

TRAVEL

Eastbourne, East Sussex And The Grand Hotel

Eastbourne's claim to be 'the sunniest place in the UK' certainly provides a very persuasive argument for making this charming south coastal town a destination for a weekend break. A winter visit was always sure to test this claim to the limit but, weather aside, it still appealed for those long coastal strolls with dramatic skylines. But there is a lot more to Eastbourne than its iconic white cliffs and beaches, as we were to discover, making a long weekend seem not long enough.

Our previous experience of Eastbourne was visiting Airbourne a few years ago. This is an international Air Show held annually on the seafront, and free to visitors. In 2016, it will run from the 11th-14th August, and features a thrilling line up including military fast jets, helicopters, parachutists and incredible displays from aerobatics teams, including the Red Arrows. If you get the chance to go, it is a fantastic show for all ages and there is lots to do and see besides the action in the skies. The town takes on a festival atmosphere for the long weekend with side shows, stalls and fun fair rides.

Beachy Head

Beachy Head boasts the UK's highest chalk sea cliff features at the western end of Eastbourne's seafront, and is part of the new South Downs National Park and Seven Sisters Country Park. In October this area becomes host to runners from across the world as they descend on the South Downs to take part in the Beachy Head Marathon, a gruelling 26-mile course across the famous beauty spot. Thankfully you don't have to be 'marathon fit' to appreciate the panoramic views and the area is easily accessible to everyone, including wheelchair users, by following the 'Peace Path' on Beachy Head.

The dramatic 530 feet high cliffs give stunning views over Eastbourne and the English Channel and from here you can visit the Beachy Head Countryside Centre, enjoy a pit stop at the Beachy Head pub, take a boat trip to the Beachy Head lighthouse or, as we did, take a coastal walk from the town below to the Cliff Edge, with its iconic view of the white cliffs and the famous red and white striped lighthouse. This route will take you past Helen Gardens, a beautifully laid out garden, perched on top of the cliff overlooking the sea and incorporating an 18 hole putting course, lawn bowls, petanque and a children's play area, with, of course, the obligatory seaside deckchairs available to hire.

The Pier & The Parade

The Parade stretches over three miles of beach, providing safe bathing zones (you may want to wait until the summer!), and romantic strolls. There are some lovely beach huts, which can be hired, and in the summer season a Dotto Train operates. Our wintry stroll was bracing, but great fun, as we enjoyed watching the waves crashing onto the pebble beach and catching us with their spray.

Eastbourne Pier dates from the Victorian era, and has recently been partially rebuilt since a fire destroyed the amusement arcade in 2014. It houses a variety of shops, a chippy (we can verify the chips are fantastic), a café/bar, Atlantis Nightclub, Victorian Tea Rooms, Coffee Republic, fishing opportunities and fantastic views of the English Channel. I am sure there are plans to add further amusements and probably another arcade to replace what was lost in the fire, most likely in time for the 2016 summer season. However, amusements aside, any trip to Eastbourne would not be complete without a stroll out to sea on this most beautiful of Piers.

Eating Out

There is a good range of restaurants in Eastbourne. We enjoyed lunch one day in Harlewood (a fun burger joint with a Hollywood twist) and dinner in the locally famous Pomodoro E Mozzarella – a large, popular and busy Italian restaurant. Do also try and make a point to visit the well-known Fuscuardi Ice Cream Parlour located just behind the promenade on Marine Parade. This long established Italian family business offers an impressive variety of authentic Italian Gelato, cakes and coffee. The kids could not resist an ice cream sundae, and our coffee and cake warmed us up from the fresh sea air. If you prefer to experience some seaside grandeur while you sip your tea, then Afternoon Tea at The Grand Hotel provides the perfect setting for this (read more about this hotel later in this review).

