

Cumbria & the Lake District



If it's grandstand views you're looking for, nowhere in England can measure up to the dumbfounding drama of Cumbria and the Lake District. Wedged against the Scottish border, trammelled by the Yorkshire Dales and the grey rollers of the Irish Sea, it's a place where the superlatives run dry – home to the nation's longest and deepest lakes, as well as the smallest church, steepest road, highest town and loftiest peak in England. The great glaciers which carved out this landscape during the last ice age have long since melted, leaving behind a spectacular string of razor crags, scree-strewn fells and sparkling tarns that form the heart of one of England's original national parks – the stunning Lake District, founded in 1951 and still the spiritual heartland of English hiking.

With so much natural splendour on show, it's hardly surprising that Cumbria and the Lake District is one of northern England's busiest corners. Over 14 million visitors flock to the national park every year to explore its hilltop trails, literary landmarks and lakeside towns, and on summer weekends that cloudlike feeling can feel frustratingly elusive. But even on the busiest days it's possible to find some solitude in the county's lesser-known corners – the lush and little-visited Eden Valley, the seaside ports and wind-battered sands of the umbrian coast, or the bleakly beautiful moorland of eastern Cumbria. And if all else fails you can always take refuge in a solid old Lakeland inn for a pint of homebrewed ale and a hearty plate of tattie hotpot, Cumberland sausage or Herdwick lamb. Reet grand, as they'd say round these 'ere parts...

HIGHLIGHTS

- Conquering William Wordsworth's favourite mountain, **Helvellyn** (p732) or England's highest peak, **Scafell Pike** (p729)
- Plumbing the gloomy depths of the **Honister Slate Mine** (p730)
- Escaping the outside world in the remote valleys of **Wastwater** (p723) and **Eskdale** (p722)
- Chowing down on some first-class Cumbrian cooking at Hawkshead's **Drunken Duck** (p718) or Penrith's **Yanwath Gate Inn** (p741)
- Watching the wild ospreys at **Bassenthwaite Lake** (p725)
- Cruising Coniston Water aboard the steam yacht **Gondola** (p720)



■ POPULATION: 496,200

■ AREA: 2629 SQ MILES

■ NUMBER OF LAKE DISTRICT PEAKS
OVER 900M: 5

History

The earliest settlers arrived in the Lake District 5000 years ago, building stone circles like Castlerigg (p727) and quarrying flint and stone around Stonethwaite and Seatoller. The region was subsequently occupied by Celts, Angles, Vikings and Romans, and during the Dark Ages marked the centre of the kingdom of Rheged, which extended across much of modern Cumbria, Dumfries and Galloway, and was annexed by neighbouring Northumbria sometime in the 8th century.

During the Middle Ages Cumbria marked the start of 'The Debatable Lands', the wild frontier between England and Scotland. Bands of Scottish raiders known as Border Reivers regularly plundered the area, prompting the construction of distinctive *pele* towers, built to protect the inhabitants from border raiders, and the stout fortresses at Carlisle, Penrith and Kendal.

The area was a centre for the Romantic movement during the 19th century, and writers including Coleridge, de Quincey and William Wordsworth were among the first to champion the area's natural beauty above its potential for industrial resources (a cause taken up by other literary luminaries including John Ruskin and Beatrix Potter). The Lake District became one of the nation's first national parks in 1951, and the modern county of Cumbria was formed from the old districts of Cumberland and Westmorland in 1974.

Activities

CYCLING

Cycling is popular in Cumbria, especially mountain biking on the fells, but you'll need nerves (and legs) of steel on the more challenging routes. Cycle-hire shops are widespread, and tourist offices stock a cycling map showing traffic-free routes; bike hire starts at around £15 to £18 per day.

Long-distance bikers can follow the 72-mile **Cumbria Way** (www.cumbriawaycycleroute.co.uk) between Ulverston, Keswick and Carlisle, and the Cumbrian section of the 140-mile **Sea to Sea Cycle Route** (C2C; www.c2c-guide.co.uk) from Whitehaven via the northern Lake District en route to the North Pennines and Newcastle.

WALKING

For many people, hiking on the fells is the main reason for a Lake District visit. Trails range from low-level rambles to full-blown moun-

tain ascents; most tourist offices sell maps and guidebooks, including the Collins *Lakeland Fellranger* and Ordnance Survey's *Pathfinder Guides*, as well as Alfred Wainwright's classic hand-drawn, seven-volume set, *A Pictorial Guide to the Lakeland Fells*. If you're planning on anything more than a low-level stroll in the Lakes – especially if you're heading into the high fells – a decent quality map is absolutely essential. Walkers have a choice of two map publishers – traditionalists generally opt for the Ordnance Survey 1:25000 *Landranger* series, which are renowned for their clarity and accuracy and are used for reference by most official bodies. But many hikers prefer Harvey *Superwalker* 1:25000 maps, which are specifically made for walkers and clearly mark major trail routes (as well as all 214 fells detailed by Alfred Wainwright in his classic walking guides).

Wainwright also dreamt up the **Coast to Coast Walk** (www.golakes.co.uk/map/walks.asp), which cuts west to east from St Bees to Robin Hood's Bay in North Yorkshire, a distance of 191 miles. The Cumbrian section passes through Honister Pass, Grasmere, Patterdale, Kirkby Stephen and Shap en route to the Yorkshire Dales, a five- to seven-day hike of 82 miles. Walkers also attempt the Cumbria way (see Cycling).

Door-to-door baggage services can be useful if you don't want to lug your pack along the whole route. Contact **Coast to Coast Packhorse** (☎ 017683-71777; www.cumbria.com/packhorse), **Sherpa Van** (☎ 020-8569 4101; www.sherpavan.com) or the YHA Shuttle Bus (see p704).

OTHER ACTIVITIES

Cumbria is a haven for adrenalin-fuelled activities ranging from rock climbing and orienteering to quad biking, fell running and ghyll scrambling (a cross between coastering and river canyoning). Sailing, kayaking and windsurfing are obviously popular too, especially around Windermere, Derwent Water and Coniston.

Check out www.lakedistrictoutdoors.co.uk for the lowdown.

Getting There & Away

TRAIN

Carlisle is on the main Virgin West Coast line from London Euston–Manchester–Glasgow, with trains running roughly hourly from both north and south.