



Birmingham, the Midlands & the Marches

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Why Go?

Few other places in the country come so close to the dream of England as the country's heart. If you're searching for green valleys and chocolate-box villages of wonky timbered houses, the legend surrounding Nottingham's Robin Hood, or stately homes that look like the last lord of the manor just clip-clopped out of the stables, you'll find them here. You'll also find the relics of centuries of industrial history, best exemplified by the World Heritage-listed mills of Ironbridge and the Derwent Valley; dynamic cities including England's second-largest, Birmingham, an industrial crucible reinvented as cultural melting pot; and tumbling hills where the air is so clean you can taste it. Walkers and cyclists flock to these areas, particularly the Peak District National Park and the Shropshire Hills, to vanish into the vastness of the landscape.

Best Places to Eat

- » Chequers Inn (p451)
- » Simpsons (p401)
- » Church Street Townhouse (p412)
- » Reform (p450)
- » Hammer & Pincers (p463)

Best Places to Stay

- » Hotel du Vin (p400)
- » Hart's (p441)
- » Hotel Maiyango (p459)
- » George Hotel (p452)
- » Hambleton Hall (p462)

When to Go

February and March see the wonderful chaos of Shrovetide football in Ashbourne. Literary buffs take note: Shakespeare takes a back seat to contemporary wordsmiths at Stratford's Literary Festival in April/May. If you're up for a belt-loosening, belly-stretching good time, head to Ludlow's famous Food and Drink Festival in September.

On weekends from April to September, Shropshire Hills Shuttles provides access to wonderful walking trails on the Long Mynd and the Shropshire Hills, and June to September is the peak season for walking and cycling in the Peak District.

Activities

The rugged hills of the Peak District are the Midlands' number-one spot to get in touch with nature. Famous walking trails such as the **Pennine Way** and **Limestone Way** struggle across the hills, while cyclists pit determination and muscle against such challenging routes as the **Pennine Cycleway** (NCN 68) from Derby to Buxton. Other activities include caving and rock-climbing.

Tracing the border between England and Wales, the lush green hills of the Marches are scattered with ruined castles, and the exposed summits of the highest hills offer views to match anything in the Peak and Lakes. Top spots for walking and cycling include the Long Mynd and Stiperstones in Shropshire, the Malvern Hills in Worcestershire and the area around Symonds Yat in Herefordshire.

Sailors, windsurfers and water babies of all ages and levels of experience flock to Rutland Water near Leicester, while canoeing and kayaking are popular diversions in Hereford and Symonds Yat, and hang-gliders and paragliders launch from the hills above Church Stretton in Shropshire.

Getting There & Around

Birmingham Airport (☎0871 222 0072; www.birminghamairport.co.uk) and **East Midlands Airport** (☎0871 919 9000; www.eastmidlandsairport.com) near Derby are the main air hubs.

There are excellent rail connections to towns across the Midlands. **National Express** (☎08718 81 81 81; www.nationalexpress.com), at Birmingham Coach Station, and local bus companies connect larger towns and villages, though services are reduced in the low season. For general route information, consult **Traveline** (☎0871 200 2233; www.travelinemidlands.co.uk) or visit www.networkwestmidlands.com. Ask locally about discounted all-day tickets.

BIRMINGHAM

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Once a byword for bad town planning, England's second-largest city – known to locals as 'Brum' – is shaking off the legacy of industrial decline, and spending some serious money replacing its drab 1960s concrete architecture with gleaming glass and steel. The town centre looks better than it has done in decades, helped in no small part by the revitalised Bullring shopping mall and

the iconic **Selfridges** building, which looks out over the city like the compound eye of a giant robot insect.

With its industrial legacy and chaotic road network, Birmingham might not leap out as a tourist attraction, but there's a lot to see, including some fine museums and galleries, while the nightlife and food are the best in the Midlands. Sleek Modern British restaurants dominate in the centre, while the 'burbs were the birthplace of the balti – England's unique contribution to the world of curry, invented by Pakistani workers who moved here in the 1970s.

History

Birmingham was first mentioned in the Domesday Book of 1086, where it was described as a small village, home to a handful of villagers and two ploughs, with a total value of £1. From these humble beginnings, Brum exploded into a bustling industrial and mercantile hub, building its fortunes first on the wool trade and then on metal-working from the 16th century.

In the mid-18th century, the Lunar Society brought together the leading geologists, chemists, scientists, engineers and theorists of the age and Birmingham became the world's first industrialised town, attracting a tide of workers from across the nation.

A degree of salvation came in the mid-1800s, when enlightened mayors such as Joseph Chamberlain (1836–1914) cleaned out the slums and filled the centre with grand civic buildings. Sadly, little evidence of this golden age remains today thanks to WWII bombers and overzealous town planning. Vast swaths of the centre were demolished in a bid to transform Birmingham into 'Britain's Motor City'.

Whatever the mistakes of the past, recent years have seen a series of successful regeneration projects as part of the 'Big City Plan', with 21st-century landmarks appearing all over the city.

Sights

Every Sunday from May to October, a free **history bus** runs around Birmingham's museums, stopping at the Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery, Soho House, Aston Hall and Sarehole Mill, as well as several smaller museums. Contact any of the museums for details. For information on all of Birmingham's museums, visit www.bmag.org.uk.