



EASTBOURNE



The Sunshine Coast



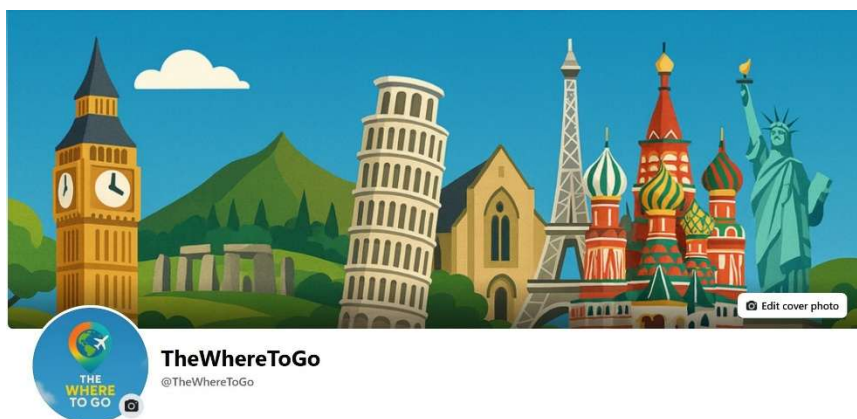
The inside cover for your information.....



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Eastbourne – The Sunshine Coast

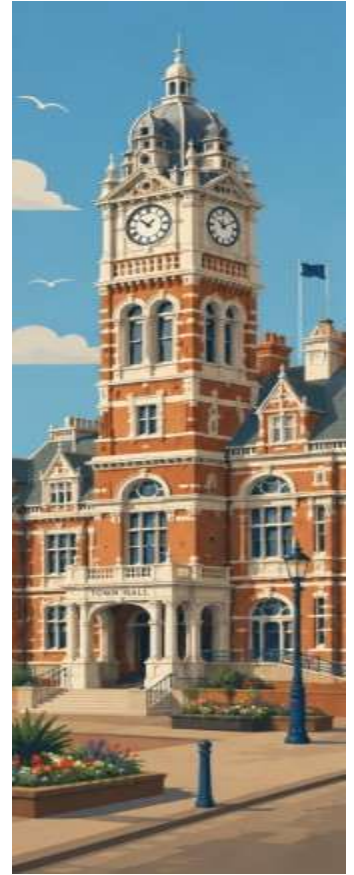
Introduction

Eastbourne is one of Britain's best-known seaside resorts, famous for its elegant Victorian architecture, long promenade and dramatic coastline beneath the South Downs. Although people have lived in the area since prehistoric times, Eastbourne remained a small collection of rural villages for centuries, centred around farming and fishing communities.

The town began to transform during the 19th century when wealthy landowners, particularly the Duke of Devonshire, developed Eastbourne as a fashionable coastal resort. Carefully planned roads, gardens, hotels and terraces gave the town a more refined appearance than many other British seaside destinations. The arrival of the railway in 1849 accelerated growth, bringing visitors from London seeking sea air, recreation and relaxation.

During the Victorian and Edwardian periods Eastbourne became associated with health tourism, attracting retirees and affluent holidaymakers. Grand theatres, piers and promenades were built as the town expanded rapidly along the seafront. Eastbourne also played a role during both World Wars. Large sections of the coastline were fortified, and nearby Beachy Head became strategically important during wartime defence operations.

Today Eastbourne combines traditional seaside tourism with cultural events, outdoor activities and heritage attractions. Known for its sunshine record, clean beaches and access to the South Downs National Park, the town remains one of the south coast's most popular destinations, balancing historic charm with modern tourism and leisure facilities.



