



IN BRITAIN

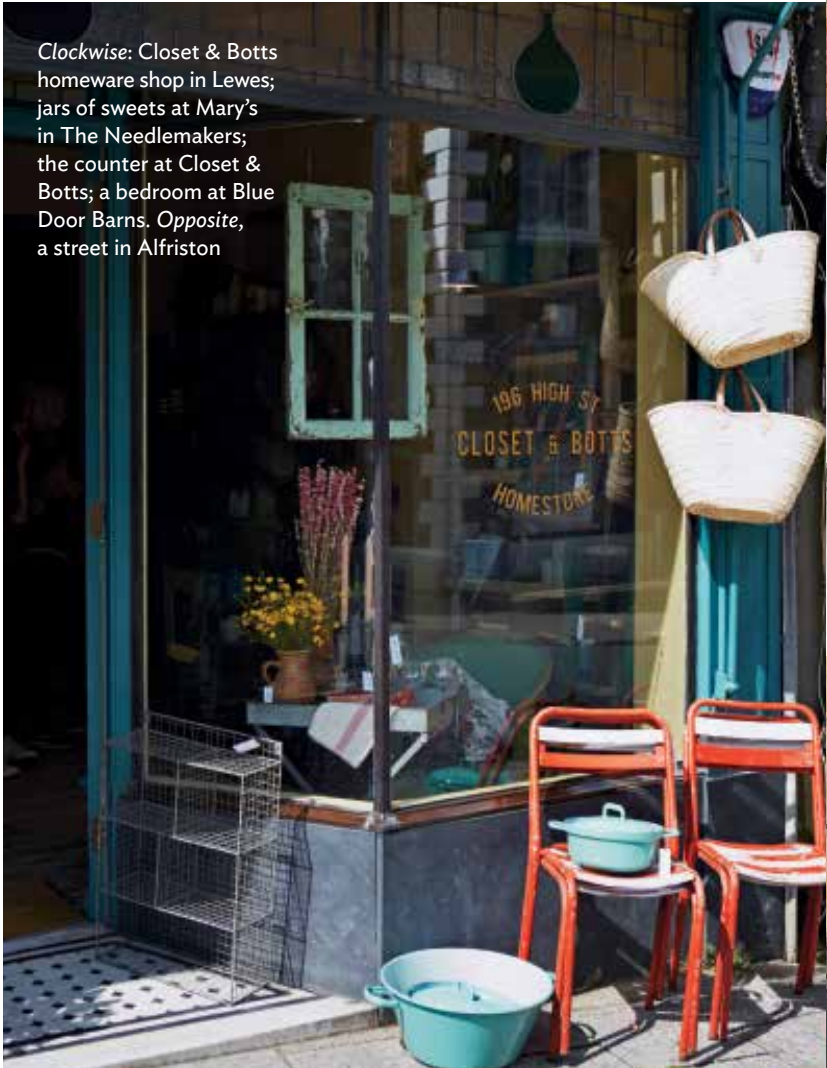


OUR SERIES OF UK INSIDER  
GUIDES CONTINUES WITH...

# SOUTH DOWNS

BY CLARE GOGERTY. PHOTOGRAPHS BY TARA FISHER

The chalk hills bowl through East Sussex, a rolling backdrop to the ancient hamlets hunkered below. Walk along them and from their gusty heights you see the Low Weald tumble away on one side and the English Channel glint distantly on the other. Little wonder, then, that this landscape has always drawn painters, writers, freethinkers and disaffected Londoners. Most famously, members of the Bloomsbury Group disported, drowned and were buried in the shadow of the downs. A string of villages – Ditchling, Firle, Glynde, Alfriston – beads the edge of the A27 (a noisy but unavoidable route to the sea), every one with its own creative community, independent bookshop, gastropub and annual fête. Many walkers stitch them together, dropping down to visit each one as they walk the South Downs Way to the coast and seaside Eastbourne. The town of Lewes, populated by artists, insurrectionists and the odd druid, is the heart of the area. Thomas Paine, the 17th-century agitator and revolutionary, lived here, and conspiratorial pubs and bacchanalian bonfire celebrations keep his spirit alive.



