

Essex



# 20 great summer outings to tempt you eastwards

Wetlands, vineyards, churches... and Southend-on-Sea. There's something for everyone, says Sophie Campbell

**1 THE BEAUTY OF BARGING**  
Flat-bottomed and snub-nosed, Thames sailing barges worked the creeks and tributaries of the Thames Estuary, with its sandbars, islets and bridges. They could be handled by a crew of two, with coastal barges carrying up to 300 tons of cargo. A few dozen survive and to see them racing, rusty sails a-billow, is quite a sight: join a summer "barge match" (one of the world's oldest sailing races, dating back to 1863), do a leisurely day sail, haul sheets with the crew or take a two-hour tea/coffee cruise from Top-sail Charter's Maldon base. *Two-hour cruises from £27pp, day sail from £65pp; top-sail.co.uk*

**▲ House for Essex,** overlooking the Stour Estuary, was designed by Fat Architecture and Grayson Perry

**5 SPRING-LOADED INDOOR FUN**  
It's summer. It's Britain. It's raining. Luckily you can pile into a Jump Street - one in Colchester, one in Chelmsford - with massive Open Jump arenas of 50 interconnected trampolines and tumble tracks. In Chelmsford there's a Clip 'n' Climb facility open to everyone from four years old and up. There are 32 different climbing challenges and three extreme challenges involving heights of over 26ft, keeping teens fully occupied. Chelmsford also features Kendrick's Kingdom, a huge soft play area for toddlers. *From £10 per hour for access to jumping areas, and from £2.50 per hour for soft play; jumpstreet.co.uk*

**▼ Sail down the Thames** on an old wooden barge

**6 ANCIENT CHURCH TO ANCIENT CHURCH**  
The St Peter's Way is a 40-mile pilgrimage route connecting two magical churches. Near the beginning of the trail is the Church of St Andrew, Greensted-juxta-Ongar, stave-built with 11th-century plank walls, which can claim to be the oldest wooden church in the world. At the end, and the focal point of the walk, is the Chapel of St Peter-on-the-Wall at Bradwell-on-Sea, the simplest of brick and stone structures perched on the site of a long-gone Roman fort, in a typically East Anglian landscape of fields, sky and sea. *Please donate if you can; britishpilgrimage.org/portfolio/st-peters-way*

**7 GARDEN IN A CAR PARK**  
Talk about prescient: the first book by Essex native Beth Chatto was published in 1978, long before most of us had discovered global warming. *The Dry Garden* was based on what was to become a legendary seven-acre garden on the site of her husband's family fruit farm, six miles east of Colchester. Gradually, her family and clutch of Chelsea Golds - grew, and in 1992 she built her famous Gravel Garden (on the site of a car park). It hasn't been



**2 GOURMET VINEYARD TOUR**  
Essex farmers Sam and Ross Lonorgan planted their first vines on a ridge overlooking the River Crouch in 2012 and now have more than 10 acres of chardonnay and pinot noir, a barn and terrace for tastings, meals and events, and an in-house chef. They are one of a cluster of vineyards around Chelmsford (with more in the north of the county) benefiting greatly from the area's south-facing slopes and low rainfall. The Gold Grand Tour includes a guided stroll through the vines and a tasting (£35), but I'd go for the Seasonal Vineyard Tour and Lunch, Yum. *Tour and lunch, £55pp; crouchridge.com*

**3 THE HOUSE THAT GRAYSON BUILT**  
In 2015, Living Architecture commissioned artist Grayson Perry and Fat Architects to build a house for Essex near the River Stour. The result is a cheery nod to holy buildings, from English waiside chapels to Romanian monasteries, with a dash of Thai temple thrown in. It sleeps four, booking is sold out and it's not cheap, so if you can't stay, walk north from Wrabness railway station and pass the house en route to Wrabness Nature Reserve (essexxv.org.uk/nature-reserves/wrabness), home to turtle doves, nightingales, barn owls and Brent geese. *Two nights midweek, £975, three nights at the weekend, £1,595; living-architecture.co.uk*

**4 A WALK ON THE WILD SIDE**  
Tom Bennett is a guide who specialises in intriguing British hikes, and his bestseller is the Broomway walk off Foulness Island. It fascinates people because it's liminal and edgy - underwater at high tide, fringed with ordnance - with all the melancholy beauty of sky and sea. Luckily, Tom's other skill is navigation: you wouldn't tackle this on your own and he is licensed to guide here. The walk abounds with ordnance, so get on the mailing list. Bookings open Sept 1 for winter 2021 and Dec 1 for spring 2022.