Holywell

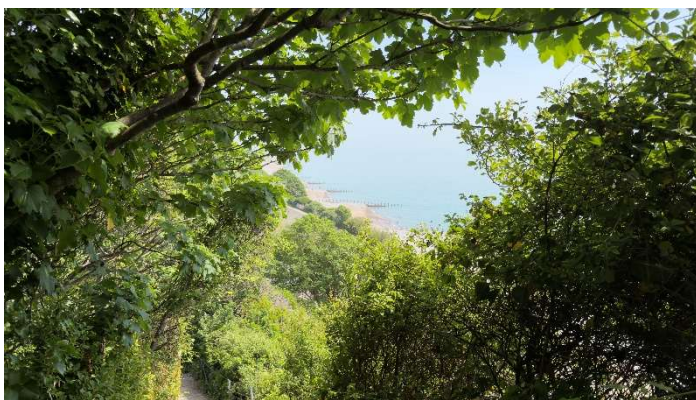
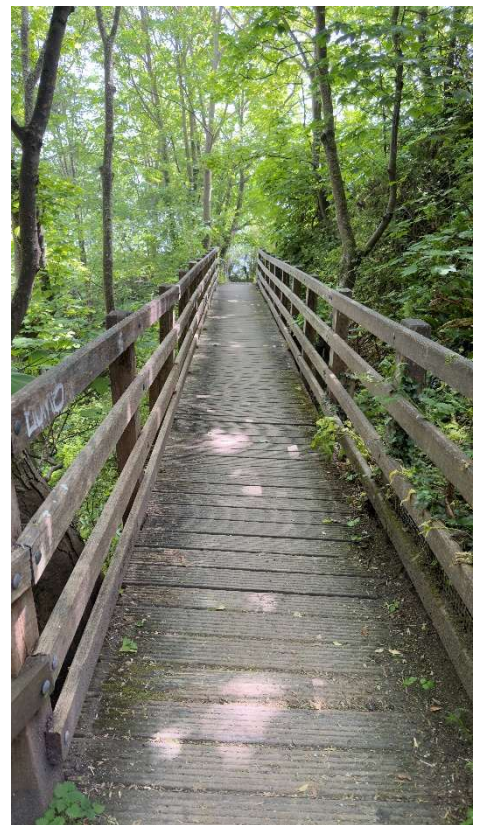
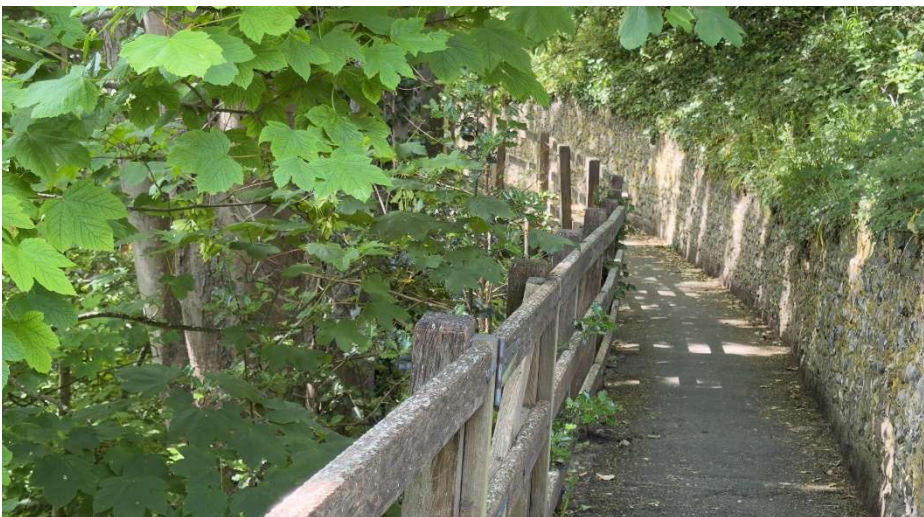
Holywell is a peaceful and scenic area located at the western end of Eastbourne's seafront beneath the cliffs of Beachy Head. Traditionally regarded as one of the quieter parts of the town, Holywell offers a more relaxed atmosphere away from the busier central promenade. The area takes its name from a natural spring once believed to possess healing qualities. During the Victorian era visitors came to drink or bathe in the mineral-rich waters, reflecting the popularity of health tourism at the time.



