editor
AllWays traveller



Short break rewards so close to home

By Ashley Gibbins

While the lure of travelling is to visit a far flung destination with different climate and culture, one should not overlook the pleasures to be had on a short break closer to home.

When we decide to take a short break in Kent, a 75 minute drive from London, the obvious choice would have been the county's coastal region.

But we opted for rural Kent around the county town of Maidstone, and were not disappointed.

The Old Boat Cafe

We began our trip to rural Kent in grand style with a wonderful lunch aboard the Old Boat Cafe.

This 1911 former horse-drawn narrow boat, called Vienna/Verben was began life as one of the many horse hauled narrow boats that ferried coal or fresh produce between Birmingham and London.

When this more leisurely form of transporting cargo was overtaken by the railways and then road haulage, the Vienna/Verbena became an obsolete resource and fell into disrepair.

But it was spotted, neglected, in Stokton by boating enthusiasts Keira and Chris Stuart-Smith.

The couple vowed to restore the Vienna and put her back into service as a floating cafe.

That is, to cut a long story short, why she now bobs gently on the River Medway, between Archbishops Palace and the Maidstone Museum and Art Gallery.

The longer version would tell of many hours of commitment to the cause by Keira and Chris.

And why visitors are able to enjoy wonderful lunches from a menu stacked with local produce and one of the best vegetarian tarts ever.

The Kentish Lady

We then hopped on the *Kentish Lady* owned and run by Nick and Linda Kennedy, for the Tuesday afternoon cruise to Allington Castle.

There is also the option of an hour's round trip between Maidstone and Allington Lock or a three hour cruise, with food, to Teston Lock.

It was a fine way to relax and enjoy the Kent countryside.

The new Medway Tow Path, which has been built for walkers and cyclists also provides an excellent way to enjoy the River in a very sustainable way.

www.kentishlady.co.uk





Hush Heath Estate Winery

Back roads and by-ways made easy by e-bike

Having become a convert to the e-bike during a trip to the French Alps, I found this equally enjoyable in rural Kent.

There are so many advantages to letting the bike take the strain when taking to two wheels.

To begin with it positively enhances, rather than dilutes, the pleasure of taking the back roads deep in to the Kent countryside with villages, woodlands, vineyards and farm land along the way.

And while cycling remains an invigorating exercise, the e-bike takes much of the more strenuous physical demands out of the equation.

E-biking therefore opens up the pleasures of cycling to anyone with an average fitness level and just a semblance of balance.

For while you pedal as you would a normal bike, when you do so the motor kicks in to assist.

There are also different power levels to meet any terrain, which is particularly useful for any hills.

There also provides the opportunity to travel longer distances with no nagging concern as to how tired one is going to feel come the end of the day.

The Electric Bike Centre

Ann and I hired our e-bikes from the UK Electric Bike Centre at based at Bloomsburys Biddenden.

The range of cycles on offer is extensive and the guys here really helpful in getting one kitted up and ready to go.

They will also suggest the best route given any time constraints and particular interests.

We were able to enjoy a day out on the e-bikes, and this enabled us to take in the stunning Sissinghurst Castle Garden (see below), glorious English countryside, a stop for a pub lunch and visits to the Hush Heath Estate and Biddenden wineries.

www.ukelectricbike.co.uk

Winemaking in Kent

Kent is home to some of the UK's leading wine producers and many of these are now geared up to exploit visitor interest with vineyard tours, wine tastings, restaurants and even accommodation available.

With similar soil and growing conditions to the French Champagne region, the county's vineyards are consistently producing fine sparkling wines.

Astride our e-bikes, we got to the Hush Heath Estate and Biddenden Vineyards.

Hush Heath Estate

Hush Heath Estate is a 400-acre family-owned Tudor estate that takes in ancient oak woodlands, apple orchards and vineyards.

The winery is the home to a range of award-winning English wines including Balfour Brut Rosé, one of the most exclusive English sparkling wines.



Its new visitor centre offers vineyard and winery tours and tastings, with sharing platters that complement the award-wines.

The estate also owns the Goudhurst Inn and The Tickled Trout, two local pubs come boutique hotels within 15 minutes of the winery.

www.hushheath.com

Biddenden Vineyards

Biddenden is a family run vineyard with second and third generations of the Barnes family now managing the estate.

Originally a 40 acre apple orchard, the family started to grow grapes in the late 1960s with, what was, one third of an acre of vines.

Today the vineyard covers 23 acres of south facing slopes in a sheltered valley, just outside the village of Biddenden.