**THE CRICKETERS, CLAVERING**  
Formerly the creation of Trevor and Sally Oliver (Jamie's parents, in case you were wondering), this long-running gastropub with rooms was taken over recently by the regional Chestnut group of pubs, but this hasn't altered its charm one bit. The food is still top-notch pub cuisine and the 22 rooms - dotted around a trio of buildings next door and across the road - have been beautifully refurbished in a bright and highly contemporary style and furnished with all the little luxuries you need. They even provide a torch to help you find your way to the pub on a dark night. *Rooms from £95 (thecricketers.co.uk)*

**THE PHEASANT, GESTINGTHORPE**  
In a very rural part of north Essex, this is a country pub at heart, with mismatched furniture, wood-burning stoves, real ale and a friendly atmosphere. There are also a number of rooms in Hill House, between the two. *Rooms from £90 (bell-inn.co.uk)*

**THE BELL INN, HORNDRON ON THE HILL**  
Expect comfy, well-appointed rooms, and seasonal, local produce, with a reasonably priced food in a busy environment at this Hornndon-on-the-Hill inn.



**▲ A-maze-ing:** Saffron Walden's turf maze is thought to be of medieval origin

**8 ROMAN RIVER FESTIVAL (SEPTEMBER 16 TO 20)**  
Colchester doesn't have a concert hall, so over three long weekends each autumn, it partners

## ROOMS AT THE INN



**▲ And so to bed:** one of the comfy rooms at the Flitch of Bacon

**FLITCH OF BACON, LITTLE DUNMOW**  
Daniel Clifford's relaxed alternative to the two Michelin-starred fare of the renowned Midsummer House is more restaurant-with-rooms than traditional inn, but in the heart of Dunmow and with three comfy and beautifully decorated rooms, it's an elevated offering for epicurean travellers exploring this part of Essex. The emphasis is on simple, hearty ingredients and unfussy techniques that don't stray too far from the restaurant's initial incarnation as a posh pub. The garden, with its Big Green Egg BBQs and a bar, completes the picture. *Rooms from £107 (flitchofbacon.co.uk)*

**THE SUN INN, DEDHAM**  
This Essex bolthole, which appeared in the Domesday Book, is located in one of southeast England's most attractive villages in the heart of Constable country. With creaky floors, oak beams, squishy sofas and open fireplace, it oozes character, but owner Piers Baker has added everyday amenities and

*Martin Dunford*

by the way, comes from the local name for a tributary of the Colne. *romanrivermuseum.org.uk*

**9 PUZZLED? YOU WILL BE**  
Mazes are intriguing: even more so when there are four in one town, one very rare. Saffron Walden's grade II listed turf maze is one of only eight in the world and was probably cut into common ground in the medieval period, then recut in 1699 and repeatedly after that. It's a low-key pleasure, best seen in low light, and followed by the Victorian hedge maze in Bridge End Garden, a contemporary brick labyrinth in the Jubilee Gardens bandstand, and a 2016 maze in Swan Meadow with planters featuring child-friendly mini-mazes and labyrinths. Oh, and there's a finger-maze artwork by Michael Ayton in the Fry Art Gallery. *Free; visitsfromwalden.gov.uk*

**10 REFUEL BY RAIL ON THE SALT MARSH COAST**  
When Maldon District Council rechristened the 75 miles of shoreline between the Blackwater and Crouch estuaries the Saltmarsh Coast, they installed information hubs at the five coastal towns and created 20 walking routes along the sea wall and looping inland. If you don't want to walk, tackle the demanding Crouch Valley Rail Ale Trail along the southern Dengie peninsula, visiting pubs, breweries and taprooms all the way. Also look out for the annual Art Trail in Burnham-on-Crouch every June, linking artists' studios and galleries. *Greater Anglia anytime return Wickford-Southminster £12.30; vistomaldon district.co.uk*

**11 BUNKER DOWN FOR THE COLD WAR**  
When 25 acres of the Parrish family's arable farm at Kelvedon was requisitioned for the building of a Cold War nuclear bunker in the 1950s, they "farmed over it so the Russians couldn't see". They bought it back in 1992 and it's genuinely creepy to walk into a dreary "bungalow" in the woods and descend into a cavernous military complex, complete with moaning sirens and eerie public information films. Above ground are a high-ropes course, a world-class mud run (used for two world championships pre-Covid) and zip wires over the lake. At night, the bunker is popular with paranormal societies and ghost-hunters. *Adults £8.50, children aged 5-16 £6.50; secretnuclearbunker.com*

**12 THE WILD WETLANDS OF WALLASEA**  
Essex has retained only a fraction of its natural, intertidal salt marshes. Wallasea, once five sparsely populated marsh islands on the south side of the Crouch estuary, was enclosed by Dutch engineers in the 15th century and turned to reed land in the 1930s. Now the sea has been allowed to encroach, creating one of Britain's largest wetland wildlife havens, bolstered by three million tons of spoil from London's Crossrail underground rail project. The "island" is managed by the RSPB, with three walking trails and two

shelters: spot teals, redshanks, wigeons, Brent geese, avocets and many others, plus small mammals and the odd seal in the River Roach. *Open Sat to 8pm, free; rspb.org.uk/reserves-and-events*

**13 MOUNTAIN BIKE FOR BRITAIN**  
There were hoots of joy in 2012 when one of our flattest counties was chosen to host the mountain biking segments of the London Olym-

