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Discovery Coast

# MAKE THE MOST OF THE DISCOVERY COAST



ENJOY THE **ESSEX COASTLINE**

## Credits

**Author:** Samantha Cook  
**Editor:** Alexandra Whittleton  
**Designer:** Nicola Erdresser  
**Proofreading:** Joe Staines  
**Senior editor:** Ros Walford  
**Senior Prepress Designer:** Daniel May  
**Cartographer:** Katie Bennett  
**Production:** Charlotte Cade  
**Account Manager:** Michael Stanfield  
**Publisher:** Joanna Kirby

*For Visit Essex and partners:*  
**Tourism Marketing and PR Manager:** Elli Constantatou

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*Beach huts, Brightlingsea*

# COASTAL ESSEX



Art Deco home, Frinton-on-Sea; pied wagtail on Wallasea Island; beach at Clacton-on-Sea

## Welcome to the Discovery Coast

Winding and weaving for more than 580km along golden beaches, switchback creeks and ragged inlets, the Essex coastline is the longest of any English county, as well as one of the

most beautiful and diverse. Despite its proximity to London, Essex's **Discovery Coast** is a world apart.

Best known, perhaps, are resorts like **Clacton-on-Sea**, **Southend-on-Sea** and **Walton-on-the-Naze**, with their gently shelving sandy beaches and traditional piers – but even here there are surprises. Did you know that, at 2.1km, Southend's pleasure pier is the longest in the world? Or that Clacton's beach has won several coveted Blue Flag awards and is prized for its watersports? Or that Walton is as much about fossils as family fun? For

another surprise, head a little further down the coast to quiet and well-to-do **Frinton-on-Sea**, which has one of the area's loveliest beaches.

The Discovery Coast is also known for its rich history. From **Maldon**, home to the iconic brown-sailed Thames Sailing Barges that once ferried goods along the east coast to London, to **Old Leigh**, with its cockle sheds, clapboard artists' studios and picturesque cobbled streets, echoes of the past reverberate throughout the area. Other historic spots here include the genteel yachting centre of **Burnham-on-Crouch**, the tiny sailing mecca of **Brightlingsea**, and **Harwich**, where – away from the port, with its monstrous cranes, ferries and cruise ships – you'll find a maze of medieval streets crammed with listed buildings.

Soak up the silence in the tiny Saxon chapel of St Peter-on-the-Wall at **Bradwell-on-Sea**, one of the oldest ecclesiastical buildings in England. Set in a remote spot on the lonely **Dengie Peninsula**, this is a magical place to encounter the vast saltmarshes and shimmering mudflats that make up so much of the Essex coastline. Once the haunt of smugglers and oystermen, these valuable habitats are today home to thousands of seabirds and dotted with important nature reserves. You'd be hard pressed to find a smuggler here



Seafront cafés at Southend

these days, but oyster fishing still thrives in the area, particularly around **Mersea Island**. Here, the prized Colchester Native oyster flourishes in the rich mudflats that creep along the shoreline.

For true seclusion, head for the tiny, privately owned **Osea Island**, where the postman only calls at low tide. You may spy a small population of seals on the estuary here. Take a seal-spotting tour from **Burnham-on-Crouch** or along the **Walton Backwaters**, setting of the classic children's novel *Secret Water* in Arthur Ransome's *Swallows and Amazons* series. These backwaters really sum up the spirit of this part of the world, where tides rule and humans and nature exist in harmony under vast skies. **See also** [visitessex.com/coast](http://visitessex.com/coast)



Evening sky over Mersea Island

# Meet the locals



**GARY WEEKS, CHIEF INSTRUCTOR, SOUTHEND MARINE ACTIVITIES CENTRE**

**※ What's your favourite thing to do?**

Teaching children new skills and seeing their faces as they get to grips with sailing.

**※ Why is this part of the coast special to you?**

It's one of the very few places on The Thames Estuary where you can learn the skills necessary to have fun and be safe on the water.



**JAMES DODD, ARTIST, WIVENHOE**

**※ Why is this part of the coast special to you?**

I was born in Brightlingsea and have lived by the River Colne most of my life. The area has given me a secure foundation, the subject matter for my art – literally, my point of view.

**※ What inspires you about the coast?**

The Essex marshes have a subtle beauty – the clouds, light and tide flow are both constant and ever-changing.



**DAVID WHITTLE, VICE CHAIRMAN, THE HARWICH SOCIETY**

**※ What inspires you about the coast?**

Harwich has been involved in the defence of our nation for hundreds of years. I like to look out over the harbour and the old defences and envisage the happenings over the centuries: from Viking invasions to wars with the Dutch, Americans and French, all the way up to the World Wars.

**※ What's your favourite thing to do?**

Nothing gives me more pleasure than to take visitors around the narrow medieval streets of my town. We have more history per square foot in Harwich than you would believe!



**RICHARD HAWARD, OYSTER FISHERMAN, MERSEA ISLAND**

**※ Why is this part of the coast special to you?**

I was born and brought up here. Seven generations of my family have lived and worked on Mersea using the best produce from the rivers and creeks to make a living.

**※ What inspires you about the coast?**

You can be out on the water all day, especially in winter, without interruption, absorbing the activity of nature and watching the sun rise and set on vast skies.



**DOUGAL URQUHART, SENIOR RANGER, CUDMORE COUNTRY PARK, MERSEA ISLAND**

**※ Do you have a "secret" place?**

The north side of Mersea Island, a coastal wilderness of marshes and mudflats, where the only sights and sounds come from the wildlife and sheep.

**※ What's your favourite thing to do?**

Watch the ebbing tide at East Mersea Point in winter, when thousands of waders arrive in wheeling flocks, chattering and feeding across the mud.

**※ What inspires you about the coast?**

The big skies, differing moods of the sea, ebb and flow of tides, flocks of Brent geese in winter, mudflats teeming with waders and the daily drama of birdlife.



**STEPHANIE VALENTINE, TOPSAIL CHARTERS, MALDON**

**※ What's your favourite thing to do?**

Cycling along the lanes around Goldhanger and Tollesbury with views of the river – and crazy golf at East Mersea!

**※ Do you have a "secret" place?**

Limbourne Creek, on the south bank of the River Blackwater, in late autumn – a fantastic panorama of huge skies, mudflats, wading birds, Osea Island and the sun catching a sail in the distance. How peaceful it is sailing on the river here or walking on the sea wall – simple pleasures.

# Calendar of events

## MAY

### ❖ **Dr Feelgood Weekend, Canvey Island**

For a blast of high-energy nostalgia, join this annual pilgrimage to the birthplace of the much-loved R&B band. @drfeelgood.org

❖ **Maldon Mud Race** This mucky charity race sees hundreds of competitors, many of them in fancy dress, slip and slide for 400m across the gloopy bed of the River Blackwater – at low tide, naturally. @maldonmudrace.com

### ❖ **Mersea Island Festival of Food, Drink & Leisure**

This festival, held at Mersea Island Vineyard and Brewery, is a celebration of local food and drink. Enjoy samples and learn how to match wines and beers with foods. @mersea-fdl-festival.com

## JUNE

❖ **Summer of Art** This superb six-month season brings together Essex artists in all media, with exhibitions, workshops

and art trails. Coastal locations include Leigh, Harwich, Burnham, Maldon and the Jaywick Martello Tower. @visitessex.com/summerofart

❖ **Leigh Folk Festival** Historic Old Leigh is the perfect setting for this fabulous four-day (and free) event, featuring established names and newcomers from the worlds of folk, jazz, country and world music. @leighfolkfestival.com

## JULY

### ❖ **Village Green, Southend-on-Sea**

A free, day-long music festival put on by the superb Metal arts organization, which creates a buzz with its excellent bands, theatre and cabaret. Enjoy the hassle-free, family-friendly atmosphere. @metalculture.com

## AUGUST

❖ **Clacton Air Show** The beachfront is chock-a-block during this spectacular

free show, known for its colourful, daredevil aerobatic displays, as well as music, family fun, and food and drink at sea level. @clactonairshow.com

❖ **Burnham Week** This lively yacht regatta – a key event on the sailing calendar since 1893 – is organized by the four sailing clubs in this pretty town. @burnhamweek.org.uk

❖ **West Mersea Regatta** This event, which has been held since 1838, includes boat and swimming races, sea shanties and a “Walk the Greasy Pole” activity on a Thames barge. @mersearegatta.org.uk

## SEPTEMBER

❖ **Maldon Regatta** Water-based races, parades and waterside fun characterize this event at historic Hythe Quay. @maldonregatta.co.uk

❖ **Colne Smack and Barge Race, Brightlingsea** Witness an impressive number of historic vessels go head to head in this race. @colnesmack.co.uk

❖ **Old Leigh Regatta** Morris dancing, cockle-eating contests, football in the mud and a dinghy tug-of-war define this event. @oldleighregatta.co.uk

## OCTOBER

### ❖ **Harwich International Shanty Festival**

Shanty crews and folk singers from around the world lead “singarounds” and workshops on everything from bone-playing to figurehead-carving. @harwichshantyfestival.co.uk

❖ **Firework Spectacular, Southend-on-Sea** Watch dazzling fountains of fireworks explode over the seafront on Saturday nights (until mid-November). @visitsouthend.co.uk

### ❖ **Saltmarsh 75**

Complete 75 miles in just two days on this coastal walking challenge. Highlights include the UK’s oldest chapel and miles of distinctive saltmarsh. @saltmarsh75.co.uk

See also @visitessex.com/events

## Southend-on-Sea

The largest destination on the Discovery Coast, stretching alongside 10km of mainly sandy beaches, **Southend-on-Sea** has been a summer resort since the early 1800s. For today's visitors, it offers both a cheeky dose of seaside fun and a vibrant cultural scene.

