The streets of Rye

A weekend in…
Rye, East Sussex

You can't say we weren't told. At the foot of the tower of St Mary's Church in Rye, there are notices warning of the steepness of the climb ahead and the narrowness of the corridor linking the stairways: the word "claustrophobia" is deployed as a further deterrent.

The stairs are steep (although the flights mercifully short) and rucksacks and other excess baggage have to be shed in order to negotiate the passageways. Near the top you can get your breath back admiring the mighty heft of the church bells, which were cast in 1775 and weigh a collective five tonnes.

When you emerge on to the roof to be greeted with a bracing blast of East Sussex air, the views over Rye and the surrounding coastline are stunning. Here, above it all, you get a powerful sense of why the heart of Rye is so special: this is a view not just untouched by the 21st century, but by the 20th as well. Don't be put off by the warnings — a visit to the tower is an essential part of your stay.

Even if you have never set foot in Rye, there's a good chance you'll be familiar with parts of it. The gently sloping, cobbled Mermaid Street would surely be in the top five of any poll to find Britain's most photographed roads. And if you watched the TV series *Mapp and Lucia* or the star-studded 2014 film *The Monuments Men* (or, indeed, many other things), then you would have had a glimpse of Rye's quintessentially English charms.

With its well-heeled bohemian vibe and air of tranquility — despite the tourists — the town has been a magnet for artists for centuries and has strong literary connections. The National Trust-owned Lamb House was once the home of Henry James, who wrote *The Ambassadors* here. Later it was owned by EF Benson, who based the Mapp and Lucia stories in the town.

History wraps itself around you like a cloak. Just behind St Mary's is the squat Rye Castle — more usually known as Ypres Tower — which is now a small but charming museum. Here you learn about the once thriving trade in contraband, see models of some of the vessels that have navigated the River Rother through the centuries and find out a little about crime and punishment in Rye.

These days it is only your bank balance that is likely to howl in pain on a visit to the town. With justification, Rye prides itself on its large number of independent shops. Highlights include the excellent Rye Art Gallery, Grammar School

Records (a must for vinyl junkies), an extremely browsable independent bookshop and a fine delicatessen.

We stayed in the heart of the town, at The George in Rye, a stylish and buzzy hotel with rooms to suit most tastes in interior design. On our first night we ate in the hotel's restaurant, The Grill, which offers a European menu with a strong emphasis on local suppliers. The steak and the lamb rump were both succulent and immaculately cooked. The next evening we went to Webbe's at the Fish Café to sample some of the seafood caught by local trawlers.

Despite its abundant charms, Rye is small and you will want to explore the surrounding area. The Rye Harbour Nature Reserve is simultaneously a site of national scientific importance, a superb spot for birdwatching and a place where children bored of heritage and shopping can run around.

Also well worth a trip is the slightly otherworldly landscape of Dungeness, 13 miles east. The hulking presence of Dungeness nuclear-power station gives the whole area a feel that will appeal to fans of science fiction. You will need a better day than the rain-lashed morning when we visited, but at various times the shingle shore offers glorious views, a fine environment for walking and water sports for the more adventurous.

You may recognise the area from photographs of the remarkable garden created by the film director Derek Jarman at his home, Prospect Cottage. Although it's not possible to visit in the conventional sense, it is easy to stop, look or walk around, as long as you respect the privacy of the owner.

And if you have time, Bateman's, the former home of Rudyard Kipling, is fabulous. This is not a mothballed museum to the writer, but gives a fascinating insight into his everyday life during the years that he lived here. The study where he wrote — and endlessly rewrote — on handwritten sheets before passing them to a secretary to type, his bright blue Rolls-Royce and, in the lovely gardens, one slowly dying fruit tree from Kipling's time.
Richard Whitehead

Need to know

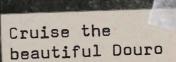Richard Whitehead was a guest of the George in Rye (thegeorgeinrye.com), which has rooms from £125 a night. In its restaurant, The Grill, starters cost from £6 to £10 and mains from £14 to £24.
More information
Tickets for St Mary's Church tower are £4. A standard adult ticket for Bateman's is £10.90

Dungeness beach