The Towner Gallery

On Sunday morning, we visited The Towner Gallery, which was a five-minute walk from our hotel. It is an award-winning contemporary art gallery and museum that runs a number of major exhibitions of UK and international contemporary art throughout the year. Whilst we were there, we enjoyed an exhibition by award-winning set and costume designer, John Napier: Stages, Beyond the Fourth Wall; bringing art and



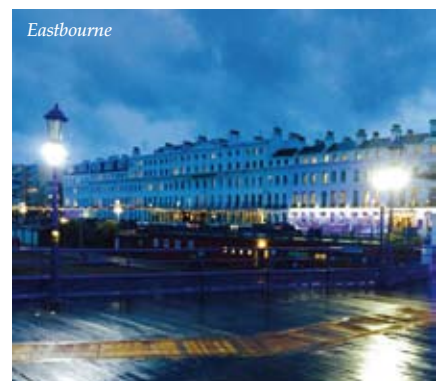
The Lighthouse from Beachy Head



The Pier, Eastbourne



Harlewood Diner



Eastbourne

theatre together. His innovative and distinctive designs are apparently responsible for some of the most iconic theatre productions: the horses in *Equus*, the barricades in *Les Misérables*, the helicopter in *Miss Saigon*, the outsized junkyard in *Cats*, and *Starlight Express*. This exhibition runs until the end of January, and is well worth a visit. As a museum, they also have a renowned collection of permanent art from across the ages. They run a number of events for all ages throughout the year. The building, designed by Rick Mather Architects (also responsible for the Dulwich Picture Gallery), was approved by Eastbourne Borough Council in 2005, and the newly designed Gallery was opened in April 2009, in an £8.58m purpose-built gallery – the largest in South East England.

Admission is free, and it is open Tuesday to Sunday, and Monday Bank Holidays. Visit www.townereastbourne.org.uk

Another gallery worth a mention is the Emma Mason Gallery, which is just up the road from the Towner Gallery. This charming small Gallery displays and sells some wonderful pieces, including some work by local artists. Visit www.emmamason.co.uk for further information.

Theatre

The Congress Theatre is home to some big shows and performances over the year. Again, only a short walk from our hotel, they were playing *Jersey Boys* at the time of our stay. In January, the fantastic *Blood Brothers* is coming, and looking at the schedule, there are some exciting classical concerts and shows on their way in the spring.

The High Street & The Museum of Shops

Stretching from the railway station to Eastbourne Pier, Eastbourne's town centre shopping streets offer everything from familiar High Street names to independent boutiques, all set in a delightful tree lined precinct. The main shopping precinct, the Arndale Centre has over 70 shops to peruse to give you a break from the sea air!

We spent a little time in the shopping area, but our one planned visit was to the wonderfully quaint and curious 'How We Lived Then' Museum of Shops, featuring 100,000+ exhibits spanning decades of history with room settings and old shops displayed over four floors. The collection would appeal to people of all ages. It's pure nostalgia for the older folk and history for the young. We spent a fascinating hour there. Visit the website www.how-we-lived-then.co.uk for further information.

Pevensey Bay

If you are looking for a quieter out of town beach spot area nearby, Pevensey Bay is worth a mention. Pevensey Castle is the landing place of William The Conqueror in 1066, and these ruins are a worthwhile visit. The Bay itself, is one of our favourite English beaches; pebbly but not busy – even in the midst of summer.

The Surrounding Area

Boat trips are available in the spring and summer, and there are also a few miniature golf courses, which make for a fun seaside activity.

A short drive away is Drusilla's – you can read more about this in our Family Days Out feature.

There is the Redoubt Fortress, which is a military museum in a fortress built to hold out Napoleon and his army.

Alfriston is also not too far, and is a quaint English village with an historic clergy house.

Michelham Priory is also a short drive away, and whilst we didn't have time to visit on this trip, I hear it is worthy of a visit.

The Grand Hotel

During our visit to Eastbourne we stayed at the beautiful, and quintessentially English, Grand Hotel, which is at the end of the promenade. A huge, white 'Palace' with breath-taking views of the ocean and cliffs, The Grand is a landmark on the Eastbourne seafront, and owned by Elite Hotels, who own three other properties in the South of England.

In 1875, The Grand Hotel first opened its doors to guests, so we were happy to be visiting in its 140th year to help them celebrate.

The hotel's reputation for grandeur and elegance is immediately apparent on arrival in the Great Hall, with its impressive marble colonnade, welcoming fire and fine galleries; an excellent setting for drinks, coffee or Afternoon Tea (accompanied by music on most occasions, we hear!). Other public lounges offer fabulous views out onto the ocean.

