

A pocket full of Rye!

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Roger Wheeler visits one of the real treasures of Sussex



The ancient town of Rye is undoubtedly one of the historic gems of Sussex, just 55 miles from Brighton and 76 from London and on the main Brighton – Ashford International railway line it's really quite accessible.

Never having been there to take a serious look, as a birthday treat we booked into one of the two four star hotels – The George in Rye, as they call it – with a deal from Booking.com at £100 for a luxury room with breakfast.

Rye is a beautiful place, with just 4,000 inhabitants, all living in what look like listed houses and with a history dating back over 1,000 years. Rye is a must see on any tourist trail and survives on tourism. During the day the town is packed with visitors from all over the world, even some from the UK, although most it seems come from the US and Europe.



During our initial stroll we overheard someone on her phone saying “*we’ve been here just over half an hour, I think we’ve seen it all now*”. That comment pretty well sums the place up, once you have walked around and admired the many stunning houses, the obligatory church with a great view from the tower and looked at the many ‘gift’ shops packed with interesting souvenirs and art, all that’s left is to have lunch and head off.

Of course purist historians would strongly disagree as there is a lot of fascinating history. Rye was one of the original Cinque Ports, and was a very important sea port, although the river and harbour silted up and the sea is now over two miles away.

During the threat of Napoleonic invasion in 1803 it was thought to be one of the main places the French would aim for. Rye Harbour was recently upgraded and is still quite a busy fishing port although most of the fish is now sold in Boulogne.

There is of course an excellent Heritage Centre by the river which has a superb model of the town and a popular sound and light presentation. The little Tourist Information centre seemed to be staffed by only one, very helpful, but very busy lady.

It seems that although the town’s official population is just over 4,000 about 50% are there just for weekends or have holiday homes, so a more accurate number would be fewer than 2,000.



Rye's only real problem is that apart from endless art galleries, an Arts Festival in September and souvenir shops there is only one food shop and that is quite small. The residents have to travel the 12 miles to Hastings or 11 miles to Tenterden to shop. Someone wryly smiled and said that there had been talk of a Sainsbury store some years ago but it would detract from the quaint atmosphere of the town and so was abandoned.

Rye has featured in several famous books not the least being EF Benson's *Mapp & Lucia* series, in which the town is renamed as Tilling. The television series was shown in 1986 and the BBC are about to film another adaptation in 2014. Paul McCartney has a farm in nearby Peasmarch, in fact lots of quite famous actors, writers and celebs choose to live close to Rye, and they probably don't mind driving 12 miles to do their shopping.

Rye today is well worth a visit, without doubt it has all the charm you could wish for, but after the last tourist heads home the town drifts off to sleep. The cobbled streets are virtually deserted; you can wander around and have the place to yourself.



There are a several decent pubs and restaurants but what life there is can be found in the hotels. There are several very good hotels and guest houses, the Mermaid Inn is possibly the oldest built in 1420 and it looks

amazing.

We stayed in The George a newly renovated hotel dating from 1545; it is very pleasant, full of interesting character and some equally interesting characters. If you're thinking of booking avoid rooms at the rear of the hotel as the kitchen extractor fans run all night and are quite noisy. But our room, one up from the basic, was fine with a fabulous four poster bed, great bathroom, TV and WiFi of course. In fact all the usual amenities you would expect from a four star establishment. The restaurant was very good, service, food, wine all excellent and the breakfast was first-class. Our total bill was just over £200, which considering the overall quality was very good value.

Rye remains in a time warp, its like stepping through a portal to a bygone age where nothing has changed for hundreds of years, which is its attraction. Visitors flock to the town in their thousands, admire the medieval architecture, buy a few souvenirs and leave.

<http://www.ryesussex.co.uk/>

<http://www.visit1066country.com/explore-1066-country/rye>

<http://www.thegeorgeinrye.com/>

<http://www.mermaidinn.com/>