

**Eugene Costello** visits the south east of England for a break on the Isle of Thanet...

# Isle be back...

**L**AST MONTH, as we experienced the highest temperatures recorded since the heatwave of 1976, the London Evening Standard published a guide to the best beaches within easy reach of the English capital.

Of the seven seaside towns featured, four were in Kent. Long known as 'The Garden of England' for its agricultural produce, the county is now being rediscovered by tourists. It's a good choice; during another heatwave in Easter, I'd visited for a two-dads-and-two-daughters escape to Kent, specifically the Isle of Thanet.

It's not really an island these days - that name derived from the former Wansum Channel, once 600 metres long, that divided this neck of the woods from the mainland. But it is especially beautiful, with a good mix of open green landscape and beguiling little seaside towns such as Broadstairs, Whitstable and Deal (technically, the last two are not on the island but are in Kent), which retain the Dickensian charm that regularly attracted the great man himself.

Thanet is the most easterly part of England, and its position facing France across the English Channel means that it is generally blessed with pretty good weather, so if you like a good dollop of sun with your sand, you're giving yourself better odds.

But the real lure is the beaches - Kent garnered 11 Blue Flag awards this year (out of 199 for the whole of the British Isles), and we visited three of them - Stone Bay at Broadstairs, Botany Bay and Minnis. We'll start with Broadstairs - it's a lovely little town that's awash with cobbled streets and Georgian/early Victorian architecture, all arranged at the top of a cliff overlooking a



DIVE IN: Broadstairs has a pretty bay



RETRO: The resort is proud of its past

seductive horseshoe-shaped Viking Bay.

When you have had enough of sunbathing and beach games, wander around the charming streets and grab a bite to eat. There are plenty of good options locally for fish 'n' chips, we grabbed a lovely cod meal at Star of the Sea on the High Street. And if the kids are clamouring for ice-cream, local institution Morelli's is a (slightly pricey) must.

There is a good mix of other options locally. Restaurant critic and local resident Marina O'Loughlin told me that Wyatt & Jones turns out consistently good food in a relaxed atmosphere, and that the STARK eatery, on Oscar Road, is "really interesting and ambitious".

Home for the evening was to be the Royal Harbour Hotel in nearby Ramsgate, a short jaunt south

or, at under two miles away, a lovely clifftop walk if you're feeling active.

Though lacking the picture-postcard charm of Broadstairs, Ramsgate is an altogether busier place - a proper town with a bustling marina. We had time to explore the catacomb of tunnels

**It is especially beautiful, with a mix of open green landscape and beguiling little seaside towns**

built under the town before reaching our hotel.

The Royal Harbour is ensconced in a row of early Victorian townhouses overlooking the harbour and across to France. We had snaffled

a family room on the top floor for Duncan and the two girls (who loved the bunk beds), while I had a small but perfectly formed single at the front with superb views down across the town, marina and out to sea.

That evening, we were dining at the Empire Room, Our hotel's 30-cover fine-dining restaurant. And what a superb meal; chef Craig Mather turns out traditional-style dishes that make the most of the abundance of produce, seafood and meat that are, for the most part, on the doorstep.

The beauty of staying in a hotel is that we were able to let the girls head up to the room while we invested in a fine bottle of Fleurie and repaired to the drawing-room (yes, there really is one) with French doors that lead across a small wooden bridge with fairy-lights to a peaceful and enclosed courtyard garden - perfect for a surreptitious cigarette away from the sight of one's tutting daughter.

Breakfast the following morning was as good as you might expect, with locally-sourced sausages, poached

eggs and everything one might wish for (and naturally, plenty of healthy options for those in that camp).

We'd come first and foremost for the seaside though (as the girls reminded us), so it was north past Broadstairs to the next beach up the coast, Botany Bay - which was a real find.

This beautiful sandy beach is away from the town, and so mercifully not overrun with tourists. In fact, even at midday on a super-sunny day, families were so spread out that we had no one within earshot.

We didn't have time to tarry though. After an hour or so on this wonderful beach, we wanted to cross Minnis Bay off the checklist before heading back to London. This meant we had to swerve Margate, though from previous trips I can tell you that it's the classic seaside resort, still with its 'Kiss Me Quick' seaside raffishness, and a wonderful retro amusement park called Dreamland.

