

Britain

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Edinburgh Festival** Laugh yourself silly with a gaggle of high-energy comedy shows (p223)
- **Tate Modern** This temple of contemporary art always raises an eyebrow or two (p165)
- **Brighton's North Laine area** These back streets offer the perfect place to uncover vintage skater gear (p178)
- **Best journey** The short, sweet train trundle from St Erth to St Ives (p184)
- **Off-the-beaten track** Hit the windswept vistas of the hiker's paradise known as the Peak District National Park (p192)

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 93,000 sq miles (240,000 sq km); around the size of New Zealand
- **ATMs** (known as cashpoints) Widespread outside banks and at supermarkets
- **Budget** £30-50 per day
- **Capital** London
- **Country code** ☎ 44
- **Famous for** tea, football, Royal Family
- **Head of State** Queen Elizabeth II
- **Languages** English, Gaelic, Welsh
- **Money** UK pound (£); A\$1 = £0.40, CA\$1 = £0.46, €1 = £0.68, ¥100 = £0.45, NZ\$1 = £0.35, US\$1 = £0.78
- **Population** 60 million
- **Time** GMT/UTC + 0
- **Visas** None required for most visitors for stays up to six months



TRAVEL HINTS

Check out restaurant lunch specials and bar happy hours, and buy food, beer and wine at supermarkets.

ROAMING BRITAIN

Head west from London across southern England via historic Salisbury, Glastonbury and Bath before dropping into Bristol for some nightlife fun.

First-time visitors to Western Europe's third most populous nation often arrive expecting warm beer, double-decker buses and red telephone boxes on every street. Instead they discover a country that has dramatically moved on from such clichés.

But just because the classic Routemaster double-deckers are disappearing and the telephone boxes have taken on a steely-grey hue (and room-temperature beer can still be found if you find the wrong pub), it doesn't mean that Britain has abandoned the qualities that still make it great for travellers.

Cosmopolitan London remains one of the world's most exciting cities, with rising post-industrial challengers like Manchester, Glasgow and Cardiff jostling for the mantle of Britain's second most vibrant metropolis. For nature-huggers, recommended areas of jaw-dropping

beauty include the desolate Devon moors, the dramatic landscapes of the Lake District and the craggy Scottish Highlands. And for those who like easy access to history, almost every town has an ancient market square and clutch of centuries-old churches.

Whether it's history, nature or contemporary culture that attracts you to Britain's shores, it's clear that leaving your preconceptions at the border is essential. This diverse yet easily travelled land is ideal for off-the-beaten-path wandering. And if you happen to spot a double-decker bus along the way, don't forget to take a photo.

HISTORY

Populated by bands of hairy hunter-gatherers for centuries, Britain was shaken from its stupor around 4000 BC when modern Europeans, wielding new-fangled stone tools, arrived to case the joint. Evidence of this period includes the mysterious structures at Stonehenge (p182), Avebury (p182) and the Orkney Islands (p215).

Even more numerous are the ruins from Britain's colourful Roman era, which began after the AD 43 invasion. The Romans met little resistance in England and Wales, but Scotland proved a tougher nut to crack; by the year 122 the occupiers had built a northern fortification called Hadrian's Wall to mark the barbarian exclusion zone.

The Romans' departure in 410 sparked the Dark Ages, a period still poorly understood by historians. Local tribes slowly began carving out larger territories during this era and, by the end of the first millennium, those ruled by the Anglo-Saxons were calling themselves the English, while the Welsh and Scots were also becoming more distinct regions.

But the British Isles were always ripe for invasion and both the Danes and the Norwegian Vikings began occupying large areas of Scotland and England. In 1066 William, Duke of Normandy, arrived from France and acquired his nickname 'the Conqueror' by defeating his rival Harold on the south coast. The Battle of Hastings launched a period of Norman rule that became as influential as that of the Romans.

The ensuing centuries saw rule from London spreading across England, Wales and the Scottish lowlands, but outlying Scottish regions remained a law unto themselves, culminating in a full-scale English invasion in 1296. The resulting treaty recognised Robert the Bruce as king of an independent Scotland. Centuries of ever-diminishing pockets of Welsh rebellion culminated in the Acts of Union, signed between 1536 and 1543, which saw Wales assimilated under English jurisdiction.

By the 16th century, Scotland was strongly nationalistic with close links to Europe and a widespread hatred of the English. But when England's Queen Elizabeth I died childless in 1603, Mary Stuart's son united the crowns of Scotland and England for the first time, becoming James I of England and James VI of Scotland. In 1707 England persuaded the Scottish Parliament to agree to a formal union under a single parliament. After a rebellion was buried at the Battle of Culloden (1746), the English decided to destroy the troublesome clans, prohibiting Highland dress and clearing ancient villages to make way for sheep grazing.

Religious strife had long been an issue in Britain – the nation had split from the Catholic Church in 1536 when King Henry VIII wanted to divorce his first wife, and religious differences fuelled a bitter civil war in 1642, with Parliament rising and ultimately executing King Charles I. The war's instigator, Oliver Cromwell, died in 1658, and the monarchy was restored in 1660.

During the 18th century, the new role of British prime minister assumed increasing power while the monarchy, soon to be represented by Queen Victoria, sank into a largely ceremonial role. By the 19th century, Britain was well placed to launch an Industrial Revolution that tied machine innovation to population explosion. Many Scots became global capitalist-barons at this time.

Britain's 20th century was a period of war and end-of-empire, followed by cultural and economic resurgence. Two world wars saw the nation brought almost to its knees, although many recall the 1940 Battle of Britain, when the nation resisted a three-month air attack, as its finest hour. Many British dominions were restored to independence after the war and the nation's industries began to decline.

But by the 1990s Britain had bounced back and it entered the new millennium with a dominant economy. Its role on the world stage was reflected by its relationship with the

BRITAIN



READING UP

For an insight into Britain's history and psychology try these: *A History of Britain Volumes 1–3* (Simon Schama, 2000–2003), *Medieval Lives* (Terry Jones, 2004), *London: The Biography* (Peter Ackroyd, 2000), *Watching the English: The Hidden Rules of English Social Behaviour* (Kate Fox, 2004), *English: A Portrait of a People* (Jeremy Paxman, 2002), *Trainspotting* (Irvine Welsh, 1993) and *The Football Factory* (John King, 1996). For some entertaining travel writing, check out *Notes from a Small Island* (Bill Bryson, 1996), *The Angry Island* (AA Gill, 2006) and *Bollocks to Alton Towers* (Jason Hazely et al, 2005).

USA and participation in military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq. Echoing a history of protest, millions took to the streets to demonstrate against the nation's involvement. In July 2005 terrorist bombs killed dozens on public transit in London, a direct reaction to Britain's support for the War on Terror.

With the country's Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair reaching the end of his final term in office, Britain's political future is entering a period of uncertainty. Dour Gordon Brown is preparing to take over and square-off against a slowly regrouping Conservative Party that is itching to repeat its 1980s hold on power.

THE CULTURE

With a population of 60 million, Britain is one of the world's most densely populated nations. Despite this, there are myriad distinct regional identities: it's common to travel less than 50 miles and find a completely different accent with its own special vocabulary. Southerners will tell you they don't understand a word uttered by the Geordies, while northerners will happily tease the Welsh over the way they speak. For the most part, this regional rivalry is fairly friendly – although it's wise to avoid calling someone 'English' if they come from Scotland or Wales. Indeed, the independent-minded Scots and Welsh often view themselves as separate races.

RELIGION

In the nation's most recent census, 72% of Brits identified themselves as Christians, with Muslims being the second biggest group at

3%. The remaining largest faiths were Hindus, Sikhs, Jews and Buddhists. Around 16% said they had no religion – a category that included agnostics, atheists, heathens and those who claimed a spiritual affiliation with the Jedis of *Star Wars* fame.

ARTS

Britain has a colourful and important cultural history that stretches for centuries. While theatre and literature are at the forefront of these historic achievements, the UK's latter-day popular culture and conceptual art movements continue to resonate throughout the world.

Travelling in the footsteps of storied English, Scottish or Welsh writers can be the highlight of any trip to Britain. An amble through the cobbled streets of Canterbury (p176) recalls Chaucer's ribald comedy, while a stroll in the Scottish glens (p213) should easily evoke the spirit of Robbie Burns. Spirits of a different variety should be sampled in the pubs of Wales, some of which inspired the poetry of Dylan Thomas.

For most lit-lovers, a visit to Stratford-upon-Avon (p190) is a must. Not only is this the historic hometown of Western literature's greatest playwright, it's also the world centre of Shakespeare performance and the home of the renowned Royal Shakespeare Company.

British musicians enjoy huge record sales around the world, with entertainment juggernauts like the Rolling Stones, Elton John and Paul McCartney routinely topping lists of highest-grossing concert tours. Back home, the reality is much edgier. Although Coldplay are in danger of becoming ubiquitous, bands like Franz Ferdinand, Kaiser Chiefs and British Sea Power continue to attract the indie crowd, while talented youngsters like Sheffield's Arctic Monkeys can still burst on the scene as if they were born with 50 great songs ready to play.

Britain's contribution to contemporary art has undergone a transformation in recent years, with new galleries and public installations creating feverish debate. While cities like Glasgow, Manchester and London house some of Europe's finest galleries, exciting new developments like the capital's Tate Modern (p165) and Newcastle's Baltic arts centre (p2020) have become popular showcases for the latest artistic movements.

LIGHTS, CAMERA, ACTION...

While Hollywood relies on clever set construction to make its history-themed movies, filmmakers in Britain can simply step outside. From untouched rolling vistas and dark London streets to castles, cathedrals and villages that have remained unchanged for centuries, the country is a giant outdoor movie set waiting to happen. For visitors, this means the fun of identifying familiar or not-so-familiar backdrops from favourite movies.

Among recent epics, the latest version of *Pride and Prejudice* brought Keira Knightley to the windswept vistas and handsome country houses of Lincolnshire, Derbyshire and the Peak District (p192), while the 2006 movie version of *The Da Vinci Code* scoured the country for historic sites. Among its real-life sets – some of them standing in for other locations named in the book – were Winchester Cathedral (p181), the National Gallery (p161) and the story's climactic Rosslyn Chapel 6 miles outside Edinburgh.

Not surprisingly, London remains England's movie location capital, with hundreds of films shot in and around the city. Celebrated movies filmed here include *Elizabeth* (Tower of London), *Notting Hill* (have a guess), *Lock Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* (Staples Market and Borough Market), *The Madness of King George* (St Paul's Cathedral and Royal Naval College, Greenwich) and *Shakespeare in Love* (Marble Hill House and the Thames near Barnes). Also check out *28 Days Later*: it includes some incredibly eerie scenes of empty London streets.

ENVIRONMENT

At less than 600 miles (966km) from north to south and under 300 miles (483km) at its widest point, Britain is roughly the same size as New Zealand or half the size of France. There's a huge array of landscapes, including the craggy Snowdonia mountains in northwest Wales (p220), the sheep-strewn moorlands of Devon (p182) and the barren, windswept islands off western Scotland (p214).

Mostly famous for being run over on roads, hedgehogs are commonly seen throughout Britain, even in urban settings where they scavenge for food at night. Another night-time scavenger is the red fox. While deer occupy large estates, particularly in the north, you're much more likely to see a grey squirrel. This ubiquitous tree-hopper may look cute but it was originally an interloper from North America and it has pushed the smaller, indigenous red squirrel closer to extinction.

Farming methods adopted after WWII saw the swift demolition of much of Britain's archetypal patchwork landscape, replacing stone walls, ancient wetlands and centuries-old hedgerows with vast, open fields. These hedgerows – knotty shrubs and bushes that sheltered some of Britain's most vulnerable flowers, insects and small mammals – have almost completely disappeared in some regions, taking their rare flora and fauna with them.

TRANSPORT**GETTING THERE & AWAY****Air**

Britain is one of the most hectic airline hubs in Europe, with London, Manchester and Glasgow in particular receiving frequent flights from around the world. A plethora of regional airports has also sprung up, servicing routes from Europe and beyond. Consider some of these as alternatives to the main airports: they may be cheaper and more convenient, depending on where you plan to stay in Britain.