Close by is the popular Holywell Tea Chalet and above that the Italian Gardens and Helen Garden which offer a peaceful contrast to the bustle of the promenade, combining dramatic coastal scenery with beautifully landscaped gardens. The larger Helen Garden was opened to the public in 1935 and takes its name from Helen Reid Stewart Hornby Lewis, a former owner of the land. Its broad lawns slope gently towards the sea, providing magnificent views across the English Channel and towards Eastbourne Pier.



Hidden below lies the more secluded Italian Gardens occupying the site of a former chalk quarry that was transformed into public gardens between 1904 and 1905 and redesigned in an Italianate style during the 1920s. The gardens feature pergolas, terraces, ornamental structures and sheltered lawns enclosed by a natural amphitheatre of trees and chalk cliffs. Often described as a "secret garden", they provide a tranquil suntrap and a unique setting for picnics, relaxation and summer open-air theatre performances.





The Wish Tower

The Wish Tower (also known as Martello Tower 73) is one of several such towers built along the south coast during the early 19th century to defend Britain against the threat of invasion by Napoleonic forces. Constructed in 1805, the circular defensive structure overlooks Eastbourne's seafront and remains one of the town's most historic military landmarks.

The Wish Tower was used as a coastguard station between 1812 and 1860, helping combat widespread smuggling along the Sussex coast. After being decommissioned in 1873, it housed a geological museum until around 1930. During the Second World War the tower was reused as a military battery. It later became home to military and puppet museums before community involvement from 2013.

Its prominent position then beside the promenade makes it a familiar part of the seafront landscape. The Wish Tower provides an important reminder that Eastbourne's coastline was once considered strategically vulnerable during times of conflict and invasion fears. During the Second World War, Eastbourne was one of the most heavily bombed non-military towns in south-east England.

Around 180 civilians lost their lives in air raids and the Eastbourne Civilian War Memorial Trust raised funds to create the Peace Garden with an eight-tonne Welsh granite boulder carrying a steel plaque engraved with the names of those who died. The garden itself was officially opened in 2018 and landscaped with paths, seating, planting and restored Victorian lamp posts to create a quiet space for reflection.





Where to find your Martello Towers in and around Eastbourne

Towner Art Gallery

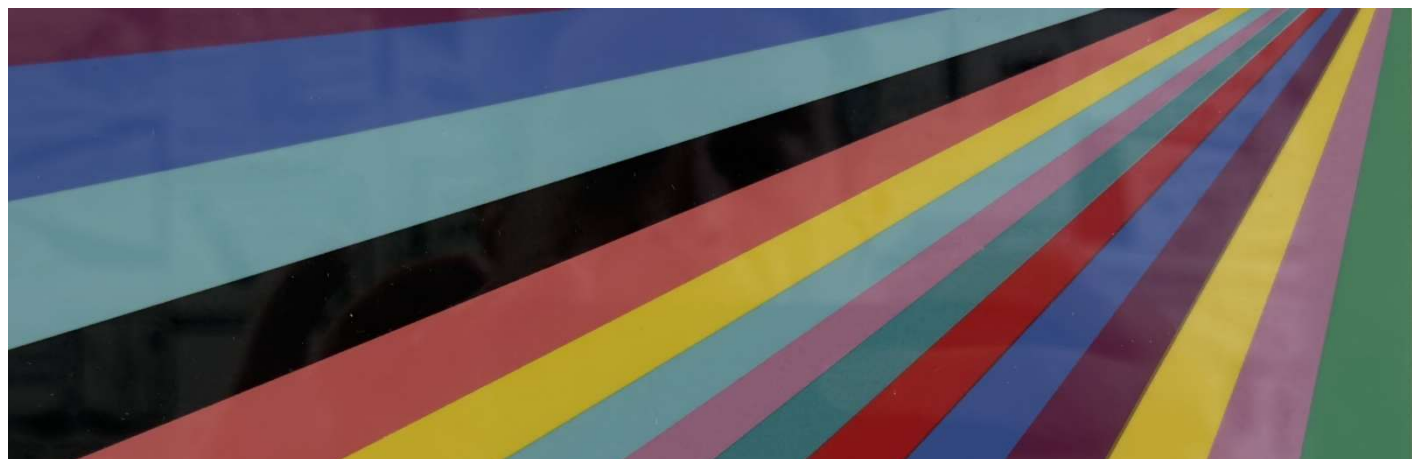
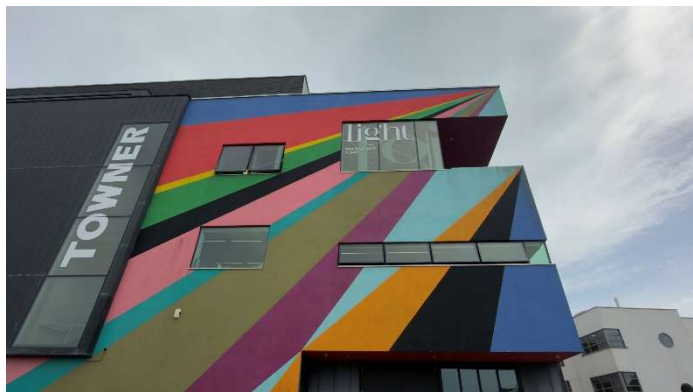