Clockwise: Closet & Botts  
homeware shop in Lewes;  
jars of sweets at Mary's  
in The Needlemakers;  
the counter at Closet &  
Botts; a bedroom at Blue  
Door Barns. Opposite,  
a street in Alfriston





From far left: loaves at The Flint Owl Bakery; potted plants at Middle Farm; a barista at The Flint Owl; the Curvy Cabin at Blackberry Wood Campsite

## WHERE TO STAY

### SHEDS AHEAD

At Blue Door Barns guests with Glyndebourne tickets are chauffeured to the event

by the B&B's co-owner Bryony, who then lays out a picnic in situ. The rooms, three of which are in converted 16th-century barns, are furnished by Bryony's partner Emma, an antiques-fair fiend. Small parties cosy up in the Sailor's House or the Nook, while larger gangs hire the whole caboodle. Breakfast – avocado with bacon and eggs on Greek flatbread; bagels with smoked salmon, spinach and poached eggs – can be eaten outdoors beneath the loggia on vintage china. [bluedoorbarns.com](http://bluedoorbarns.com); doubles from £130

### LOCAL LOCK-IN

Stay a couple of nights in one of the four rooms at The Ram Inn in Firle and you start to believe you are part of this friendly rural community. It attracts a loyal bunch of regulars, including farmers, artists, gentry and TV-star vicar Peter Owen-Davies. Game comes from a nearby estate and vegetables from the allotment. Monthly folk-music nights are rumbustious affairs. Rooms have crisp linen and generous breakfasts are served by an open fire. Go to the Trevor Arms in nearby Glynde, run

by the same team, for a pie and a pint in the beer garden that rolls out into the orchards. [raminn.co.uk](http://raminn.co.uk); doubles from £80

### FIELD DAY

Each pitch at Blackberry Wood Campsite, near Ditchling, is enclosed in its own glade so campers can enjoy a private back-to-nature hideaway. Smoke from campfires threads through lofty boughs in the evening (dry logs and charcoal are sold on site) as marshmallows are toasted, and the surrounding countryside squeaks with birdsong. An adjacent field is home to a double-decker bus, a helicopter and a curvy cabin, all of which you can sleep in. [blackberrywood.com](http://blackberrywood.com); tents, £10 per night

## WHERE TO STROLL

### AMPLE RAMBLES

Walking the entire 100 miles of the South Downs Way is a week-long undertaking, but there are many shorter options for a few hours' or a day's jaunt. Easiest of the lot is to drive to the National Trust car park at Ditchling Beacon and take in the views. Alternatively, tackle the 11-mile coastal route from Alfriston to Eastbourne, which rollercoasts along the Seven Sisters cliff path to Beachy Head. [nationaltrail.co.uk/southdowns](http://nationaltrail.co.uk/southdowns)

### OH I DO LIKE TO BE...

More elegant and less lairy than Brighton, Eastbourne is perfect for a day spent sauntering in the salty air. The prom is lined with tropical palms and modern prairie-style planting. The Thirties bandstand has a blue ceramic dome and hosts regular musical events, and the pier is a Eugenius Birch masterpiece of Victorian ironwork with a camera obscura from which to view the seafront in panoramic vision.

