



Wessex

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Why Go?

With Wessex you get the cream of ancient England. This laid-back corner of the country is packed with some of Britain's best historic sites – here you can encounter iconic stone circles, explore blockbuster stately homes and experience life aboard some of the world's most famous ships. Architectural eye-candy is everywhere; take in Roman remains, romantic castles, serene cathedrals and Bath's sumptuous Georgian cityscape. The rolling, lyrical landscape still echoes with the myths of King Arthur and Alfred the Great, and the writings of Thomas Hardy and Jane Austen.

Wessex also boasts thriving cities, party-hard resorts and the 2012 Olympic sailing venues. Throw in two wildlife-rich national parks, a carefree holiday island and a fossil-packed shoreline studded with bewitching bays and towering rock formations, and you have a bit of a dilemma. With Wessex the question is not so much 'why go', as 'what to do first'.

When to Go

Cliffs, hillsides and formal gardens burst into fragrant blooms during April and May. Most attractions are open, but some may have reduced hours. June brings music festival fever at ultra-cool Glastonbury (alternate years from 2013) and on the funky Isle of Wight.

Coastal areas, big-name sights and key roads can get overwhelmed in July and August. Prices rise, too, but the odds are (fairly) good for better weather. Otherwise wait until September and October when school holidays are over, and expect cheaper sleeping spots, quieter beaches and warmer seas.

History

Wessex's compelling past is visible in the present. Human history here can be traced back as far as the Stone Age; a 9000-year-old skeleton was found at Cheddar Gorge. By 3000 BC a complex tribal society had developed, along with social hierarchies and shared religious beliefs. It's known as the Wessex culture and its peoples built the magnificent stone circles of Stonehenge and Avebury, and the wealth of barrows and processional avenues nearby. Centuries later, Iron Age inhabitants engineered massive forts at Maiden Castle and Old Sarum, before being subjugated by the Romans – their city of Aquae Sulis is now known as Bath.

When the Romans withdrew from here in the 5th century, King Cerdic founded the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Wessex. At its core was land now covered by Hampshire, Dorset, Wiltshire and Somerset. Borders shifted over the centuries, but at its height the kingdom stretched from Kent in the east to Cornwall in the west. The most famous ruler was King Alfred (r 871–99), who made Winchester his capital and ensured Wessex was the only sizeable Anglo-Saxon territory not overrun by the Danes. Wessex officially became part of England in the mid-9th century.

Dorset novelist Thomas Hardy revived the name of Wessex 1000 years later, using it as the setting for his novels, initially in *Far from the Maddening Crowd*. The archaic title Earl of Wessex, last used in the 11th century, was only reintroduced in 1999 when the Queen's youngest son, HRH Prince Edward, was granted it when he married.



Activities

Cycling

Gentle gradients and quiet country lanes make Wessex ideal for pedal-pushers. In the New Forest, hundreds of miles of bike paths

snake through a historic, rural environment. Wiltshire is also a highlight – the 160-mile circular **Wiltshire Cycleway** is good for long or short rides. The Isle of Wight has 62 miles of bike-friendly routes and its own cycling festival (p262).

The **West Country Way** is a fabulously varied 240-mile jaunt from Bristol to Padstow in Cornwall. Exmoor provides some superb, and testing, off-road cycling, as do the fields, woods and heathland of the 12-mile-long Quantock Hills, an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) that peaks at 300m. The North Wessex Downs provide gentler terrain and take in the World Heritage site of Avebury, the market towns of Marlborough and Hungerford, and the western part of the Ridgeway National Trail (p243).

Walking

This is a fantastic region for hitting the trail. Top spots include Exmoor, the Mendips, the Quantocks and the Isle of Wight. The 630-mile **South West Coast Path** (www.southwestcoastpath.com) runs along the region's northern and southern shores, taking in some of the main coastal towns en route.

In northeastern Wiltshire, the **Ridgeway National Trail** (www.nationaltrail.co.uk/ridgeway) starts near Avebury and winds 44 miles through chalk hills to the River Thames at Goring in Oxfordshire. The route then continues another 41 miles (another three days' walk) through the Chiltern Hills.

Other Activities

Water sports draw many to Wessex's coasts. Highlights are the 2012 Olympic sailing venues at Weymouth and Portland, the yachting havens of the Isle of Wight, and the watery playgrounds of Poole, where you can try everything from kitesurfing to powerboating. Horse riding, fishing and falconry are available on Exmoor, while beachcombing

WESSEX'S ANCIENT SITES

Avebury Stone Circle (p299) Bigger than Stonehenge in atmosphere and acreage, this huge stone ring encases an entire village.

Stonehenge The world's most famous collection of megaliths – debate still rages over exactly why it was built.

Maiden Castle (p276) Massive and rampart-ringed, this is the biggest Iron Age hill fort in Britain.

Glastonbury Tor (p326) Myth-rich and mighty hard to climb, this iconic mound looks down onto the Vale of Avalon.

Old Sarum (p291) A stunning Iron Age stronghold on Salisbury Plain.