The following are among the key international airports:

Birmingham (code BHM; ☎ 0870 733 5511; www.bhx.co.uk)

Bristol (code BRS; ☎ 0870 121 2747; www.bristolairport.co.uk)

Cardiff (code CWL; ☎ 01446 711111; www.cwlfly.com)

Edinburgh (code EDI; ☎ 0870 040 0007; www.edinburghairport.com)

Glasgow (code GLA; ☎ 0870 040 0008; www.glasgowairport.com)

Liverpool (code LPL; ☎ 0870 129 8484; www.liverpooljohnlennonairport.com)

London Gatwick (code LGW; ☎ 0870 000 2468; www.gatwickairport.com)

London Heathrow (code LHR; ☎ 0870 000 0123; www.heathrowairport.com)

London Luton (code LTN; ☎ 01582 405100; www.london-luton.co.uk)

London Stansted (code STN; ☎ 0870 000 0303; www.stanstedairport.com)
Manchester (code MAN; ☎ 0161-489 3000; www.manchesterairport.co.uk)

Some of the busiest airlines flying to and from Britain:

Aer Lingus (code EI; ☎ 0845 876 5000; www.flyerlingus.com)

Air Canada (code AC; ☎ 0871 220 1111; www.aircanada.com)

Air France (code AF; ☎ 0870 142 4343; www.airfrance.com)

American Airlines (code AA; ☎ 0845 778 9789; www.aa.com)

British Airways (code BA; ☎ 0870 850 9850; www.ba.com)

British Midland/BMI (code BD; ☎ 0870 607 0555; www.flybmi.com)

easyJet (code EZY; ☎ 0870 600 0000; www.easyjet.com)

KLM (code KLM; ☎ 0870 507 4074; www.klm.com)

Lufthansa (code LH; ☎ 0870 833 7747; www.lufthansa.com)

Qantas (code QF; ☎ 0845 774 7767; www.qantas.com.au)

Ryanair (code FR; ☎ 0871 246 0000; www.ryanair.com)

Virgin Atlantic (code VS; ☎ 0870 574 7747; www.virgin-atlantic.com)

Boat

There's a bewildering array of marine services linking Britain and Europe, and prices can change rapidly to reflect the intense competition. Shop around for bargains via operators' websites and keep an eye on national newspapers for summer promotions. The shortest crossing from mainland Europe is Calais to Dover on the English south coast. Contact operators for additional routes and information.

BELGIUM

Superfast Ferries (☎ 0870 234 0870; www.superfast.com) operates between Zeebrugge and Rosyth near Edinburgh (from £99, 17½ hours, daily).

FRANCE

P&O (☎ 0870 242 4999; www.poferries.com) operates between Calais and Dover (from £18, 75 minutes, every 45 minutes).

Brittany Ferries (☎ 0870 366 5333; www.brittanyferries.co.uk) operates between Cherbourg and Portsmouth (£29, six to nine hours, daily).

IRELAND

Stena Line (☎ 0870 570 7070; www.stenaline.com) operates between Rosslare and Fishguard, south

Wales (from £65, 1½ to three hours, twice daily).

THE NETHERLANDS

DFDS Seaways (☎ 0870 252 0524; www.dfds.co.uk) operates between Amsterdam and Newcastle (from £110, 15 hours, daily).

SPAIN

Brittany Ferries (☎ 0870 366 5333; www.brittanyferries.co.uk) operates between Santander and Plymouth (from £48, 24 hours, twice weekly).

SWEDEN

DFDS Seaways (☎ 0870 252 0524; www.dfds.co.uk) operates between Gothenburg and Newcastle (from £105, 17 hours, twice weekly).

Bus

Servicing a vast network of long-distance routes, **Eurolines** (☎ 0870 514 3219; www.eurolines.com; 52 Grosvenor Gardens, Victoria, London) is an umbrella company linking 32 regional bus/coach operators. Popular direct daily services to London Victoria arrive from Amsterdam (from £10, 12 hours, three daily), Paris (from £15, nine hours, four daily) and Dublin (from £24, 12 hours, two daily). There are also Eurolines services to cities outside London. You can book tickets online, through any UK National Express office or at many larger travel agencies.

Car & Motorcycle

Visitors can bring cars or motorbikes to Britain from Europe via ferry services or the Channel Tunnel. See left for ferry routes and p156 for tips on driving in Britain.

Train

High-speed **Eurostar** (☎ 0870 518 6186; www.eurostar.com) passenger trains arrive in London from Paris (from £59, three hours) and Brussels (from £59, 2½ hours) via the Channel Tunnel throughout the day. There are also regular direct services from Lille, Avignon and Disneyland Paris, with additional connections from across Europe. Youth discounts are available to travellers under 26. In 2007 Eurostar services switched from the old London Waterloo terminus to the swanky new London St Pancras International terminal.

An alternative is the vehicle train service operated by **Eurotunnel** (☎ 0870 535 3535; www.eurotunnel.com). These trains carry cars and their

EMERGENCY NUMBERS

For almost any type of emergency dial ☎ 999. You will be connected to the nearest coast guard, fire service, mountain rescue, ambulance or police via this number.

passengers through the Channel Tunnel between Folkestone in the UK and Calais in France. Trains depart up to four times an hour in each direction between 6am and 10pm, and every hour from 10pm to 6am. A car plus passengers can cost up to £220 but advertised promotions can bring this down to £39. The journey takes 35 minutes.

GETTING AROUND

Buses, trains and cheap airlines form a dense transportation network across much of Britain, but these services dwindle to almost nothing in remote areas where populations are relatively low. With some creative thinking, visitors can get almost anywhere – especially if they deploy a bike or the odd hiking trail. Contact **Traveline** (☎ 0870 608 2608; www.traveline.org.uk) for information on local and regional bus and train options or visit **Transport Direct** (www.transportdirect.info) for longer journeys – the site has car route maps and a useful tool for comparing flight, bus and train options between cities.

Air

No-frills airlines offer some of the best potential bargains for travelling around Britain – especially between London and Scotland – but you'll have to be flexible to get the best deals (flights from £1, excluding taxes and fees) and factor in the cost of travelling to and from airports. There are sometimes extortionate penalties for ticket changes and some airlines now charge for hold luggage.

AIRLINES IN BRITAIN

The following airlines operate domestic flights:

Air Scotland (code GRE; ☎ 0141-222 2363; www.air-scotland.com) Serving Birmingham, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Manchester and Newcastle.

BA Connect (code TH; ☎ 0870 850 9850; www.ba.com/baconnect) Serving Birmingham, Bristol, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Inverness, London City, London Gatwick, London Luton, Manchester and Southampton.

BmiBaby (code WW; ☎ 0870 224 0224; www.bmibaby.com)

.com) Serving Birmingham, Cardiff, Edinburgh, Glasgow, London Gatwick, Manchester and Newquay.

easyJet (code EZY; ☎ 0870 600 0000; www.easyjet.com) Serving Aberdeen, Bristol, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Inverness, Liverpool, London Gatwick, London Luton, London Stansted and Newcastle.

Flybe (code BE; ☎ 0871 700 0535; www.flybe.com) Serving Aberdeen, Birmingham, Bristol, Edinburgh, Exeter, Glasgow, Jersey, Leeds Bradford, Liverpool John Lennon, London City, London Gatwick, London Luton, Manchester, Newcastle, Newquay, Norwich and Southampton.

Ryanair (code FR; ☎ 0871 246 0000; www.ryanair.com) Serving Aberdeen, Birmingham, Blackpool, Bristol, Cardiff, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Inverness, Leeds Bradford, Liverpool John Lennon, London Gatwick, London Luton, London Stansted, Manchester, Newcastle and Newquay.

Bicycle

Bike-friendly Britain's urban and countryside routes attract plenty of travelling pedal pushers. Helmets are not compulsory but they are advisable since some routes – particularly in cities – can be crowded. While the best roads for cycling are country lanes, many urban centres have designated bike paths. Cost-effective bike rentals (from £6 per half-day) are available in larger towns. See p222 for further information.

Bus

Buses are the cheapest way to get around Britain but they can be slow, with some services dawdling inexorably before reaching their destination. While local services operate in each region, there's also a network of intercity buses (usually referred to as coaches) covering longer distances.

Britain's dominant coach operator is **National Express** (☎ 0870 580 8080; www.nationalexpress.com), along with its north-of-the-border subsidiary **Scottish Citylink** (☎ 0870 550 5050; www.citylink.co.uk). **Megabus** (☎ 0900 160 0900; www.megabus.com) is its no-frills rival with a growing roster of services between major cities. Its fares start at £1, if you book early enough. National Express offers low 'funfares' to compete on many Megabus routes.

BUS PASSES

The National Express Brit Xplorer pass comes in seven-, 14- and 28-day versions. It's only available to non-Brits but can be purchased in the UK. The company also offers an annual discount card for those under 26 (£10, ID required, 30% discount on regular fares).

Scottish Citylink offers three-, five- and eight-day passes (£35/59/79).

Car & Motorcycle

Often the quickest, most convenient way to travel around Britain is by car or motorbike. But cars are rarely recommended in city centres, where parking can be troublesome and expensive. Petrol is also pricey in Britain, especially compared with North America.

DRIVING LICENCE

Your overseas driving licence is valid in Britain for up to 12 months from date of entry.

HIRE

Vehicle hire is expensive in Britain and it's often better to make arrangements in your home country for a fly/drive deal. Ask for any special offers and mention that you're shopping around for the best rate. Also consider smaller independent operators in larger cities: they are usually more open to negotiation.

Major hire companies:

Avis (✉ 0870 010 0287; www.avis.co.uk)

Budget (✉ 0870 153 9170; www.budget.co.uk)

EasyCar (✉ 0906 333 3333; www.easycar.com)

Hertz (✉ 0870 844 8844; www.hertz.co.uk)

Thrifty (✉ 01494-751600; www.thrifty.co.uk)

PURCHASE

For longer treks, it may be cost-effective to buy an older car or camper van. Roadworthy near-wrecks cost from £500 but for something with seats you should budget for around £1000. Make sure the vehicle comes with a log book and has passed its Ministry of Transport (MOT) test before handing over any money. Additional costs before you set out will include road tax (up to £105 for six months) and third-party insurance (often around £400). Check out what's available in the used market via **Autotrader** (www.autotrader.co.uk) magazine.

ROAD RULES

The *Highway Code*, available in most bookshops, contains all you need to know about Britain's road rules. Vehicles drive on the left-hand side; seat belts are compulsory in front seats (also in the back, where fitted); the speed limit is 30mph in built-up areas, 60mph on single carriageways and 70mph on dual carriageways. A yellow line along the edge of a road indicates parking restrictions – look for a sign nearby for exact limits. Motorcyclists

must wear helmets. The legal blood-alcohol limit for drivers is 0.08%.

Train

Travelling by train in Britain is far better than flying if you want to see the countryside. It also has the convenience of taking you right into the centre of town, rather than making you struggle from an airport in the middle of nowhere. But with new trains and faster rails in recent years – redressing decades of under-investment – fares can be expensive. There are two ways to circumvent this: book early and be flexible on dates so you can shop around for the best deal; or consider buying a train pass. For comprehensive fare, route and timetable information, contact **National Rail Enquiries** (✉ 0845 748 4950; www.nationalrail.co.uk).

CLASSES & COSTS

Many but not all trains have two classes: 1st-class tickets are up to 50% more expensive than standard-class tickets and have separate carriages. There are myriad ticketing options within standard class and the system is needlessly complex on some routes. Recommended options:

Apex The cheapest ticket for long-distance outward and return journeys on different days.

Cheap Day Return The cheapest option for local and regional return trips on the same day.

SuperSaver A return ticket that excludes travel at weekday peak times, Fridays and holidays.

Keep in mind that there are dozens of train operators in Britain, many servicing the same routes. Frequent promotions are advertised, especially during off-peak seasons, and these can dramatically reduce fares. While the no-frills, low-cost approach has yet to deeply infiltrate the train market, Megabus subsidiary **Megatrain** (✉ 0900 120 0300; www.megatrain.com) recently launched routes between London, Bath, Exeter, Portsmouth and Salisbury. If you book far enough in advance, fares can be as low as £1.

