

Margate, Kent UK

www.allwaystraveller.com

So much to do beside the seaside

Margate, which is a coastal town in the eastern part of the English county of Kent, has enjoyed a long seafaring and maritime tradition.

But it was the arrival of the railway, in 1863, that saw the town become a classic British seaside destination.

For the next 100 years, Londoners flocked *down to Margate* on day trips or for the annual family holiday.

They were happy to escape the grime of the capital for Margate's bracing breeze and sea bathing.

While other, nearby resorts, attracted the more affluent holidaymaker, Margate cornered the market for working class fun and frivolity.

And thrived on this seaside fare until the 1960s and the arrival of the low cost package holiday to the sunshine resorts of southern Europe.

The challenging Kent coastal weather lost its appeal and Margate staggered into a steep decline.

But, in recent years the resort has enjoyed a genuine renaissance and resurgence with the new Turner Gallery and revitalised old town supporting Margate's traditional seaside offering to tremendous effect.

www.visitthanet.co.uk

Ashley Gibbins

Managing editor
AllWays traveller



A personal view of Margate



Third time lucky – so pleased I persisted

By Ashley Gibbins

When we decided to take a break in Margate, I agreed with some reluctance. For I had vowed never to return to the town. Twice!

My first visit was in the late 1970s, when I drove eight hours from the west country for a 20 minute job interview - that I failed to get.

It rained non-stop and my very quick, post interview, tour of the town, before getting back in the car, did not inspire.

Regardless of the inclement weather Margate had obviously seen better days.

I remember the town seemingly feeling very sorry for itself.

The sea front looked as though it had 'given up the ghost', its days as a premier resort long gone.

The 'mods' and 'rockers'

At that time Margate was still tainted for staging the 'bank holiday' confrontations between the 'mods' and 'rockers'.

The 'mods' were clean cut youths, wearing suits and riding scooters. The 'rockers' built their culture and reputation around the motorcycle and leather gear.

These two culturally contrasting groups liked nothing better than to be beside the seaside - but for a riotous 'punch-up' rather than a fun-filled day out.

The Margate seafront saw a series of pitched battles between the two groups with the police sandwiched in large numbers between them, trying in vain to keep the peace.

And the lure of the sun

While the 'dire national press' this generated was a blow to the resort's family friendly attraction, it was cheap holiday's in Spain, Portugal and Greece that brought the town to its knees.

As a traditional seaside destination, how could Margate expect to compete with the lure of the new Mediterranean hotspots.

They offered wall to wall sunshine, clear blue sea, soft golden sand and even British beer and all English breakfasts.

Driving back home, feeling totally dejected at my rejection, I vowed never to return to Margate.

Back once again

But return to Margate I did, in the mid 1980s, when staff at the London Council I worked for had their annual 'Beano' to Margate.

As was the tradition, this involved drinking on the coach trip down and in a shabby pub on arrival.

With UK pubs closing (at that time) for the afternoon, it was fish and chips and a deckchair nap on the beach until reopening time – and more drinking.

You may have guessed this is not my idea of a good day out.

As we travelled back to London, I strenuously reinforced my vow never to return to Margate.

While in the area

The Thanet area of Kent takes in Margate, Broadstairs and Ramsgate and offers 15 beaches and bays, seven with Blue Flags and three with Seaside Awards.

Although the three resorts are a short drive from each other they each have a distinct character.

Margate

Margate's renaissance focussed on in this feature) has brought a thriving, vibrant arts scene to the town, led by the opening of the world-class Turner Contemporary gallery.

Broadstairs



This Victorian seaside town offers a cliff top promenade, winding lanes, hidden cobbled squares and fishermen's harbour cottages

Charles Dickens enjoyed visiting and wrote : *You cannot think how delightful and fresh the place is and how good the walks.*

Folk Week in August attracts visitors from all over the world and the Broadstairs Food Festival in October celebrates Kent's fine produce and culinary talent.

www.visitbroadstairs.co.uk

Ramsgate



This classic seaside town, with the UK's only Royal Harbour, has sweeping Georgian terraces and splendid Regency squares.

Active Ramsgate offers cycling routes, walking trails, golf courses and boat trips, with RIB Request, Sea Searcher or Galleon Cruises.

www.visitramsgate.com

Here we go. Here we go. Here we go – again!

But now, some 30 years later, here I was driving down to Margate - yet again.

And it was raining, yet again - heavily.

Not wishing to keep anyone in suspense I can say we had an absolutely splendid time.

Seldom was a case of third time lucky more appropriate.

A change for the Better

Into the 21st-century, the 'powers that be' in Margate realised the town was well beyond its 'sell-by' date.

As a resort Margate could still exploit its coastal location close to London, but this would not be enough.