Towner Eastbourne is one of the most significant regional art galleries in southern England. The gallery combines contemporary exhibitions with an important permanent collection focused on British modern art. The Towner's origins date back to the early 20th century when Alderman John Chisholm Towner donated artworks and funding to establish a public gallery for Eastbourne.

Over time the collection expanded considerably, particularly in works associated with Sussex and the South Downs. The current gallery building opened in 2009 and was designed to create modern exhibition spaces capable of hosting major touring exhibitions with large windows framing extensive views of the surrounding town and coastline.

The Towner is especially respected for its collection of works by Eric Ravilious, whose watercolours and illustrations are closely linked to Sussex landscapes and English rural life. Today the gallery forms a major part of Eastbourne's cultural identity, attracting visitors interested in both contemporary art and regional artistic heritage.

The striking geometric artwork covering the exterior of Eastbourne's Towner Art Gallery is *Dance Diagonal!* by German artist Lothar Götz. Created in 2019 to mark the gallery's tenth anniversary, the mural transformed the building into one of Eastbourne's most recognisable modern landmarks overlooking Devonshire Park and the seafront.



EASTBOURNE THEATRES

CONGRESS · WINTER GARDEN · DEVONSHIRE PARK

Congress Theatre

The Congress Theatre is Eastbourne's largest theatre and one of the leading entertainment venues on the south coast. Opened in 1963, the modern auditorium was designed to host major touring productions, concerts, comedy performances and conferences. The auditorium seats around 1,689 people making it one of the largest theatres in southern England and an important cultural venue for residents and visitors.

A major refurbishment of the theatre took place in 2019 which restored the original 1960s modernist feel rather than trying to make it look Victorian. The building is Grade II listed and is regarded as one of Britain's most important post-war theatre designs. The red seating, curved ceiling lighting and timber wall panelling are celebrated features of the current interior.

With the Winter Gardens and Devonshire Park, the theatre forms part of Eastbourne's main entertainment complex. It also plays a key role during the town's annual tennis tournament and cultural festivals. The Congress Theatre reflects Eastbourne's continuing commitment to arts and entertainment tourism and helps maintain the town's reputation as one of Britain's traditional cultural seaside resorts.



Winter Garden



Next door to the Congress Theatre is the Winter Garden which is a historic entertainment and conference venue which opened in 1875. The building originally functioned as a Victorian glasshouse and social venue where visitors could enjoy concerts and events sheltered from the weather. Its elegant interior features high ceilings, decorative ironwork and large open spaces characteristic of Victorian leisure architecture.

The Winter Garden consists of the Floral Hall and Gold Room, used for functions, weddings, music, dances, shows, conferences, exhibitions and comedy clubs. Architecturally, one of the most interesting features is the roof. Historic England describes it as an innovative tubular iron-framed structure clad with zinc panels which was a very advanced design for the 1870s and worthy of a visit.