TRAIN PASSES

The Young Persons Railcard (£20), Senior Railcard (£20) and Disabled Persons Railcard (£14) are each valid for 12 months and give a one-third discount on most trips in Britain. Check the options at the **Railcard** (www.railcard.co.uk) website. Applications can be processed over the counter at larger stations: you'll need

proof of age or student enrolment for the Senior or Young Persons railcards and proof of entitlement for the Disabled Persons Railcard. Some regions also have their own discount train passes, with the southeast's Network Card (£20) particularly popular.

The most convenient and cost-effective option for extensive train travel is a **BritRail** (www.britrail.com) pass. You must buy them at home via the Britrail or **Rail Europe** (www.rail-europe.com) websites or at larger travel agents. With your validated pass in hand, you don't need to pick up tickets: just step on the train and show your pass to the attendant. Consider paying extra for a 1st-class pass, especially if you're travelling in the crowded summer season. Winter discounts are offered on some BritRail passes.

Pass options include the popular BritRail Consecutive Pass (unlimited four- to 31-days' travel ranging from US\$218 to US\$702) and the BritRail Flexipass (four-, eight- or 15-days' travel over a two-month period for US\$275 to US\$604). England-only and Scotland-only versions of these passes are cheaper. There are also popular nonconsecutive London passes (US\$70 to US\$176). Remember that Eurail passes are not valid in Britain.

ENGLAND

When the government's Department for Culture recently launched a campaign to discover England's enduring icons, they kicked-off with a Top 12 of well-worn classics. Spitfire warplanes and *Alice in Wonderland* made the cut, while chestnuts like tea and Stonehenge rounded out the numbers.

But when organisers invited public nominations, they were overwhelmed with suggestions for icons they hadn't even thought of, creating a collage of self-reflection about what being English really means. Eschewing the obvious, suggestions included gin, Penguin books, *Teletubbies*, regional accents, John Cleese's silly walk and closed-circuit TV cameras in public places.

With Scotland and Wales gaining more power to run their own affairs in recent years, the 'idea' of England – as opposed to Britain – is clearly back on the agenda. For visitors, the debate indicates the level of diversity they can expect to experience here. Rolling hills, thatched cottages and old-world pubs are a

ICONS OF ENGLAND

With perhaps a little too much time on their hands, bureaucrats at the Department for Culture kicked off their campaign to uncover England's enduring icons with the following Top 12. To see the dozens of additional icons added by the public, visit www.icons.org.uk.

1 Stonehenge

2 Punch & Judy

3 Holbein's Henry VIII portrait

4 *Alice in Wonderland*

5 SS Empire Windrush

6 A cup of tea

7 The FA Cup

8 Routemaster double-decker bus

9 The King James Bible

10 *Angel of the North* (the sculpture)

11 The Spitfire plane

12 'Jerusalem' (the anthemic song)

given but latter-day England is also stuffed with exciting cities like Bristol, Manchester and Newcastle; dripping with excellent beaches from Whitby to Newquay; and coloured by accessible outdoor adventure in regions like Exmoor and the North York Moors.

LONDON

020 / pop 7.4 million

Like a mid-sized country on its own, London has enough history, vitality and cultural drive to keep most visitors occupied for weeks. In recent years, this cosmopolitan world capital has led international trends in music, fashion and the arts, riding a wave of 21st-century British confidence that has washed into areas of the city that were formerly dark and depressing. Adding to established tourist-haven neighbourhoods like Westminster, Knightsbridge and the City, reinvented areas of London such as the artsy South Bank have become newly visitor-friendly. With the 2012 Olympic Games rolling into town, it's a process that will continue to alter London's tourist landscape. The downside of this gentrification, of course, is increasing cost: London is now Europe's most expensive city for visitors.

But despite the scary price tags there are dozens of free or nearly free activities in the city that can help keep travel budgets down.



These include the Tate Modern, National Gallery and the Victoria & Albert Museum. Just wandering the streets of London (stopping only for a cheap lunchtime sandwich) is worth a day of anyone's time – and Buckingham Palace and Westminster Abbey are just around the corner.

HISTORY

A straggle of Celtic communities clung to the banks of the Thames for centuries, but it wasn't until the Romans arrived in AD 43 that the modern idea of London began to take shape. But when the modernisers withdrew in the 5th century, they left the settlement to several hundred years of less-sophisticated Saxon rule. By exploiting the trading advantages of its giant river, the city slowly developed, becoming a key European port.

This increased importance made invasions inevitable. The Danish Vikings had a go in 851, with the Saxon King Alfred taking 25 years to retake and rebuild the city. A period of Saxon prosperity ensued, but the persistent Vikings finally appointed a Danish king in 1016, naming London as their capital. In 1042 the Viking-friendly Saxon, Edward the Confessor, was allowed to take the throne; he went on to build Westminster Abbey.

The vacuum created by Edward's death led to an international power struggle. Following a series of skirmishes, the 1066 Battle of Hastings enabled the Norman duke, William the Conqueror, to march into London, build his citadel at the Tower of London and underline the city's role as capital.

Prosperous London increased in size and global importance throughout the medieval period, surviving the 1665 Plague and 1666 Great Fire. By 1720 London had 750,000 inhabitants and was the centre of a growing empire. Fuelled by mercantile wealth, the Victorian era was its golden age.

In contrast, WWII was London's darkest hour, with the city subject to relentless bombing. An ugly postwar rebuilding phase gave way to the cultural renaissance of the 1960s when the city was the world's swinging capital.

Today's London is both economically and culturally vital, as hip as it was in the '60s, and almost as rich as it was in the Victorian era, creating a self-confidence that fuelled its selection as 2012 Olympic Games host. But for every period of success, tragedy has

never been far away. On 7 July 2005, the day after London won its Olympic bid, four terrorist bombs killed dozens on buses and underground trains around the city. While deep anxiety initially gripped Londoners, most soon returned to their daily routines – a response mirrored throughout the capital's turbulent history.

ORIENTATION

The Thames divides the city roughly into north and south, with many must-see attractions north of the river in the highly walkable Westminster area. The easy-to-use London Underground system (known by everyone as 'the tube') is an essential method for finding your way around – pick up a colour-coded underground map for navigation. Many of London's attractions lie within the loop of the Circle Line (colour-coded yellow).

Among London's other popular visitor districts, the West End includes major theatres, a small Chinatown, and Covent Garden's markets and buskers. The chichi Kensington and Knightsbridge areas feature pricey boutiques, national museums and Hyde Park. The area called the City is home to some magnificent old buildings and a plethora of pubs, and is a short hop from the Tower of London. The South Bank includes gentrified riverside alleyways, Shakespeare's Globe Theatre and the Tate Modern. Heading east along the river, you'll witness the dramatic revival of the Docklands and the colourful history of Greenwich.

Major mainline train stations are dotted throughout the capital, while the main bus and coach hub is in Victoria, due south of Buckingham Palace. Pick up a *London A-Z*, the definitive London street guide in a handy pocket-sized format.

INFORMATION

Internet Access

easyInternetcafé (www.easyInternetcafe.com; per 20min from £1) Kensington (Map pp170-1; 160-166 Kensington High St W8; ☎ 7am-11pm; ⚡ High St Kensington); Oxford St (Map pp162-3; 358 Oxford St W1; ☎ 8am-11pm Sun-Wed, 8am-midnight Thu-Sat; ⚡ Bond St); Tottenham Court Rd (Map pp170-1; 9-16 Tottenham Court Rd W1; ☎ 8am-midnight Sun-Wed, 8am-2am Thu-Sat; ⚡ Tottenham Court Rd); Trafalgar Square (Map pp170-1; 456-459 The Strand WC2; ☎ 8am-11pm; ⚡ Charing Cross)

GETTING INTO TOWN

Heathrow airport is 15 miles west of central London. Arriving every 15 minutes between 5.25am and 11.55pm at London Paddington, the **Heathrow Express** (0845 600 1515; www.heathrowexpress.co.uk) train is the fastest transit option into town (£14.50, 20 minutes). Piccadilly Line underground services also pick up at Heathrow and arrive at several central London stations (£6.20, one hour). The service runs every few minutes from 5.30am to 11.45pm. National Express buses from Heathrow arrive at London Victoria throughout the day (£10, one hour).

Gatwick airport is 30 miles south of central London. Arriving at London Victoria every 15 or 30 minutes between 5.50am and 2.10am, the **Gatwick Express** (0845 850 1530; www.gatwickexpress.co.uk) train is an efficient transit option (£14, 30 minutes). National Express buses from Gatwick also arrive at London Victoria throughout the day (£6.60, one to two hours).

Stansted airport is 35 miles northeast of central London. Arriving at London Liverpool St every 15 to 45 minutes between 6.15am and 1.15am, the **Stansted Express** (0845 748 4950; www.stanstedexpress.com) train is the fastest route into the city (£15, 45 minutes). Direct National Express buses from Stansted arrive at London Victoria day and night (£10, 1½ hours). Two cheaper alternatives are the **Terravision** (01279-680028; www.lowcostcoach.com) bus services that run to London Victoria (£8.10, 75 minutes) and London Liverpool Street Station (£6.70, 55 minutes).

Luton airport is 35 miles north of London. Regular direct train services arrive from Luton at London King's Cross throughout the day (£11.20, one hour). Frequent National Express bus services from Luton arrive at London Victoria throughout the day (£8, one to 1½ hours). **easyBus** (www.easybus.co.uk) runs a frequent daily minibus service from the airport to London's Regent's Park area (from £2, one to two hours).

Long-distance bus services arrive at **Victoria Coach Station** (Map pp162-3; 7730 3466; 184 Buckingham Palace Rd SW1; Charing Cross). Eurostar trains arrive at the new London St Pancras International terminal (see p154). Each of London's mainline stations serves various regions of Britain. For more information on train travel, see p156.

Internet Resources

BBC London (www.bbc.co.uk/london) News, transport and entertainment.

Time Out (www.timeout.com/london) Superior listings guide.

Visit London (www.visitlondon.com) Official tourism site.

Media

Evening Standard London's daily weekday newspaper (45p), with Thursday listings magazine.

Time Out Essential weekly listings guide (£2.50).

Medical Services

Dental Emergency Care Service (7188 0511; Guy's Hospital, St Thomas St SE1; 9am-5pm Mon-Fri; Charing Cross) Arrive early: walk-in service is always busy.

NHS Direct (0845 4647; 24hr) Call for the latest roster of 24-hour pharmacies.

University College Hospital (Map pp162-3; 7387 9300; Grafton Way WC1; 24hr; Euston Sq) Accident and emergency.

Money

American Express (Map pp162-3; 7484 9600; 30-31 Haymarket SW1; 9am-6pm Mon-Sat, 10am-5pm Sun; Piccadilly Circus) With branches across the city.

Thomas Cook (Map pp162-3; 7853 6400; 30 St James's St SW1; 9am-5.30pm Mon, Tue, Thu & Fri, 10am-5.30pm Wed, 9am-4pm Sat; Green Park) With branches across the city.

Post

Trafalgar Square Post Office (Map pp162-3; 0845 722 3344; 24-28 William IV St WC2; 8.30am-6.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-5.30pm Sat; Charing Cross) Busy central post office; hundreds of branches throughout the city.

Tourist Information

Britain & London Visitor Centre (Map pp162-3; www.visitbritain.com; 1 Lower Regent St SW1; 9.30am-6.30pm Mon, 9am-6.30pm Tue-Fri, 10am-4pm Sat & Sun; Piccadilly Circus) Free London and UK maps and brochures plus internet computers (per 15 minutes £1) and currency exchange. There is also a late-opening London Visitor Centre in the arrivals hall of the Waterloo International Terminal.

London Information Centre (Map pp162-3; 7292 2333; www.londontown.com; 1 Leicester Square WC2; 8am-11pm Mon-Fri, 10am-6pm Sat & Sun; Leicester Sq) Located in the Leicester Sq theatre-ticket sales booth (see p173).

SIGHTS

London is an expensive city but it's also teeming with free sights for those with the creativity to look beyond the obvious attractions. Spending a day exploring on foot can be just as rewarding as spending your budget on a high-priced gallery or museum visit. Grouped by district, the listings below offer an array of free sights as well as some must-do attractions that you might just have to spend your lunch money on.