First stop has to be the iconic **pier**, which, at 2.1 km, is the longest pleasure pier on the planet. The journey to the end, whether by foot or on the train, really does transport you to a different world. There are no slot machines or amusements here. Rather, as the neon and flashing lights of the seafront

*Seafront, Southend*



*The innovative Royal Pavilion*

recede, you'll encounter a delicious blast of fresh air, glorious fleeting skies and expansive views out across the estuary to Kent.

Bustling on sunny days, tranquil off-season, the end of the pier has three year-round fixtures: a busy **lifeboat station** that's open to visitors; a huddle of sea anglers who, come rain or shine, wait patiently for a bite; and the **Royal Pavilion**, a modern cultural centre, despite its traditional name. Set at jagged angles, this unusual building blends well with its elemental surroundings. Its huge windows and slanted silver roof gleam in the shifting light and its weathered boards, leading up to the entrance, change colour according to the weather – from a burnished bronze in summer to an algae green in winter. Sit with a cappuccino on the café terrace here and linger over the view. You may

see visiting tall ships and excursion boats – including the *Waverley* (1947), the world's only remaining seagoing paddle steamer (see p.29).

Near the pier entrance, the cosy **Pier Museum** is a cubbyhole of nostalgia, with working penny-slot machines, crazy mirrors and photographs of bustling ladies and boatered gents promenading in the sun. Next door, the **Adventure Land** fun park offers far less sedate twenty-first-century thrills. Then there's the handsome **Kursaal**, with its huge skylit dome, which was built in 1901 as the centrepiece of one of the first amusement parks in the world.



*The Kursaal, illuminated at night*



*City Beach with interactive fun fountains*

Now a listed building, the Kursaal is still a “palace of fun” given over to sports bars, a casino and tenpin bowling.

Follow in the footsteps of Edwardian holiday-makers by taking the 1912 **cliff lift** down to the seafront and strolling along the Western Esplanade. Be sure to stop by at **Rossi's**, which has been whipping up ice cream in Southend since the 1930s. Their indulgent recipe uses fresh milk and cream.

Southend also offers plenty for rainy days. Sitting at the heart of charming Priory Park is **Prittlewell Priory**, which



*The historic Southchurch Hall*

has a long and fascinating history. The museum here – one of the region's best – uses a lively mix of ancient artefacts and interactive exhibits to trace the history of the priory, from its founding by Cluniac monks in 1110 through to the Dissolution of the Monasteries, right up to Victorian times.

**Southchurch Hall**, meanwhile, a half-timbered, fourteenth-century manor house, presents a series of replica period rooms, including a medieval hall and a Victorian bedroom. **Central Museum**, in Southend's old Victorian library, is solidly old-fashioned and educational covering local social and natural history, from the Ice Age up to the twentieth century. The new library, **The Forum**, couldn't be more different: this state-of-the-art space is home to the **Focal Point Gallery** (see p.37), which hosts cutting-edge exhibitions.

See also @visitsouthend.co.uk

## Leigh-on-Sea

Only 6.5km west of Southend is **Leigh-on-Sea** with its appealing high street, but the big draw is down by the water. Here, **Old Leigh**, a quaint fishing village with a working boatyard, features cobbled quayside streets lined with narrow old cottages. Once a large naval base, Leigh has been a major cockling centre since the nineteenth century – more than a quarter of the UK's cockles are now landed here. The local mussels and fish are also excellent.

Head for the weatherboard **cockle sheds** and then eat your seafood down by the quayside. At low tide, the vision of colourful fishing boats moored on gleaming mudflats that are streaked



*Mudflats at low tide*

with silvery streams is quintessential coastal Essex. There's a small, gently shelving beach here, while over to the west, at **Two Tree Island**, there is fabulous birdwatching. Part of the island has now been turned into a nature reserve.

Local art and unusual gifts are on offer at **The Old Foundry** on the High Street,

while the tiny **heritage centre** features a charming model fishing cottage. The flower-filled garden at **Sara's** is a lovely spot for coffee or lunch, and the waterside pubs are particularly lively on Sunday, when local bands take to the stage.

See also @visitsouthend.co.uk



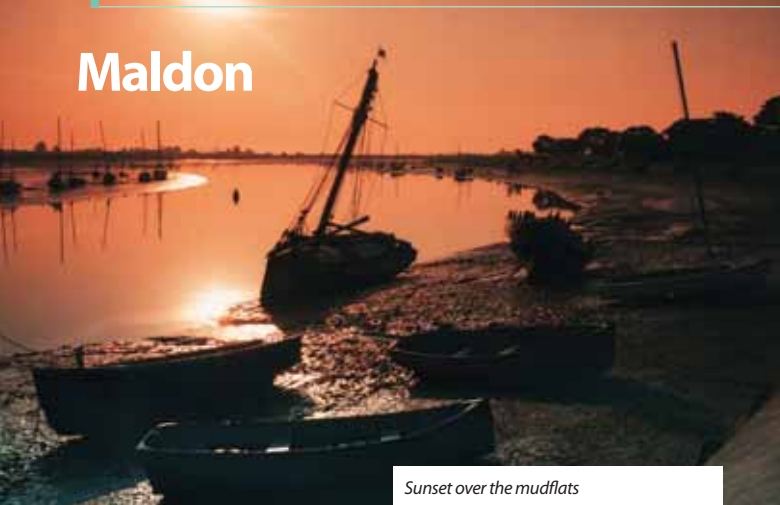
*The Old Foundry*



*Pretty Leigh*



# Maldon



*Sunset over the mudflats*

**Maldon**, known to foodies everywhere for its sea salt, is a handsome market town sitting astride the River Blackwater. The atmospheric **Hythe Quay**, a historic working waterfront, is lined with tarred weatherboard shipwrights' huts and piled with boat paraphernalia. The quay is also home to seven active **Thames Sailing Barges** – more than anywhere else in England – which date from as far back as 1895. It's quite a sight to see these iconic cargo vessels, or "stackies", gliding through the estuary with their distinctive brown sails and lofty masts. To get up close, take a sailing tour with Topsail Charters, based at Hythe Quay,

or head below deck for tea and cake at the **Barge Tearooms** in winter.

You could while away hours at The Hythe, watching the boats and listening to the clatter of masts and the rhythmic flap of sails in the wind. At low tide, you'll see wading birds busily pecking in the Blackwater mudflats, while the surrounding marshes seem to change colour with the endlessly shifting light.

At the end of the quay, **Promenade Park** – known locally as "the Prom" – stretches parallel to the waterfront right to the head of the estuary. It's packed with attractions to keep the kids busy (see p.28), including, in the old park

keeper's cottage, the **Maldon Museum**, where curiosities include a replica waistcoat belonging to the "Fat Man of Maldon" (Edward Bright, 1721–1750), who weighed in at 42 stone.

The **Blackwater Estuary** offers rich pickings for ramblers, birdwatchers and photographers. Walk along the sea wall north to reach **Heybridge Basin**, a picturesque spot where the saltwater river meets the eighteenth-century **Chelmer and Blackwater Canal**. Summers here resound with the gentle hubbub of dog-walkers and hikers enjoying a pint by the sea lock, but it's wonderfully peaceful off-season. Stop by at **The Lock Tea Room** in

Heybridge (see p.51) for a cream tea with delicious Essex jam. From here, you can see **Northey Island**, site of the 991 Battle of Maldon (see p.31); today, it's a nature reserve owned by the National Trust.

From Heybridge, you can walk along the sea wall a couple of kilometres to the mudflats opposite **Osea Island**, where a twisting pebble causeway is only passable every seven hours, due to the tides. Scenes from *The Woman in Black* movies were filmed on this eerie stretch. You may see a lone oysterman roaming the causeway at low tide, but the island itself is a private resort (see p.57).

See also @visitmaldondistrict.co.uk

*Boats docked at Maldon*



# Burnham-on-Crouch

It's hard to resist the sea-salty charm of **Burnham-on-Crouch**, a yachting town on the eponymous river. A **waterfront** stroll here will take you past boatyards, wooden jetties and moorings. Check out the 1931 **Royal Corinthian Yacht Club**, an Art Deco classic with sleek lines, walls of windows and metal railings. This is one of four yacht clubs in a town where, unsurprisingly, the Burnham Week annual regatta is a big deal (see p.9).

As you continue west, the town slowly slips away as water takes over, and moody views open up across to RSPB-protected **Wallasea Island**. In summer, hop on the foot ferry to the island, where you can while away an hour or so on a wildlife exploration.

Burnham's **high street** features a hodgepodge of architecture, from simple Essex weatherboards to Georgian town houses and an intriguing octagonal clock tower. While you're here, pop into the **Tall Green House** for coffee and to browse classy gifts and souvenirs, or catch a film at the nostalgic 1931 **Rio Cinema** nearby.