Devonshire Park Theatre

The Devonshire Park Theatre is a beautifully preserved Victorian theatre located next to the Winter Garden and close to Eastbourne's seafront. The theatre was opened in 1884 and was designed by Henry Currey who was effectively the house architect for the 7th Duke of Devonshire, who owned much of the land that was developed into modern Eastbourne. Henry Currey was responsible for many of Eastbourne's landmark Victorian buildings, including the Winter Garden, the Queen's Hotel and buildings at Eastbourne College.

The interior of the Devonshire Park Theatre is quite delightful although what we see today is mainly attributable to another famous architect called Frank Matcham. In 1903 he was responsible for carrying out major improvements to the interior including extended balconies, ornate plasterwork, a redesigned proscenium arch and improved lighting, heating, furnishings, acoustics and sightlines. He was also responsible for designing or remodelling the London Palladium, London Coliseum, and Hackney Empire

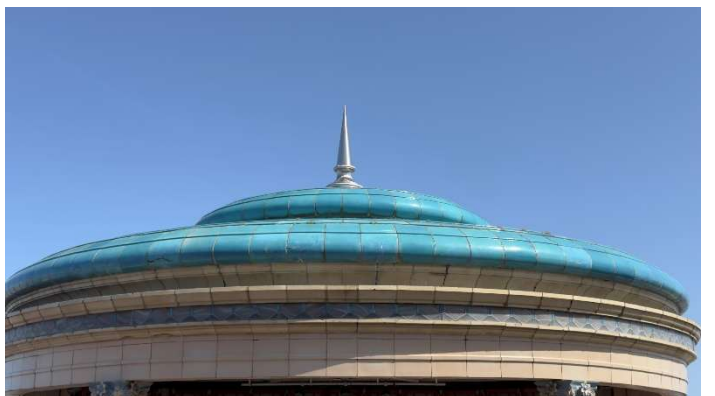




Bandstand

Eastbourne's Bandstand is one of the town's most recognisable seafront landmarks which opened in 1935 although Eastbourne's first bandstand was built on the seafront in 1893..... and a Municipal Orchestra followed in 1899, providing regular concerts for Victorian holidaymakers. Today's bandstand was designed by Borough Engineer Leslie Rosevere and cost £28,000 — a huge sum at the time. Its distinctive semi-circular shape, blue domed roof and cream faience-clad colonnades make it unique in Britain.

The bandstand hosts concerts, tribute performances and public events throughout the year, continuing the Victorian and Edwardian tradition of seaside music performances. Brass bands originally played for visitors strolling along the seafront, helping create the relaxed atmosphere associated with British coastal resorts. One of the venue's best-known events is its 1812 fireworks concerts, where live music is combined with displays over the sea...and frightens the life out of my dog every Wednesday night.



Eastbourne Beach

Eastbourne Beach stretches for several miles along the Sussex coastline and forms the centrepiece of the town's seaside appeal. Unlike the sandy beaches found elsewhere on the south coast, Eastbourne's beach is mainly shingle, offering wide open views across the English Channel. The beach became popular during the Victorian era when Eastbourne developed into a fashionable holiday resort.

Visitors were attracted by the clean sea air, mild climate and carefully maintained promenade. Today the seafront includes gardens, cafés, water sports facilities, traditional seaside attractions and, more recently, a sauna. Different sections of the beach offer varying experiences, from family-friendly areas near the pier to quieter stretches closer to Holywell and Beachy Head.



Carpet Gardens

The Carpet Gardens which sit prominently beside the promenade near the pier are one of the town's best-known features although presently the subject of much local discussion and debate. The Carpet Gardens were created in 1880, making them almost as old as Eastbourne's heyday as a Victorian seaside resort. They were part of the Duke of Devonshire's vision to make Eastbourne the finest and most elegant resort on the south coast.

At the time, carpet bedding was the height of horticultural fashion. Instead of growing flowers naturally, gardeners planted thousands of low-growing annuals in precise geometric patterns. Different coloured plants were arranged like pieces of a mosaic to create circles, diamonds, scrolls, coats of arms, dates, crowns and floral pictures. For generations, the gardens symbolised Eastbourne's reputation as a premier resort and remained one of the town's most cherished landmarks.