Eleven different grape varieties are grown to produce a full range of white, rosé, red and sparkling English wines.

www.biddendenvineyards.com



Allington Castle

History and heritage comes to the fore in Kent

Kent has some of the most impressive and important castles and fortresses in the UK, and most of them can be visited year round.

Dover Castle, built in the aftermath of the Norman Conquest of 1066, is the largest castle in England and Rochester Castle, which was built by William de Corbeil when Archbishop of Canterbury, in 1127, is also among the country's best-preserved.

On our visit to rural Kent we were able to take in four architecturally spectacular castles with stunning grounds and gardens.

Leeds Castle is celebrating its 900th Centenary in 2019 and Hever Castle, which was the childhood home of Anne Boleyn, is nearly 700 years old.

Sissinghurst Castle Garden is Grade I listed on Historic England's register of historic parks and gardens and finally the 13th Century Allington Castle, which offers restricted opening hours.



Hever Castle



Leeds Castle

Leeds Castle, which is found in the village of Leeds some four miles from Maidstone, is one of the UK's best preserved historic castles in what is undoubtedly one of the finest settings.

Much play is made of it being heralded as 'the loveliest castle in the world' and, while I have been unable to determine by whom, there is much to justify this claim.

There is no doubting it is one of the most visited historic buildings in Britain.

To start with (as one does when visiting) are the 500 acres of lush green parkland. These begin with the Princess Alexandra Gardens, which lets visitors stroll to the Castle via the River Len.

Depending on the time of year there are a profusion of Daffodils, Narcissi and Anemones or Azaleas and Rhododendrons.

To the other side of the Castle is the Culpeper Garden, which is named after the family who owned it in the 17th century.

This very English garden features Roses, Lupins and Poppies along with more exotic blooms.

Moreover, the admission ticket allows you to visit as many times as you like for 12 months.

This enables many return visits for picnics in the parkland or taking in one or more of the Castle's many special events.

There are garden and flower festivals; classical and pop concerts; open air theatre, fireworks spectacles and medieval tournaments.



Although dating back to 1119, Leeds Castle has been altered and added to over the centuries.

In the 13th century it was a favoured residence of King Edward I and three hundred years later, Henry VIII gave it as a home to his first wife, Catherine of Aragon.

The property also served as a Jacobean country house and Georgian mansion.

But as with Sissinghurst and Allington (below) it was the driving and financial force of one person that, in more recent times, made sure we are able to enjoy Leeds Castle today.

The property was purchased and painstakingly restored during the mid 20th Century by Lady Baillie, the last private owner of Leeds Castle.

Lady Baillie also furnished the castle with a range of antiques, paintings and tapestries.

And finally, for those wanting to embrace Leeds Castle to the utmost, there are a range of accommodation options.

www.leeds-castle.com





Sissinghurst Castle Garden

The house and magnificent gardens that now comprise the Sissinghurst Castle Garden began life as a manor house in the 1530s by Sir John Baker, and for some two centuries it remained one of England's finest properties.

But, by the 18th century, the fortunes of Baker's descendants had waned and Sissinghurst Castle, as it was now called, became a prisoner-of-war camp in the Seven Years' War.

The prisoners showed little concern for the property and by the mid-19th century much of Sir John's original house had been demolished.

What remained was used as a workhouse and then as a working farm.

In 1930 Sissinghurst was bought by Vita Sackville-West, a successful poet and writer, and her husband Harold Nicolson and the couple devoted their lives to restoring the gardens.

With the eminent horticulturalists of the time they created, over thirty years, the Sissinghurst Castle Garden, with Vita cultivating some two hundred varieties of roses and large numbers of flowers and shrubs.

Following Sackville-West's death in 1962, the estate was donated to the National Trust.

Sissinghurst is now Grade I listed on Historic England's register of historic parks and gardens and one of the Trust's most popular properties.

The garden is divided into a series of rooms filled with informal arrangements of plants around themes that include the White Garden and Purple Border, the Rose and Herb Gardens and the Cottage Garden.

We had planned a 45 minute visit, spent double that time and could happily have stayed another couple of hours in these wonderfully serene gardens.

www.nationaltrust.org.uk/sissinghurst-castle-garden

Hever Castle



Hever Castle, which is located in the village of Hever, was first built in 1270 but came to prominence some two hundred and thirty years later when it was the seat of the Boleyn family.

