

The Suffolk coast

The Suffolk coast is an elemental and ancient place, filled with tantalising hidden histories, Anglo Saxon burial mounds, raw shingle shores and even wilder birdlife, reveals Claire Boobbyer

From a new lookout I peered down at the bumps scattering the banks of the Deben River. A bow and a stern poked out from a fulsome grassy knoll, a replica of the 27m-long wooden ship that became one of Britain's great historical finds back in 1939. It was then that archaeologist Basil Brown unearthed an iron rivet at Sutton Hoo – the tell-tale sign of an ancient wooden vessel – before later uncovering the burial chamber of a 7th-century Anglo Saxon king cradled in its hull. The warrior had lain surrounded by treasures, though the most extraordinary find was the discovery of fragments of a helmet, now rebuilt. Its gilt-bronze nosepiece and eyebrows form a fantastical flying creature, its glinting eyes made of dazzling garnets.

The bodies of the buried royalty of Sutton Hoo are long gone but the birds, ever-present symbols in the ancient Anglo-Saxon world, are the modern-day treasures of the Suffolk Coast. You'll find waders in the reeds at Minsmere Nature Reserve or in the estuary of the River Blyth, which lies in the shadow of Blythburgh Church (the 'Cathedral

of the Marshes'). Rare marsh harriers can be spied darting across the eerie shingle banks of Orford Ness, where relics of its secret wartime past still loom; and at Dingle Marshes, a patchwork of freshwater and salt lagoons, you might spot the little tern, its nesting sites vulnerable along the shingle.

This coastal strip of shifting shores and North Sea vagaries has attracted cultural figures, too. Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears brought their music to Aldeburgh; JMW Turner captured seaside Orford, Dunwich and Aldeburgh on canvas; and JM Barrie's *Peter Pan* inspired the islands of the Meare boating lake at Thorpeness.

Writer George Orwell had a complicated relationship with his family's hometown of Southwold. Mine is straightforward: I like to play eccentric games in the Under the Pier Show, breathe in history at the Sailors' Reading Room, buy Bakewell gelato from Harris & James, and finish with a pint of Adnam's Ghost Ship at The Lord Nelson pub. It's an area that rewards if you make time for the slower lanes and meander the coast's rolling landscapes, taking in its history, culture and food. ▶



52.1872° N, 0.9708° E

Ask a local

"I like to walk from Orford Castle towards Gedgrave, past the Cragpit to the footpath which leads to the river Alde wall. Turn right for the loop past Butley Ferry, or left towards Orford village. Skeins of geese fly across from the Ness, a mysterious site with a hidden history of wartime activities. There's a sense of remoteness, yet it's a stone's throw from the pubs and tearoom."

Becky Munting is an artist who paints local wildlife



All quiet on the eastern front

(clockwise from this) Southwold's 250m-long pier, which first opened in 1900, has been heavily refurbished in recent years; sunset bathes Dingle Marshes in a fading light; a replica of the wooden ship found at Sutton Hoo; Blythburgh Church is also known as the 'Cathedral of the Marshes'; the reconstructed helmet unearthed at Sutton Hoo





DAY ONE

Step back 1,400 years to explore the Anglo-Saxon royal burial site at **Sutton Hoo**. Don't miss the excellent free noon tour that explores the surrounding site (nationaltrust.org.uk/sutton-hoo). Across the river, stroll the streets of **Woodbridge**, which are tightly packed with cafés and boutique stores – check out the artsy **The Merchant's Table** (themerchantstable.co.uk), among others. And before you leave, spend some time at the **Tide Mill Museum** (woodbridgetidemill.org.uk), one of the world's last working tide flour mills, which uses the tidal currents to power its wheel. Next, head to the pretty village of **Orford**, where the walk from its diminutive **castle** (pictured top) down to the harbour, past rose-covered red-brick homes, is a delight. Down in the village, the perfect reward for your efforts are the dusted almond croissants at **Pump Street Bakery** (pumpstreetchocolate.com) and the local oysters at **Butley Oysterage** (pinneysforford.co.uk). Next, make your way to **Aldeburgh**, whose pebbled shore is lined with pastel-painted Victorian homes. Along the way lies **Snape Maltings**, a row of 19th-century buildings sat on the reed-lined banks of the River Alde, which hides a slew of indie galleries, shops and a concert hall with year-round **performances** (brittenpearsarts.org). Finish with cod and chips by the sea from Aldeburgh's finest chippie (aldeburghfishandchips.co.uk), or try fine dining at **Sur Mer at The Suffolk** (the-suffolk.co.uk), which has a roof terrace gazing over the coast.