In 2025, Eastbourne Borough Council introduced a major redesign. Instead of formal carpet bedding, much of the site was replanted with drought-tolerant perennials, grasses and wildlife-friendly species. The aim was to reduce watering, lower maintenance costs and create a more sustainable display that could cope with a changing climate. The reaction was mixed to put it mildly. Critics described the new gardens as untidy, neglected and resembling a "cat litter tray", while supporters argued that the scheme is more sustainable.

I have included some historical pictures of the carpet gardens and some pictures taken more recently so you can make up your own mind....



Eastbourne Pier



Eastbourne Pier is one of the town's most famous landmarks and a classic example of Victorian seaside architecture. Opened in 1870, the pier originally provided entertainment and leisure facilities for visitors arriving at the fashionable resort. Built from iron with decorative Victorian detailing, the structure stretches out into the English Channel and offers panoramic coastal views. Over the decades the pier has contained theatres, amusement arcades, tea rooms and entertainment venues reflecting changing seaside tastes.

The pier survived storms, wartime threats and a major fire in 2014 that damaged part of the structure. Restoration work has helped preserve its historic appearance while maintaining its role as a popular tourist attraction. Today, Eastbourne Pier remains central to the town's identity and continues to attract visitors seeking traditional seaside experiences. Its distinctive silhouette forms one of the best-known images of Eastbourne and symbolises the enduring popularity of Britain's historic coastal resorts.



Eastbourne Town Centre

Eastbourne Town Centre forms the commercial and shopping heart of the town. Developed largely during the Victorian and Edwardian eras, the centre contains broad streets, historic buildings and pedestrian shopping areas reflecting Eastbourne's planned urban layout. The 1980s saw the construction of the Arndale Centre (now The Beacon), which shifted shopping away from the traditional street pattern and into a covered mall.

Eastbourne's shopping centre has evolved from grand department stores and traditional high-street retailers to a more varied mix of shopping, dining and leisure. Famous names such as Bobby's, Beales, Woolworths, Debenhams and BHS have disappeared, reflecting national retail trends, yet the town centre continues to adapt through a growing café and restaurant culture as well as a few too many vape and charity shops.



Royal Hippodrome

The Royal Hippodrome Theatre is Eastbourne's oldest theatre and one of the most distinctive entertainment venues on the south coast. The theatre opened in August 1883, and was designed by the celebrated theatre architect Charles J. Phipps, whose other theatres included London's Savoy Theatre and the Theatre Royal in Drury Lane. The theatre was originally called the Theatre Royal and Opera House and staged plays, operas and touring productions.

Around 1904 it adopted the name "Royal Hippodrome", reflecting its growing emphasis on music hall and variety entertainment with some of the biggest names in theatre such as Harry Houdini, Charlie Chaplin, Gracie Fields, Norman Wisdom and Bruce Forsyth. The theatre, given its position in a heavily bombed part of Eastbourne, survived with only minor blast damage, but declined during the 1950s although it did manage to stay open even though the buildings needed significant upgrading.

The restoration work over the past decade, including restoration of the façade, enlargement of the foyer, major refurbishment of the auditorium and improvements to audience facilities, have had a very positive impact and the theatre is growing in popularity with a varied programme of entertainment. Today, the Royal Hippodrome reflects Eastbourne's long-standing commitment to live performance and remains an important historic landmark within the town's theatre offer.

