

1 Family Highlights of England



The English are seen by outsiders to be an insular, slightly quaint race of people living in chocolate-box thatched cottages, doffing their hats respectfully to the Queen and going to their drab civil service jobs in bowler hats and pinstripe suits on big red London buses. The impression is that the English are polite, deferential, not terribly bright and perfectly content when drinking tea and eating a good sponge cake. The English are reserved and ever so slightly distrustful of swagger. They work reasonably hard, try not to complain and love their pets more than their children, whom like their pets they prefer to pat rather than kiss to stop them getting too emotionally attached. As for England itself, it's either a smoke-belching metropolis like Birmingham or a picture-perfect village full of Miss Marple look-alikes collecting Hornby train sets, playing bridge rubbers and doing the cryptic *Daily Telegraph* crossword. Certainly that's the impression you'd get if you spent a Sunday evening watching TV in England, where nostalgic series like *Heartbeat* and *Last of the Summer Wine* score heavy ratings.

However, this version of Englishness has largely been consigned to the dustbin. Yes, we do love our tea (I am drinking a cup as I write). The English though, are less reserved than they once were. They've seen weeping on *Oprah* and like to think they can do that too, albeit quietly and with a clean hanky up their cardigan sleeves. Swagger is more popular and although the English are still not as effusive in the company of children as the Italians, they are not openly hostile any more. Restaurants, attractions and places to stay are geared increasingly towards families. Many go out of their way to ensure children are not only seen but also heard and ungrudgingly cleaned up after as well.

We drove 8,000 miles round England researching this book. We went as far north as Berwick and as far south as the Lizard in Cornwall, we went east to the Broads and west to Eardisland. Our conception of England changed over the four months we spent on the road with our two children (Charlie age one and Phoebe age four). The patchwork of memories that constituted this country for us were joined up. The dots connected to give an overall impression of the country we were born in. And actually, guess what, at the risk of a little swagger, we're pretty damn good. We live in a fantastic country to holiday in. We knew, of course, about the great family beaches of Devon and Cornwall before, but not that there were quite so many miles of them. And then there's the little-visited coastline of Northumberland, possibly the most beautifully unspoiled seaside scenery in England. The cities of Liverpool, Leicester, Birmingham and Manchester in particular have had sums lavished on their redevelopment and look as sleek as anything you'd find in continental Europe. In addition to family zoos and theme parks and aquaria, we still do our history well; there are scores of wonderful castles and old country

houses to visit, full of children's activities. Perhaps a legacy of our view of ourselves as eccentric, we also have some of the most curious museums in the world – what other country would have a museum boasting the world's largest pencil? Eating out is a different ball game entirely from when I was child. English food, the laughing stock of Europe, has come on leaps and bounds. Most places have children's menus and it isn't always of the burgers and chicken nuggets variety either, while the accommodation range is enormous. In 120 nights away we never stayed in two places remotely alike. We had a tremendous time researching this book – and hope you'll have as good a time reading it as we did writing it.

ENGLAND'S FAMILY HIGHLIGHTS

Best View The jagged Cornwall coastline from the summit of Tintagel Castle over the cave that Merlin, of King Arthur lore, is said to have lived in (see p 156). Although it could equally be looking at stunning Bamburgh Castle in Northumberland (see p 181) from the beautiful sandy deserted beach below, but, if we are honest, we think it was our children finally asleep in their beds after our disastrous meal out at the sophisticated restaurant Greens in Whitby (see p 204). Our daughter managed to fall off her seat, dragging the table cloth down with her, and then we got lost on the way back to our hotel.

Best City Brighton where we live, love and can watch the flocks of starlings above the rusting West Pier joining and parting to make giant geometric shapes in the sky against a tangerine-orange sunset across the



Brighton seafront

sea. On top of this, there is the wonderfully over the top Royal Pavilion, the Palace Pier and some of the best restaurants outside London. See p 46.

