

Joan Scales, travel writer and broadcaster

Though our nearest Neighbour is just a short hop away we tend not to consider taking holidays and breaks in England. However, maybe we should.

When Visit Britain closed its office in Dublin in 2007, and then never marketed in Ireland it left holes in our knowledge of visiting England. Now that Brexit is five years old, it is time to see what has been happening across the pond and why we should Visit England.

Brighton

Brighton is a lovely historic seaside city. It has a Regency vibe in its architecture and of course, the famous Brighton Pavilion and Garden, built for George IV, known as Tum Tum. It has been completely restored.

The Lanes area is full of interesting jewellery and antique shops as well and traditional bars and cool new places. It is an ideal spot for some jewellery hunting, if you were in the market for an engagement ring or a special piece of jewellery.

Newer to Brighton is the i360, a 180 -metre Rotating Viewing point on the west pier. It has had a bit of turmoil lately but is due to reopen under new ownership soon. It is well worth a visit to see over Brighton and the South Downs. There's even a bar on board and you can sip a drink as you view the scenery.

Though the beach at Brighton is pebbly, it is still fun to sit on or paddle in the sea. The famous Brighton Pier is well worth a visit to try the traditional rides, roller coaster, helter skelters and slot machines. Finish the day with a dollop fish and chips.

The city has a vibrant nightlife and is ideal for a short break. It is only a 30-minute train journey from Gatwick.

Bristol

Following a rough number of years with declining business and race riots, Bristol is now recovered and is in the limelight. In recent years it has been declared the happiest city to live in and the best city for under 25s.

The city has embraced street art – Banksy is from here. The city hosts an annual international street art festival. One of my favourite things to do here is a street art walking tour.

Oddly enough for an inland city on the Avon River Bristol has a harbour - the city has a strong shipping heritage and the old docklands have been redeveloped into an entertainment area with bars, restaurants, clubs and shops.

Try a gin-based cocktail on the Glassboat waterfront gin bar, where you can choose from 6 O'clock Gin G&Ts, gin cocktails and a range of beers, wines, spirits, soft drinks and snacks.

St. Nicholas Market is an indoor quirky market, with stalls selling all kinds of unusual things, and there are delicious ethnic food stalls at St. Nicks too.

Ciara McQuillan had a great piece in The Irish Times about Bristol on Monday 27th.

Cornwall

Can you feel the Celtic influences in Cornwall – I think so. The Cornish people are very friendly, and the landscape will feel familiar here. There is so much to do in Cornwall for all ages.

Surfers will love the vibe of Newquay with its amazing waves and great nightlife. On one visit we stayed in the Headland Hotel – a grand Victorian dame of a hotel overlooking Newquay and Fistral Beaches. It is popular with storm watchers for its location.

One of the amazing places to see in Cornwall is the Eden Project – this is a series of domes that celebrate the natural plant world. Each dome has a different climate and houses various species of plants, such as a tropical dome and a desert dome. During the summer there are always events and concerts at Eden. £38 adults £12 children. It's a whole day out here.

Garden lovers will adore the Lost Gardens of Heligan – these Victorian gardens were lost to the wilderness from WW1 and lay undisturbed until 1990 when it became Europe's largest garden restoration project. Today the 200 acres are a paradise for wildlife, plants and for garden romantics.

A good time to visit is in the spring when there are more than 70 veteran camellias and 350 ancient rhododendrons to see in bloom. £20 adult and £9 children.

The Minack Theatre is not for the fainthearted or those in fear of heights, but for the brave it is an amazing venue clinging to the cliffs at Porthcurno near Penzance. Tickets for the summer outdoor season go on sale from February 10th.

Rick Stein, a Cornwall stalwart, has put the county on the map with his television series on BBC 2 and his cookery programmes. His website rickstein.com gives some great ideas for enjoying Cornwall.

Bath

This stunning Roman town does not forget its heritage and the reason for it being here. The 2,000-year-old Roman Baths still exist and you can visit this

extraordinary building – but not to bathe. However, if you love a spa the newer Thermae Bath Spa uses the thermal hot spring waters from the original springs and you can go there as a day visitor, from £42.50, treatments are extra.

Bath Abbey is the second longest in the UK with beautiful architecture, from the 12th century though an older abbey stood here since the 7th century. Services still happen at the Abbey.

One of the nicest parts of Bath is the Royal Crescent, a semicircular Georgian Houses built in the Palladian style. The Royal Crescent Hotel in the middle is worth a visit, if just for a drink to enjoy the architecture. In front of it is the Royal Crescent Lawn leading to the Royal Victoria Park. Bath is on the river Avon and along the banks are lovely river walks.

Birmingham

A short hop from Ireland, Britain's industrial city has become quite the place for shopping these days. The centre of the city has been completely refurbished and is now a great place to visit for shopping, entertainment and some great Asian cuisine.

The Bullring and Grand Central in the middle of the city is now a high-end shopping centre with a wide variety of classy stores including a huge Selfridges. Watch out for a photo op with the massive bronze bull. Behind it are traditional markets for food, produce, meats, clothes and household goods. Even the Primark in the centre of Birmingham is in a fantastic building.

Birmingham is an entertainment city with great events on through the year in the Symphony Hall, the Hippodrome, Birmingham Royal Ballet, the Royal Crescent Theatre, just to name a few.

I took a bus to Ladypool Road to experience the Asian side of Birmingham as there is a large community here. It is a street of Asian shops, and I loved looking at the extraordinary wedding rigouts and sumptuous jewellery. It is also a good place for a curry. On the way back I happened on the Patrick Kavanagh pub, on Trafalgar Road, a reminder that Birmingham is home to a strong Irish community.

Getting there

There are hundreds of flights every week to regional airports in the UK from Dublin, Cork, Shannon, Knock, Kerry, Belfast and Derry. Book early for the best fares.

Ferries can be great value for car travel to England with routes from Dublin to Holyhead, and Liverpool and Rosslare to Pembroke and Fishguard, prices are from €177 each way. Foot passengers on the ferries can take advantage of good value sail rail tickets from €47.50 each way. Adding on the rail costs little more i.e. Dublin to Birmingham cost €50 each way. Irish Ferries and Stena Line operate on routes from the Republic. From Northern Ireland to the UK, it is Stena Line and P&O Ferries.

Duty Free

Since Britain left the European Union, duty-free returned. Passengers to England can bring up to four litres of spirits, 18 litres of wine and 200 cigarettes or tobacco. However, you can only bring back one litre of spirits, four litres of wine and 200 cigarettes.

Taste of England

I hope I have given you a little taste of what we have been missing in England and encourage you to visit some of these extraordinary places. I have always felt welcome on my visits.