Burnham is a great base for exploring the stunning, mysterious **Dengie Peninsula**, with its unspoiled villages and eerie saltmarsh fringes. The seven-hour walk along the sea wall here to the seventh-century chapel of **St Peter-on-the-Wall** at Bradwell is one of coastal Essex's greatest walks. **See also** @visitmaldondistrict.co.uk

*The Royal Corinthian Yacht Club*



# Brightlingsea



*Sunset, Brightlingsea*

The staid Victorian appearance of little **Brightlingsea** belies its rich history. After 1360, the town benefitted from its status as a "limb" of the Cinque Port coastal town of Sandwich. It was renowned in Elizabethan times for fishing and shipbuilding, and later became a major oyster town. Still a sailing centre today, Brightlingsea is an ideal family resort, with a Blue Flag **beach**, retro open-air **lido** and tidal **paddling pool**.

In the spot where the Colne Estuary meets Brightlingsea Creek, you'll find octagonal **Bateman's Tower**, a Victorian folly now used by the local yacht club. This structure marks the start of both an 8km **nature trail** across the saltmarshes and a shoreline path that curves along the **promenade**, lined with beach huts. The views from both routes are dazzling at sunset, when candyfloss clouds



*Beach huts lining the promenade*

hover over the silvery water. Beyond the swish marina, at the bustling **Hard**, or harbour, a historic **Thames Sailing Barge** is available for tours and there's a summer-only **foot ferry** to Point Clear and Mersea for great beach walks.

Tiny **Brightlingsea Museum** explores local history, while medieval **Jacobs Hall** is Essex's oldest timber-framed house. In the walls of thirteenth-century **All Saints Church**, 2km north, you'll find Roman tiles and poignant memorials for parishioners lost at sea. **See also** @essex-sunshine-coast.org.uk

# Mersea Island



*Windswept Mersea Island*

Straddling the estuaries of the Rivers Colne and Blackwater, **Mersea Island** is Britain's most easterly inhabited island and a land unto itself. At high tide, water washes over the kilometre-long **Strood** – the causeway built by the Anglo-Saxons. Of the five thousand people who live on the island, just five hundred of them reside in **East Mersea**, where the occasional farm shop punctuates rich arable fields.

In the late 1800s, Sabine Baring-Gould, author of the tub-thumping hymn *Onward Christian Soldiers*, was rector of the fourteenth-century **St Edmund Church**. If his bestselling novel *Mehalah* (1880) is anything to go

by, it seems he felt a touch ambivalent about the island he called home. His tragic melodrama paints a very sodden, desolate picture of the marshlands here.

At the island's eastern tip, the lovely **Cudmore Grove Country Park** offers grassy expanses, sand and shingle beaches, moody saltmarshes and gleaming mudflats – it is a favourite with dog walkers, birdwatchers and beachcombers. From the park's sea wall you can spy the jaunty beach huts of Brightlingsea across the estuary – keep your eyes peeled and you may even spot a seal. Nearby is **Mersea Island Vineyard**, a family-run operation also known for its great beer. Opt for one of the occasional guided tours, or simply pop in and buy a bottle to take home.



*An idyllic island cottage*



*Pretty row of beach huts, West Mersea*

**West Mersea** is firmly in oyster territory. Take a stroll along the shell- and pebble-strewn beach here, which is fringed with beach huts. Head west along the shore, encountering quirky weather-blasted houseboats and tip-tilted fishing boats wonkily moored in the oyster-shell-pocked mud. Pleasures here are simple: crabbing from the jetties, watching the activity at the boat-repair yards, taking in the dramatic, wide skies, and, of course, feasting on fresh native oysters.

**Oyster farms** and sorting stations abound here. At the **Company Shed** (see p.51) restaurant you can tuck into fresh oysters and seafood platters,

or sample something from the day's catch – usually a mix of whelks, scallops, gurnards, bloaters, dabs, flounders and herrings. Afterwards, take a walk along **The Lane** – an extremely pretty, narrow pathway that is lined with tiny sixteenth-century cottages, clapboard captains' houses and gardens tangled with lanky hollyhocks and fragrant jasmine.

Inland, on West Mersea high street, the small **Mersea Museum** employs an intriguing jumble of artefacts to illuminate local fishing, oyster-catching and boatbuilding, while the **Art Café** opposite offers good food and a funky gallery-cum-gift shop.

**See also @west-mersea.co.uk**

# Clacton-on-Sea



*Clacton's pleasure pier*

**Clacton-on-Sea**, long a byword for end-of-the-pier British seaside fun, was developed as a resort in 1871. Its Victorian **pleasure pier** (formal address: No. 1, North Sea) offers modern amusements, not least at the shore-end pavilion, where night-time glow bowling is a big attraction.

Wandering through the pier's covered **arcade** – a jangling cacophony of video games, hurricane simulators, teacup rides and novelty photo booths – you emerge into the light at the broad pier end. Here, an ensemble of **fairground attractions** (dodgems, a carousel and a helter-skelter), family pursuits (crazy golf and the SeaQuarium) and high-adrenaline thrills (bungee jumping and water zorbing) create an irresistible buzz.

At the end of the pier sits the **Old Jolly Roger** restaurant, built in the 1880s. This has been used as a music hall and a circus – some of its original wrought iron remains inside, along with vintage trapeze ropes. Outside, it's fun to laze on a deckchair with a huge puffball of candyfloss and watch the world go by on the water. Pleasure boats, including the *Waverley* (see p.29) – the world's only



*Jaywick Martello Tower*

remaining seagoing paddle steamer – come and go, while the wind farm stands sentinel against the huge sky.

By the pier, Clacton's **beach** is a gem: golden, sandy and broad, with seaside volleyball and rugby in summer, along with Punch and Judy shows. Here, too, is the Clacton Pavilion, an entertainment and amusement centre with rides and a 5D cinema. To the west, graffiti art by Bristol artist Silent Hobo adorns the sea walls and old-fashioned tea kiosks sell cornets and chips. If you fancy a picnic without getting sand in your sandwiches, climb the steps up to street level to the **Seafront Gardens**, an elegant Edwardian display laid out in the 1920s that blazes with neatly manicured colour in summer. It includes a Mediterranean



*Splendid Seafront Gardens*

garden, a war memorial garden, a sunken rose garden and a sensory garden.

A big beach regeneration project – due to be completed in 2017 – will ensure Clacton's sandy beaches stretch out east of the pier as well as to the west. For now, it's possible to walk 13km east along the shore to **Walton-on-the-Naze** via **Frinton-on-Sea** and **Holland Haven Country Park** – a route that's great for birdwatching. Meanwhile, 5km south of town lies **Jaywick**, which boasts a fabulous sandy beach and an atmospheric art gallery in the **Jaywick Martello Tower**, a squat white tub of a building gazing out to sea. **See also** [www.essex-sunshine-coast.org.uk](http://www.essex-sunshine-coast.org.uk)

# Harwich



Harwich Ha'penny Pier

**Harwich**, the northernmost town on the Discovery Coast, is almost entirely surrounded by water. Its harbour, which is the largest between the Humber, in the north of England, and London, was created by a storm surge in the 1100s – a quirk of fate that gave rise to the area's long and fascinating seafaring history.

Down at the quayside is **Trinity House**, which controls all navigation and lighthouses around England, Wales and the Channel Islands; colossal buoys sit in the yard here waiting to be transported to their waterborne positions. The wooden **Ha'penny Pier** nearby, built in 1853, was used by the paddle steamers

that brought Victorian Londoners to the coast for a blast of fresh air. Walk to the end, past tangled mounds of colourful nets, to watch pleasure craft, ships and yachts glide by. The **Ha'penny Visitor Centre** here has a fascinating little exhibit on New World explorations that set off from Harwich. This includes the *Mayflower* – the ship in which the Pilgrim Fathers sailed to Massachusetts in 1620 in order to colonize America. You can see a replica of the vessel being rebuilt in the old train yards nearby. Permanently moored by the quayside, the **LV 18** was Britain's last manned light vessel. It was decommissioned in 1994, but is open to the public today.

Stretching back from the quay is the **old town**, its venerable weatherboard cottages, sail-makers' lofts and bow-fronted captains' houses lining an unchanged medieval street grid. Sights include the man-operated **Treadwheel Crane** (1667), a kind of colossal hamster wheel based on a Roman design, and the **Lifeboat Museum**, a Victorian lifeboat shed bursting at the seams with its centrepiece boat. Nearby are the **High Lighthouse** and the squat, white **Low Lighthouse**, 137m apart. The structures were built in 1818 and

worked as a pair until silting up in the 1860s changed the course of the shipping channel. The latter now holds the **Maritime Museum**, which is filled with quirky nautical bygones.

Further inland, the **Guildhall** (1769) displays beautiful graffiti scratched into wooden walls by prisoners using sharpened bones and soot. Don't miss the 1911 **Electric Palace**, a gloriously nostalgic cinema that has all its original features and still screens movies.

Like so many of England's Napoleonic forts, Harwich's circular **Redoubt** (1808) – on high ground but hidden away behind a residential street – never saw military

*Harwich quayside*



*The Electric Palace*

action. Impeccably restored, with historic guns and cannon guarding the parapet, it has seventeen casements set around the circular courtyard.

