

Villages and towns have defied power of the sea

There is plenty to enchant visitors to the Suffolk coast

It may only be two-and-a-half hours from London, but the Suffolk coast is a world of its own – one that is dominated by the sea.

Even the town of Aldeburgh, now full of art galleries and chic cafes, can't ignore the bitter east wind and battering storms which have eroded much of it away and shaped its original fishing village character.

Aldeburgh's erosion is under control now, which is probably just as well for the Brudenell Hotel since it is separated from the sea only by a tiny road and a great number of pebbles.

Luckily, my visit coincided with a few sunny days, and my blue and green room, overlooking a brilliantly calm expanse of water, was filled with glittering light.

The Brudenell is a really nice hotel, laid-back and comfortable, with good food and helpful staff.

In the sunshine, breakfast next morning on the sunny terrace felt positively Mediterranean – once I'd found a spot out of that east wind, that is.

I spent my first morning exploring marshland to the south of town, a grand landscape with open skies, rippling grass and rushes.

I didn't meet any people

but I heard curlews and skylarks, saw an avocet and spotted a family of swans and cygnets in a nest, before heading back for an early lunch of good grilled herring and home-made ices in the excellent and long-established White Lion on the sea-front.

Aldeburgh's most celebrated son is the composer Benjamin Britten, and he and his partner Peter Pears founded the Aldeburgh Festival in 1948.

The festival sponsors all kinds of cultural events at many different venues, and has turned Aldeburgh into the artistic centre for the whole region.

Sculpture

A few years ago, indeed, Maggi Hambling was commissioned to create a sculpture for the beach and her abstract Scallop, with echoes of shells and waves, has words from Britten's tragic Aldeburgh opera, Peter Grimes, pierced around its edge.

The festival's main focus is still on music at the concert hall in a converted maltings in the nearby village of Snape.

This year's big names included Alfred Brendel, Oliver Knussen and the Monteverdi Choir but, for me, the high spots were several brilliant and passionate Bartok concerts from the Keller Quartet and the pianist Tamara Stefanovich.



■ Maggi Hambling's Scallop sculpture on Aldeburgh beach



■ The colourful beach huts at Southwold

I hadn't heard of them before and I hope Britten would have been glad that their performances opened my ears.

Snape Maltings is set on a meandering section of the

River Alde and I spent a few happy hours in the grounds, following a sculpture trail, doing a bit of shopping and watching boats at the quay, before heading up the coast towards Dunwich for the second part of my visit.

Dunwich was once one of East Anglia's biggest cities. Now it's a village with some attractive houses, one surviving church, medieval ruins, a pub, a friendly beach cafe and a clematis nursery, but everything else has been claimed by the sea.

Its small but engaging museum offers just the right amount of interesting detail about its disastrous past, its many famous visitors and the recent high-profile archaeological digs on both land and sea.

You can walk from Dunwich along the beach to Minsmere Cliffs where the Na-

tional Trust has a row of coastguard cottages, a stunning lookout point and a nice tea room.

A little further on is the RSPB's unspoiled Minsmere reserve and further up the coast is the science-fiction dome of the Sizewell nuclear power station and a handful of remote but charming villages, still eroding, with roads literally ending in the sea.

My final destination was Southwold, up near the Norfolk border.

This 1950s-style seaside town does not plan to be eroded away, and has very good coastal defences as well as multi-coloured beach huts, a lighthouse, an Adnam's brewery, an art deco pier and a unique Victorian reading room for sailors.

But to me, Southwold's piece de resistance is its Un-

der the Pier Show of eccentric slot machines.

Startlingly original, these creations, devised by local cartoonist and engineer Tim Hunkin, include a pensioner's Zimmer frame run across a virtual motorway, an automatic doctor and a Truth Machine.

They deserve a whole article to do them justice so I'll only say that I won a "radioactive" sweet on the My-Nuke Personal Nuclear Reactor and successfully tested my nerve with a fierce robotic dog.

While in Southwold I stayed in Marston House, a big, comfortable, cheerful 1920s self-catering house near the sea.

It has a sunny back garden but by the time I'd settled in the weather had changed.

Mist and occasional shafts of sun created a slightly fantastical atmosphere as I set out for a tramp across the dunes next day.

Whiff of salt

When I reached a river-mouth, I thought I could go no further – but then I spotted a ferry, operated by a man in a rowing boat.

I paid my 90p and got in. As we moved from shore, I looked back at the tarred black shacks of the fishermen, selling fish to passers-by.

On the opposite shore, the marsh path began again.

It led, my map said, to an ancient chapel-of-ease standing alone in the watery landscape.

Distant sea pounded, gulls wheeled around, there was a whiff of salt. The ferryman rowed steadily.

And it didn't – no, it really didn't – feel like two-and-a-half hours from London.

Contacts

For more information on the Suffolk coast, visit www.visitsuffolk.co.uk

Marston House, Southwold <http://www.southwoldpier.co.uk/page/marston-house> (01502 722105)

Southwold Under-the-Pier Show, www.underthepier.com

Brudenell Hotel Aldeburgh, www.brudenellhotel.co.uk (01728 452071)

White Lion Hotel, Aldeburgh, www.whitelion.co.uk (01728 452720)

Aldeburgh Festival at Aldeburgh Music : www.aldeburgh.co.uk (01728 687100)

Coastguard Cottages, National Trust <http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/dunwich-health/>

Minsmere RSPB Reserve www.rspb.org



■ A ferryman near Southwold