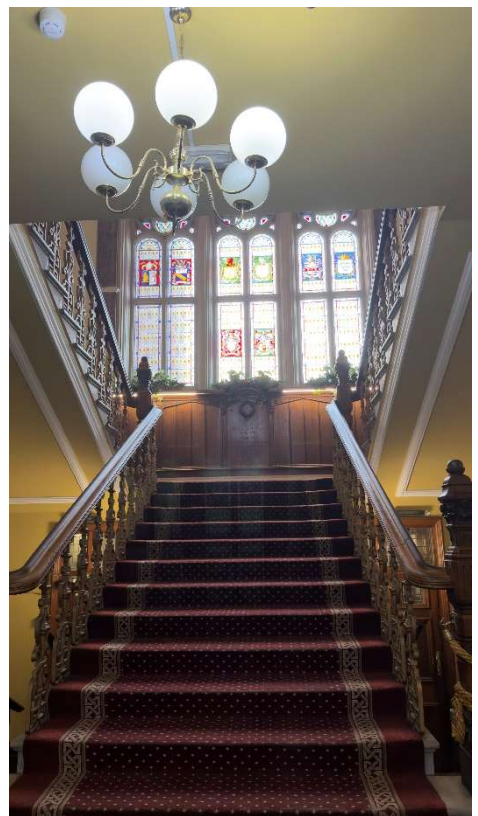


Eastbourne Town Hall



Completed in 1886, Eastbourne Town Hall is one of the town's finest Victorian buildings and a proud symbol of Eastbourne's rapid growth during the late nineteenth century. Designed by architect W. Tadman Foulkes in an elegant Renaissance style, the building replaced earlier civic offices as Eastbourne transformed from a small seaside settlement into a fashionable resort. Its red brick façade, decorative stonework and clock tower still dominate Grove Road today.

The Town Hall has witnessed many important moments in local history, from civic celebrations and royal visits to wartime activity during the Second World War. Inside, the grand staircase, stained glass windows and richly decorated council chamber reflect the confidence and ambition of Victorian Eastbourne. The surrounding area remains lively and interesting with many independent shops and cafes in South Street.

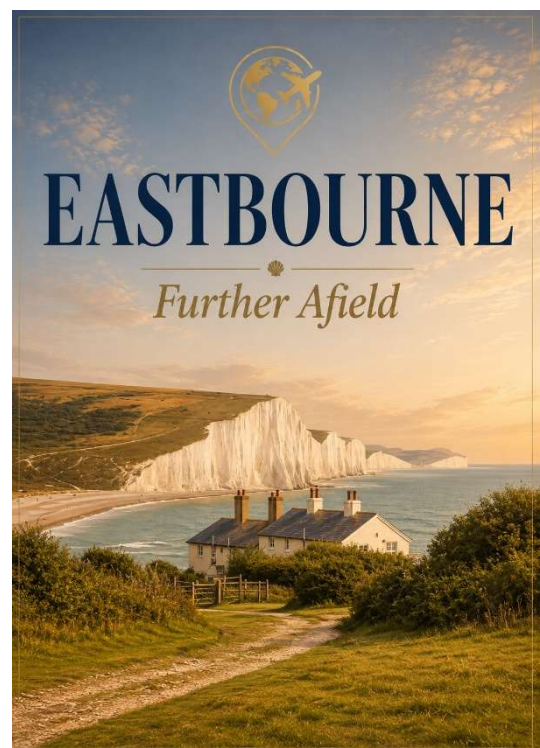


Reflection

Eastbourne is a town that seems to balance elegance, nostalgia and natural beauty with surprising ease. Beneath the white cliffs of Beachy Head and the rolling South Downs lies a traditional seaside resort that still retains much of its Victorian identity while continuing to evolve. Grand theatres, historic promenades, landscaped gardens and the famous pier reflect the ambition that transformed a small collection of villages into one of Britain's best-known coastal destinations.

What makes Eastbourne distinctive is the variety packed into a relatively compact area. Within a short distance you can move from peaceful gardens and dramatic cliff-top walks to theatres, galleries, bandstands and lively seafront attractions. The town embraces both heritage and change, sometimes successfully, sometimes controversially, as seen in debates surrounding the Carpet Gardens. Ultimately, Eastbourne remains a town shaped by sea air, history, culture and the enduring appeal of the English coast.

Don't forget the other book in this series called, [Eastbourne - Further Afield](#). You can download the guide and watch the video at www.thewheretogo.com



The outside cover, if you enjoyed this guide.....



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