**See also** @harwich-society.co.uk



# Walton-on-the-Naze

**Walton-on-the-Naze** is a Victorian family resort with traditional appeal. Its spick-and-span covered pier is adorned with the words "The happiest sound in all the world is the sound of children's laughter". It may not have the elegance of Southend Pier or the cheeky charm of Clacton's, but it's the third longest in the UK and offers arcades, amusements, tenpin bowling and good sea angling. A sandy, shelving beach stretches away to either side, sliced through by groynes and fringed by tiers of beach huts. Visit the little **Maritime Museum** nearby, where nostalgic memorabilia includes Walton china tourist knick-knacks and exhibits on the *James Stevens No. 14* – the world's oldest motorized lifeboat, which is available for jaunts.

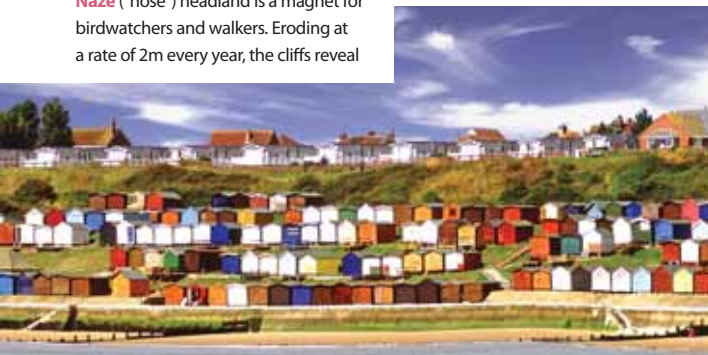
To the north, the wild, elemental **Naze** ("nose") headland is a magnet for birdwatchers and walkers. Eroding at a rate of 2m every year, the cliffs reveal

crumbling banks of London Clay and Red Crag, yielding a wild scatter of prehistoric fossils on the beach. On the cliff top, the 26m-high, octagonal **Naze Tower**, built as a navigation aid in 1720, displays local art and has an appealing tearoom. Climb the 111-step spiral staircase to the top to gaze out over the marshy **Walton Backwaters** and their resident seals. **See also** [@essex-sunshine-coast.org.uk](https://www.essex-sunshine-coast.org.uk)



*Naze Tower*

*Rows of beach huts*



# Frinton-on-Sea



*Frinton beach*

Since its landmark level-crossing gates were removed back in 2009 (to the annoyance of many local residents, who wanted to see them preserved), leafy **Frinton** is no longer divided between those who live "inside the gates" and those on the other side of the tracks. However, developed in the 1890s without boarding houses, pubs or a pier in order to attract a better class of tourist, the town remains resolutely traditional – it acquired its first fish-and-chip shop in 1992 and its only pub in 2000. It may even be hard to get an ice cream on a sunny afternoon in Frinton, since the seafront holds no commercial outlets. If it's a peaceful, expansive, sandy **beach** you're after, you cannot beat this sedate resort.



*Art Deco homes*

**Connaught Avenue**, which leads from the level crossing to the sea, is thriving with independent shops and cafés. Browse Art Deco treasures at **No. 24** and enjoy tasty fare at cosy **Emma's Kitchen**.

Along the **seafront**, Art Deco homes bring a touch of Miami to the Essex coast. Meanwhile, heading out to the cliffs, the manicured **greensward** boasts fantastic views and an excellent outdoor theatre season. **See also** [@essex-sunshine-coast.org.uk](https://www.essex-sunshine-coast.org.uk)

# THINGS TO DO



*Crabbing in Maldon; fun at Essex Wildlife Trust nature reserve; a day out at Southend Pier*

## Family fun

The Essex coastline offers a wealth of amusements that are geared to kids. Whether you're after fairground thrills, fascinating museums or sandy days spent crabbing and shell-collecting, the Discovery Coast is fantastic for families.



*Sealife Adventure Aquarium, Southend*

The seaside resorts offer the bulk of the rides and paying attractions. At **Southend Pier**, a trip on the train running its 2.1km length is a year-round treat. Beside the pier, the compact **Adventure Island** offers forty or so rides in a comfortably manageable area. It's particularly good for younger children, with everything from gentle choo-choos to jaunty helter-skelters. There are even a couple of hardcore roller coasters here, including "the Rage", which keep more mature thrill-seekers happy. From here, a ten-minute stroll along the seafront brings you to the small **Sealife Adventure Aquarium**, where you can peep through portholes and stroll through fibreglass tunnels to



*A Punch and Judy show, Clacton beach*

encounter sea creatures from around the world. Nearby is the historic **Kursaal** amusement park, a popular place for local teens to enjoy tenpin bowling.

**Clacton Pier** abounds in family attractions, with countless amusement arcades and bright-and-breezy fun rides. Here, the **SeaQuarium** is home to freshwater and tropical fish – simply follow the sound of excited shrieks to find the sharks and piranhas. At the unassuming Martello **Children's Zoo**, meanwhile, friendly, furry creatures – from pygmy goats to alpacas – live in the unusual environs of an 1810 Martello Tower, complete with a dry moat and working drawbridge. Further

up the coast, **Walton Pier** offers timeless seaside fun with its dodgems, penny slot machines and teacup rides.

For good family museums, head first to Southend. Here, you'll find the **Central Museum**, where quirky exhibits range from a mammoth tusk resembling a huge slab of sea-blasted scrimshaw to a 1980s doll's house decked out like a 1950s boarding house. The resort also boasts a traditional but captivating **planetarium** and **Prittlewell Priory**, where high-tech and creative displays – including lots on the Scrattton children who lived here in Victorian times – brilliantly feed young people's imaginations.

Just outside Burnham-on-Crouch, the **Mangapps Railway Museum** is a must for nostalgia-lovers and fans of steam locomotives. Highlights include original railway buildings and locomotives, and a vintage train that rides through the surrounding countryside. At Harwich, kids can enjoy a real-life fort in the circular Napoleonic **Redoubt**, its ramparts lined with historic guns and cannons. Regular re-enactments bring noise and action to its huge courtyard.

**Brightlingsea**, which is famed for its beach huts, is a big hit with families. The town boasts a 1930s open-air **lido**, large tidal wading pool, playground and boating lake, all clustered together near the waterfront. There are boat trips from the harbour, too, as there are from the bustling old quay at **Maldon**, where the riverside **Promenade Park** is a splendid family attraction. Here, the

ornamental and boating lakes, sand pits, skateboard and BMX ramps, pirate galleon, splash park and aerial runway draw youngsters in their droves. There's also a popular family orienteering trail.

For simple outdoor fun, East Mersea's **Cudmore Grove Country Park** is brilliant for kite-flying and picnics. For something more adventurous, try fossil-hunting at the **Naze**, where erosion has revealed all kinds of prehistoric flotsam and jetsam on the foreshore. You can also while away many happy hours crabbing at jetties along the coast, from Old Leigh to West Mersea to Harwich.

Finally, a handful of outdoor centres offer activity days. **Bradwell Outdoors** is excellent for watersports – they offer sessions on powerboating, keelboat, dinghy and catamaran sailing. Meanwhile at **Mersea Outdoors**, children can try their hands at rock climbing, archery and caving.

*Mersea beach*



## Messing about on boats



*A handsome Thames Sailing Barge*

A boat tour is a wonderful way to explore the Discovery Coast. You can hop on a river taxi or seasonal **foot ferry** at several places – between Wallasea Island and Burnham, for example – or enjoy a jaunt on a **paddle-steamer**. The *Waverley*, the world's last seagoing, passenger-carrying paddle steamer, sails between London and Harwich, stopping at Southend and Clacton (@waverleyexcursions.co.uk). For historic grandeur, the **Thames Sailing Barges** are hard to beat. Topsail Charters (@top-sail.co.uk), based at Maldon's Hythe Quay, offers excursions around the Blackwater and Crouch Estuaries, including birdwatching trips, historical tours and overnights. From Walton-on-the-Naze, you can visit Harwich or

Ipswich on the *James Stevens No. 14*, the world's oldest motorized **lifeboat** (@fwheritage.co.uk).

Anyone with an interest in wildlife should get out onto the water for a rewarding **wildlife trip** exploring the Essex coast's myriad creeks and inlets. From West Mersea, the *Lady Grace*, in conjunction with the RSPB, offers fishing, wildlife- and birdwatching jaunts around the Blackwater Estuary (@charterboats-uk.co.uk). On the Crouch Estuary, try the *Lady Essex* from Burnham or Wallasea Island (@ladyessex.com), and *Nature Break* from Burnham (@wildlifetrips.org.uk). The Naze backwaters can be explored with local boatman Tony Haggis from Walton (07806 309460).

# Historic coastal Essex

The history of the Essex coast is inextricably linked to the sea, shaped by incursions from abroad and explorations across the water. Just a short hop from the Low Countries to the east and abounding in accessible inlets, it was always an obvious gateway for raiders and invaders, from Romans to Vikings to eighteenth-century pirates.

Great seafaring adventures launched from here included Elizabethan expeditions and fishing-boat rescue missions from Leigh to Dunkirk.