Anne Boleyn, the second (of six) queens of Tudor King Henry VIII of England, spent her childhood there and Hever also passed to Henry's fourth wife, Anne of Cleves.

Hever Castle & Gardens offers visitors the chance to learn more about the Tudors and also about the Astor family, who owned the Castle for 80 years from 1903.

Along with three floors of antique furniture there is Anne Boleyn's prayer books, instruments of torture, and a large collection of Tudor paintings.

There are also landscaped grounds and ornamental gardens along with a yew maze, planted in 1904.

An annual events programme including Hever in Bloom and jousting tournaments and archery displays.

www.hevercastle.co.uk

Allington Castle



The stone built and moated Allington Castle, which was built during the early 12th century, was replaced by a fortified manor house in the 13th century and altered and extended over the following two hundred years.

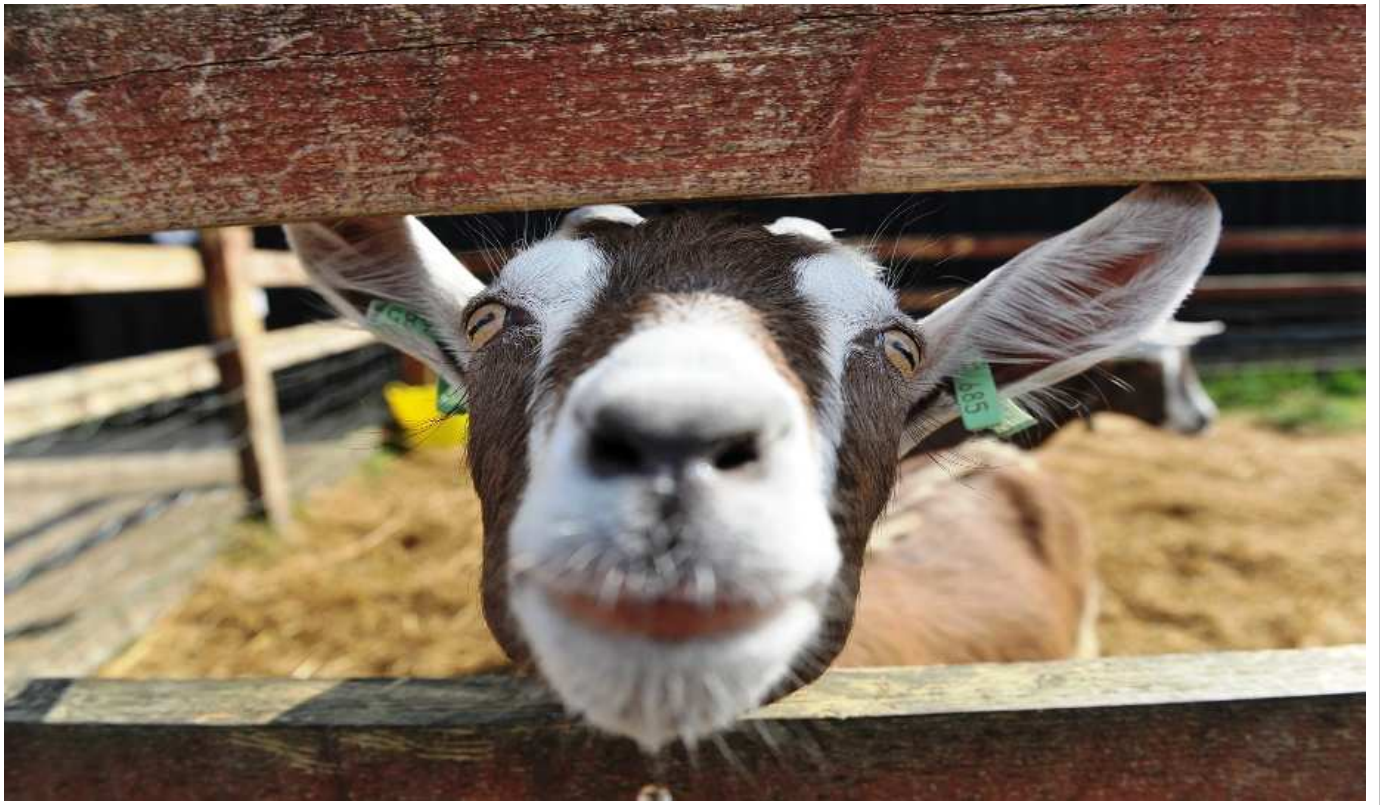
The castle gradually fell into decline and was little more than a ruin come the 20th century, when it was saved and restored by Sir Martin Conway and his wife over the next fifty years.

