

The Guardian



Ten ways to enjoy the South Downs

Sussex local **Annabelle Thorpe** recommends what to see and do in Britain's new national park

Annabelle Thorpe

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The South Downs are often referred to as the lungs of south-east England; a much-needed swathe of countryside backed by the ever-broadening coastal sprawl. Sandwiched between London and the south coast, the rolling hills, pretty villages and beautiful landscapes have gone unrecognised for too long, but finally they are to be awarded National Park status. So what to see and do in the south-east's new rural idyll? Here's our pick of where to stay, eat, walk, drink and enjoy the views.

1. Seven Sisters Country Park, Eastbourne

Visible from miles away along the coast, the rippling chalk cliffs of the Seven Sisters lie at the easternmost end of the new park. Backed by open grassland and a beautiful river valley (the Cuckmere), some 280 hectares of East Sussex countryside make up the Seven Sisters Country Park, with canoeing, birdwatching, cycling and walking all on offer. Camping is available within the park and there is basic barn accommodation, too, from £14 for a car and two people.

. +44 (0)1323 870280; sevensisters.org.uk.

2. Breaky Bottom Vineyard, Lewes

The chalky soil of the Sussex Downs is of a similar composition to that of Champagne region in France, meaning that the south of England produces some of the best sparkling wines in the country. Breaky Bottom, just outside Lewes, was first planted in 1974 and produces sparkling and award-winning white wines. Mercifully free of a "visitor centre", this is a serious vineyard rather than a tourist attraction. Vinophiles are nonetheless welcome to drop in for a tasting - although phoning ahead is essential.

. +44 (0)1273 476427; breakybottom.co.uk.

3. Blackberry Wood Campsite, Streat

Back to basics but with a certain flair, Blackberry Wood is a dream of a campsite, where most of the pitches are in secluded glades with just a couple of logs for seats and a fire-pit. Supper can be cooked over the open fire, or served up at the Jolly Sportsman, an award-winning pub just a short stroll away. There are proper toilets and showers and Wi-Fi but apart from that, it's all about the rural beauty, with walks and bike trails unfurling from the campsite grounds.

. +44 (0)1273 890035; blackberrywood.co.uk, from £19 per night for a tent and two people.

4. Chanctonbury Ring, Washington

On first sight, Chanctonbury Ring seems no more than a circle of beech trees on a hill above the village of Washington. In fact, they were planted on the site of a hill fort that is thought to date back to the Iron Age, and which was used by the Romans as a religious site. Legend has it that if you run around the trees in an anti-clockwise direction you will summon the Devil, who will offer you a bowl of soup in exchange for your soul. Alternatively, stroll down to the Frankland Arms pub, which will offer you something similar for a rather less exorbitant price.

. +44 (0)1903 892220, franklandarms.co.uk.

5. The Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust, Arundel

A great family day out, there are 26 acres to explore at the Wildfowl Trust; boardwalks and hides to discover, hundreds of birds to feed, and a "Pond Explorer" area where younger visitors can grub around in the water to find small aquatic creatures to examine. Kids will love the guided boat safaris which travel deep into the reed beds, home to water voles, snakes and migrant birds. Opposite the Wetlands lies Swanbourn Lake, an idyllic picnic spot with boats for hire and a small cafe.

. +44 (0)1903 883355; wwt.org.uk

6. Parham House, Parham

Most people on the stately home trail head to the National Trust's Petworth House, but Parham is an absolute gem - backed by the Downs, surrounded by the most English of gardens and with a house slowly restored over a period of 60 years, now filled with antique paintings, textiles and furniture. Dating back to the late 16th century, Parham has remained a family home, creating a different feel to the museum-like air of many stately houses. The gardens - opulent, flower-filled borders, seven acres of lawns and a vast walled garden are blissfully peaceful - perfect for a picnic, or tea and a slice of home-made cake from the cafe.

. +44 (0)1903 742021; parhaminsussex.co.uk

7. Goodwood Racecourse

The racecourse first opened over 200 years ago, lies on the top of the Downs and offers some of the best flat-racing in the country. Edward VII described Goodwood as "a garden party with racing tacked on" and Glorious Goodwood - five days of race meetings from 28 July to 1 August

- has retained a pseudo-glamorous hats-and-hampers feel. The racecourse traces the southernmost edge of the new National Park and the nearby village of Sutton has a great gastropub with rooms, the White Horse Inn.

. +44 (0)1243 755042; goodwood.co.uk, The White Horse (01798 869221; whitehorse-sutton.co.uk)

8. The South Downs Way

Running the length of the new National Park, from Winchester to Eastbourne, the South Downs Way stretches for 100 miles. Taking in the market towns of Petersfield and Lewes, winding along the banks of the River Adur and passing attractions such as the Amberley Working Museum and beauty spots such as Ditchling Beacon and Devil's Dyke, it is dotted with some great pubs; the Bull at Ditchling is particularly good. The walk can be split into short sections and is clearly waymarked - most of the path is suitable for cyclists and horseriding as well as walkers.

. southdownsway.co.uk, The Bull (+44 (0)1273 843147; bullditchling.com)

9. West Stoke House, near Chichester

One of the new breed of restaurants with rooms, West Stoke picked up a Michelin star in the 2009 guide. The house is elegant but friendly - polished wooden floorboards and comfy leather armchairs, white linen and fresh flowers in the eight elegant bedrooms which range from a cosy attic bolthole to a sumptuous double with a circular bed. The food is refreshingly hearty - loin of venison, confit pork belly, wild bass with deep-fried risotto - but chef Darren Brown (formerly of The Lanesborough) brings it all together with a light and confident touch. Croquet on the lawn and five acres of gardens with views across the Downs complete the country-house feel.

. +44 (0)1243 575226; weststokehouse.co.uk, doubles from £140 B&B.

10. Winchester

If you're all walked out, and fancy dipping into more urban pleasures, Winchester - at the westernmost end of the park - offers a pleasant mix of history, shopping and a few good spots for a long, lazy lunch. The cathedral is one of the largest in Europe, with atmospheric precincts and an oh-so-English green stretching out from the grounds. Dip into the individual shops on The Square (Cadogan and James for edibles, the Hambleton for interiors, Little London for clothes) for a bit of retail therapy. The original - and best - Hotel du Vin is in town, along with the Wykeham Arms, famed for its fantastic, locally-sourced food and cosy bedrooms.

. The Wykeham Arms (+44 (0)1962 853834; fullers.co.uk), hotelduvin.co.uk

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