Best Day Trip To Brownsea Island in Dorset to see red squirrels in the woods having borrowed (free) an all-terrain buggy that made us feel like proper middle-class parents (see p 162). Drayton Manor Theme Park (see p 116), with its host of toddler rides, is also up there and might well have won if it wasn't for the fact that occasionally in

idle moments my brain reverts to our three hours in Thomas Land and I once more start humming the 'Thomas the Tank Engine' theme tune.

Best Freak of Nature Daniel Lambert, the one-time heaviest man in the world, whose waistcoat is on display in the Newarke Houses Museum in Leicester. He was so large up to six children could sit on his stomach as he floated down the River Soar. See p 118.

Best Animal Park Drusillas in Alfriston, East Sussex, where we have been to so many times because of the great children's activities. We know most of the animals by their first names and even which fruit peel is whose favourite. See p 49.

Best Aquarium The National Marine Aquarium in Plymouth for its fantastic Discovery Centre, where our daughter checked out a whale skull, completed a fish jigsaw and made an electric eel hat. See p 159.

Best Historic Attraction The Tower of London, where you can stand at the site of the execution of two of Henry VIII's wives, and Blenheim Palace, where you can enter the bedroom Sir Winston Churchill was born in. See p 29.

Craziest Story we Heard That Adolf Hitler used to work as a waiter at the family-friendly Adelphi Hotel in Liverpool (see p 233). In the Museum of Hartlepool, there is a display about a monkey who was

washed ashore in the town during the 19th-century Napoleonic Wars; it was hung for being a French spy. See p 183.

Best Walk Nunnery Wood at the Worcester Countryside Centre for the short circular walk along a buggy-friendly path under a canopy of trees with animal sculptures along the way. When our baby son fell asleep, my wife came up with the idea for a new type of buggy – one with a sleeping compartment in it for adults. 'So when your baby's sleeping you hop in and get some rest yourself'. See p 128.

Best Museum The Natural History Museum in London, with its blue whale room, hands-on creepy crawlly gallery and dinosaur exhibition. You could spend a week exploring and still not do it justice. See p 28.

Best Castle Norwich Castle, so full of children's entertainments like drawing, sticking, model building and interactivity, that it could only have been more fun if it had been a bouncy one. See p 82.

Best Dressing Up Alnwick Castle in Northumberland, where our daughter dressed as a 'lovely court lady, Daddy – do you like my beautiful dress?' See p 181.

Best Sunset From the Esplanade Hotel overlooking the surfer's paradise of Fistral Beach in Cornwall. See p 168.

Best Wildlife Spotted The boat trip to the Blakeney Point



Dressing up at Alnwick Castle

seal colony on the sand bar in Norfolk. See p 81.

Best Close-up Animal Encounter Dozens of hungry parakeets crawling all over us in Friskney, Lincolnshire, pecking for millet seed, at the walk-through aviary of the National Parrot Sanctuary. See p 70.

Most Comical Attraction The Cumberland Pencil Museum in Keswick featuring the world's longest pencil (see p 226), and also, of course, the Museum of Dog Collars at Leeds Castle in Kent. See p 36.

Place Where the Riskiest Emergency Wee Stop

Occurred Either the tiger enclosure of Woburn Safari Park (see p 54) or the field marked as part of a Military Zone in Offerburn Northumberland, which was full of ordnance debris. See p 203.

Nerdiest Sights In a warehouse at the National Railway Museum in York watching train buffs in brightly coloured rain-coats excitedly handling muffled pop safety valves. See p 195.

Places that Inspired my Wife's Most Ridiculous Comments

The National Stud, where she asked me, 'Will we see them having sex?' about the horses (see p 74). Although actually I think it was the amphibious landing craft in Liverpool; she thought it was a submarine and that we were going to be travelling underwater at Albert Docks in a vessel with plastic windows fastened shut with velcro. See p 220.

Place that Inspired our Daughter's Silliest Comment

Trentham Monkey Forest, when staring closely at the swollen red behind of an endangered



Parrots, Friskney

Barbary macaque monkey, she asked: 'Daddy, they've not got our bums, have they? They have their own bums'. See p 123.