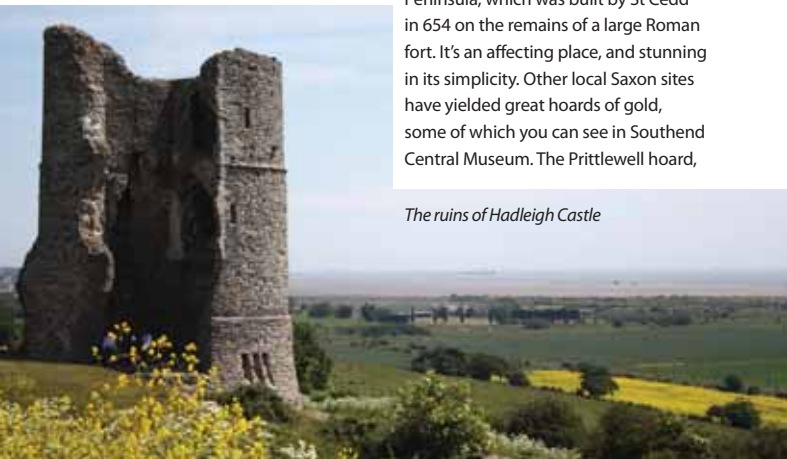
Evidence of the region's **maritime history** can be found everywhere, from the beautiful Thames barges moored

by Maldon's ancient quayside to the imposing Napoleonic towers and concrete World War II pillboxes that stud the shore.

Little survives of the string of coastal defences built by the **Romans** to protect Colchester from Saxon invaders, but there are other impressive Roman remains in the area. At Mersea, an ancient burial mound called the Barrow sits next to the East Mersea road, and at Brightlingsea, Roman tiles are embedded in the wall at All Saints church.

One important **Anglo-Saxon** site is the simple ragstone chapel of St Peter-on-the-Wall, near Bradwell on the Dengie Peninsula, which was built by St Cedd in 654 on the remains of a large Roman fort. It's an affecting place, and stunning in its simplicity. Other local Saxon sites have yielded great hoards of gold, some of which you can see in Southend Central Museum. The Prittlewell hoard,

*The ruins of Hadleigh Castle*



*Byrthnoth, Earl of Essex – the defeated hero of the Battle of Maldon, 991*

discovered in 2003, revealed the largest Saxon tomb ever found in England, complete with rare treasures.

Invading **Vikings** made good use of the creeks and gullies of this extravagantly corrugated coast – most dramatically in 991 when the Battle of Maldon, on Northey Island in the Blackwater Estuary, saw the Saxons, led by Byrthnoth, roundly defeated. The three-day battle, a heroic failure recorded in the epic Old English poem *The Battle of Maldon*, makes Northey the oldest recorded battlefield in Britain.

There are few **Norman** remains, although ruined Hadleigh Castle, built in around 1215 and extensively

re fortified by Edward III, is an evocative place. Ripped through by a broad fissure and open to the skies, it towers over the encroaching marshes, with low stone foundations allowing you to pick your way through long-disappeared rooms. Southend's Southchurch Hall, a fourteenth-century moated manor house, displays remnants of its **medieval** days, as does Prittlewell Priory, where you can learn about the lives of the largely silent Cluniac order.

**Elizabethan** times brought much adventure to coastal towns such as Leigh, Brightlingsea and Harwich, with sailors setting off to battle the Spanish Armada and discover new worlds.



Harwich Low Lighthouse

In 1620, the Pilgrim ship the *Mayflower* was launched from Harwich, home of the King's Navy – today, you can see a replica being built in the old train yards.

In addition to some lovely domestic architecture in towns like Harwich and Burnham, the **Georgian** years are

best characterized by the repurposed Martello towers – there's one at Jaywick, which is now a gallery, and another at Clacton, which has become a zoo. The impressive Napoleonic Redoubt (fort) at Harwich also dates from this era.

For **Victorian** history, you can do no better than wander the resorts of Southend, Clacton and Walton-on-the-Naze, where the piers, beach huts and grand old theatres evoke the heyday of English seaside tourism. Architecture buffs also get excited about Burnham, with its Modernist Royal Corinthian Yacht Club, and Frinton, where houses with steel-framed windows and sleek railings represent the height of **Art Deco** chic.

Harwich Redoubt



## Wildlife spotting



Boat trips, Crouch Estuary

The Discovery Coast is a moody tangle of mudflats, lonely saltmarshes, sinuous tidal inlets, rustling reedbeds, shingle banks and estuarine islands. It is a wild, ever-changing place, where water defines the land and the natural world rules. Internationally important for **birdwatching**, this coastline harbours crucial wintering sites for wildfowl and waders, including Brent geese; in fact, around a quarter of the world's Brent goose population winters here.

This stretch of coast features RSPB and Essex Wildlife Trust (EWT) reserves, as well as several Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs). One of these is **Southend's** 10km-long foreshore, which,

at the mouth of the Thames Estuary, is a key habitat for migrating birds. A string of important wildlife reserves border the river, not least **Two Tree Island** with its Brent Geese, breeding Avocets and roosting waders. There's also a new EWT site at Mucking, a trio of new RSPB reserves at West Canvey, Bowers and Vange Marshes, as well as an established reserve at Rainham Marshes.

The **Blackwater Estuary** and isolated **Dengie Peninsula** are also SSSIs. Their saltmarshes, backwaters and creeks are crucial breeding and feeding grounds for birds. Stunning sites in these areas include the environs of the chapel of St Peter-on-the-Wall and the mudflats

at Maldon, at the head of the estuary. Here, you can witness vast flocks of redshanks as they make mesmerizing formations in the huge skies.

**Wallasea Island** is reached either by a foot ferry from Burnham or via a causeway from Canuden. It's the base of the RSPB's most ambitious conservation project in the UK, which involves restoring saltmarshes and mudflats from flood damage. You'll see dozens of birds from the sea-wall footpath here, along with lively brown hares and, out to sea, the bobbing heads of grey and common seals. For magical views – and, perhaps, a close-up seal encounter – take a boat trip from the island's marina.

**Mersea Island** is a favourite for waders. Here, **Cudmore Grove Country Park** at the mouth of the estuary offers rare glimpses of important birdlife. Avocets and little terns swoop down to the mudflats, while Brent geese, wigeons, teals and herons can be found near the pond. You may also spot seals and the occasional harbour porpoise near the shore.

The unique landscape of the **Naze** headland, north of Walton-on-the-Naze, is an SSSI of huge geological and biological importance. The **John Weston Nature Reserve** is a valuable migration site and nesting area for



*RSPB-protected Wallasea Island*



*Corn bunting, Wallasea Island*



*Sunset over the Naze headland*

several protected bird species. Behind the Naze, the tidal inlets, islands and creeks of **Hamford Water National Nature Reserve** and the tranquil **Walton Backwaters** are a crucial habitat for waders, waterfowl and breeding birds. They're best explored by boat, when you're likely to encounter the local seals – notice their orangey pelts, which get their colour from the iron oxide in the mud. The Naze's exposed, 21m-high cliffs, meanwhile, are superb for fossil-hunting.

Another lonesome beauty spot is the **Wrabness Local Nature Reserve**. This mix of grassland, ancient woodland, intertidal mudflats and saltmarsh lies on the southern bank of the River Stour near Harwich. The ancient Stour and

**Copperas Woodlands** are aflutter with butterflies in summer, while in winter **Copperas Bay** offers the spectacle of masses of wading birds and wildfowl.

Lesser-known sites include the SSSI of **Brightlingsea Creek**, where the mesh of estuary and marsh is home to a variety of birds – including sedge warblers, Brent geese and little egrets – as well as colourful butterflies, sea lavender and golden samphire. There are more waders and wildfowl near the village of St Osyth at **Howlands Marsh**, where reed- and sedge-filled dykes punctuate grazing and saltmarshes. In a rural spot on the coast between Clacton and Frinton, **Holland Haven Country Park** is another SSSI, known for its birdlife and rare flora.

# Fancy a breath of fresh air?

We invite you to come and experience  
the wildlife spectacles at your local  
RSPB Essex nature reserves.

[rspb.org.uk/essex](http://rspb.org.uk/essex)

## Cultural coastal Essex



*Jaywick Martello Tower*

Artists have long been drawn to the Essex coast for its exquisite light and end-of-the-earth atmosphere. Little **Wivenhoe**, for example, with its quiet quayside, was an artists' colony in the 1950s; painter Francis Bacon and photographer John Deakin both made their homes here. The town still boasts an active arts scene today. Then there's the cobbled waterside enclave of **Old Leigh**, which attracts potters, painters and photographers. The town's art trail ([leigharttrail.com](http://leigharttrail.com)) is one of the highlights of the Summer of Art (see p.8).

A number of the defensive towers that stud the Essex coast make unusual, creative art spaces. The lofty eighteenth-century **Naze Tower** ([nazetower.co.uk](http://nazetower.co.uk)), for example, high on the cliff at Walton-on-the-Naze, exhibits local art, as does the **Jaywick Martello Tower** ([jaywickmartellotower.org](http://jaywickmartellotower.org)), near

Clacton, which also hosts the highly regarded Jaywick Open during the Summer of Art.

For big names look no further than Southend where the **Beecroft Gallery** ([southendmuseums.co.uk](http://southendmuseums.co.uk); closed for re-housing until summer 2014) has a fine collection of contemporary art and historical paintings. The gallery is next door to the **Central Museum** and **Southend Planetarium**. The town's bijou **Focal Point Gallery** ([focalpoint.org.uk](http://focalpoint.org.uk)) puts on avant-garde exhibitions.

