Cambridge & East Anglia

Why Go?

Unfurling gently eastwards to the sea, the vast flatlands of East Anglia are a rich web of lush farmland, melancholy fens and sparkling rivers. The area is justly popular for its sweeping sandy beaches, big skies and the bucolic landscape that inspired Constable and Gainsborough.

It's not all rural idyll, though: rising out of the Fens is the famous university town of Cambridge, with its iconic classical architecture and relaxed vibe, and to the east is the cosmopolitan city of Norwich, with its magnificent cathedral. Around them, splendid cathedral cities, busy market towns and picturesque villages are testament to the wealth amassed here during medieval times, when the wool and weaving industries flourished.

Meanwhile, the meandering coastline is peppered with appealing fishing villages, seafood restaurants and traditional bucket-and-spade resorts, while inland is the languid, hypnotic charm of the Norfolk Broads.

When to Go

Aldeburgh swings into action with its classical music festival in June. You can chill out and tune in at the Latitude Festival in Southwold in July. On 24 December the King's College Chapel is at its best at the Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols.

East Anglia is at its best between late spring and early autumn, though during the months of July and August, the Norfolk coast beaches and seaside towns tend to be busiest with visitors. If visiting Cambridge, bear in mind that many colleges are closed to visitors during the exams in May and June.

Best Places to Eat

» Midsummer House (p417)
» Great House (p430)
» Company Shed (p424)
» Pea Porridge (p432)
» Roger Hickman’s (p443)

Best Places to Stay

» Lavenham Priory (p430)
» Cley Windmill (p446)
» The Varsity Hotel & Spa (p416)
» Angel Hotel (p432)
» Sutherland House (p436)
History
East Anglia was a major Saxon kingdom, and the treasures unearthed in the Sutton Hoo burial ship 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 the 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 took 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 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 Royal Air Force (RAF) and the United States Air Force. The remains of these bases can still be seen today.

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. Try www.visiteastofengland.com for information, or visit local tourist offices for maps and guides.

Cycling
East Anglia is famously flat, and all four counties boast networks of quiet country lanes. There's gorgeous riding to be had along the Suffolk and Norfolk coastlines and in the Fens. Mountain bikers should head for Thetford Forest, near Thetford, while much of the popular on- and off-road Peddars Way walking route is also open to cyclists.

Walking
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, 93-mile national trail from Knettishall Heath near Thetford to Cromer on the coast. The first half follows 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.

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

ANGLIAN ANTICS

Ah, the English; stiflingly proper, embarrassingly prudish and impeccably reserved. And just a little bit eccentric. Where else could you see laser technology employed to shoot peas, watch Elvis roll a wooden blue cheese down a village main street or find grown adults painting snails with racing stripes? East Anglia, of course.

Here you can enter your own pet invertebrate in the World Snail Racing Championships (www.snailracing.net) in Congham, about 7 miles east of King’s Lynn. Each year more than 300 racing snails gather here in mid-July to battle it out for a tankard full of juicy lettuce leaves.

In Witcham, about 8 miles west of Ely, it’s the World Pea Shooting Championships (www.witcham.org.uk) that draws contestants from far and wide. The schoolroom prank of blasting dried peas through a tube at a target is alive and well, with shooters gathering in early July on the Village Green.

And in the village of Stilton, a few miles south of Peterborough, every May Day Bank Holiday teams in fancy dress scramble along the main street to become Stilton cheese rolling champions (www.stilton.org).