



Windsor Castle is a must-visit in the county of Berkshire.

The Great British escape

Millions of people fly into London's Heathrow Airport every year, but not everyone ventures far out of the capital during their stay. So here is **Francesca Lynagh's** guide to the most picture-perfect counties within a stone's throw of London, detailing all you need to know to plan your very own adventure in the beautiful British countryside

When you think of visiting the UK, it's likely that your mind fills with images of London's iconic red buses, telephone booths and Big Ben. While the world-class restaurants, theatres and art galleries of the capital are undoubtedly worth a visit, there's so much more to Great Britain than the hectic hustle and bustle of London. You don't need to travel far from the capital to be immersed in the picturesque English countryside, so next time you fly into London, this guide is all you'll need to help you plan your very own escape to the Great British counties.

Berkshire

In May this year, pretty much the whole world tuned in to watch Prince Harry and Meghan Markle tie the knot in Windsor. The postcard-perfect scenes of the quaint English streets were a great advert for the county of Berkshire, and it's no wonder that there's an increased interest among travellers to see it for themselves. After all, it's only a 20-minute drive from Heathrow Airport, so it makes the perfect destination for a weekend escape.

WHAT TO DO: No visit to Windsor would be complete without a trip to **Windsor Castle**, the Queen's residence when she's not at Buckingham Palace. For just £10 per adult, an ex-guard named Paddy McNeill will show you around, imparting his knowledge of ceremonial occasions such as the historic ritual of the changing of the guard.

If you're visiting Berkshire in June, then consider attending **Royal Ascot**, Europe's best-attended horse race meeting which attracts over 300 000 people every year. Expect fancy dresses, extravagant hats and a nail-biting atmosphere.

WHERE TO STAY: Meghan Markle spent her final night as a single woman at **Cliveden House Hotel** in Taplow. So, if you fancy being treated like a princess, check into a room in the historic country mansion. Its award-winning cuisine and luxurious spa facilities will set you back about £500 per night, though. Prince Harry stayed at the equally exquisite **Coworth Park Hotel** down the road in Sunningdale, which boasts a Michelin-starred restaurant.

DID YOU KNOW? If you see the Union Jack flag flying above Windsor Castle, it's a signal that the Queen isn't in residence.

Surrey

Just a short drive or train journey south-west of London, you'll find yourself deep in the **Surrey Hills**. With their adorable chocolate-box villages and winding country lanes, you'll feel a million miles from the chaos of London. If you're in search of fresh air, long country walks and a hearty lunch in a local pub, then leafy Surrey is the perfect destination for you.

WHAT TO DO: The first stop is the village of **Sher**, supposedly the most photographed spot in Surrey. There's a certain cottage with blue window frames, which featured in the feel-good romantic comedy *The Holiday* starring Cameron Diaz and Kate Winslet, that's made Shere a popular day-trip destination for film fanatics.

Wine enthusiasts should also schedule a trip to **Denbies Wine Estate**, situated on the outskirts of yet another quintessentially English town called **Dorking**. While England isn't quite on the same level as South Africa in terms of wine production, Denbies grows some of the country's best offerings in a beautiful setting.

WHERE TO STAY: Dorking is only a 50-minute train ride from London Waterloo station, so if you choose to spend the night in the peaceful Surrey countryside after a day of wine tasting, then the historic coaching inn, **The White Horse**, situated right on Dorking's High Street is a cosy place to rest your head. Not only that, but it's a foodie's heaven thanks to the newly revamped menu at the hotel's restaurant, **The Dozen**. Try its world-class fish and chips and sample a quirky cocktail from its Charles Dickens-inspired list. Artful Slinger, anyone?

DID YOU KNOW?

A man named Major Peter Labilliere, who lived in Dorking in the 1700s, was convinced that the world was "topsy-turvy" and so he requested to be buried upside-down at the top of **Box Hill** so that, in the end, he might be "right at last".

While England isn't quite on the same level as South Africa in terms of wine production, Denbies grows some of the country's best offerings in a beautiful setting.

Denbies Wine Estate near Dorking, Surrey, has the largest vineyard in England with 107ha under vines.





The Roman Baths complex is a well-preserved Roman site for public bathing.

Somerset

Take the train from London to the county of Somerset and you'll sail past acres of luscious green farmland dotted with grazing cattle and hay bales; the epitome of British countryside. There's no doubt that life moves at a slower pace once you're this far from the capital, but that's not to say there's nothing to do here.