However, introduce a world-class contemporary art gallery, regenerate the historic old town and develop a coastal cycle route - now there's a package worth selling.

And this is just what Margate has done.

People make places

I am forever saying that *people make places*, and nowhere is this more true than Margate.

Maybe it's because this area was once an island and islanders have a proud and passionate togetherness in speaking at the place they live.

Margate is located on what is still referred to as the Isle of Thanet, because this part of Kent was at one time separated from the 'mainland' by the river Wantsum.

A fine greeting

And so it was that on our arrival we met Richard who is a 'Kent greeter'.



The greeter service is a worldwide one whereby volunteers offer a free welcome to a destination via a guided walk around.

It's a great way to get to know an area and, where available, should be the first thing to do on arrival.

For us Richard was tremendous taking us on a short and so interesting tour of the town.

Thanks to Richard we got our bearings and were able to plan what to do during the rest of our stay.

www.visitkent.co.uk/Kent-greeter

And in Margate



Entertainment

The Theatre Royal

One of the UK's oldest theatres, the Theatre Royal Margate offers a wide ranging programme of professional productions, concerts and community entertainment.

www.theatreroyalMargate.com

The Winter Gardens

Set on the cliff tops, this venue stages a wide range of concerts and entertainments throughout the year.

www.margatewintergardens.com

The Tom Thumb Theatre

The Tom Thumb, one of the smallest theatres in the world, in a former coach house, stages comedy nights, burlesque, off-beat cinema and live music.

www.tomthumbtheatre.co.uk

Attractions

The Tudor House



We also took in the Tudor House, one of Margate's oldest buildings, which dates from the first half of the 16th century.

The house gives a glimpse of life during Tudor times, but it was Cliff, another Margate resident, who made the visit memorable.

Cliff is a self-taught harpsichord musician who performs traditional Elizabethan sonnets while the house is open to the public.

Cliff also plays Victorian music hall classics at the Lifeboat inn (see below).

www.visitthanet.co.uk/attractions

The Turner Contemporary

First stop was the *Turner Contemporary*, which overlooks the sea and sands and has, perhaps, been the single key component in Margate's revival.

The gallery to JMW Turner is appropriate as it is located on the site of a one time bed and breakfast run by Sophia Booth where Turner would stay.

While here, he is known to remark that *the loveliest skies in Europe are over the Isle of Thanet.*

This internationally acclaimed modern art gallery opened in 2011 and has, since then, attracted over 1.5 million visitors attracted by its premier exhibitions and creative activities.

www.turnercontemporary.org



The knock on effect

The opening of the *Turner Contemporary* has been a magnet for the independent art galleries and studios that are now clustered in Margate's historic old town.

Strolling this area one can view the works of international, national and local artists across a range of media or browse the antique shops.

www.visitthanet.co.uk/things-to-do/galleries.

From one extreme to another

Having had our senses tested to the limits by a hugely popular, thought provoking, exhibition by *Grason Perry* at the Turner, we strolled through to the Margate Museum.

In complete contrast to the Turner, the town's museum is a ramshackle collection everything Margate, and housed in a Georgian building that was the Town Hall, police station and magistrate's court.

A gem of a place, it closed in 2006, when the local authority decided it could no longer be funded.

With its collection destined for who knows what, a group of passionate residents agreed to run the museum on a volunteer basis.



Margate Museum

They reopened in 2011 on the back of the opening of the Turner and have been rewarded with 40,000 plus visitors every year since then.

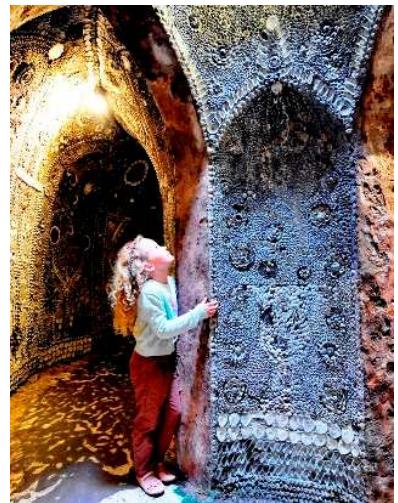
This is real gem located in the former Mayor's parlour, police station and magistrate's court.

Its rooms are filled, floor to ceiling, with a ramshackle collection of displays and memorabilia that recognises Margate's history and its wartime experiences.

On our visit we met Sue and Rick, two of the volunteers who devote their time and enthusiasm to keeping this place open. There can be no finer ambassadors for Margate.

www.margatemuseum.wordpress.com

The Shell Grotto



The grotto is an underground passage whose walls are covered with intricate patterns made up of millions of shells.

Its meanings and origins have never been conclusively determined.

www.shellgrotto.co.uk

The Walpole Bay Hotel and Museum



The Walpole Bay Hotel and Museum gives guests and visitors the chance to glimpse a bygone era.