The hotel is large inside, and with 152 rooms and suites. Our room was luxurious, traditional, and extremely spacious. We had a stunning sea view and were presented with a beautiful sunny view on Saturday morning - what a way





Great Hall, The Grand Hotel

to wake up! We were all provided with soft, fluffy bathrobes, and even the children wanted to have a bath in the large marble bathroom! The room also had a Nespresso coffee machine, with small cans of fizzy pop for the children.

Breakfast each morning was excellent. The buffet was substantial, and whilst busy, was enjoyable to take at a leisurely pace.

We spent Saturday afternoon in the indoor pool. There is also a steam room and a whirlpool spa, with pleasant lounge areas. For those with active requirements, there is a well-equipped gym. There are also a number of treatment rooms, offering massages, beauty therapies, pedicures and manicures, and a hair salon. There is also an outdoor heated pool, which is open during the summer months.

The Grand caters well for families with children, with a Junior Crew programme including a goody bag, Family Dining, a Playroom, DVD's and Games consoles and the option of cookies and milk at bedtime.

The hotel also caters for a number of banquets and conferences, and has smaller rooms to cater for celebrations and parties of all sizes. There is a great buzz in the hotel, and there are events

going on all the time; fun to people watch, and the hotel would be a beautiful venue for weddings at any time of the year.

We dined in The Garden restaurant, in addition to a varied À la Carte menu, the restaurant offers an excellent value 4-course meal for £40. We sampled a variety of the dishes including Smoked Salmon, Cream Cheese & Chive Roulade and Moroccan Chicken & Apricot for starters; ample and delicious. For our main courses we enjoyed Honey & Spice Glazed Roast Gammon (served on a trolley under a large cloche, and carved at the table) with Cocotte Potatoes, French Beans, Cauliflower Mornay & Madeira Sauce, Spiced Supreme of Duck with Mashed Sweet Potato & Coconut, Mange Tout, Broccoli with Almonds & Plum jus. My wife opted for the Monkfish from the À la Carte, which she thoroughly enjoyed. The Dessert menu offered a good choice, and we enjoyed Fresh Fruit & Ice Cream, a Dark Chocolate Cheesecake, a Mango Pavlova, and I thoroughly enjoyed my huge portion of Cheese & Biscuits. The wine list is also extensive, but we complemented our meal with a few glasses of Pinot Noir.

If we had gone earlier (between 6 & 7.30pm; each evening during the school holidays and weekends), Adults and Children's Menus are available in a family style setting without formality. We had dinner after this time, and our kids loved their meals, and had enough energy for a game of snooker afterwards.

There is a fine dining, 2 Rosette star restaurant called Mirabelle. In 2016, I would seriously consider trying to attend one or two of the organised dinners/events they have on their calendar.

Nothing was too much trouble for the friendly staff at this hotel; the kids loved it, and although there weren't hundreds of kids there, they really look after them and make them feel special - and the adults too, of course!

So, definitely worthy of a day trip or longer, go and discover for yourself if Eastbourne is the 'sunniest place in the UK'. We were lucky in our November stay that we saw some a fair amount of sunshine, so can almost verify this statement! Personally, I prefer it to Brighton - it is not as noisy or busy, parking and driving is easier and it is a more relaxed destination. Whilst in the UK, be sure to put Eastbourne on the 'to do list', and even on a blustery day, you will find it charming, and quintessentially 'English'.

The Grand Hotel, King Edwards Parade, Eastbourne BN21 4EQ

Telephone: 01323 412 345

Website: www.grandeastbourne.com

Visit www.visiteastbourne.com

Getting To Eastbourne:

By road: From London follow signs on the M25 for M23 (Gatwick Airport/Brighton) then take the M23/A23 towards Brighton, then the A27 to Lewes, then Eastbourne.

By rail: A twice hourly service London Victoria to Eastbourne takes 90 minutes, and a direct rail link from Gatwick to Eastbourne is 50 minutes.



The Grand Hotel



Bedroom, The Grand Hotel