## WHERE TO EAT

### LUNCH CLUB

The original branch of Bill's, opened by a Lewes greengrocer on Cliffe High Street, still pulls in the punters, but a couple of newer places are snapping at its heels. Le Magasin has a French-influenced menu, home-baked pastries and edible-art cakes. The Real Eating Company makes much of its seasonal produce, including British charcuterie (Woodall's Cumberland salami) and grilled mackerel, as well as beers from breweries in the area. At the family-run South Street Fish Bar, where Kevin Bacon once filmed an EE advert, the cod is cooked to order and chips come soused with vinegar. The nearby Snowdrop Inn has a selection of craft ales and a hearty menu which includes venison cottage pie,

wild-boar-and-apple sausages, and smoked-haddock kedgeree. [bills-website.co.uk](http://bills-website.co.uk); [facebook.com/LeMagasinCafe](http://facebook.com/LeMagasinCafe); [real-eating.co.uk](http://real-eating.co.uk); +44 1273 474710; [thesnowdropinn.com](http://thesnowdropinn.com)

### SLICE OF PROPRIETY

Rescued from use as council offices in 2004, Elizabethan Pelham House is now a boutique hotel. On sunny days, tea is taken on the terrace, where cakes and sandwiches are presented with decorum by waiters in crisp aprons. Views of the Downs help the Earl Grey, or Breaky Bottom sparkling wine, slip down nicely. Nose around the reception rooms on your way out: the lobby ceiling has a trompe-l'oeil mural of high-wire artists by Lewes resident Julian Bell. [pelhamhouse.com](http://pelhamhouse.com)

### WITH A CHERRY ON TOP

A single scoop of one of the 18 flavours at Fuscuardi's, an ice-cream parlour first opened on Eastbourne's seafront in the 1960s, is enough to satisfy most gelato lovers. For a more elaborate confection, go for a Banana Swan Lake or Malteser Magic sundae: endless permutations of ice cream, fruit, whipped cream, nuts, fudge sauce and sprinkles presented in a fluted glass. [fusiardiicecreams.co.uk](http://fusiardiicecreams.co.uk)

## WHERE TO SHOP

### STREET SMARTS

New independent shops spring up daily in Lewes, and there are no shortage of places to buy a waffle towel or a fig-scented candle. To find something a little more idiosyncratic, check out The Tom Paine Printing Press on the High Street where owner Peter Chasseaud sells typographic work created on his 18th-century-style press. Paul Clark's Clothiers is a dapper gentleman's outfitters for Panamas, trilbys and Ally Capellino man bags. On School Hill, the charming Closet & Botts, a lifestyle store in a former chemist's shop, stocks reclaimed homeware. At The Flint Owl Bakery in the town centre bag one of the flavoured sourdoughs (try sea salt and rosemary) or a delicious malted loaf. The Needlemakers is a converted factory that now peddles second-hand books, vintage clothes and haberdashery. Hurtle along the A27 towards Firle to find Middle Farm, a sort of agricultural theme park. It's worth a visit to buy Sussex cheese and bottles of cider and perry from the farm shop. [tompaineprintingpress.com](http://tompaineprintingpress.com); [paulclarkclothiers.com](http://paulclarkclothiers.com); [closetandbotts.com](http://closetandbotts.com); [flintowlbakery.com](http://flintowlbakery.com); [needlemakers.co.uk](http://needlemakers.co.uk); [middlefarm.com](http://middlefarm.com)

## WHAT TO SEE

### FRAME OF MIND

For years, evidence of the village of Ditchling's early-20th-century artistic community – mainly centred on the sculptor and printmaker Eric Gill – was confined to a small Portakabin. Now, as a result of Heritage Lottery Funding and donations, Ditchling Museum of Art and Craft has an impressive gallery designed by Adam Richard Architects. Pieces by Gill, Frank Brangwyn, David Jones and others are displayed in small buildings the architect describes as the 'antithesis of the white-box museum'. The black-zinc-covered central exhibition space is a dash of modernism on the village green. [ditchlingmuseumartcraft.org.uk](http://ditchlingmuseumartcraft.org.uk)

### GROOVY CREW

Ask many locals in Lewes where the Zu Studios are and they will look at you blankly. More pity them: if they were to venture along the river until they reached a cluster of industrial units, they would find a hotbed of cosmic goings-on, which include theatrical performances, lithesome dancing and a permaculture garden. To crank up the psychedelic vibe further, God of Hellfire Arthur Brown has been known to preside. [zustudios.com](http://zustudios.com)