This historic Margate hotel was built for discerning guests in 1914, extended in 1927 and is now being restored to her former glory by the Bishop family.

www.walpolebayhotel.co.uk

Annual events in Margate

Margate stages a range of annual events including :

Margate Beach Cross
March and October/November

Margate Beach Cross sees the towns Main Sands transformed into a course for motocross bikes and quads.

www.margatebeachcross.com

The Viking Coastal Trail



Lili's place : part home from home, part work of art

While the Turner and old town is spearheading Margate's new found allure I would also urge getting on two wheels and cycling the Viking Coastal Trail, or at least part of it.

This is a relaxingly active way to spend a day or half-day.

The 32 mile trail for cyclists, and indeed walkers, starts at Margate promenade and travels around a coastline of white cliffs.



The Viking Coastal Trail

Along the way there are ample chances to stop for a cup of tea, lunch or just to watch others enjoying being beside the seaside.

The beach hut community

Along the trail one comes across clusters of beach huts that offers the opportunity for families lucky enough to have one, to have a presence with a sea view.

Many are colourfully decorated with a pride, passion and artist's eye.

Westgate-on-Sea

It was while on the Westgate-on-Sea stretch of the Viking Trail that we met Lili Sanchez who has turned her beach hut into a veritable work of art.

Singing its praises

Lili spends much of her time, year round, in her beloved hut and needs no second chance to sing the praises of this part of Kent.

Having spent a while chatting to Lili she later took time to email how much Westgate means to her.

"I ramble on about Westgate-on-Sea but I so love our little town", she wrote.

"It is a hidden gem, as you will see if you visit. I highly recommend Frederick's for their coffee and 'delish' cakes.

"Our Town Hall building and the cinema are quite something too."

Beside the seaside - beside the sea

While I have been singing the praises of Margate off the seafront, this is still a seaside resort.

And, when the weather is fine, the beach becomes a magnet for mums and dads looking to snooze in the sun while their youngsters happily building sandcastles - and splashing around in the sea.

As generations of families have done before.

MargateMeltdown

(May)

MargateMeltdown is a major motorcycle ride from the Ace Café, London, to Margate for a celebration of motorcycles and memorabilia, music and entertainments.

www.acecafeevents.com/margate

Skagate

(July)



Skagate Festival celebrates the historical connection of Margate to the British Skinhead subculture and its continued relationship with the original late 50's Jamaican music genre known as Ska.

Spread across central Margate this family festival brings together the old and modern genres with Live & Dj performances, fashion, photography and film.

www.skagate.com

Margate SoulWeekend and Carnival

(August)



The Margate SoulWeekend and Carnival attracts visitors from across the world who enjoy the best of soul music and the resort's traditional seaside carnival filled with colourful floats.

www.margatesoulweekend.co.uk

Dreamland : the golden age of the seaside



If one attraction epitomizes Margate's heyday as a seaside resort, while also pointing to proof of its bright future it could well be Dreamland.

The amusement park offered 'rides, slides and roundabouts' when opening in 1880, and 'packed 'em in' when, in 1920 the (now Grade II* listed) Scenic Railway wooden rollercoaster was unveiled.

Over the years Dreamland developed into a grand seafront 'fun fair' before hitting the same hard times as the rest of the resort and closing, a shadow of its former self, in 2003.

The site became derelict although the listed status of the roller coaster meant this could not be dismantled.

And it provided the focus for a community campaign, supported by the local council, to see Dreamland saved.

In 2015 Dreamland reopened its doors to an amusement park that included 17 restored vintage rides, a roller disco and pleasure gardens.

The Lifeboat

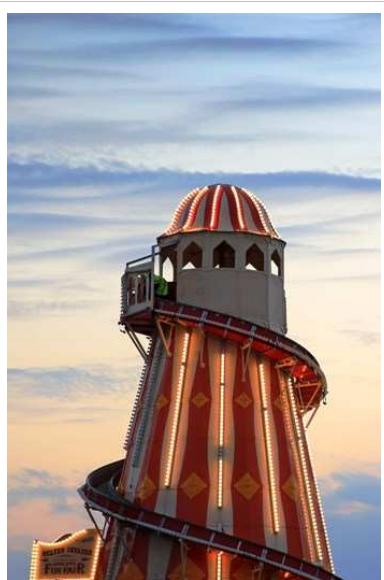
And finally, a particular mention for the Lifeboat Inn.

My love of the 'old English' pub is well known, so I was always going to warm to the Lifeboat.

Sawdust on the floor and real ale and cider standing in the stacked barrels.

Not sure what to choose? No problem, taste as many as you need to before deciding.

Live music comes from a string of favourites including Cliff and his music hall repertoire.