**14 ART AT THE END OF THE PIER**  
Southend-on-Sea, famed for its mighty pier, has been coming into focus as an art hub since the first Estuary Festival in 2016, co-curated by art incubators Metal (who have a base in Southend) and Cement Fields in Kent. The 2021 festival is over, but many works are on show all year and Arbonauts stages Silt, featuring swimmers on the Shooburyness mudflats, on Sept 24 and 25. Meanwhile, a public art installation, *Hares About Town*, features 30 giant hares and 53 leverets designed by artists and schoolchildren and linked by a walking trail. A farewell event will be held from Sept 24-26, with proceeds to the local Havens Hospices. *Please donate £1pp; haresabouttown.co.uk. Also see estuaryfestival.com/events.html*

**15 THE JOY OF JACOBAN**  
Audley End, just west of Saffron Walden, is an exercise in Jacobean symmetry and ambition, with grounds landscaped by Capability Brown in the 18th century. At its peak, the house had more than 100 servants and its stables housed 20 horses (with room for 20 more when visitors came). You can spend time in the Victorian Stable Yard, meeting the five resident horses as they come back from their morning exercise, watching a display of skills (including the elegant art of riding side saddle) and talking to their "Victorian" grooms. *House and garden admission £20.90 adults, £10.60 children; english-heritage.org.uk*

**16 PADDLING IN THE WILD**  
Clacton Kayaks offers rentals and tuition in kayaking and paddleboarding on the 1920s Dovercourt Boating Lake, yards from the sea in Harwich (not, confusingly, in Clacton), so beginners can learn in calm water while more experienced renters can head for the sea. They also do private wildlife tours by kayak for up to six people on the River Stour, starting at Sturford St Mary (which is, in fact, in Suffolk, shhh). *Lessons £25 adults, £15 children, Wild Guided Tours £45pp; clactonkayaks.co.uk*

**17 A VIEW OF A VIADUCT**  
In July 1849, the first train to travel from Colchester to Sudbury was hauled over a staggering piece of engineering, the Chappel Viaduct, more than 1,000ft long and built

**Audley End is an exercise in Jacobean symmetry and ambition**

**over the south door.** Go midweek if possible, as pretty little Dedham is often swamped at weekends. *General admission £12, guided tours £17; mumingsmuseum.org.uk*

**19 YOUR OWN ISLAND (BRIEFLY)**  
Osea Island, in the middle of the Blackwater Estuary, has been owned for more than 20 years by Nigel Friedl, the record producer and brother of hairdresser John. It combines its status as a site of special scientific interest with a general choice of very cool places to stay, with 23 charming properties from a cottage sleeping two to the glamorous Manor House overlooking the sea. It's natural, rather than flash - all the cottages are self-catering - but it's also home to two private recording studios and several private-hire bars and eateries, so it is often booked in its entirety by the rich and famous. Not your average island, then. *Rooms for two start at £250-£300 per night; oseaisland.co.uk*



**▲ Ride your luck** at Audley End, near Saffron Walden

**▲ Tide be there** get away from it all on Osea Island

**▲ Enjoy fine fare** and wine at Crouch Ridge Estate



for the Colchester, Stour Valley, Sudbury and Halstead Railway Company over the River Colne and Mount Bures ridge. Watch trains pass as you sip a pint in the garden of the 14th-century Swan Inn in Chappel and Wakes Colne. Travel by train from Marks Tey (six minutes), then on to the Thatchers Arms at Bures, which probably began as a beer house for the navvies. *Greater Anglia single tickets £3.50 per leg; greateranglia.co.uk*

**18 AT HOME WITH SIR ALFRED**  
Alfred Munnings, who so riled the Modernists as president of the Royal Academy from 1944 to 1949, was a fine painter of horses and rural life. He converted stables into a studio at his home, Castle House in Dedham, left to the nation by Lady Munnings. Eight rooms and 200 paintings are on show via timed tickets or guided tours (closed Sundays and Mondays). The café is closed, so bring a picnic. Just down the road is St Mary's Church in Dedham. *The Ascension*, a rare example of a religious Constable painting, hangs

**20 JAM WITH EVERYTHING**  
When the Wilkin family first grew fruit on their farm near Tiptree, it all went to London by train. By the late 1880s, they were specialising in fruit preserves, and a descendant, "Mr John", started a modest museum. Today it's the Jam Museum, where sweet-toothed visitors can potter about amongst jam paraphernalia and mementos of old village life. Farm tours are currently suspended (they hope to add tractor tours in 2022) but the shop and tea room, with outdoor seating, are open. Tiptree has traditional tea rooms across the county: try the one at the Lock, Heybridge Basin, handily placed on a four-mile hiking route, so you can walk it off afterwards. *Free tours. Cream teas £6.95pp, no reservations; tiptree.com/museum*

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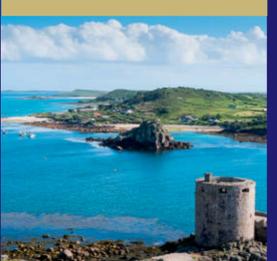
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