If you're after some saucy seaside fun to follow your cultural fix, then take your pick from the area's countless nightlife venues. Southend's **Cliffs Pavilion** ([thec Cliffspavilion.co.uk](http://thec Cliffspavilion.co.uk)) and Edwardian **Palace Theatre** ([palacetheatresouthend.co.uk](http://palacetheatresouthend.co.uk)) stage everything from Ken Dodd to opera, fringe, folk and classic drama.



*Cliffs Pavilion, Southend*



*Royal Pavilion, Southend*

The light-drenched **Royal Pavilion** (@visitsouthend.co.uk), on Southend Pier, is an exciting modern space for concerts and exhibitions, while Clacton's **West Cliff Theatre** (@westcliffclacton.org) stages an old-school summer show.

For film-viewing, the best option has to be Harwich's stunning 1911 **Electric Palace** (@electricpalace.com), a volunteer-run community cinema. Though new releases and art movies are the focus, you may be lucky enough to catch a silent classic, with live music or even a jazz concert.

The Essex coast has a passion for folk music, and this, combined with its strong links to the sea, means that the sea-shanty tradition is in fine fettle in the area. As well as its excellent free folk festival (see p.8), Leigh-on-Sea is at the heart of the scene, with the **Community Centre** (@leighonseatowncouncil.gov.uk) and waterside pubs at **Old Leigh** putting on regular folk gigs. Nearby, in Southend, the hip **Railway Hotel** (@railwayhotelsos.co.uk) presents a consistently creative roster of acoustic nights and arty events.

## Coastal walks



*Chapel of St Peter-on-the-Wall*

One of the greatest pleasures of the Discovery Coast is exploring it on foot. The scenery is a photographer's dream, especially in the opalescent light of early morning, or at dusk, when vivid sunsets blaze across huge skies. At this time, encountering the wilderness can be a transcendental experience. Whether you're in the mood for a lonesome voyage into otherworldly isolation, a cobweb-clearing hike, a cheery seaside stroll or an informative town tour, there are kilometres of footpaths to roam across the area.

One of the loveliest walks is around the northernmost tip of the **Dengie Peninsula** – the barely populated hump

of arable land that's cut off from the rest of the coast by the rivers Blackwater and Crouch. Park at **Bradwell-on-Sea** and take a fifteen-minute stroll along a country path to **St Peter-on-the-Wall**, a Celtic chapel built by St Cedd in 654 on the remains of a Roman fort. Still active today, this chapel has a moving, eerie beauty. It's a wild place, perched incongruously between the decommissioned Bradwell power station to the west and a vast wind farm to the east. Just beyond, dry land dissolves into glistening mudflats, cockle spits and salty, sodden marshes. It's nice to amble along the sea wall here, beside the mercurial pools of the flats.



*Sunset over the River Crouch*

At low tide, you may see bait-diggers or beachcombers trudging a lonely furrow.

You can walk all the way to **Burnham-on-Crouch** along the coast from here – a 26km route of haunting melancholy, where the silence is broken only by the whisper of marsh grasses and the mournful cries of hungry birds. Another favourite spot with walkers is the area around **Maldon**, on the fringes of the Dengie Peninsula, which boasts many good hiking trails. From Maldon itself you can walk along the sea wall to picturesque **Heybridge Lock**.

The 21km walk around the coast of **Mersea Island** is the perfect way to

experience its unique character. En route, you'll crunch along the shell-strewn sands of West Mersea beach towards **Cudmore Grove Country Park** in the east. The park, with its low cliffs, grasslands, beaches and glorious views across the Colne and Blackwater Estuaries, is a destination in itself for walkers. The coastal path continues along the serrated Pyefleet and Strood channels and back to West Mersea, where a restorative stop-off for fresh oysters is practically obligatory.

For more wild beauty, the **Naze** is a fabulous destination, whether you set off along the cliffs and take in the nature

reserve or follow the beachside **Crag Walk** in front of the southern end of the cliffs. This walkway was built as part of a scheme to slow the devastating erosion of this fragile part of the coast.

Created by the Royal Geographical Society, **Neither Land Nor Sea** is an 8km route from South Benfleet to Old Leigh that passes the ruined Hadleigh Castle and takes in the tidal creeks, saltmarshes and mudflats of the Thames Estuary. Not conventionally pretty, particularly in its early stages, the walk has that raw, lonely charm that gives so much of this coast its moody character.

Other excellent walks include the 8km nature trail from Bateman's Tower in **Brightlingsea**; the 10km **Estuary Trail** along the seafront at Southend; the route from Southend to the medieval market town of **Rochford** and out as far as the coast around **Wallasea Island**; the gorgeous coastal stretch from Clacton to **Walton-on-the-Naze**, which passes through **Holland Haven Country Park** and **Frinton-on-Sea**; and last, but by no means least, the **Harwich Maritime Trail**, along which the history of this fascinating seafaring town really comes to life. See also @visitessex.com/walks

## Top beaches in Essex



*One of many beaches at Southend*

The dramatically indented Essex coastline, slashed through with estuaries and tidal inlets, is studded with good beaches, many of which boast Blue Flag awards for their cleanliness, safety and water quality. Whether your tastes run to sunbathing or jet-skiing, beachcombing or sandcastle-building, you're sure to find a spot here.

**Southend-on-Sea** can claim ten uninterrupted kilometres of clean, safe and largely sandy strands. The busiest of these, right in the heart of the action, tends to be the small **Three Shells Beach**, next to the pier. Just a few minutes walk away, **Westcliff Beach** offers more peace, with a selection of

good little eateries under the arches; at low tide here you may even spot seals on the estuary sandbanks. Things get more active – and more shingly – east of Southend Pier, where **Thorpe Bay**, **Shoebury Common** and **Shoebury East Beach** are the domain of watersports enthusiasts.

To the north, sandy **Brightlingsea**, where the River Colne meets the sea, is a low-key family choice, with a lido and a tidal paddling pool by the shore. You can gaze across to **Mersea Island**, accessible by crossing the Anglo-Saxon Strood causeway at low tide or by jumping on the foot ferry. West Mersea is the most popular bathing beach here

and a spectacular windsurfing spot, but **Cudmore Grove Country Park**, in the east of the island, is a treat, fringed by a shell-strewn pebble shore that's perfect for beachcombing.

Gently shelving **Martello Bay**, at **Clacton**, is the largest beach on the Essex coast and another good family option. Here, they give out wristbands to help prevent children getting lost. Things get quieter the further north you head. **Frinton-on-Sea** is justly proud of its spotless sands, which, when the tide is out, seem to go on forever, while neighbouring **Walton-on-the-Naze** sees a little more activity. There is another gloriously sandy

stretch here, located at the base of the Naze cliffs, which yields an exciting hoard of fossils. Remote **Wrabness**, west of Harwich on the Stour Estuary, is a nature-lover's and fossil-hunter's dream, while **Dovercourt** is a delightful seaside resort with a Blue Flag sandy beach just south of Harwich.

If you really like your shorelines secluded, elemental and raw, then make for the **Dengie Peninsula** – the low-lying plug of land between the Blackwater and Crouch Estuaries. The vast, empty coastline here is fringed with shell-speckled beaches, atmospheric saltmarshes, tiny islands, seal colonies and vast cockle spits.



*The enormous beach at Frinton-on-Sea*

## Adventure sports

With its hundreds of kilometres of shore, much of it made up of sheltered estuaries, creeks and backwaters, the Discovery Coast is a popular



*Windsurfing at Southend*

destination for watersports enthusiasts. Fans of **sailing**, **canoeing** and **kayaking** flock here at all times – particularly in the summer – and the local calendar is

studded with regular regattas and races. Despite its strong links to the sea, however, this area, with its flat terrain and lovely country lanes, is also a popular **cycling** destination.

Seafaring visitors to this stretch of coast will find moorings at countless marinas, boatyards and clubs. Burnham-on-Crouch is *the* yachting destination, with four yacht clubs, one of which is the elegant **Royal Corinthian Yacht Club**; the town's regatta in August is a highlight on the sailing calendar. Southend's 10km of beaches boast no less than five yacht clubs, and there are also clubs

at Bradwell, Maldon, West Mersea, Tollesbury, Brightlingsea, Wivenhoe, Clacton, Walton-on-the-Naze and Harwich, among others. Some of them offer lessons for non-members: at **Brightlingsea Sailing Club**, for example, there are beginner sessions in dinghy sailing for adults and kids.

Southend is a major watersports destination. The resort boasts near-perfect conditions for high-speed **windsurfing**, and there's fabulous **jet-skiing** and **jet-boating** from



*Cycling on Mersea Island*

Shoebury East and Shoebury Common beaches. **Southend Marine Activities Centre**, on the eastern esplanade, offers instruction in sailing, canoeing, windsurfing, paddle sports, jet-skiing and more – for any level of ability. It also holds an Open Day in spring, when you can try out the sports for free. **Southend Kitesurfing**, meanwhile, offers water-based kitesurf tasters and beginner courses, with land-based power-kite sessions for younger kids. More tasters for children take place throughout the year at **Bradwell Outdoors** and **Mersea Outdoors**.

Finally, the area's outstanding cycling routes keep many landlubbers happy. The 10km **Estuary Trail** along Southend's seafront offers brilliant views of the Thames Estuary and takes you past the town's main attractions. More remote areas to explore on two wheels include the villages and lanes around the **Blackwater Estuary** near Maldon and the Heybridge Basin; the routes from **Wivenhoe to Brightlingsea** and from **Clacton to Walton-on-the-Naze**; and the rural **Witchfinders Way**, from Harwich to the little port of Mistley near Wrabness. **Mersea Island** is also ideal for cycling; carry your bike over on the ferry from Brightlingsea.