A community of friars and nuns then occupied the castle until it was purchased, in 1999, by Sir Robert Worcester, the founder of the MORI polling company.

The grade I listed building remains Worcester's private home with no public access.

Except on Tuesday afternoons when the Kentish Lady takes passengers on a river trip down the Medway for a private tour of the castle.

www.allington-castle.com and
www.kentishlady.co.uk



A celebration of all that's best in Kent Life



Kent Life, which is a 28 acre heritage farm park and open-air museum located at Allington Locks, on the east bank of the River Medway, is a family friendly place that is particularly popular with children.

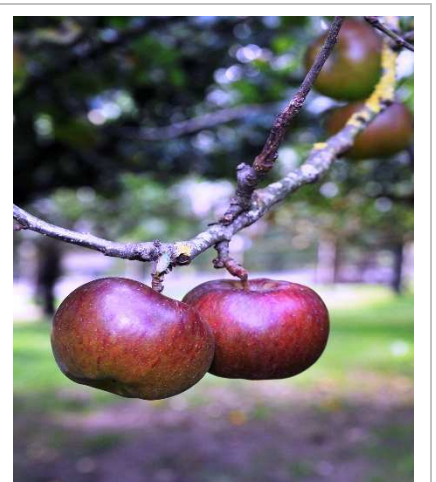
Its farm showcases and breeds traditional farm animals including sheep, cows, pigs, horses, rabbits, goats, ducks and chickens.

In September, there's the chance to pick hops by hand, and see the last working coal-fired Oast House, which is fired up for the weekend of the annual Hops 'n' Harvest Beer Festival.

The Vintage Village comprises buildings gathered from across the county and lets visitors appreciate what life would have been like during World War II.

The Kent Owl Academy has 12 different species on view, and annual events include the Hops 'n' Harvest Beer Festival and Apple and Cider Fayre

www.kentlife.org.uk





History, grandeur, beauty and country comfort

By Ann Mealor

Approached Chilston Park down an impressive tree lined avenue, we found this mansion had everything you could ask for from a country house hotel.

It is in 22 acres of stunning parkland, with manicured lawns swept down to a lake, a circular fountain in front of the house, ornamental trees marking the pathways and views extended over the Kent countryside.

Inside was just as spectacular.

A sweeping oak staircase

A magnificent oak staircase swept up to the first floor galleried landing and gilt framed portraits of past lords, ladies and viscounts decorated the deep rose coloured walls.

The narrow hallway leading to our bedroom was crammed with antiques – an oak writing bureau, a heavy chest, porcelain vases and prints filled every inch of the walls.

Our room

Our room was elegant with a huge, traditional four poster bed.

Decorated in creams and golds and furnished with a chic Edwardian sofa, a small, stylish table and chairs and an original fireplace, over which hung an elaborate, gold mirror.



Heavily draped sash windows overlooked the glorious grounds and the marble bathroom was large, light and airy.

Gowns and slippers were provided, as were high quality, environmentally friendly Gilchrist & Soames toiletries, made especially for the hotel.

I was also pleased to see a good selection of in-room tea and coffee.

As a guest, you are encouraged to treat the house as your own.

And people did, chatting over a drink or afternoon tea in the Marble Lounge or reading the newspapers by the fireplace at the bottom of the grand staircase.



Breakfast

We had breakfast each morning in the charming two AA Rosette Culpeper's Restaurant.

Located in the original dining room of the house, the restaurant has a wealth of original features and furnishings including elegant sash windows, a decorative ceiling and fireplace, grandfather clocks, white linen table clothes, silver cutlery, sparkling glassware and country vistas.

There couldn't be a better place for a hearty breakfast to kickstart the day.

We enjoyed freshly made mushroom, cheese and tomato omelettes; a traditional full English with Cumberland sausage, back bacon and fried eggs and a very tasty vegetarian version.

The hot selection also included grilled Manx kipper and homemade pancakes with vanilla cream and seasonal fruits.

There was also a continental selection with fresh fruit, cereals, yoghurt, croissants, Kentish apple juice, Kent honey, a freshly made smoothie, homemade strawberry jam, jasmine infused apricots and cold meats and cheeses.

I was spoilt for choice and wanted to try everything, which I think I did during the stay.

We did not get to dine at Chilston Park but I am sure it would have been splendid.

We couldn't have stayed in a better place for a weekend exploring the Maidstone countryside.