When the scenic railway reopens Dreamland will become a veritable living museum/cum thrilling, colourful fairground that celebrates the golden age of the British seaside.

www.dreamland.co.uk



Playing the spoons and singing along to music hall standards with a glass or two of Kent's makes for a truly memorable evening.

www.thelifeboat-margate.com

Quex Park

A short drive from Margate is Quex Park, and a memorable and very enjoyable half-day it offers.



The park itself comprises 250 acres of delightfully landscaped parkland and gardens, with the old walled garden providing a particularly colourful and serene stroll through.

In addition, Quex House, the ancestral home of the Powell-Cotton's is also open to the public with rooms decorated with oriental and English period furniture.

But it is the Powell-Cotton Museum, housed in an adjacent, purpose building, that offers a thought-provoking, if somewhat macabre, experience.

This is held as, one of the most impressive Natural History dioramas in Europe.

In 1896, Major Percy Horace Gordon Powell-Cotton founded the museum to display his collection of mammals and artefacts, which were acquired on his expeditions to Africa and Asia.

The animals were shot in very (some might think obscenely) large numbers, shipped back to England and mounted by the noted taxidermist Rowland Ward.

The Powell-Cotton Museum has three very large galleries of stuffed animals comprising more than 500 African and Asian animals, which are displayed in reconstructions of their natural habitats.

Although there is something fundamentally disturbing about viewing so many majestic creatures killed so they could be viewed 'lifelike' by Powell-Cotton and his wealthy friends, it must be remembered this was a different era.

One positive outcome is that the skins of the slaughtered animals now offer zoologists very valuable DNA evidence with which to 'trail' the species.

Other galleries at the museum display Powell-Cotton's vast collection of African, Asian and European artefacts, firearms and weapons and porcelain.

www.quexpark.co.uk

A place to stay in Margate : The Sands Hotel



The Sands is a boutique hotel on the seafront with a rooftop that has one of the best sunset views in the area.

Like much of Margate, the property had become derelict until bought at auction in 2011 by Nick Conington.

Nick's original plan was to turn the building into luxury apartments.

After discovering the property had been a hotel at the end of the 19th Century, Nick decided instead, to turn it back into a hotel.

Over the past two years, it has been restored to its former splendour.

The hotel's jazz evenings are very popular.

www.sandshotelmargate.co.uk



And a place to eat : The Ambrette, Margate

By Ann Mealor

With Margate better known for fish and chips and other British seaside fare, it was a surprise to find *The Ambrette*, an Anglo-Indian, Michelin recommended restaurant.

Using local ingredients including seaweed, the menu created by owner and chef Dev Biswal is hugely creative.

The Ambrette has secured quite a name for itself – and its easy to see why.

Our evening began with a complimentary pre-starter - a red lentil and onion dumpling, topped with mango and tamarind chutney, sweetened yoghurt and a tiny popadom.

A pleasant surprise, spicy and delicious.

Ashley and I both chose a starter of sea bass, served with fish cake, seafood raita and sundried shrimps.

The portions were generous and nicely presented; the fish fresh and the mix of flavours and textures worked so well.

Then came a second *compliments of the chef* - a delightful lentil soup with tiny bread rolls with turmeric and chilli butter.

I then chose free range British belly pork with stir fried broccoli, spiced apple chutney and pickle, spiced dauphinoise potatoes, home-made crackling and a malt vinegar and garlic wine sauce.



The crackling was crispy without being tough and the pork was juicy and succulent, the broccoli, crunchy and spicy.

The flavours were wonderful.

Ashley went for the fresh fish of the day, hake steamed in banana leaves with locally grown sea spinach.

This was served with cured fish, mung lentil kedgeree, kale, pickled fennel, parmesan crisp with a South Indian spice and coconut sauce.

It was a deliciously powerful combination of flavours.

Our tasty, generously portioned mains were followed by our third complimentary dish - a refreshing orange and mango sorbet with zingy popping candy!

I really enjoyed these small, but perfectly formed, extra dishes from the chef.

Even though we both thought we couldn't eat another thing, we managed to scrape the dish of our final course, a Kent pear and star anise crumble with warm masala chai custard.

A dining experience

Dining at *The Ambrette* was a very enjoyable experience – one couple we met had dined there over 30 times!

The quality of the food is excellent and it is warming to appreciate the ethos of supporting local suppliers and the community.

The Ambrette has a senior citizen privilege card, a text club for special offers and it supplies freshly cooked food weekly to a Cliftonville community centre for local homeless people.

Dining here really is one very good reason to go down to Margate.

www.theambrette.co.uk

A snapshot of Margate



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Ashley Gibbins is a professional travel writer and photographer and Chief Executive of the International Travel Writers Alliance.



Ann Mealor is a professional travel writer and photographer and Commissioning Editor of *AllWays traveller*.