

East Anglia



Perched on the back end of Britain, East Anglia is characterised by its flat, sprawling landscape where vast fenlands sweep gently out to the sea. This is a country of big skies, mysterious marshes and stunning sunsets, but the counties of Cambridgeshire, Suffolk, Norfolk and Essex feature far more than lush farmland and sparking waters. Hidden between the meandering rivers and gentle hills are magnificent cities, aching pretty villages and mile upon mile of sweeping, sandy beach.

During the Middle Ages East Anglia flourished thanks to the thriving wool trade, and rich merchants built ostentatious mansions, impressive trading halls and comfortable cottages. The rich, royal, noble and good flocked here and soon majestic cathedrals and abbeys adorned the region's towns and cities. The elaborate half-timbered houses and the superb cathedrals in Ely, Peterborough, Norwich and Bury stand testament to the enormous wealth amassed during this time. While business boomed in rural areas, the country's academic elite were gathering at Cambridge, building colleges and chapels and establishing a reputation for one of the finest institutions in the country. The city remains East Anglia's most visited attraction and its otherworldly atmosphere, gowned cyclists, ancient pubs and earnest attitude are set against a backdrop of some of England's most stunning classical architecture.

Surrounding all the medieval finery is a coastline that rivals any in the country and offers everything from traditional bucket-and-spade resorts to wildlife reserves, broad, sandy beaches, pretty seaside villages, and access to one of the region's most tranquil charms, the inland waterways of the Norfolk Broads.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Dreaming of your student days as you **punt** (p407) past Cambridge's historic colleges
- Wandering aimlessly along the pristine sands of **Holkham Beach** (p432)
- Soaking up the medieval atmosphere in topsy-turvy **Lavenham** (p418)
- Walking the prom, dining on sublime food and just chilling out in understated **Aldeburgh** (p422)
- Relaxing on a slow boat through the tranquil waterways of the **Norfolk Broads** (p430)



■ POPULATION:
3.3 MILLION

■ AREA: 6055
SQ MILES

■ LENGTH OF SOUTHEND PIER (WORLD'S LONGEST
PLEASURE PIER): 1.33 MILES

History

East Anglia was a major Saxon kingdom and the treasures unearthed in the *Sutton Hoo* burial ship (see p417) proved that they enjoyed something of the good life here.

The region's heyday, however, was in the Middle Ages, during the wool and weaving boom when Flemish weavers settled in the area and the grand churches and world-famous university began to be established.

By the 17th century much of the region's marshland and bog had been drained and converted into arable land and the good times rolled. The emergence of a work-happy urban bourgeoisie coupled with a strong sense of religious duty resulted in the parliamentarianism and Puritanism that would climax in the Civil War. Oliver Cromwell, the uncrowned king of the parliamentarians, was a small-time merchant residing in Ely when he answered God's call to take up arms against the fattened and corrupt monarchy of Charles I.

East Anglia's fortunes waned in the 18th century, however, when the Industrial Revolution got under way up north. The cottage industries of East Anglia dwindled and today crops have replaced sheep as the rural mainstay. During WWII East Anglia became central to the fight against Nazi Germany. With plenty of flat open land and its proximity to mainland Europe, it was an ideal base for the RAF and the United States Air Force. The remains of these bases can still be seen today.

Information

You can get tourist information for the region from the **East of England Tourist Board** (☎ 01284-727470; www.visiteastofengland.com).

Activities

East Anglia is a great destination for walking and cycling enthusiasts with miles of coastline to discover, vast expanses of flat land for leisurely touring and plenty of inland waterways for quiet boating. We concentrate on the highlights here, but you'll find more information throughout the chapter. Regional tourist websites are packed with walking, cycling and sailing information, and tourist offices are stacked high with leaflets, maps and guides covering outdoor activities.

CYCLING

East Anglia is famously flat and riddled with quiet roads; even the unfit can find vast swathes

for a gentle potter on two wheels. All four counties boast networks of quiet country lanes, where the biggest natural hazard is the wind sweeping in unimpeded from the coast. When it's behind you though, you can free-wheel for miles. There's gorgeous riding to be had along the Suffolk and Norfolk coastlines and in the Fens. Finding quiet roads in Essex is a little more of a challenge but not impossible. Mountain bikers should head for Thetford Forest, near Thetford, while much of the popular on- and off-road Peddars Way (below) walking route is also open to cyclists.

WALKING

East Anglia is not everybody's idea of classic walking country; you won't find any challenging peaks here, but gentle rambles through farmland, beside rivers and lakes and along the wildlife-rich coastline are in ample supply.

The **Peddars Way and Norfolk Coast Path** (www.nationaltrail.co.uk/peddarsway) is a six-day, 88-mile national trail from Knettishall Heath near Thetford to Cromer on the coast. The first half trails along an ancient Roman road, then finishes by meandering along the beaches, sea walls, salt marshes and fishing villages of the coast. Day trippers and weekend walkers tend to dip into its coastal stretches, which also cover some of the best birdwatching country in England.

Curving round further south, the 50-mile **Suffolk Coast Path** (www.suffolkcoastandheaths.org) wanders between Felixstowe and Lowestoft, via Snape Maltings, Aldeburgh, Dunwich and Southwold, but is also good for shorter rambles.

OTHER ACTIVITIES

With wind and water so abundant here, it's a popular destination for **sailing**, both along the coast and in the Norfolk Broads, where you can easily hire boats and arrange lessons. It's also possible to just put-your way around the Broads in **motorboats**. Alternatively, the wide and frequently empty beaches of the Norfolk coast make great spots for **land yachting** and **kitesurfing**.

Getting There & Around

Getting about East Anglia on public transport, both rail and coach, is straightforward. Consult **Traveline** (☎ 0871 200 2233; www.travelineeastanglia.org.uk) for all public transport information.