West End

NATIONAL GALLERY

Occupying a handsome promontory overlooking Trafalgar Square, the **National Gallery** (Map pp162-3; 7747 2885; www.nationalgallery.org.uk; Trafalgar Square WC2; admission free; 10am-6pm Mon, Tue & Thu-Sun, 10am-9pm Wed; Charing Cross) is Britain's leading public art space. Seminal paintings from every period in art history are here, including works by Giotto, Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo and Van Gogh. Arrive early and take your time or target your visit to a particular period.

NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY

The excellent **National Portrait Gallery** (Map pp162-3; 7306 0055; www.npg.org.uk; 2 St Martin's Pl WC2; admission free; 10am-6pm Mon-Wed, Sat & Sun, 10am-9pm Thu & Fri; Charing Cross) is the place to put faces to the famous and infamous names of Britain's past and present. The ground floor is the most fun, focusing on contemporary figures from popular culture, including Harry Potter actor Daniel Radcliffe – the gallery's youngest non-Royal portrait.

BRITISH MUSEUM

Founded in 1753, the **British Museum** (Map pp162-3; 7323 8299; www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk; Great Russell St WC1; admission free; 10am-5.30pm Sat-Wed, 10am-8.30pm Thu & Fri; Russell Sq/Tottenham Court Rd) houses one of the world's finest cultural collections. With some seven million items – the result of judicious acquisition and controversial empire plundering – its highlights include rooms stuffed with Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Greek and Roman antiquities. A latter-day wonder, the museum's spectacular **Great Court** is Europe's largest covered public square.

WESTMINSTER, ST JAMES'S & PIMLICO

Westminster Abbey London's leading religious attraction, **Westminster Abbey** (Map pp162-3;

FIVE FREE LONDON ACTIVITIES

- Stroll the once-wobbly Millennium Bridge near the Tate Modern.
- Take in a busker show around Covent Garden (put some money in the hat if it's really good).
- Hunt down the blue plaques that show where historic Londoners once lived.
- Soak up some rays (or some rain) in a large London park.
- Jostle among the crowds at a clamorous street market.

7222 5152; www.westminster-abbey.org; 20 Dean's Yard SW1; adult/child £10/6; 9.30am-4.45pm Mon, Tue, Thu & Fri, 9.30am-8pm Wed, 9.30am-2.45pm Sat, worship only Sun; Westminster) is where most British monarchs have been crowned since Christmas Day 1066. Once a monastery, its highlights include cloistered courtyards, the fan-vaulted Henry VII chapel and a gaggle of monuments to famous statesmen, scientists and poets.

TATE BRITAIN

Ever in the shadow of its rambunctious sibling, **Tate Britain** (Map pp162-3; 7887 8000; www.tate.org.uk; Millbank SW1; admission free; 10am-5.50pm; Pimlico) houses a world-leading collection of British art from the 16th to the late 20th centuries. Look for works by Blake, Constable, Hockney, Bacon and Moore. The Turner collection is particularly comprehensive. A boat service (sep174) runs from here to the Tate Modern.

BUCKINGHAM PALACE

Built for the Duke of Buckingham in 1703, **Buckingham Palace** (Map pp162-3; 7766 7300; www.royalcollection.org.uk; Buckingham Palace Rd SW1; state rooms adult/child £14/8; 9.45am-6pm Aug & Sep, changing of the guard, 11.30am daily May-Jul, alternate days Aug-Apr; Green Park) has been the monarch's main London pad since 1837. The gaudily furnished State Rooms are open in summer for the hordes of tourists, but it's more fun (and free) watching the **changing of the guard** outside.

KENSINGTON & KNIGHTSBRIDGE

VICTORIA & ALBERT MUSEUM

The **Victoria & Albert Museum** (Map pp170-1; 7942 2000; www.vam.ac.uk; Cromwell Rd SW7; admission free; 10am-5.45pm Mon, Tue & Thu-Sun, 10am-10pm Wed;

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The City

MUSEUM OF LONDON

The **Museum of London** (Map pp162-3; ☎ 0870 444 2852; www.museumoflondon.org.uk; 150 London Wall EC2; admission free; ☐ 10am-5.50pm Mon-Sat, noon-5.50pm Sun; ☛ St Paul's/City) is a recommended introduction to the city's rich history, starting with a set of 300,000-year-old flint tools found in Piccadilly. The rest is a fascinating smorgasbord of Romans, Royals and rooms re-creating London's historic epochs. Don't miss the dramatic Fire of London simulation and check the museum's roster of temporary exhibitions.

TOWER OF LONDON

Despite the coach parties and surrounding tower blocks, it's still possible to back into a corner at the **Tower of London** (☎ 0870 756 6060; www.hrp.org.uk; Tower Hill EC3; adult/child £15/9.50; ☐ 9am-6pm Tue-Sat, 10am-6pm Sun & Mon Mar-Oct, 9am-5pm Tue-Sat, 10am-5pm Sun & Mon Nov-Feb; ☛ Tower Hill) for uninterrupted views of the medieval buildings. After the obligatory **Crown Jewels** visit, explore the walls, dungeons and museum rooms. Reserve ahead for the free **Ceremony of the Keys**, the tower's 700-year-old lock-up routine.

ST PAUL'S CATHEDRAL

Christopher Wren's grand masterpiece, the recently renovated **St Paul's Cathedral** (Map pp162-3; ☎ 7246 8350; Ludgate Hill EC4; adult/child £9/3.50;

☛ South Kensington) is the world's greatest repository of decorative arts. Spread over nearly 150 galleries, it's bursting with everything from furniture to fashion and ceramics to sculpture. Regular temporary exhibitions – including recent Art Deco and Arts and Crafts shows – are often must-see blockbusters.

NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM

Lots of fascinating interactive exhibits make the **Natural History Museum** (Map pp170-1; ☎ 7942 5000; www.nhm.ac.uk; Cromwell Rd SW7; admission free; ☐ 10am-5.50pm Mon-Sat, 11am-5.50pm Sun; ☛ South Kensington) a favourite for kids and adults alike. Highlights include the Darwin Centre (with 22 million plant and animal specimens), the towering dinosaur skeletons and the ginormous blue whale.

SCIENCE MUSEUM

The **Science Museum** (Map pp170-1; ☎ 0870 870 4868; www.sciencemuseum.org.uk; Exhibition Rd SW7; admission free; ☐ 10am-6pm; ☛ South Kensington) does a terrific job of bringing to lustrous life a subject that can be impenetrable. Curiously, although it's stuffed with high-tech simulators and a five-storey IMAX cinema, kids crowd in awe around the low-tech steam engines and Industrial Revolution machinery. Escape the noisy tots at the lounge-style **Dana Centre**, an adults-only bar and café.

☛ 8.30am-4pm Mon-Sat, services only Sun; ☛ St Paul's) is the proud bearer of the capital's largest church dome. Attractions include the golden ceiling mosaics and the **Whispering Gallery** – if you talk close to the wall it carries your words around to the opposite side. VIPs remembered by their tombs and monuments here include Nelson, Joshua Reynolds and Wren himself.

TOWER BRIDGE

An iconic landmark near the Tower of London, the **Tower Bridge** (☎ 7403 3761; Tower Bridge SE1; adult/child £5/5.00; ☐ 10am-6.30pm Apr-Sep, 9.30am-6pm Oct-Mar; ☛ Tower Hill) is one of the city's most photographed spots. But it's not just a pretty face: its drawbridge still opens several times a day. It's free to walk across but you'll have to pay to enter and check out the small exhibition.

Along the South Bank

HYDE PARK

Originally a hunting ground for Henry VIII, London's favourite **park** (Map pp170-1; ☐ 5.30am-midnight; ☛ Hyde Park Corner/Knightsbridge/Marble Arch/Lancaster Gate) is the green space of choice for thousands of locals every day – especially in summer, when lunching office workers drop by to top up their tans. For visitors, the park is dripping with free attractions, including monuments like the Albert Memorial, Marble Arch and Speaker's Corner, where nutbar orators spout their stuff. The top freebie is the **Serpentine Gallery** (Map pp170-1; ☎ 7402 6075; [www.serpentinegallery.org](http://serpentinegallery.org); Kensington Gardens W8; ☐ 10am-6pm; ☛ Knightsbridge), a handsome 1930s tea room now housing one of London's finest collections of modern art.

TATE MODERN

The hugely popular **Tate Modern** (Map pp162-3; ☎ 7887 8008; www.tate.org.uk; Bankside SE1; admission free; ☐ 10am-6pm Sun-Thu, 10am-11pm Fri & Sat; ☛ Blackfriars) exhibits 20th-century art in a cavernous former power-station shed. The permanent collection, ranging from Rothko to Lichtenstein, is impressive, while temporary installations in the Turbine Hall and regular special exhibitions draw locals back for more. The 7th-floor café and 4th-floor espresso bar have great views over the Thames. A boat runs from here to Tate Britain (see p174).

SHAKESPEARE'S GLOBE

An authentic 1997 rebuild of the original London theatre where Shakespeare's plays

ROUTEMASTERS RULE

Decommissioned in 2005 after more than 50 years of public service, London's charming red double-decker Routemaster buses have begun a new lease of life travelling on two heritage routes. The No 9 trundles from the Royal Albert Hall to Aldwych via Piccadilly Circus, while the No 15 runs from Trafalgar Square to Tower Hill via Fleet St. Standard bus fares apply (see p175), and buses run every 15 minutes from 9.30am to 6pm.

were performed, the **Globe** (Map pp162-3; ☎ 7902 1500; www.shakespeares-globe.org; 21 New Globe Walk SE1; adult/child £8.50/7; ☐ 10am-5.45pm; ☛ Mansion House/Southwark/London Bridge) is a pilgrimage destination for fans of the Bard. Within its circular wood-framed walls, outdoor plays are performed 'in the round' from May to October (see p173). The rest of the year, there's a colourful exhibition (adult/child £8.50/6) that includes a backstage tour.

LONDON EYE

On a clear day, from the **London Eye** (Map pp162-3; ☎ 0870 500 0600; www.londoneye.com; Jubilee Gardens SE1; adult/child £13/6.50; ☐ 10am-9pm Jun-Sep, 10am-8pm Oct-May; ☛ Westminster/Waterloo) you can see for 25 miles in every direction. The 32 glass-enclosed gondolas of the world's largest Ferris wheel take 30 minutes to completely rotate, so passengers (up to 25 in each capsule) really get time to take in the experience. Consider a night 'flight' for more sparkly views. It's a good idea to book tickets in advance via the website – especially in summer, when everyone wants a ride.

South London

GREENWICH

Worthy of its own maritime-themed day out, Greenwich's highlights start with the **Cutty Sark** (☎ 8858 2698; www.cuttsark.org.uk; King William Walk SE10; adult/child £5/3.70; ☐ 10am-5pm; ☛ DLR Cutty Sark), a lovely old tea-and-wool clipper ship.

It's a short walk to the complex of handsome Greenwich palaces, including the **National Maritime Museum** (☎ 8312 6565; www.nmm.ac.uk; Park Row SE10; admission free; ☐ 10am-6pm Jul-Aug, 10am-5pm Sep-Jun) and the baroque **Old Royal Naval College** (☎ 8269 4747; www.oldroyalnavalcollege.org; King William Walk SE10; admission free; ☐ 10am-5pm). Climb

the nearby hill to the **Royal Observatory** (☎ 8312 6565; www.rog.nmm.ac.uk; Greenwich Park SE10; admission free; ☎ 10am–6pm Jul–Aug, 10am–5pm Sep–Jun). A brass strip in the courtyard here marks the Prime Meridian, dividing the world into eastern and western hemispheres.

MUSEUM IN DOCKLANDS

Housed in a 200-year-old former warehouse, the **Museum in Docklands** (☎ 0870 444 3857; www.museumindocklands.org.uk; West India Quay, Hertsmer Rd E14; adult/child £5/free; ☎ 10am–6pm; ☎ Canary Wharf) illuminates the intriguing ebb and flow of two millennia of Thames history. Displays include Roman figurines and a striking scale model of the medieval London Bridge. Stroll around Sailortown, a walk-through re-creation of the area's 18th-century streets, complete with the sounds of drunken sailors and cackling hags.