Place that Inspired our Son's Naughtiest Behaviour The Shakespeare Birthplace Museum in Stratford-upon-Avon (see p 101), where he clambered on to Shakespeare's second-best bed, although it could be Leeds Castle in Kent, where he spilt orange juice on Lady Baillie's precious 1926 ebony floor. See p 36.

Weirdest Things to Do Visit dank Mother Shipton's Cave in Knaresborough, home of a prophetess who predicted the Great Fire of London, the Plague and the Internet. It is also home to petrifying waters that

have turned to stone, among other things, an old woolly hat of Seth's from TV's *Emmerdale*. See p 193.

Stupidest Thing to Do Attempt to meet friends in the height of summer on a Saturday somewhere unspecified in the vortex that is Legoland in Windsor (see p 50). Or possibly drive two hours to the Wensleydale Cheese Visitor Centre expecting it to be a Wallace and Gromit-style theme park rather than an ordinary-looking (and not very interesting) cheese factory. See p 195.

Best Celebrity Spot Mark Owen of Take That at the Grove Hotel in Chandler's Cross and Patsy Palmer in Brighton, plus a contender from an early TV series of *The Apprentice* (the

one with the posh voice and red face) outside Lincoln Cathedral.

The Least Likely Attraction

The Abbey Pumping Station in Leicester, where our daughter excitedly followed the progress of excrement from a toilet to the Wanlip sewage works via a see-through waste pipe. See p 115.

Spookiest Attraction Seeing the doll's hospital at the Vina Cooke Museum of Dolls and Bygone Childhood where, laid out on a lace-draped dining room table when we visited, there was a large plastic dolly face down, two arms detached beside her with an ominous pair of sharp scissors alongside (see p 124). Also the Kelvedon Hatch Secret Nuclear Bunker in Essex, where we learned how 57 million of us could die in the event of nuclear war in the bunker, making us feel that we may have missed a nuclear war while on the A12 getting there. See p 78.

Mother Shipton's Cave, Knaresborough



Most Embarrassing Moment

My wife shutting down the entire cable car ride at the Heights of Abraham in Matlock Bath (see p 121) after getting our son's buggy wedged under a rotating pod. Or perhaps when she pebble-dashed three professors with scrambled egg at the Old Bank Hotel in Oxford while whipping our son's napkin from his neck too fast in the crowded breakfast restaurant (see p 58). As for me, it was retrieving a plastic turd from my pocket while looking for change to pay for my coffee at the café at Pendennis Castle. See p 154.

Mostly Unlikely Interactive

Activity Handling mineralized mammoth poo at the Dinosaur Farm Museum on the Isle of Wight. See p 42.

Scariest Moment Eating my cheese platter at The Treehouse in Alnwick Garden (see p 205) after my wife, fresh from the Poison Garden informed me 'just one tiny speck of Angel's Trumpet on that plate and you'd drift off to sleep and would never wake up again'. Alternatively, it was being angrily called a 'grockle in a grockle can' by a man whose path we had veered into on the A3020 on the Isle of Wight. Other contenders: running out of Pinot Grigio at Boggle Hole Youth Hostel in Whitby, and getting trapped in a graveyard at the back of the Canterbury Tales attraction. See p 38.

The Funniest thing Overheard

A German man behind me in the queue at an ice-cream stand

at Chester Zoo ordering 'von Nobbily-Bobbily'. See p 214.

Best Run-ins with Authority

Getting barred from the Dewa Roman Experience in Chester (see p 238), being told off in the Teddy Bear Museum in Dorchester (see p 164) and being so publicly shamed in the café of the York Castle Museum for eating our own cheese and pickle rolls that we half-suspected we might be forced to wear bright gold badges and pointed hats for the remainder of our visit. See p 197.

Most Exaggeration in an

Attraction's Name Eden Ostrich World near Penrith, where we counted approximately . . . two ostriches. See p 227.