More information

www.handpickedhotels.co.uk/chilstonpark





Dining in town and country

By Ann Mealor

During our rural Kent visit we were lucky enough to dine out in town and country.

Frederic's, Maidstone

Frederic's, in the centre of Maidstone is one of the most popular restaurants around. We went there on a Wednesday evening and the place was buzzing and filled with chatter.

Waiters were zipping round handing out menus, taking orders and pouring wine.

Frederic's, named after the youngest son of owners, Ulric and Sarah Allsebrook, has the feel of a typical French brasserie – red checked table cloths, wooden floors, bistro chairs, *Charles Trenet* playing in the background and candles in wine (and gin) bottles.

Ulric, Chef Patron is passionate about using good quality ingredients, seasonal produce and local suppliers wherever possible.

And this shows in the food.

I started with mussels in a bacon and mushroom cream sauce.

There was plenty of them, but I managed to polish them all off.

Ashley chose the sautéed wild mushroom on brioche with white wine sauce and hazelnuts.

Topped with green pea shoots, it looked a picture on the plate.

For mains, I went for the fillet steak with a piquant pepper sauce, crisp salad and hot and crunchy fries.

Ashley chose the pan roasted cod fillet with spring onion potato cake and a fennel and samphire lemon beurre blanc.

The fish was particularly sweet, the sauce light and the mix of flavours worked well together, enhancing the delicate flavour of the cod.



I was really looking forward to trying the desserts as I had spotted a superb selection of colourful pastries, oozing cream, in the window as I came in.

All were homemade and designed by Chef Pâtissière, Sarah Allsebrook.

After much deliberation, as they all sounded mouthwatering, I opted for the Millefeuille and Ashley chose the raspberry and pistachio tart.

I tried both, and they were delicious and worth the calories.



A new wine and cheese bar has recently opened alongside the restaurant. Over 350 French wines can be sampled and enjoyed along with 30 different French cheeses.

Again, the wine bar was busy and bustling whilst we were there, with diners enjoying a little piece of the Dordogne in the heart of Maidstone.

www.fredericbistro.com



The Black Horse Inn, Thurnham

Our country dining experience was in The Black Horse Inn, a wonderfully atmospheric hostelry.

The Inn has offered food, drink, bed and breakfast for weary travellers for hundreds of years.

It is on the historic Pilgrims Way, the route the Pilgrims took between Winchester and Canterbury, to the shrine of Thomas Beckett, as mentioned in Chaucer's 'Canterbury Tales'.

Large, yet intimate with cosy nooks and crannies, leaded window panes, weathered wooden beams, old images and photos on the walls, copper kettles, leather bound books, tartan cushions, open log fires, winged back snoozing chairs, newspapers and other antiques all work hard to make you feel more than at home.

Most impressive of all though are the glorious dried hops that decorate the entire Inn ceiling, like the mossy lining of a snug birds nest.

The food at the Black Horse tastes as good as the Inn looks.

All produce is locally sourced, from high quality suppliers; the meat comes from a butcher just a mile down the road. A selection of traditional English dishes as well as an impressive ale and wine list draws diners in from all over the county.

Four hand pumps offer a variety of local ales from breweries such as Whitstable, Westerham, Old Dairy and Musket.



The wine list includes several award winning English wines, including those from Chapel Down on the Weald of Kent.

I enjoyed a starter of plump chilli, ginger and garlic prawns with a creamy lime mayonnaise and toasted coriander bread. Ashley went for the chervil salmon gravadlax with a flavour filled fennel, cucumber and horseradish remoulade and caper dressing.

For mains, I tucked in to a fillet of beef boardelaise, dauphinoise potatoes, sauteed spinach and asparagus spears. It was absolutely delicious and the best meat I have tasted for a long time. The beef was perfectly cooked to my liking, medium-well, but still soft and juicy.



I ate every bit of this lip-smacking dish and savoured every mouthful.

Ashley decided on one of the specials – fish, chips and mushy peas. The fish was large, the peas were smooth, the beer batter crunchy, the chips crisp and plentiful. Ashley was happy.

We still managed to fit in a dessert, I had a sticky toffee pudding and Ashley had a showy, yet zesty, lemon meringue and blueberry sundae.

We left the Inn, as many a traveller before us, extremely well fed and watered.

www.blackhorsekent.co.uk

A snapshot of the rural Kent



AllWays traveller and the International Travel Writers Alliance



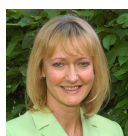
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www.itwalliance.com



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