TOURS

London is crisscrossed with great walking tours that scratch below the surface of the city's colourful past. History-huggers will enjoy a stroll with **London Walks** (☎ 7624 3978; www.walks.com; adult/child £6/free), which expertly covers a huge array of subjects, including ghosts, pubs and *The Da Vinci Code*.

For a less-conventional approach, the **Back Passages of Spitalfields** (☎ 7729 4816; www.backpassageswalks.co.uk; adult/child £6/5; ☎ 6.30pm first 2 Sundays of every month Apr–Oct) tour combines comic street theatre and eye-opening stories on this infamous East End enclave.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

University Boat Race (www.theboatrace.org) The traditional Oxford-versus-Cambridge row-off from Putney to Mortlake along the Thames in March.

Trooping the Colour (www.royal.gov.uk) The Queen's 'other birthday' is celebrated with pomp, pageantry and parades at Horse Guards Pde in mid-June.

Pride Parade (www.pridelondon.org) Gays and lesbians head off from Oxford St to paint the town pink in July.

Notting Hill Carnival (www.lhc.org.uk) Enormous multicultural street parade in mid-August.

Lord Mayor's Show (www.lordmayorsshow.org) Giant colourful street procession in November.

New Year's Eve Celebration Countdown to midnight in Trafalgar Square.

SLEEPING

Staying in London is an expensive business, but there are ways to cut your costs without sleeping on the streets. There are plenty of

hostels and many colleges provide good-value summer accommodation – contact **Venuemasters** (☎ 0114-249 3090; www.venuemasters.com) for information. It's also worth trying a B&B homestay: check your options with the **London Bed & Breakfast Agency** (☎ 7586 2768; www.londonbb.com). Contact London's official **hotel bookings service** (☎ 0845 644 3010; www.visitlondonoffers.com) for up-to-date sleepover bargains throughout the city.

West End

The centre of the action charges a premium for convenience, but it can also be a noisy place to spend the night.

Piccadilly Backpackers (Map pp162–3; ☎ 7434 9009; www.piccadillybackpackers.com; 12 Sherwood St W1; dm/s/tw £12/36/26; ☎ ; ☎ Piccadilly Circus) This giant, cheap and cheerful spot is as bright as a kindergarten art class. Along with its pod-style dorm beds, high-speed internet access (per hour £1), there's a rowdy on-site bar. This is a party hostel, so don't expect to get far with your copy of *War and Peace*.

Oxford St YHA (Map pp162–3; ☎ 0870 770 5894; oxfordst@yha.org.uk; 14 Noel St W1; dm £23.50; ☎ ; ☎ Oxford Circus) The most central of London's YHA hostels is basic, clean, welcoming and loud. All the dorms are small – there's a maximum of four beds per room – and there's a TV lounge and large kitchen. It's a great location for pubs, clubs and theatres.

Travelodge (Map pp162–3; ☎ 0870 085 0950; www.travelodge.co.uk; 10 Drury Lane WC2; r from £49; ☎ Covent Garden/Holborn) On the northern fringes of Covent Garden, price is the main selling point at this functional chain hotel. The rooms are clean but institutional – perfect if you're planning to be out all day and just need a well-located place to crash.

Bloomsbury & Fitzrovia

A quieter, more residential area than the rabble-rousing West End, and prices are usually more reasonable here.

Generator (Map pp162–3; ☎ 7388 7666; www.generatorhotels.com; Compton Pl, off 37 Tavistock Pl WC1; dm/s/tw from £12.50/35/46; ☎ ; ☎ Russell Sq) Don't be fooled by the industrial, factory-floor interiors: this place is not about work but about serious hedonism. There are nearly 900 beds, an on-site travel agency and an internet suite, but it's the late-opening bar that sees the most action. There's no kitchen, so consider leftover beer for breakfast.

Indian Student YMCA (Map pp162–3; ☎ 7387 0411; www.indianymca.org; 41 Fitzroy Sq W1; dm/s/d £22/35/50; ☎ ; ☎ Warren St) For all nationalities and not just students, this good-value YMCA has clean, good-sized rooms, laundry facilities and an excellent gym. Prices include breakfast and a tasty curry dinner, and there are attractive discounts for longer stays.

Arran House Hotel (Map pp162–3; ☎ 7636 2186; www.arranhouse-london.com; 77–79 Gower St WC1; dm/s/d from £18.50/55/72; ☎ ; ☎ Goodge St) This good-value, detail-oriented hotel has dorm and private accommodation, and is a short walk from the British Museum. The cosy double rooms have Art Deco fireplaces and the rose garden is a pleasant summer bonus. Breakfast and free wireless access are included.

St Margaret's Hotel (Map pp162–3; ☎ 7636 4277; www.stmargaretsotel.co.uk; 26 Bedford Pl WC1; s/d from £55/82; ☎ ; ☎ Russell Sq/Holborn) This smashing family-run townhouse hotel is among the most homey options in central London. The rooms are simply furnished but comfortable and the bathrooms are spotless. Ask for a back room if you're craving tranquillity – you'll be overlooking a small garden.

Westminster, Pimlico & Victoria

It's not the most attractive part of London, but Victoria's budget hotels are better value than those in Earl's Court. Pimlico is more residential but convenient for the Tate Britain.

Victoria Hostel (Map pp162–3; ☎ 7834 3077; www.astorhostels.com; 71 Belgrave Rd SW1; dm £15–18, d/tw £50/50; ☎ ; ☎ Pimlico) This warm and welcoming backpacker joint has 200 beds in mostly mid-sized dorm rooms. Facilities include two kitchens and a TV lounge with DVD movies. There are Thursday night group dinners and rates include continental breakfast.

Wigram House (Map pp162–3; ☎ 7834 1169; www.wmin.ac.uk/comserv; 84–99 Ashley Gardens SW1; s/tw £35/56; ☎ Victoria) One of seven University of Westminster student residences available from June to September, this six-storey Victorian mansion has basic study rooms (all with sinks), shared bathrooms, large kitchens and laundry facilities. Located in a quiet residential area near St James's Park.

Luna & Simone Hotel (Map pp162–3; ☎ 7834 5897; www.lunasimonehotel.com; 47–49 Belgrave Rd SW1; s/d/tr from £35/65/90; ☎ ; ☎ Victoria) In a street crowded with B&Bs of widely varying quality, this is a shining example of good value well done. The bright, spotless rooms have

satellite TV and most are en suite (love those power showers). Cooked breakfast is included and wi-fi access is available on the ground and 1st floors.

James House & Cartref House (Map pp162–3; ☎ 7730 7338/7730 6176; www.jamesandcartref.co.uk; 108 & 129 Ebury St SW1; s/d/tr from £52/70/95; ☎ ; ☎ Victoria) Among the area's best for the budget, these two handsome townhouse B&Bs face each other across the street. Run by a friendly couple with a good knowledge of the area, the rooms (some with shared bathrooms) are clean and bright, and the cooked breakfast is a hearty stomach-filler.

Kensington & Earl's Court

Close to Hyde Park, major museums and a busy shop-lined High St, Kensington is a good base with a wide range of accommodation options. Adjacent Earl's Court mines the budget end of the spectrum, but the quality here can vary enormously.

Earl's Court YHA (Map pp170–1; ☎ 0870 770 5804; earlcourt@yha.org.uk; 38 Bolton Gardens SW5; dm £19.50; ☎ ; ☎ Earl's Court) Situated in a large, recently refurbished Victorian townhouse, this immaculate and spacious hostel has mainly four-bed dorms and very helpful staff. There is a well-equipped self-catering kitchen and a large lounge with satellite TV. Bike hire available (per day £9.50).

easyHotel (Map pp170–1; ☎ 7216 1717; www.easyhotel.com; 14 Lexington Gardens W8; r from £30; ☎ ; ☎ Earl's Court/Gloucester Rd) The first of a planned chain of orange-hued no-frills properties, the rooms here are either 'small', 'very small' or 'tiny' and most are windowless. Each has a double bed, airplane-style bathroom and wall-mounted TV (£5 extra). On the plus side, it's clean, well located and, if you book far ahead, an exceptional deal.

Mayflower Hotel (Map pp170–1; ☎ 7370 0991; www.mayflowerhotel.co.uk; 26–28 Trebovir Rd SW5; s/d/tr from £65/85/105; ☎ ; ☎ Earl's Court) Yet another white-stucco, former townhouse hotel, the Mayflower distinguishes itself by offering rooms with a refreshing Indonesian theme, including lovely teak furnishings and colourful fabric flourishes. The bathrooms, with floor to ceiling tiles, are equally impressive. There's a juice bar in the lobby and the continental breakfast includes cheese, waffles and fresh fruit.

Bayswater, Paddington & Notting Hill

This area has a good selection of inexpensive accommodation, with some funky options at the higher price range around Notting Hill.

Wake Up! London (Map pp170-1; ☎ 7262 4471; www.wakeuplondon.co.uk; 1 Queen's Gardens W2; dm/s/d/tw from £11/18/30/35; ☕ ☻; ⚡ Paddington) The spartan mid-sized dorms at this colourful Australian-owned hostel are complemented by a plethora of facilities that include laundry, internet access, a well-stocked kitchen and an on-site travel agency. The subterranean bar specialises in getting you as drunk as possible for the least amount of money.

Leinster Inn (Map pp170-1; ☎ 7229 9641; www.astorhostels.com; 7-12 Leinster Sq W2; dm/s/d from £14/26.50/41; ☕ ☻; ⚡ Bayswater) In a large old house northwest of Bayswater tube station and close to Portobello Rd Market, this friendly, well-established hostel has an internet café, late-opening bar and regular themed party nights. Prices include continental breakfast.

St David's Hotel (Map pp170-1; ☎ 7723 3856; www.stdavidshotels.com; 16-20 Norfolk Sq W2; s/d/tr from £35/59/80; ⚡ Paddington) Some of the rooms are a bit pokey and the décor has seen better days, but this 19th-century Mews-style property has a wide array of good-value rooms, with rates for groups of three or more especially enticing. Includes a cooked breakfast.

EATING

It's hard *not* to find somewhere to eat in London. All-you-can-eat pizza bars abound, pubs serve grub by the ton and street markets dish up home-cooked nosh for the price of a latte. But quality varies enormously and it's easy to drop £20 on a meal and feel dissatisfied.

West End

Soho is one of London's gastronomic centres, with plenty of worthy choices along Old

SPLURGE

Portobello Hotel (Map pp170-1; ☎ 7727 2777; www.portobello-hotel.co.uk; 22 Stanley Gardens W11; s/d/tw from £135/180/200; ☕ ☻ ☻; ⚡ Notting Hill Gate) From the Sex Pistols to Kate Moss, this exclusive Notting Hill hotel has been a firm favourite of discerning stars for years. Its public spaces are bright and theatrical but the rooms are tastefully decorated with high ceilings, colourful fabrics and unforgettable beds, some of them four-poster. There's a 24-hour bar and restaurant and free internet – but if you can afford to stay here, that's probably not an issue.

Compton and Dean Sts. Chinatown also offers plenty of set-menu bargains.

Café de Hong Kong (Map pp162-3; ☎ 7534 9898; 47-49 Charing Cross Rd WC2; lunch combo £5.80; ☕ lunch & dinner; ⚡ Leicester Sq) This clamorous Chinese cafeteria is full every lunchtime with noisy Asian students comparing cellphone images and sipping bubble tea. The fast-food approach delivers great value, though, with dozens of rice or noodle combos for under £6.

Food for Thought (Map pp162-3; ☎ 7836 9072; 31 Neal St WC2; mains £4-8; ☕ 9.30am-8.30pm Mon-Sat, noon-5pm Sun; ☕; ⚡ Covent Garden) Crammed between Neal St's trendy boutiques, this tiny vegetarian nook is good value. Its ever-changing menu of hearty dishes includes excellent stir-fries and substantial salads plus the kind of cakes your granny would make.

Masala Zone (Map pp162-3; ☎ 7287 9966; 9 Marshall St W1; mains £6-12; ☕ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat, dinner Sun; ☕; ⚡ Oxford Circus) The industrial, canteen-like design, juxtaposed against terracotta walls, fits perfectly with the modern approach to Indian cuisine here. Dishes range from street hawker snacks to noodle bowls and curries but there are some good-value combos that allow you to flex your taste buds without exhausting your cash.

