

Share the lifestyle

Love to be beside the seaside? It's not simply the salt air that refreshes your spirits. Kent's diverse coastal panoramas – elegant seafronts and promenades, bright beach huts and twisting streets – work their distinctive magic, too. Be surprised by mysterious maritime landmarks, intrigued by seafarers' forts, inspired by futuristic eco-building. Each new setting takes you away from the 24/7 and it's so quick and easy to be here. So come for a weekend or short break, tour coastal treasures and grand designs. Escape and find your own space.

Enjoy a coastal 'architour'

Each townscape tells a story through its architecture: of fashionable society come to take the waters or smugglers creeping at dead of night. Enjoy a coastal 'architour' of Kent and share the varied heritage. Make Canterbury your gateway, beginning with the thrilling statement in stone that is Canterbury Cathedral. Look up to the sprays of rib vaulting in the 14th-century Perpendicular Gothic nave and feel your imagination soar with such daring medieval design. Then let curiosity be your compass as you browse the cobbled streets of one of the oldest cities with a continuous history.

For total contrast, hire a bike (or bring your own) and cycle the 7.5-mile Crab and Winkle Way to Whitstable, admiring fascinating modern sculptures and medieval earthworks as you go. Suddenly, you're in a delightful harbour town of weather boarded cottages, smugglers' dwellings and winding lanes. Seafood and quirky-chic vistas: the perfect match for lunch or a leisurely evening meal. Drift along the coast, past Victorian hotspot Herne Bay with its pier, to Margate for a toe-dip in tradition – and a surprise or two.

Stretch out on the sands and soak up the very essence of the English seaside: the Edwardian favourites are still here, rock shops, ice-cream and seafood stalls, now enlivened by a revitalised Old Town. Walk the prom, consult the Victorian clock tower, visit the casino or relax in the Winter Gardens. At Walpole Bay you'll find one of the last tidal swimming pools to be built and there's Regency luxury to view at Quex House, Birchington.

But Margate's most curious 'architreature' is the Shell Grotto, uncovered in 1835. Ancient temple or Regency folly? Descend the chalk stairway and see for yourself the 2,000 sq ft of mosaic created from 4.6 million shells, depicting gods and trees of life.

On, then, past North Foreland Lighthouse to Broadstairs, where you can take a seafront time-walk following the development of the resort: beginning with the Georgian bow-fronted houses of Eldon Place, taking in restored gardens and promenade, and ending with the decorative late Victorian buildings of Victoria Parade. 'Fresh breezes – fine sands – pleasant walks,' was how Charles Dickens recorded the delights of his favourite coastal getaway. Stay, like him, and recharge your batteries. His bolthole, Bleak House, peers over a typical postcard sweep of beachside buildings.

Neighbouring Ramsgate reveals handsome terraces and squares of Regency villas built to cater for high society who came to play (it's even quicker to reach from London, these days, of course). The 19th-century architect Augustus Pugin, leader of the Gothic Revival, knew and loved the town from visits in his youth, declaring in

1844: 'I would give anything to get to Ramsgate.' He designed a house for himself, The Grange, which has recently been restored by the Landmark Trust and is now open for holiday lets. Try it out. And while you're here, follow the unique Pugins town trail from east to west cliffs, linking the splendid buildings designed or associated with the talented Pugin family.

Slipping south along the coast, we come next to Sandwich. Here you'll find not only the highest density of listed buildings in any English town, but also the greatest number of medieval structures. Pick up a free town trail leaflet from the Visitor Information Centre and unlock some secrets. Amble past the half-timbered houses of Strand Street and homes renovated in inimitable style by 16th-century Dutch and Flemish Protestants who had fled Catholic Spanish oppression.

A few miles more and Deal beckons with further proof of a coastal heritage that's cherished. The Middle Street Conservation Area is a maze of quiet, unspoilt streets, and everywhere you'll spot contrasts of building periods and materials. Bring your paints or camera: the variety of viewpoints gives superb light and shadow effects.

The town is proud of its pier, too, dating from 1954 and internationally recognised as an angling venue. While other piers in England have dwindled away, Deal's continues to be improved and is a National Piers Society 'Pier of the Year' winner. Latest developments include a striking new café, the subject of a competition organised by the Royal Institute of British Architects. Kent's land- and seascapes constantly inspire artists – see what they do for you.

There's a new landmark at St Margaret's Bay as well, in the lovely Pines Garden where lake, waterfall, grass labyrinth and art installations offer imaginative escape. The Pines Calyx events space is built to an environmentally friendly design combining traditional techniques with 21st-century technology. And it's hailed as 'one of Europe's most sustainable and healthy structures'. What do you think? A fusion of graceful curves and natural light, it certainly gives a lead as one of England's most energy-efficient buildings.

Maybe there's something in the air of White Cliffs Country that stimulates innovative ideas, because just a short distance away is South Foreland Lighthouse. The white-painted Victorian sentinel high above the sea was built in 1843 to warn ships navigating the infamous Goodwin Sands. Both Marconi and Faraday used it for their pioneering work in wireless telegraphy and electricity. Marconi made his first ship to shore and international radio transmissions here. Climb the tower with a guide and you'll hear all about it – and get superb views across the Channel.

We continue our coastal route via Dover's Georgian seafront to Folkestone, whose Edwardian seaside vibe is invigorated by the burgeoning Creative Quarter around the cobbled Old High Street. Stroll the mile-long cliff-top promenade, The Leas, already an established focus of visionary townscaping with its manicured lawns and views. Complete your architour exploring Hythe and Dymchurch. Discover in Hythe a tale of two towns, the charming old part of mainly 18th-century houses and the Victorian resort. Then hop on the Romney, Hythe and Dymchurch miniature steam railway for jaunty family seaside scenes at Dymchurch – maybe get out your bucket and spade to build a castle or two on the vast, sandy beach.

For more information see www.visitkent.co.uk