But carry on around the coast to Minnis Bay and you're in for a real treat. Very much a family beach, it is

## More details

- Aer Lingus flies 30 times daily from Ireland to London. Fares from Dublin start from €29.99 to London Gatwick and from €44.99 to London Heathrow. From Cork and Shannon, fares to London Heathrow start from €44.99, while from Knock to London Gatwick, fares start from €32.99, and from Belfast to London Heathrow, fares start from €39.99. All fares quoted are one-way, including taxes and charges. Visit [aerlingus.com](http://aerlingus.com)
- Trains to Ramsgate from London St Pancras take 75 minutes. Prices start at just £10 for an off-peak day return. Visit [southeasternrailway.co.uk](http://southeasternrailway.co.uk)
- Rooms at The Royal Harbour Hotel start at £79, while a three-course set dinner on Mondays at the Empire Room is £18.
- For more details on this part of the coast, see [visitthanet.co.uk](http://visitthanet.co.uk)

a long sandy strip with sectioned-off areas for children, and is popular with wind and kitesurfers. It feels more of a locals' beach than a day-trippers' one, and there is an upmarket hostelry called The Minnis Bay Bar & Brasserie.

We sat outside at the tables on the grassy dunes that overlook this lovely beach and had a fine brunch of crayfish and seafood sauce sandwiches, washed down with a pint of local Shepherd Neame ale. As the sun gently burnished my balding pate, I was replete and content. Life had never tasted so good, nor the city felt so far away... +



## A sweet trip to Belgium

Bruges, made famous by the Brendan Gleeson and Colin Farrell film *In Bruges*, is a stunning canal-based city, and you can visit the sights there with a four-day escorted tour in October.

The Belgian city's historic centre, which boasts breathtaking sights and medieval architecture, has been named a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

This break includes a guided walking tour through the city, plus a visit to a traditional chocolatier and a trip to Ypres, and the World War I battlefields nearby.

The trip with [grenhamtravel.ie](http://grenhamtravel.ie) includes return flights and three nights in a three-star hotel in the old town with breakfast. It runs from October 1-5 and costs from €489pp.



## Fly off to the Canaries

Lanzarote is famous for its top sunbathing spots and watersports, and its long season means that you will even get plenty of sunshine on its south coast during the late autumn/early winter months.

In Puerto del Carmen you will find Playa Grande and Playa de los Pocillos, two family-friendly beaches that are safe for swimming and have a large range of facilities. There are also lots of restaurants, cafés and arcades along the promenade.

On August 31 you can enjoy a week's stay in the two-star Costa Volcan Apartments in Puerto Del Carmen, self-catering, from €549pp. See [falconholidays.ie](http://falconholidays.ie)

## Get a late summer bargain

Teletext Holidays, which recently launched in Ireland, has started an Algarve For Less promotion for September, and has flights available from Dublin, Cork and Shannon.

On the 20th there's a week in the three-star Vilanova Resort, Albufeira, from €275pp, or the three-star Clube Praia da Rocha, Portimão, from €305pp.

From Cork on September 17 they have seven nights in the three-star Rosamar Apartments in Armacao de Pera from €305pp, while from Shannon on September 15, a week at the three-star Albufeira Jardim apartments costs from €379pp.

For more details, call 01 695 0643 or visit [www.teletextholidays.ie](http://www.teletextholidays.ie)



## A lap of luxury

Cassidy Travel has a special four-night cruise taking in Monte Carlo, Marseille, Livorno and Rome, with a night's stay in the five-star Sina Bernini Bristol in the Eternal City.

Luxury continues on board the five-star Silversea Silver Spirit, with one crew member per guest, butler service in all suites, and beverages throughout including champagne.

The price of €1,599pp includes a day tour of Rome and flights from Dublin, departing November 10. Call Cassidy Travel on 01 291 0000, or book in one of their nine stores.

## Enjoy a jumbo holiday in Thailand

If you want to bring the kids to Thailand for a treat there's an elephantastic deal with Sunway, taking in the beaches of Phuket as well as an overnight trip to an elephant camp.

You'll get two days and a night in the Elephant Hills jungle tented camp - a unique experience in and around Khao Sok National Park in southern Thailand that's close to the area's popular beach destinations.

That's combined with six nights B&B in the Old Phuket Karon Beach Resort, which is near Karon beach, a 20-minute drive from Phuket town, 15 minutes from Patong and 50 minutes from Phuket International Airport. A good variety of shops and restaurants are just a few metres away, while the white sandy beach and crystal-clear water of the Andaman Sea is a short walk across the road.

The trip, priced at €1,225pp, is available next May. See [Sunway.ie](http://Sunway.ie)



FIT FOR A KING: The Royal Harbour Hotel