Satsuma (Map pp162-3; ☎ 7437 8338; 56 Wardour St W1; mains £6-12; ☕ lunch & dinner; ⚡ Piccadilly Circus) Don't be put off by the modern Japanese chain restaurant look of this place: the food includes excellent hand-made sushi and more good-value combo options than you can shake chopsticks at. The fresh tempura plates are recommended, as well as the takeaway bento boxes – a perfect picnic lunch.

Other recommendations:

Café in the Crypt (Map pp162-3; ☎ 7839 4342; St Martin-in-the-Fields, Duncannon St WC2; mains £4-9; ☕ 8am-8pm Mon-Wed, 8am-10.30pm Thu-Sat, noon-8pm Sun; ⚡ Charing Cross) Among shadowy church arches, this is a great coffee-and-cake spot.

Chuen Cheng Ku (Map pp162-3; ☎ 7437 1398; 17 Wardour St W1; combo lunch £8.80; ☕ lunch & dinner; ⚡ Leicester Sq) Arrive early at this giant Cantonese restaurant: it's hugely popular.

Bloomsbury, Fitzrovia & Westminster Prices are generally lower in Bloomsbury and Fitzrovia, but there are few bargains to be had in Westminster.

Carluccio's Caffé (Map pp162-3; ☎ 7636 2228; 8 Market Pl W1; mains £6-12; ☕ lunch & dinner; ⚡ Oxford Circus) Among the family-owned Italian restaurants

in central London's backstreets, this lunchtime pit stop serves satisfying pasta and risotto dishes. The good-value menu includes daily-changing specials and the hearty desserts are prepared with care.

Rasa Samudra (Map pp162-3; ☎ 7637 0222; 5 Charlotte St W1; mains £6-12; ☕ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat, dinner Sun; ⚡ Goodge St) Ignore the neon-pink exterior of this lip-smacking South Indian restaurant and head straight for the Keralan fish and shellfish menu. There are plenty of well-priced mains but if you can stretch to £30, indulge in the Seafood Feast, a banquet of starters, curries and desserts that covers the kitchen's main highlights, including the excellent crab curries.

Busaba Eathai (Map pp162-3; ☎ 7299 7900; 22 Store St W1; mains £5-11; ☕ lunch & dinner; ☕; ⚡ Goodge St) A happening Thai eatery with the communal bench seating arrangements favoured by many of London's new wave Asian restaurants. But the aesthetics are only part of the equation. Generous, innovative dishes like butternut pumpkin curry and prawns pomelo on betel leaves bring the office workers back for more.

Footstool (Map pp162-3; ☎ 7222 2779; St John's, Smith Sq SW1; mains £8-18; ☕ lunch Mon-Fri; ⚡ Westminster) Set in an atmospheric brick-vaulted church crypt, the buffet lunch here is deservedly popular and focuses on traditional British and Mediterranean fare. Check out the shady character in the corner – he's probably an MP from the nearby House of Commons. Ring for evening dining hours.

Kensington, Knightsbridge & Earl's Court

From finger-licking cheap eats to credit-card-busting Michelin stars, this area caters well to most budgets.

Troubadour (Map pp170-1; ☎ 7341 6333; 265 Old Brompton Rd SW5; mains £6-13; ☕ breakfast, lunch & dinner; ⚡ West Brompton/Earl's Court) This wood-floored bohemian hang-out is exactly what a great café should be: tons of trinkety character, staff who encourage lingering and a menu focused on comfort food. A great place for breakfast, and dinner classics include Cajun chicken and bangers and mash.

Lundum's (Map pp170-1; ☎ 7373 7774; 117 Old Brompton Rd SW7; mains £4.50-14; ☕ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat, lunch Sun; ⚡ Gloucester Rd/South Kensington) Set in a beautiful Edwardian building with bright and airy interiors, this warm Danish eatery serves

authentic Scandinavian dishes like hearty pork meatballs and succulent grilled salmon. The lunch special – two courses for £13.50 – is a good deal, allowing you to dip into marinated herrings without gagging at the price.

Notting Hill

Increasingly a London food-lovers paradise, Notting Hill combines cheap ethnic takeaways, quirky cafés and some seriously trendy restaurants.

Sausage & Mash Café (Map pp170-1; ☎ 8968 8898; 268 Portobello Rd W10; mains £6-8; ☕ 9am-11pm Mon-Thu, 9am-11.30pm Fri & Sat, 9am-10pm Sun; ⚡ Ladbroke Grove) Wittily known as the S&M café, this place does an upmarket version of the rib-sticking English favourite. There are 20 sausage varieties to choose from (including vegetarian options), with wild boar and mushroom and tarragon recommended. Look out for additional branches in Islington at 4-6 Essex Rd and opposite Spitalfields Market.

Café Grove (Map pp170-1; ☎ 7243 1094; 253 Portobello Rd W11; mains £5-9.50; ☕ 10am-5pm Sun-Fri, 10am-6pm Sun; ⚡ Ladbroke Grove) This no-frills neighbourhood eatery has been attracting the locals for decades. They come for all-day breakfasts (the eggs Benedict dish is great), as well as heaping pastas and jaw-stretching sandwiches. There's a large terrace overlooking the nearby market.

Food @ The Muse (Map pp170-1; ☎ 7792 1111; 269 Portobello Rd W11; mains £8-14; ☕ lunch & dinner Tue-Sat, dinner Sun & Mon; ⚡ Notting Hill Gate) Part of the Muse Gallery, this sleek, modern restaurant focuses on contemporary European cuisine. Its dishes are eclectic and adventurous, with the hot-and-sour green-mango salad with roast peanuts particularly recommended.

DRINKING

Booze has flown through London like a second River Thames since the wine-quaffing Romans arrived 2000 years ago. But while the capital has more old-school pubs than you can shake a yard of ale at, a new breed of lounge-style bars has also slid onto the scene.

Ye Olde Cheshire Cheese (Map pp162-3; ☎ 7353 6170; 145 Fleet St EC4; ⚡ Blackfriars) The granddaddy of London pubs, this 17th-century multiroomed maze is stacked over several levels. Head downstairs for the brick-lined vault, fringed with stone arches and dimly lit corners – it's the kind of place villains from Dickens would come to plan their nefarious shenanigans.

CENTRAL WEST LONDON**BRITAIN****BRITAIN**

SPLURGE

Boxwood Café (Map pp170-1; ☎ 7235 1010; Wilton Pl SW1; mains £10-26; ☺ lunch & dinner; ☛; Ⓜ Hyde Park Corner) The stylish interiors of this Gordon Ramsay restaurant belie a surprisingly comfortable eatery with an excellent menu of contemporary British dishes. The seasonal offerings focus on simple preparations that reveal naturally complex flavours, hence dishes like steamed wild sea bass and fried oysters with fennel and lemon. A nonsnooty way to enjoy a top-class meal in haughty Knightsbridge.

Bradley's Spanish Bar (Map pp162-3; ☎ 7636 0359; 44 Hanway St W1; Ⓜ Tottenham Court Rd) Shabby, small and charming, this roguish bohemian haunt can still pack in the alternative types on most nights. Head downstairs for dimly lit alcoves, red velvet seats and a diverse selection of European beers or just hit the jukebox; it's stocked with classics by Nirvana, Pearl Jam et al.

Lamb & Flag (Map pp162-3; ☎ 7497 9504; 33 Rose St WC2; Ⓜ Covent Garden) Tucked in Covent's Garden's narrow backstreets, this old charmer hasn't changed in decades. The wood floors are still painted black, the tables are chipped and wobbly, and the shadowy back room still has a fireplace. For those who like to eat with their beer, there's a celebrated gourmet cheese menu.

Anchor Bankside (Map pp162-3; ☎ 7407 1577; 34 Park St SE1; Ⓜ London Bridge) With a large patio on the edge of the Thames, this is the perfect spot to watch the pleasure boats slide by. On rainy days, the pub building – a handsome brick and timber construction garnished with bright blue window shutters – is a cosy gem, with an array of Shakespearean ephemera indicating the area's link to the Bard.

Loungelover (☎ 7012 1234; 1 Whitby St E1; Ⓜ Liverpool St) With its menagerie of interior quirks – think stuffed hippo' heads – this eccentric drinking hole has been popular with hipsters since it opened. Despite the determinedly wacky aesthetics, it's still cosy and has a kick-ass selection of cocktails. There's live music on Friday nights.

Seven Stars (Map pp162-3; ☎ 7242 8521; 53-54 Carey St WC2; Ⓜ Holborn) There's not much elbow room at this eccentric sliver of a pub that combines the history of several centuries with movie-buff wall displays. Built in the early 1600s,

it has a continental ambience, a surprisingly good wine list and a menu of great gastro-pub food.

CLUBBING

London hosts an astonishing array of club venues, from noisy warehouse-sized dance stadiums to intimate house and hip-hop fests. While 'superclubs' can charge anywhere up to £20 for entry on Friday and Saturday nights, admission to smaller joints can be free.

93 Feet East (☎ 7247 3293; 150 Brick Lane E1; admission free-£10; ☺ 5-11pm Mon-Thu, 5pm-1am Fri, noon-1am Sat, noon-10.30pm Sun; Ⓜ Liverpool St) Hosting Hoxton's finest, this excellent club has three rooms, a swish downstairs bar and an appealing outdoor courtyard for cooling off. Hip-hop, soul and house are the mainstays but there's an eclectic mix of additional happenings to keep the locals interested.

Bar Rumba (☎ 7287 2715; 36 Shaftesbury Ave W1; admission free-£12; ☺ 10.30pm-3am Mon & Wed, 8.30pm-3am Tue, Thu & Fri, 9pm-5am Sat, 8pm-1.30am Sun; Ⓜ Piccadilly Circus) This intimate subterranean Soho club has been packing them in for more than 10 years. The crowds come for theme nights like Barrio Latino, focusing on salsa and urban Latin beats, and Sportswear Jam, where Adidas-clad funksters party to house.

Fabric (Map pp162-3; ☎ 7336 8898; 77a Charterhouse St EC1; admission £12-15; ☺ 9.30pm-5am Fri, 10pm-7am Sat; Ⓜ Farringdon) This former meat-cellars venue attracts an international crowd to its three dance floors, including the kidney-shaking 'Bodysonic' floor. Focuses include electro and house but Friday night's Fabriclive event is a heart-racing mix of everything from hip-hop to drum'n'bass.

Pacha London (Map pp162-3; ☎ 7834 4440; Terminus PI SW1; admission £15-20; ☺ 10pm-4am Fri, 10pm-6am Sat; Ⓜ Victoria) Large, loud and mainstream, this ever-popular London nightspot combines wood panelling, upholstered booths and an amazing stained-glass ceiling. The music is pop, soul and house, and there are regular monthly theme nights.

Other recommendations:

Cross (Map pp162-3; ☎ 7837 0828; 27-31 Kings Cross Goods Yard, off York Way N1; admission £12-15; ☺ 10.30pm-5am Fri & Sat, 10.30-4pm Sun; Ⓜ King's Cross) House with an Ibizan flavour.

Cherry Jam (Map pp170-1; ☎ 7727 9950; 58 Porchester Rd W2; admission £5-8; ☺ 7pm-1.30am Thu-Sat; Ⓜ Royal Oak) Latin to deep-house, plus live bands and readings.

Gay & Lesbian Venues

Soho is the heart of gay London – head for the main strip of Old Compton St where there are plenty of bars and cafés, and pick up free listings like *Boyz* and *QX*. More serious papers and magazines include *Diva* and *Gay Times*. The annual Pride Parade is in July (see p166).

Candy Bar (Mapp162-3; ☎ 7494 4041; 4 Carlisle St W1; ☺ 5-11.30pm Mon-Thu, 5pm-2am Fri & Sat, 5-11.30pm Sun; Ⓜ Tottenham Court Rd) London's best lesbian bar.

Compton's of Soho (Map pp162-3; ☎ 7479 7961; 51-53 Old Compton St W1; Ⓜ Leicester Sq) Popular cruising bar for the boys.