WHAT TO DO: The beautiful city of **Bath** filled with stunning Georgian architecture is the UK's only whole city to achieve UNESCO World Heritage Site status. First, head to the **Roman Baths** to see how the former settlers liked to unwind way back in AD43, but get there early to avoid the crowds.

After that, it's time to enjoy a pampering spa day of your own at **No 15 Great Pulteney Street**. Situated in a cave-esque retreat underneath a typical Bath-style townhouse on one of the city's most iconic streets, the spa at No15 is a tranquil space complete with a large cedarwood hot tub and stand-alone sauna. Popular treatments include the "Luxury and Wellness with Afternoon Tea", which indulges guests with a luxurious spa experience, followed by a decadent afternoon tea featuring sandwiches, cakes and classic English scones. If, afterwards, you then choose to spend the night, you'll find a quirky boutique hotel which has a dreamy open larder stocked with ice cream and sweets if you fancy a midnight treat.

WHERE TO STAY: So much of Somerset's charm lies in its serene landscape, so for the true English countryside experience, check into **The Pig** near Bath. It's a rural country house with only 29 rooms, offering guests a truly wholesome farm to table experience. The hotel markets itself as "a restaurant with rooms", which hints at how impressive the locally sourced menu tastes, but you'll find luxury in every corner of your room too. Don't forget to ask your waiter about the "Guilty Pleasure" cocktail.

DID YOU KNOW? Every fourth year, the iconic Glastonbury Festival takes a break – otherwise known as a "fallow year" – in order to give the fields a much-needed break from all the wellies churning up the land.

The Cotswolds

Straddling five different counties, The Cotswolds is the largest Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty in the UK. It incorporates parts of Gloucestershire, Oxfordshire, Warwickshire, Wiltshire and Worcestershire, and at only two hours from London, it's the perfect rural escape.

WHAT TO DO: English Historian GM Trevelyan once said that **Chipping Campden** had "the most beautiful village street now left on the island". As you gaze at the honey-coloured limestone buildings lining the road, you'll understand why he felt that way. Close by is another gorgeous village called **Broadway**. It's situated at the foot of **Fish Hill**, where monks used to store their fish, and at the top of the mound stands Broadway Tower, an almost 20m-high structure that's well worth a visit. From the top, you can see as many as 14 counties, if the weather's in your favour.

WHERE TO STAY: In between the two sites sits **Dormy House Hotel & Spa**, a gorgeous 17th-century farmhouse which boasts some of the cosiest rooms in the Cotswolds. After a morning spent exploring the area, settle into an afternoon relaxing by the infinity pool or unwinding in the hot tub. If you're feeling energetic, however, then you'll be able to book a personal training session in

the private gym, or, if you're in need of a pamper session, visit the on-site nail bar. By evening, you'll be ready to sample the seven-course tasting menu featuring beautifully tender lamb kidney and tongue, as well as a selection of delectable local cheeses.

DID YOU KNOW? Thousands of people gather at Cooper's Hill in The Cotswolds every May ready for a bizarre contest which sees contestants chasing a wheel of Double Gloucester cheese down the hill.



Dormy House Hotel & Spa

GALLO IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES/ALAMY

Sussex

The historic county of Sussex was formerly a medieval kingdom. Still today, there are numerous iconic castles that are fascinating to explore. The seaside town of **Brighton** also falls within Sussex's borders, and at only one hour by train from London, you'll be enjoying an ice cream on the beach in no time.

WHAT TO DO: In East Sussex lies **Bodiam Castle**, one of the most famous in all of the UK. It was built in 1385, and still boasts an impressive moat and strong battlements from where enemies could be spotted while still miles away. Explore the interior of the castle with an expert guide who'll bring the lives of former residents Sir Edward and Lady Elizabeth Dallingridge to life.

Fast forward to the 21st century, and the vibrant town

of Brighton is home to an annual event full of celebration and colour. **Pride** is arguably the biggest event in the area's calendar, drawing in people from all over the country and further afield to celebrate inclusivity. Book from 2-4 August 2019 if you want to be part of the action.

WHERE TO STAY: Brighton is full of bed-and-breakfast options for those wanting to spend some time at the British seaside. But for a really unique stay, head to **The Spread Eagle Hotel & Spa** in Midhurst for the ultimate British countryside experience. In partnership with the hotel, Cowdray Polo Academy welcomes you to try your hand at polo in a private lesson. Not only that, but guests can take home a personalised polo stick in a colour of their choice.

DID YOU KNOW? Oscar Wilde wrote *The Importance of Being Earnest* while living in the Sussex seaside town of Worthing in 1895.



Bodiam Castle