**See also** @visitessex.com/cycle



*Young sailors on the water*



*Sunset, Walton-on-the-Naze*



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## Food and drink



*Fresh seafood, Brightlingsea*

Several of the most delicious foods in Essex come from its coast. **Fresh fish** and **seafood** abound, including that quintessential Essex delicacy, **jellied eels**. Perhaps even better known than these are **Colchester Natives**. Succulent, firm and delicate, these delicious oysters, highly prized at both Billingsgate and Borough Market in London, are cultivated around Mersea Island and taste out of this world when served fresh with a squeeze of lemon. **Leigh cockles** are another Discovery Coast speciality. Old Leigh has a great tradition of cockling, and long-established family fleets still sell

their daily catch from the weatherboard cockle sheds by the quay. Buy a plate, grab a cool drink, and settle down to a seafood feast in the fresh estuary air.

The Essex coast is also known for its fantastic **meat**. The coastal marshes here provide excellent grazing land for sheep and cattle, and much of the meat produced is organic. You can find it, along with other fresh produce, in farm shops, family butchers and delis all over the region. Check out the **Dan Hull Wrekin Farm Shop** near Burnham-on-Crouch and the **farmers' markets** in Southend-on-Sea, Leigh-on-Sea, Burnham-on-Crouch, Brightlingsea and Dovercourt.



*An oyster fisherman, Mersea Island*



The Essex coast has been a big producer of salt since Roman times, thanks to its saline tidal waters – the result of low-lying saltmarshes and low annual rainfall. **Maldon sea salt** – a favourite of TV chefs – has been produced for nearly 150 years by the Maldon Salt Company.

The Romans planted vineyards in this area and, today, a number of award-winning coastal wineries continue the tradition. **New Hall Vineyard**, on the Dengie Peninsula, has a great selection of dry whites and rosés; you can buy bottles on site, and book guided tours in summer. **Mersea Island Vineyard and Brewery**, meanwhile, produces



*A bottle of Mersea Island wine*

splendid whites, including a popular Chardonnay, as well as rosés and sparkling wine. The owners also buy in malt and hops to brew their own beer – make a point of trying the tasty, dark Mersea Mud. Look out for ales from the two breweries in Maldon; **Mighty Oak** who brew the Oscar Wilde mild, and the **Maldon Brewing Company** with their Puck's Folly, both award-winning beers.

## Where to eat

**The Coast Inn** *West Mersea, Mersea Island* ☎01206 383568, @thecoastinn.co.uk This contemporary restaurant on West Mersea's coast road is friendly, lively and relaxed. Seafood is the main event here – the mussels are particularly good, and daily specials feature the freshest catch – but also on offer are tasty meat dishes. You can pop in for coffee or a drink, and warm yourself by the log fire in winter.

**The Company Shed** *West Mersea, Mersea Island* ☎01206 382700, @the-company-shed.co.uk Things couldn't be simpler at this seafood shed, which serves gourmet-quality food in the most basic surroundings. Foodies from Rick Stein to Jay Rayner have raved about this buzzing eatery, which is always packed with seafood-lovers feasting on the likes of seared scallops, grilled tiger prawns, lobster, crab, steaming mussels, and, of course, native and rock oysters. Bring your own bread and, if you wish, something to drink (though Mersea Island wines and beers are on offer).

**The Lock Tea Room** *Heybridge Basin* ☎01621 854466, @trooms.com This charming weatherboard tearoom on the Blackwater Estuary is run by Essex's very own Wilkin & Sons, known for its Tiptree



*The Company Shed, West Mersea*

jams and preserves. The views from here across to the islands of Northey and Osea are unmatched, and the home-made food is superb, whether you go for a hearty breakfast, light lunch or cream tea. Be sure to buy a jar of something to take away; try the crab-apple jelly, green-fig jam or Essex blossom honey.

**Naze Tower Tearooms** *Walton-on-the-Naze* ☎01255 852519, @nazetower.co.uk An appealing spot for a cuppa and a snack, either inside the tower itself, with its gallery and viewing platform, or on the lawns overlooking the sea. Closed Nov–March.

*Rossi's, Southend*

**The Oyster Smack Inn** *Burnham-on-Crouch* ☎01621 782141, [theoystersmackinn.co.uk](http://theoystersmackinn.co.uk) Run by Trevor Howell, protégé of celebrity chefs Jamie Oliver and Gordon Ramsey, this relaxed, comfortable, Modern British restaurant offers a fabulous fish and seafood selection. Top choices include the flavoursome fish stew or the simply perfect fish pie. Desserts are spectacular here, too – sample a selection with the mini-dessert sharing platter.

**The Pier Hotel** *Harwich* ☎01255 241212, [milsomhotels.com/thepier](http://milsomhotels.com/thepier) You can choose from two classy eateries at this historic quayside hotel. Firstly, there's the sophisticated Harbourside Restaurant, which specialises in local seafood with a view. Try the Harwich crab tacos to start, perhaps followed by grilled lemon sole. Then there's the funkier Ha'Penny Bistro, where contemporary dishes might include grilled bream with artichoke risotto

or fish, crab and prawn curry. Locally sourced meat dishes and creative veggie options keep non-pescetarians happy.

**The Restaurant at the Roslin Beach**

**Hotel** *Southend-on-Sea* ☎01702 586375, [roslinhotel.com](http://roslinhotel.com) A popular local choice for a special occasion, this restaurant serves classy food in a smart dining room with panoramic views of the Thames Estuary. Seasonally changing menus focus on local produce, including fresh fish and free-range meats, much of which is sourced at the restaurant's farm in Hampshire. Typical choices include saddle of lamb with tomato and tarragon fondue, and wild sea bass with scallops.

*Roslin Beach Hotel, Southend-on-Sea**The Pier Hotel, Harwich*

**Rossi's** *Southend-on-Sea* ☎01702 467532, [rossiicecream.com](http://rossiicecream.com) Rossi's delicious soft Italian ice cream has been a Southend icon since the 1930s. There are kiosks all around town, but the original branch – which also serves simple meals – is a retro landmark on the Western Esplanade at Westcliff. Go for a zingy lemon sorbet or a simple, creamy vanilla.

**Stop the World** *Leigh-on-Sea* ☎01702 719969, [stoptheworldcafe.com](http://stoptheworldcafe.com) This French brasserie-style café on Leigh's lively high street serves creative

breakfasts, brunches and all-day options. Menu highlights include everything from bubble and squeak to crab-cake Benedict, and the coffee and home-made cakes are terrific.

**The Yacht Club @ Brandy Hole** *Hullbridge* ☎01702 230320, [brandyhole.com](http://brandyhole.com) On the southern shores of the River Crouch, this light and airy restaurant serves Modern European cuisine with a focus on fresh fish and seafood, such as pan-fried haddock with spinach and thyme risotto. Bag a seat on the outdoor deck on a sunny day.

## Accommodation



*Pretty Bouncers Farm, Wickham Bishops*

The Discovery Coast offers a great choice of accommodation for all tastes and budgets – and prices, as a rule, are extremely reasonable. Whether you're after a boutique B&B or a luxury spa, a family-friendly caravan park or a historic hotel, the chances are you'll find something to suit you here.

### Holiday Parks and Campsites

**Bouncers Farm Campsite** *Wickham Bishops, 8km north of Maldon* ☎01621 894112, @operaintheorchard.co.uk/camping.html You get off-grid glamping at Bouncers Farm's "Gypsy Camp" – a lovely spot set in its own private orchard.

Beautifully restored bow-top wagons sleep two people each, while a bender tent, made from local willow and poplar, and constructed using traditional techniques, provides shelter for the daytime and evenings. The tent has a day bed, a little wood-burning stove and all the cooking equipment you need. There's no electricity, so light is by candles, and you cook your food over a campfire. A wonderful back-to-basics hideaway.

**Cosways Holiday Park** *East Mersea, Mersea Island* ☎01206 383252, @waldegraves.co.uk Quiet, spacious and relaxing, this family-run holiday park comprises privately owned and

holiday-rental caravans. Set in gorgeous coastal countryside overlooking the lovely Blackwater Estuary, the park has its own safe, sandy beach and boat launch, along with a heated outdoor pool, clubhouse, tennis court and children's play area. There are good walking and cycling trails close by.

**Martello Beach Holiday Park** *Jaywick, Clacton-on-Sea;* ☎0843 309 2566, @park-resorts.com This well-landscaped caravan park has direct access to the town's wide, sandy beach, and it offers easy access to Colchester. The on-site Sparky's Krew Club keeps youngsters more than happy, and there's a lively schedule of family shows in the evenings. Park Resorts run holiday parks in Mersea Island and Walton, along with three other parks in Clacton.



*Martello Beach Holiday Park, Clacton*



*Waldegraves Holiday Park, Mersea Island*

**Waldegraves Holiday Park** *West Mersea, Mersea Island* ☎01206 382898, @waldegraves.co.uk Waldegraves is an award-winning campsite and caravan park that boasts luxury holiday caravans, both for rent and sale.

The park is set in a lovely, rural spot overlooking the Blackwater Estuary. Its private beach is a bonus, while entertainments include a popular kids' club and a variety of lively stage shows.