Getting there: Woodbridge and Melton (for Sutton Hoo) are on the Great Eastern Mainline and are 1.5 hours from London Liverpool Street (via Ipswich) with Greater Anglia. Public transport on the Suffolk coast is intermittent, but taxi services such as Katch (katchlift.com) and CabsSmart (cabssmart.com) help. Car hire is easier from Ipswich.

Stay at: Secret Meadows (secretmeadows.co.uk) is an award-winning glamping site set in a nature reserve near Woodbridge. Bed down in its luxury lodge or safari tents, or try a night in a horsebox hideaway; from £332 for two nights (sleeps four). Or head to Five Acre Barn (fiveacrebarn.co.uk), an award-winning B&B with five cedar-clad light and contemporary rooms crafted out of a 19th-century building and set in gardens a few kilometres from Aldeburgh; from £115 per night.

Further info: For year-round events, visit thesuffolkcoast.co.uk.



DAY TWO

Rise early with the otters, avocets and bitterns – Britain's loudest bird – at RSPB flagship reserve **Minsmere** (rspb.org.uk). If you're new to birding, book the morning tours for beginners. Just north of Minsmere is the wild canary-yellow gorse and mauve heather of **Dunwich Heath**, where you'll also find the **Coastguard Cottages Tearoom** (nationaltrust.org.uk). Much of tiny **Dunwich** now lies beneath the waves, but in the 11th century it was the capital of the kingdom of East Anglia and one of the largest towns in England. Walk north through sun-dappled woods to reach the coastal trail, passing the ruins of **Greyfriars Friary** (pictured top) and the last standing grave of the town's toppled **All Saints Church**. Get the 'lost city' lowdown at **Dunwich Museum** (dunwichmuseum.org.uk) before returning to the tearoom down by the beach. At pretty seaside **Walberswick** you can try your hand at crabbing on the creeks of **Dunwich River**, then hop on the **ferry** for the short ride across the River Blyth to **Southwold** (walberswickferry.com). Here you can stroll sandy beaches (pictured below) under the gaze of the lighthouse, stacking up on £1 coins for the quirky handmade automata on **Southwold Pier** (southwoldpier.co.uk/business/under-the-pier-show). Finish with a table overlooking the marketplace at **The Swan** (theswansouthwold.co.uk); the Blythburgh pork belly is highly recommended at its restaurant, The Still Room.



4 TOP THINGS TO DO

DETOUR to Orford Ness. Orford's harbour is home to the shingle spit of Orford Ness, where you can see Chinese water deer, rare-breed sheep and its so-called 'pagodas', eerie structures once used to test for G-force fractures on dummy atomic bombs. You need to take a boat to get there, so book tickets (£12pp) in advance. nationaltrust.org.uk

DRINK a local brew. The behind-the-scenes Adnams' Brewery Tour (£25pp) is a deep dive into the history of Southwold's moreish beer with a spoilt-for-choice tasting flight to finish. Times are clearly changing – its bestseller is now its 0.5% ABV Ghost Ship. adnams.co.uk

CANOE up the river Alde from the village of Iken, which lies on the water bank between Snape and Aldeburgh. A two- or three-person Canadian canoe trip with Iken Canoe (£40 for 2 hours) gives you front-row seats to spy waders prodding the muddy riverbank, marsh harriers and common seals. ikencanoe.co.uk

HIKE the Suffolk Coast Path (97km), which stretches from Felixstowe to Lowestoft, using a series of foot ferries. For shorter routes and loops along the coast, check out the guides on the Coasts and Heaths website (suffolkcoastandheaths.org), which has walking routes for exploring Walberswick, Snapes, Orford and others. Alternatively, try the new Discover Suffolk app (discoversuffolk.org.uk). 