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What better way to spend a weekend than at the British seaside? Hanging out in Hastings

OUR BREAK DIDN'T start brilliantly; it was a rare sunny Saturday as my companion and I made our way from the Midlands to the south coast. Weirdly, it seemed most Londoners had hit on similar plans. From the M25 on, the traffic crawled. Jam-free, though, the journey should take about three hours.

Eventually we arrived at Hastings House, a small eight-bedroom 'boutique' hotel with views of Warrior Square gardens and the sea.

Owners Seng and Elisabeth Loy have transformed an old guest house into a stylish bed and breakfast with a relaxed friendly feel, yet the couple are clearly serious about making sure each guest has an enjoyable stay.

Sea view
On arrival we

were offered drinks and a slice of delicious-smelling apricot tart – an offer I regret declining to this day.

We took Room Three, a 'superior king with sea view' at £130 per night for two. The huge bay window affords a beautiful view of the gardens and the seafront, plus a glimpse of the sadly now closed down Victorian pier (just £17million needed to restore it). Plasma screen TV, swanky bathroom and mini-bar as standard, naturally.

Hastings House is actually located in St Leonards, which is a stone's throw from Hastings proper. It's best you take a bit of time to discover what each has to offer.

While the old town of Hastings is thriving as a trendy area for independent shops – vintage clothing, antique and junk shops and cafe/bars in particular – and the fishing area of Rock-a-Nore continues to attract tourists, St Leonards is becoming increasingly popular with artists and media types. Broadsheet and glossy magazine property sections these days devote pages to helping their readers find a cosy little bolthole from London, a blatant indicator that St Leonards is very much back on the way to returning to its former (Victorian) status as a stylish destination for the well-off. It too, has a good mix of the above businesses, but tends to retain a calmer, more considered air than that of its more famous neighbour.

Fresh seafood
Head to Norman Road for reasonably priced antiques and second-hand clothes shops, or to QOL@Spike's Fine Food Stores and cafe for a daytime salad or freshly-baked flan.

At the top of the road is Mercatoria, a street which boasts St Clements restaurant, a

relaxed modern eatery serving top-notch food without the stuffiness of fine dining. Their speciality is, of course, fish and seafood, and dishes such as cuttlefish and huss can be found on the menu, depending on the local catch of the day.

In an ingenious twist, St Clements is joined to the Horse and Groom pub next door, so you can retire next door for an after-dinner digestif without braving the elements should bad weather strike.

Having checked out the above places and finding them both highly agreeable, we spent what was left of our first night investigating a small Russian bar on the seafront. Before long we were drawn into a drunken conversation with a 'leading artist of his generation' (so says Wikipedia), a TV producer and various other casually successful types. An invitation to visit said artist at his studios the next morning was proffered, and we bade goodnight, feeling we were already well in with St Leonards' bohemian set.

Classic seafront

After a superb Hastings House cooked breakfast the next morning we were set up for a day of sightseeing.

We headed up the promenade to Hastings town, a walk which took us past the pier, the seafront arcades – the Deluxe is apparently pronounced 'De-loo' by locals – the crazy golf and the souvenir shops – all those charming essential tenets of British seaside life that the unstylish despise.

From George Street, which is where the Old Town begins, we hopped on the West Hill cliff railway – the UK's steepest funicular – and were within minutes at the top of the cliff. It was up here that John Logie Baird, the inventor of television, made his first radar experiments.

A fantastic aspect of the Old Town, the sea, Flamingo Fun Park and the fishing area stretches out from this standpoint, which is also home to the ruins of Hastings Castle.

However, we were here for the nearby Smugglers Adventures at St Clements Caves.

Underground exploration

Once inside the cliff, a vision of 'Hairy Jack' is beamed on to a screen to inform visitors of the history of smuggling, the caves themselves and to lead them around more than 5,000 sq m of caverns and passages.

It's all pretty hands-on and aimed mainly at younger visitors; all the different have-a-go exhibits and waxworks everywhere making it quite easy to miss the actual experience of being deep within the Earth.

Leaving the gloom of the underground behind us we emerged into the bright sun and followed the narrow steps back down to sea level, through many of the famous 'twitters'. These narrow alleyways provide what feel like secret passages, from the West Cliff down and throughout the Old Town.

Fishing village

Having browsed a few junk/retro/antique shops, we made our way past the Dolphin fish and chip shop – once reputed to be Hastings' best – and the tourist info to the Stade Fishing Beach, famous for its fishing huts and being Europe's largest beach-launched fishing fleet.

Check out the Coastal Heritage Centre and the Fishermen's Museum, both of which are quite small, meaning interest can be

sustained even if you are not an avid fan of Deadliest Catch.

Snack on lobster, crab claws and other seafood treats – available from any number of huts and shops – and the necessary bag of chips, for which we graced the Mermaid. Darned good chips, even if the service was a little aloof.

As a lazy afternoon wandering the beach turned to early evening, we were faced with a troubling question; where to head for dinner? Pondering the matter over aperitifs of bloody marys and oysters in St Leonards' Bar Blah, we were advised of an interesting sounding venture back in George Street.

Fantastic food

Luckily, we had the sense to follow up on this suggestion and soon found ourselves returning to the Old Town, and being ushered to a small table and chairs wedged snugly between bookshelves crammed with secondhand tomes. This was Boulevard Books; by day a bookshop; by night a Thai restaurant... and bookshop.

It was quite astonishing for a lover of eating and reading to be permitted to sit unchallenged among thousands of wonderful titles and chug away at a bottle of wine (bring-your-own) while in the background a superb meal is freshly prepared for you. It's probably one of the greatest places I've been to in my life, and the food certainly the best Thai I've ever eaten; simple home cooking, done proud.

You could come for dinner here with someone duller than a bucket and still have a great evening, because you'll spend the whole time scanning the shelves for books worth reading and needn't spend any time concerned with your companion at all, should that be your preference.

Staggering home with a bagful of books, we popped into the Smugglers, a live music pub in White Rock Court. Recognising a few faces from the previous night's pubs we nodded our acknowledgements, increasing our illusory status as people on the local



scene, before realising we were really quite full, drunk and laden down with books.

And so, we returned to Hastings House, helped ourselves to free mineral water from the mini-bar, and called it a night; our short seaside break a triumph.

Stay: Hastings House, hastingshouse.co.uk
Eat: Boulevard Books, 01424 436521; St Clement's, stclementsrestaurant.co.uk
Drink: Bar Blah, 01424 444481; Horse and Groom, horseandgroomstleonards.co.uk

Visit: St Clements Caves, smuggleradventures.co.uk; Hastings Castle, hastingscastle.co.uk

Events: Hastings Seafood and Wine Festival, Sept 19th to 20th, visit1066country.com