**Waterside Holiday Park** *St Lawrence Bay, Southminster* @park-resorts.com With prettily landscaped grounds running right down to the water's edge and jaw-dropping views out to Mersea Island, this Dengie Peninsula caravan park is a big hit with visitors. The small indoor pool is great for kids, who can enjoy all sorts of fun activities, including crabbing in the estuary. Perfect for a relaxing break.

# Great Family Holidays & Short Breaks



Award-winning Waldegraves and Cosways Family Holiday Parks are situated on the beautiful Mersea Island overlooking the Blackwater estuary. You will find a great range of facilities on the park and many visitor attractions nearby, there's something for the whole family to enjoy.

## Facilities include:

- Entertainment venue • Bars and restaurant
- Outdoor heated swimming pool
- Play areas • Crazy golf • Family games room
- 4 fishing lakes
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- 18 hole pitch and putt course • Golf driving range
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[www.waldegraves.co.uk](http://www.waldegraves.co.uk)

Waldegraves Family Holiday Park,  
Mersea Island, Colchester, Essex, CO5 8SE



## Self-Catering

**Creeksea Place Barns** Burnham-on-Crouch ☎07725 082885, [creekseaplacebarns.com](http://creekseaplacebarns.com) Creeksea Place Barns, located on a scenic farm just outside Burnham-on-Crouch, blends rustic charm with elegant, modern comforts. The stylish accommodation here comes in the form of beautifully restored barns, and there's heaps of outdoor space. The farm also offers a relaxed café – for those times you crave a macchiato or an effort-free meal – as well as a fishing lake, a menagerie of farm animals, a children's play area and easy access to coastal footpaths.

**Lee Wick Farm** St Osyth ☎01255 823281, [leewickfarm.co.uk](http://leewickfarm.co.uk) You get a bit of everything here: self-catering in two restored farm buildings – The Cart Lodge, which sleeps up to twelve, and Stable Cottage, which sleeps up to seven; three wooden "Megapods" for glamping, which sleep up to four each;



*Osea Island Resort*

and space for camper vans and caravans in an enclosed paddock. Don't miss the pretty and ancient village of St Osyth, west of Clacton, or the many fantastic walks nearby.

**Osea Island Resort** Osea Island ☎01621 788593, [oseaisland.co.uk](http://oseaisland.co.uk) There's something very special about this private island, which is only accessible at low tide via a sinuous, 2km-long causeway. Set in a pristine marine sanctuary, the resort is known for its abundant wildlife and rare birds, and offers a real sense of seclusion. There are several accommodation options to choose from: take over the Edwardian manor house, which sleeps up to twenty people; commandeer



*Lee Wick Farm Cottages, St Osyth*

the Captain's House, which sleeps sixteen; or hunker down in the small hamlet of rustic seventeenth-century cottages, which sleep between two and eight each.

**Park Hall Country Cottages** *St Osyth*  
 ☎01255 820922, @parkhall.info

Located on a farm north of Clacton-on-Sea, near some of the area's loveliest beaches, Park Hall Country Cottages have a truly stunning setting. Choose from five romantic luxury cottages, which sleep between two and six people each and have original oak

beams, vaulted ceilings, fireplaces and lovely gardens. There are also three bedrooms in the fourteenth-century hall itself (see p.60).

**The Thatched Cottages** *Burnham-on-Crouch* ☎07767 807156,

@thethatchedcottages.co.uk These two award-winning cottages – one with a double room, the other with a double and twin – date from the sixteenth century and are set in their own private gardens conveniently near the railway station. They offer easy access to the town, river and yacht clubs.

*The Thatched Cottages, Burnham*



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**B&Bs**

**The Limes Guest House** *Maldon*  
 ☎01621 850350, @thelimesguesthouse.  
 com This seventeenth-century, Grade  
 II-listed town house offers luxury B&B  
 accommodation with personal design  
 touches, fresh flowers and antique  
 furnishings, which lend it a very  
 distinctive character. There are six  
 rooms within the house itself, some  
 of which have four-poster beds,  
 and a further eight options, more  
 contemporary in style, in two annexes.  
 All rooms are en suite. Breakfasts,  
 prepared with the best local produce,  
 may include eggs from the owners'  
 chickens. This guesthouse is in the  
 centre of town, just off the high street  
 and near the quay, and within easy  
 walking distance of the main sights.

*Park Hall Country House, St Osyth*

**The Oyster Smack Inn** *Burnham-on-Crouch* ☎01621 782141,  
 @theoystersmackinn.co.uk A great  
 base for exploring this attractive  
 yachting town, the Oyster Smack Inn  
 is an excellent, relaxed restaurant with  
 five en-suite rooms attached. The style  
 here is contemporary, comfortable  
 and characterful, and the welcome is  
 always warm and friendly. Rates include  
 a good continental breakfast (cooked  
 dishes cost a bit extra).

**Park Hall Country House** *St Osyth*  
 ☎01255 820922, @parkhall.info Set  
 in countryside north of Clacton-on-  
 Sea, this fourteenth-century former  
 monastery is a rather special country  
 retreat. Oak beams, log fires and  
 opulent lounges define the interior, and  
 the three bedrooms are plush, relaxing

and beautifully appointed. Drinks and  
 snacks are available in your room, and  
 fresh flowers, champagne and a range  
 of massage treatments are also on offer.  
 The gourmet breakfasts here are superb.  
 Self-catering is also available (see p.58).

**Pier View Guest House**

*Southend-on-Sea* ☎01702 437900,  
 @pierviewguesthouse.co.uk  
 This Grade II-listed Georgian building  
 boasts a very convenient location as  
 well as fantastic views of Southend's  
 iconic 2.1 km-long pier and the estuary  
 beyond. There are seven en-suite  
 rooms and one single that has a private  
 shower room; many of the rooms  
 feature original fireplaces. The award  
 winning breakfast is a continental  
 buffet, but with more choice than usual  
 for this price range.

**Pond House B&B** *St Osyth* ☎01255  
 820458, @earlshalfarm.info This  
 Victorian farmhouse – part of a working  
 farm – lies about 6km north of Clacton-  
 on-Sea, near the old village of St Osyth.  
 Its two comfy en-suite rooms overlook  
 the large garden, and there is a guest  
 sitting room where you'll be served tea  
 and cake when you arrive. Breakfasts  
 are a treat here, and include hearty  
 cooked options made with locally  
 sourced ingredients. Self-catering is  
 also available. Dozens of lovely walking  
 routes are accessible from here.



*The Pier View Guest House, Southend*





*Park Inn Palace, Southend*

## Hotels

### **Holiday Inn** *Southend-on-Sea*

☎01702 543001, @hisouthend.com

Southend's Holiday Inn, which opened in 2012, is located right by Southend Airport. It is a reliable, contemporary option with clean, comfortable and spacious rooms. The fifth-floor 1935 Rooftop Restaurant offers panoramic views of the airport runway through floor-to-ceiling windows; but don't worry, it's fully soundproofed, as are the bedrooms. The breakfast buffet includes a huge variety of fare.

### **Lifeshouse Spa and Hotel** *Thorpe-le-Soken*

☎01255 860050, @lifeshouse.co.uk

In the village of Thorpe-le-Soken, just a ten-minute drive from Frinton-on-Sea, Lifeshouse is a lovely, modern spa

hotel that effortlessly mixes luxury with quirky, sometimes whimsical design. Some of the spacious, comfy rooms have their own little terraces, and the glorious old gardens are the perfect place to stretch your legs. The spa area, though not enormous, is well equipped, with a pool, jacuzzi, plunge



*Lifeshouse Spa and Hotel, Thorpe-le-Soken*



*Holiday Inn, Southend*

pool, sauna and special salt-inhalation steam room. The treatments, offered by expert practitioners, are superb. You can fill up with a fantastic breakfast, served in the contemporary restaurant. The establishment also offers a free collection and drop-off service from the nearby train station.

### **Park Inn Palace** *Southend-on-Sea*

☎01702 455100, @parkinn.co.uk/hotel-southendonseas

This 137-room Radisson hotel, located in a grand old Edwardian building, has been sitting proudly on Southend's Western Esplanade, overlooking the pleasure pier, since 1901. Today's facilities are all you would expect from the reliable Radisson brand, with a large bar and restaurant and an on-site gym. Comedy duo Laurel and Hardy stayed here in 1952.

### **The Pier Hotel** *Harwich* ☎01255

241212, @milsomhotels.com/thepier

Claiming the most atmospheric spot in town, this hotel is set in two Victorian buildings opposite the Ha'penny Pier, on

the quayside at old Harwich. It's a welcoming, stylish boutique hotel with historical charm and quirky decor that recalls the town's history, including some gorgeous old railway posters. The fourteen contemporary bedrooms have complimentary mini-bars, and the full breakfasts are wonderful. Make sure you try the on-site Harbourside Restaurant, or the more casual Ha'Penny Bistro (see p.52).

### **The Westcliff Hotel** *Westcliff,*

*Southend-on-Sea* ☎01702 345247,

@westcliff-hotel.co.uk The grand old Westcliff was built in 1896. Today, it offers around sixty individually decorated rooms, some of which maintain original Victorian details and Art Deco features. Situated about 2km west of the pier, the hotel is conveniently located for shows at the Cliffs Pavilion theatre.

### *The Pier Hotel, Harwich*



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