Heaven (Map pp162-3; ☎ 7930 2020; The Arches, Villiers St WC2; admission £1-12; ☺ 10.30pm-3am Mon & Wed, 10.30am-6pm Fri, 10pm-5am Sat; Ⓜ Charing Cross) Legendary London gay club.

ENTERTAINMENT

London hosts a lively, vibrant mix of welcome distractions. It's a world leader in live theatre, a catalyst for new music and a hub of great clubs.

Theatre

While juggernaut musicals that never seem to end and vanity projects starring Hollywood glitterati draw the headlines, London's theatredom is more diverse than it's often given credit for. To see what's on offer, check out the **Official London Theatre Guide** (www.officiallondontheatre.co.uk), providing comprehensive listings and discounts.

There are many hole-in-the-wall businesses advertising cheap tickets but Leicester Sq's **tkts** (Map pp162-3; www.tkts.co.uk; ☺ 10am-7pm Mon-Sat, noon-3pm Sun; Ⓜ Leicester Sq) is the only one that's consistently reputable. Arrive in the morning to see what's on offer (booking fee £2.50). If you're in town during the off season – usually mid-January to mid-March – dozens of theatres take part in **Get Into London Theatre** (☎ 0870 040 0039; www.getintolondontheatre.com), a discount promotion with tickets for top shows running from £15 to £30.

Royal National Theatre (Map pp162-3; ☎ 7452 3000; www.nt-online.org; South Bank SE1; tickets £7-35; Ⓜ Waterloo) Running its own discount promotion in summer, with tickets selling for £10 during the annual Travelex promotion, the National is Britain's flagship repertory. Located on the South Bank, this three-stage theatre combines innovative new plays and sparkling revivals.

Shakespeare's Globe (Map pp162-3; ☎ 7401 9919; www.shakespeares-globe.org; 21 New Globe Walk SE1; ☺ May-Oct; Ⓜ Mansion House/Southwark/London Bridge)

Fans of the bearded one will love taking in a performance at the Globe, a near-perfect replica of the building where his plays were staged from 1598 to 1611. This is al fresco theatre-in-the-round, so make sure you bring something warm to wear on cooler evenings. Tours and exhibitions are also offered (see p165).

Live Music

London's live rock, pop, indie and classical music scenes hit the stage at dozens of venues around the city. Pick up *Time Out* – it lists hundreds of gigs every week.

Brixton Academy (☎ 7771 3000; www.brixton-academy.co.uk; 211 Stockwell Rd SW9; Ⓜ Brixton) Top venue for hot bands.

Shepherd's Bush Empire (☎ 8534 3300; www.shepherds-bush-empire.co.uk; Shepherd's Bush Green W12; Ⓜ Shepherd's Bush) Leading large rock and pop venue west of Hyde Park.

12 Bar Club (Map pp162-3; ☎ 7916 6989; www.12barclub.com; Denmark St WC2; Ⓜ Tottenham Court Rd) Intimate, with an emphasis on singer-songwriters.

Borderline (Map pp162-3; ☎ 7734 5547; www.meanfiddler.com; Orange Yard, Manette St WC2; Ⓜ Tottenham Court Rd) Subterranean space with rock edge.

Garage (☎ 8963 0940; www.meanfiddler.com; 20-22 Highbury Corner N5; Ⓜ Highbury & Islington) Focused on indie acts.

Sport

Football is at the heart of English culture and London has 11 professional teams – more than any other city in the world. While Premiership high-flyers like **Chelsea** (☎ 7915 2951; www.chelseafc.com; Stamford Bridge Stadium, Fulham Rd SW6; tickets £38-48; Ⓜ Fulham Broadway) and **Arsenal** (☎ 7704 4040; www.arsenal.com; Avenell Rd N5; tickets £28-50; Ⓜ Arsenal) attract the big crowds, it's easy (and cheaper) to catch a game at a smaller London club like **Queen's Park Rangers** (☎ 0870 112 1967; www.qpr.co.uk; Loftus Rd Stadium W12; tickets £22-28; Ⓜ Shepherd's Bush). Alternatively, consider a cheap and cheerful greyhound racing night out at **Walthamstow Stadium** (☎ 8531 4255; www.wsgreyhound.co.uk; Chingford Rd E4; admission £1-6; Ⓜ Walthamstow Central, then bus 97 or 215).

SHOPPING

Manically crowded Oxford St is lined with generic chain stores but it's far more fun to duck down the back streets for some less

HOT MARKETS

Brick Lane is still the best place for a morning fried-egg sandwich, sold from a rusting roadside van held together with layers of old cooking fat. But there's much more to London's eclectic street markets than a heart attack waiting to happen. The following are five great market recommendations.

Borough Market (8 Southwark St SE1; ☎ noon-6pm Fri, 9am-4pm Sat; ↗ London Bridge) 'London's Larder', this original 13th-century farmers market is a smorgasbord of quality fresh food and produce. Come here hungry: you'll want to snack on treats like rustic pork pies and succulent chorizo sandwiches. If you get thirsty, grab a beer in the nearby Market Porter pub.

Brick Lane Market (Brick Lane E2; ☎ 8am-2pm Sun; ↗ Aldgate East) This sprawling East End pearl is a real hotchpotch of fake designer T-shirts, cheap razor blades and socks that are as thin as paper. But it's just as much fun to watch as it is to buy: there are still a few old-school market hawkers here and their lively banter is always entertaining. Arrive early to avoid the bottleneck crowds.

Camden Market (Camden High St NW1; ☎ 10am-6pm; ↗ Camden Town) A cosmopolitan grab bag of several markets lining the High St, north of central London, this colourful area is great for local arts, trendy crafts and cheap souvenirs. There are some excellent outdoor food stands serving heaping ethnic dishes for just a few quid along with fun vintage clothes stalls under the railway arches.

Portobello Rd Market (Map pp170-1; Portobello Rd W10; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Wed, Fri & Sat, 8am-1pm Thu; ↗ Notting Hill Gate/Ladbroke Grove) Like a giant open-air bric-a-brac museum, this clutch of markets specialises in browsable used goods, including vintage clothes and funky costume jewellery. Since this is chichi Notting Hill, there are also plenty of tasty takeaway treats that are a cut above the burger stands of other markets.

Spitalfields Market (Commercial St, E1; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Fri & Sun; ↗ Liverpool St) A favourite among Londoners, there's a youthful, intelligent vibe to this lovely covered Victorian market between Brushfield and Lamb Sts. You'll find cool stuff like funky new fashions and retro furniture alongside craft jewellery and handmade soaps. The twice-weekly food market (Wednesday and Sunday) is a delightful feast of organic beer, piquant cheeses and chocolate croissants.

mainstream shopping. Among the more enjoyable shopping areas in London are Covent's Garden's Neal's Yard for shoe shops and clothing boutiques and the Charing Cross Rd area between Tottenham Court Rd and Leicester Sq for both general and specialist bookshops.

Muji (Map pp162-3; ☎ 7379 0820; 135 Long Acre WC2; ↗ Covent Garden) Homesick language students and budget-conscious young locals flock to this Japanese general store whenever they have a few pennies to spare. Despite the generally low prices, everything – from basic sweatshirts to stainless-steel business-card holders – has a minimalist flair. There are outlets throughout the city.

Paperchase (Map pp162-3; ☎ 7467 6200; 213-215 Tottenham Court Rd W1; ↗ Goodge St) Those who drool over stationery won't want to miss this three-storey flagship store. It's bristling with clever notepads, quirky journals, slick pens and designer desk storage units.

Topshop (Map pp162-3; ☎ 7636 7700; 36-38 Great Castle St W1; ↗ Oxford Circus) This giant flagship

store is a revelation to those who think they know this chain from its high-street locations across Britain. Funky designer copies, hipster disposable fashions and low, low prices are the reasons this megastore is always crowded.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

For details on getting in and out of London, see p160.

GETTING AROUND

Boat

London's internal boat services include **Tate-to-Tate** (☎ 7887 8888; www.tate.org.uk/tatetotate; one way/day ticket £4.30/£7.30; ☎ 10am-5pm), a ferry route between Bankside pier at the Tate Modern and the new Milbank pier at sister museum Tate Britain. **City Cruises** (☎ 7740 0400; www.citycruises.com) links Greenwich and Westminster (single/return £7/9), as well as Tower Pier and the London Eye (single/return £6/7). Travelcard holders (see opposite) receive one-third off many fares.

Public Transport

For information on London's bus, underground, Docklands Light Railway (DLR) and mainline train services, contact **Transport for London** (☎ 7222 1234; www.tfl.gov.uk). The website has a journey planner.

For the lowest fares on public transport, it pays to buy an Oyster (£3 returnable deposit) prepaid fare card, purchased at tube stations. You charge the card with cash, swipe it on buses or at tube/train station barriers and the fare is deducted from your balance. Oyster fares are lower than the regular fares charged to passengers who buy single tickets for their journeys.

BUS & TUBE

London's extensive bus and tube systems run from early morning (typically 7am for buses and 5.30am for the tube) until around midnight. The tube currently runs until 12.30am Monday to Saturday and until 11.30pm Sunday, although at the time of writing plans were underway to extend Friday and Saturday night services by one hour. The single adult fare on buses is £1.50 (80p to £1 with Oyster). Depending on trip length, single adult fares on the tube cost between £3 and £6.20 (£1 to £5.50 with Oyster).

Travelcards provide all-day, unlimited access to bus, tube, DLR and many mainline train services. Adult one-day Travelcards cost £4.30 to £6.20, depending on the areas you will be travelling in and the time of day you will be travelling. If you use an Oyster card for all-day travel, the card is capped so you never pay more than the price of a Travelcard, no matter how many trips you take. Oyster cards can also be loaded with weekly or monthly Travelcards for those who are staying in town for more than a few days.

London also has a night bus system, with Trafalgar Square, Tottenham Court Rd and Oxford Circus its main terminals. They stop by request and run every 10 to 20 minutes. Your previous day's Travelcard is valid on the night bus network until 4.30am.

DLR & TRAIN

The driverless Docklands Light Railway (DLR) runs from Bank and Tower Hill underground stations to Canary Wharf, Stratford, Beckton, Greenwich and Lewisham. Fares are the same as on the tube. Mainline trains are the primary means of transport to much of London's sub-

urbia and their stations link with the tube. Travelcards are valid on both systems.

Taxi

The city's **black cabs** (☎ 7253 5000; ☎ 24hr booking service) now come in a variety of colours and can be hailed when their 'for hire' sign is lit. They're certainly not the cheapest way to travel. You can tip drivers up to 10% but most people round up to the nearest pound.

Although minicabs are cheaper, there is an ongoing problem with unlicensed operators. Do not get into a minicab if you are unsure whether it is legitimate. Visit www.tfl.gov.uk for a search engine of accredited operators. These companies include **Lady Cabs** (☎ 7272 3300), which employs women drivers and is recommended for women travelling alone.

AROUND LONDON

When you're tired of London, you're tired of life, opined arch 18th-century Londoner Samuel Johnson. But he wasn't living in an age when a day out on the airless tube system can leave you tired and grouchy. Luckily, the capital is surprisingly close to some excellent day-out escapes.

Windsor & Eton

☎ 01753 / pop 31,000

One of Britain's largest and most imposing medieval palaces, **Windsor Castle** (☎ 020-7766 7304; www.windsor.gov.uk; adult/child £13.50/7.50; ☎ 9.45am-5.15pm Mar-Oct, 9.45am-4.15pm Nov-Feb) is still used by the Queen. Visitors can enter large sections of the complex, now fully restored after the devastating 1992 fire. Highlights include Queen Mary's giant dolls' house (designed by Sir Edward Lutyens) and St George's Chapel, containing the tombs of several monarchs, including Henry VIII. The surrounding Victorian town is also worth checking out, particularly for its traditional tearooms.

A short walk along Thames St and across the river brings you to **Eton College** (☎ 671177; www.etoncollege.com; adult/child £4/3.20; ☎ 10.30am-4.30pm mid-Mar-mid-Apr, 2-4.30pm mid-April-Jun, 10.30am-4.30pm Jul-Aug, 2-4.30pm Sep), the famous public school that has educated royals and prime ministers. Several buildings date from when Henry VI founded the school in the mid-15th century. Entry includes a free tour and admission to the Museum of Eton Life, which focuses on the world of the public schoolboy past and present.