BEST FAMILY ACCOMMODATION

Most Child-friendly Hotel

Knoll House, Enid Blyton's

Bracken Bank Lodge, Penrith

favourite place to stay in Dorset; it felt exactly like being at Auntie Fanny's house at the start of a *Famous Five* mystery. See p 165.

Most Tranquil Place to Stay

The remote and beautiful Kielder Leaplish Waterside Park in Northumberland until (a) our daughter fell over on a gravel path doing her 'cheese dance' and bit through her bottom lip and had to be taken to Hexham Hospital and (b) we found a live bat in our lodge. See p 203.

Most Friendly Place to Stay

The Roofree Guesthouse in Sandown on the Isle of Wight, where our daughter was given a ballet lesson for free by the owner and former professional dancer Anne Abe, who looks like – and very bizarrely once worked with – Bonnie Langford. See p 60.

Most Eccentric Hotelier/

Guesthouse Owner The aristocratic Stuart Burton of Bracken Bank Lodge in Penrith, who told





Ettington Park, Stratford-upon-Avon

us his grandfather was responsible for shooting many of the animals whose pelts lined the walls of the lodge. And, of course, his lovely wife who made us a great breakfast the next morning and was mysteriously obsessed with the village of Plumpton. We kept a tally of her utterances of it (14). See p 234.

Kindest Member of Staff

Damon at Ettington Park in Stratford-upon-Avon, who turned a blind eye to the aromatic duck vomit down my shirt when I checked in with food poisoning and then brought pints of cola to my room and talked to me about Norman Cook. See p 129.

Hotel with Most Children's Stuff

Fritton House Country Park in Norfolk. There's an adventure playground with an enormous play castle, slides, a jumping pillow, pony rides (£2), boat rides, a

barn with small buggies and ride-on diggers. See p 86.

Hotel with Strangest Children's Activity

Armathwaite Hall Hotel in Keswick, Cumbria, where they have Young Etiquette classes, involving lessons for children on how to use a knife and fork, which glasses to use for what drinks and why it is bad form to shovel peas. See p 231.

BEST FAMILY DINING

Most Child-friendly Restaurant

The Disney-esque Outside Inn in Blackpool, with its fibre-glass wonderland of lanterned trees, ruined castles, waterfalls and Tudor houses. Regular pirate nights are staged, during which staff dress as buccaneers and children can help themselves

from a treasure chest of sweets. See p 239.

Largest Portions Breakfast at the 202 West Parade Guest-house in Lincoln. See p 90.

Best Ice Cream The Leonardo da Vinci at Morellis in Broadstairs, where the comic actor Tony Hancock went wooing John Le Mesurier's wife. See p 61.

Best Cheese Selection The dessert trolley at Holbeck Ghyll in the Lake District. See p 232.

Most Hilariously Themed Dessert A slice of Mrs Bennet's Lemon Drizzle cake in the Regency Tea Room at the Jane Austen Centre in Bath. See p 173.

Freshest Fish My haddock at the Magpie Café in Whitby; it could probably have swum in my brown sauce if I'd made the puddle any deeper. See p 207.

Least Likely Place To Celebrity Spot The Essex Rose Tea House in Dedham, where Sting, Griff Rhys-Jones and Dave Hill from Slade have visited; it's also where Chelsea and England midfielder Frank Lampard pops in for a rock 'n' roll tuna jacket potato with no tomatoes. See p 93.

The Poshest Pier Food A Roquefort salad at Southwold Pier in Suffolk. See p 93.



The popular Magpie Café at Whitby

Most Welcome Appearance of a Person in a Bear Costume Brewster bear at the Hampton restaurant in Peterborough after a harrowing row with my wife about directions. My daughter and son hugged him and, emotionally wrought by the evils of the ring road, we felt like hugging him too. See p 94.

Most Historic Place to Eat a Stilton Ploughman's In the high-backed settle seat of the Lord Nelson pub in Norfolk's Burnham Thorpe. It was Nelson's local and he came here between ship commands. See p 92.