Direct trains from London Waterloo arrive at Windsor & Eton Riverside twice hourly (£7, one hour). Trains from London Paddington also arrive regularly at Windsor and Eton Central (£7.10, 25 minutes), but require you to change at Slough.

SOUTHEAST ENGLAND

A large swathe of the UK population lives in one of the five 'Home Counties' in this region, so even small towns can feel busy. This is especially true on summer weekends, when high-street shopping becomes a clamorous contact sport. Luckily, respite is never more than a few miles away in sleepy pub-strewn villages, handsome castle complexes and patchwork rolling countryside. For information, contact **Tourism South East** (023-8062 5400; www.visitsoutheastengland.com).

CANTERBURY

01227 / pop 43,552

With its jaw-dropping, multispired cathedral surrounded by cobbled medieval streets, this Unesco World Heritage city has been a popular pilgrimage site for Christians and tourists for centuries. Latter-day visitors – they almost overwhelm the area in summer – come to immerse themselves in religious and secular history, including Thomas Becket's murder and the bawdy works of Geoffrey Chaucer. But this is no mothballed outdoor museum: Canterbury is a surprisingly vibrant centre and a good base for exploring the region's quaint villages, gentle valleys and colourful coastline.

Orientation & Information

Almost enclosed by a medieval wall and fully surrounded by a modern ring road, the historic centre of Canterbury is compact enough to explore on foot, which is just as well since many of its ancient streets are closed to cars. The bus station is within the old city walls on St George's Lane but the two train stations – Canterbury East and Canterbury West – are a few minutes' walk from the ancient perimeter.

The **TIC** (Tourist Information Centre; 01378 100; www.canterbury.co.uk; 12-13 Sun St; 9.30am-5pm Mon-Sat Easter-Oct, 10am-4pm Mon-Sat Nov-Easter, 10am-4pm Sun Easter-Dec) is opposite the cathedral. Free internet access is available at the **Library** (013608;

High St; 9.30am-6pm Mon, Wed & Thu, 9.30am-7pm Tue, 8.30am-7pm Fri, 9am-5pm Sat).

Sights

Barely surviving major fires in 1067 and 1174, **Canterbury Cathedral** (762862; www.canterbury-cathedral.org; adult/child £6/4.50, tour £4.20; 9am-6.30pm Mon-Sat, 9am-2.30pm & 4.30-5.30pm Sun Apr-Oct, 9am-5pm Mon-Sat, 10am-2pm & 4.30-5.30pm Sun Nov-Mar) embodies Britain's tumultuous and frequently bloody religious history. Following the 1170 martyrdom of Thomas Becket in the north-west transept, the site became Europe's top spot for pilgrims and it remains the spiritual centre of today's Church of England. It's easy to spend a couple of hours marvelling at the Early English architecture here, but it's worth taking a one-hour tour to hear the stories behind the stonework.

Illuminating the city's earlier history, Canterbury's **Roman Museum** (785575; Butchery Lane; adult/child £2.90/1.80; 10am-5pm Mon-Sat year-round, 1.30-5pm Sun Jun-Oct) is located underground at the level of the original settlement. It's a fascinating mix of excavated artefacts and clever reconstructions – check out the mosaic remains and the smells in the Roman kitchen – and visitors are encouraged to handle some of the displays and use their deductive skills as archaeologists.

Sleeping

Summer is ultracrowded in Canterbury, so book ahead.

Kipps Independent Hostel (786121; www.kipps-hostel.com; 40 Nunnery Fields; camp sites per person £6.50, dm/s/d £14/19/33;) This good-value backpacker joint, a few minutes from the city centre, combines the warmth of a family-run property with great facilities. Internet access (per 30 minutes £1), a games room and a tuck shop are available, plus a wide array of room types – dorms have a maximum of eight beds and camping spots are offered.

YHA Hostel (462911; www.yha.org.uk; 54 New Dover Rd; dm £17.50;) A splendid Victorian Gothic pile that looks as though it should be haunted, this 69-bed YHA is now open year-round and is less than a mile from Canterbury East train station. The ambience is institutional and the facilities – TV lounge, games room, shop and cycle storage – are a notch above basic.

Cathedral Gate Hotel (464381; www.cathgate.co.uk; 36 Burgate; s £26-60, d £50-90;) An amazing location just a hop, skip and jump from the

cathedral for this labyrinthine 15th-century property. The rooms offer a grab-bag of historic quirks – interior beams and wonky floors are common – but all have fairly modern, if slightly worn furnishings. The basic, 3rd-floor rooms have shared facilities but are a bargain.

Eating & Drinking

Canterbury centre is full of cheap-eat cafés and there are some great old-world pubs.

Café St Pierre (456791; 41 St Peter's St; baguettes £3.50; 8am-6pm Mon-Sat, 9am-5.30pm Sun) This welcoming French eatery – with popular people-watching seating out the back – has fresh-baked pastries, baguettes and quiches. It's perfect for a mid-morning snack or lunch to go as you meander towards the cathedral.

The Goods Shed (459153; Station Rd; mains £8.50-22; market 10am-7pm Mon-Sat, restaurant noon-2.30pm & 6-9pm Tue-Sun;) Adjacent to Canterbury West train station, this converted Victorian warehouse is a must-visit for those craving great food. Sourcing fine seasonal ingredients from its on-site daily farmers market, the restaurant's ever-changing menu has a rustic brasserie approach.

Thomas Becket (464384; 21 Best Lane; mains £5-9) Probably Canterbury's best traditional bar, this textbook English pub comes complete with a roaring fireplace and a coterie of copper pots. A good spot to hunker in a corner and work your way through the local ales.

Getting There & Away

National Express bus services arrive throughout the day from London Victoria (£11.40, two hours) and Dover (£4.30, 40 minutes). The **Stagecoach East Kent** (0870 243 3711) bus 115 service also arrives hourly (less frequently on Sunday) from Dover (£2.90, 35 minutes). Train services from London Victoria (£18.30, 90 minutes) arrive at either Canterbury West or Canterbury East stations, while services from London Charing Cross and London Waterloo (£18.30, 90 minutes) arrive only at Canterbury West. Trains from Dover Priory (£5.20, 15 to 30 minutes) arrive at Canterbury East twice an hour.

DOVER

01305 / pop 34,087

The definition of a 'gateway town', the brightest thing about Dover is its signature white cliffs. The rest – aside from a visit-worthy

medieval castle – is an uninspiring melange of ferry port access routes.

Ferry departures are from the Eastern Docks while Dover Priory train station is a short walk west of the city centre, just off Folkestone Rd. The bus station is more central, on Pengester Rd.

The city centre **TIC** (205108; www.whitecliffs-country.org.uk; Old Town Gaol, Biggin St; 9am-5.30pm Mon-Fri, 10am-4pm Sat & Sun) provides accommodation, ferry and bus booking services.

One of England's mightiest medieval fortresses, **Dover Castle** (211067; adult/child £9.50/4.80; 10am-6pm daily April-Jul & Sep, 9.30am-6.30pm daily Aug, 10am-5pm daily Oct, 10am-4pm Mon-Fri Nov-Jan, 10am-4pm daily Feb & Mar) occupies a spectacular hilltop promontory dripping with history. There are Roman, Saxon and Norman remains here but it's the site's more recent past that attracts many visitors. Expanded during WWII, the castle's labyrinth of secret Napoleonic tunnels was used as an Allied command post during the evacuation of Dunkirk. Entry includes a colourful 50-minute underground tour of this fascinating complex.

Castle St and Maison Dieu Rd are B&B hot spots. **Dover YHA** (0870 770 5798; dover@yha.org.uk; 306 London Rd; dm £17.50;) is in a slightly run-down Georgian townhouse, 15 minutes' walk from the bus and train stations. **East Lee Guest House** (210176; www.eastlee.co.uk; 108 Maison Dieu Rd; s/d from £35/52;) is a flower-fronted Victorian heritage house with chintzy rooms and a veggie-friendly breakfast menu.

If you get hungry later in the day, head to **Cullin's Yard** (211666; 11 Cambridge Rd; mains £6-18; lunch & dinner). Popular with the locals, this waterfront bistro specialises in regional seafood but also serves traditional British dishes like beef and ale casserole with a dash of gourmet flair.

Getting There & Away

National Express buses arrive twice-hourly from London Victoria (£11.50, three hours) and also several times a day from Canterbury (£4.30, 40 minutes). Regular Stagecoach East Kent buses arrive from Brighton (£5.50, three hours) throughout the day.

Train services arrive several times an hour at Dover Priory station from London Victoria (£22, two hours) and every hour from London Charing Cross (£22, two hours). See p154 for details of ferry services from mainland Europe.

BRIGHTON & HOVE

01273 / pop 247,820

While many of England's crumbling seaside resorts are paint-peeled reminders of an era when most Brits used to vacation at local beaches, Brighton – which merged with nearby Hove in 2000 – has successfully moved on from deck chairs and donkey rides. Now one of the country's hippest cities, it has a vibrant cultural scene and a youthful bohemian edge that makes up for a 7-mile stretch of beach that's completely covered with stones.

Orientation & Information

The seafront is a 10-minute downhill stroll from the train station along Queen's Rd and West St. When you arrive at the beach, Brighton Pier is to your left. A few streets back from the front, you'll find the Lanes and North Laine shopping areas. Hove is west of the city centre.

The TIC (292590; www.visitbrighton.com; Bartholomew Sq; ☎ 9am–5pm Mon–Fri, 10am–5pm Sat, 10am–4pm Sun) has maps and listings magazines. Between Hove and Brighton, Internet Junction (109 Western Rd; per hr £2.50; ☎ 10am–9pm Mon–Fri, 10am–8pm Sat, 11am–6pm Sun) offers Web access.

Sights

Built in the early 19th century for the playboy Prince Regent, the onion-domed Royal Pavilion (290900; www.royalpavilion.org.uk; adult/child £6.10/3.60, guided tours £1.25; ☎ 9.30am–5.45pm Apr–Sep, 10am–5.15pm Oct–Mar, tours 11.30am & 2.30pm) is an over-the-top fusion of faux Asian interiors and flamboyant period furnishings. Among the near-obscene displays of languid decadence, there's a comparatively discreet tearoom and a permanent exhibition on the palace's turbulent conservation history.

Brighton's original fishing village is now known as **The Lanes**, a narrow, cobblestone web of 17th-century cottages housing independent shops, restaurants and pubs. Renowned for its one-of-a-kind eateries, it's more gentrified than the adjacent **North Laine** area, which has a funkier, alternative vibe. Along streets of multicoloured shops, this avant-garde area offers used record stores, vegetarian cafés and retro skater fashions.

The landmark **Brighton Pier** (609361; www.brightonpier.co.uk; admission free; ☎ 10am–10pm Mon–Thu, 10am–11pm Fri–Sun) is a suitably brash reminder of England's simple, seaside-loving past. Its

white-painted exterior houses noisy arcades, takeaway food stands and – like a fairground on a stick – a clutch of thrill rides and traditional attractions, including a helter-skelter and ghost train.

Sleeping

Traditional B&Bs and swanky boutique hotels line the streets near Brighton Pier. Book ahead during summer.

St Christopher's Inn (020-7407 1856; www.st-christophers.co.uk; 10-12 Grand Junction Rd; dm £10–27, s/d from £25; ☎ ☛) A great waterfront location for this bustling, party-lovers' hostel. The dorms have up to 10 beds and all have en suite facilities. There's no kitchen – free continental breakfast is included – but there are good food and drinks specials at the hopping downstairs bar. Guests with extra money can upgrade to a hotel room on the upper floors.

Baggies Backpackers (733740; 33 Oriental Pl; dm/d £12/30; ☎ ☛) A popular, laid-back budget option with a good vibe, Baggies has a communal feel and is close to the seafront. Attracting long-termers as well as short-stop visitors, it's a little worn but everything is clean and functional. Dorm rooms are mostly small but shower rooms are shared, which may be an issue for shy travellers.

Paskins Town House (601203; www.paskins.co.uk; 18–19 Charlotte St; s/d per person from £27.50; ☎ ☛) This excellent 19-room B&B occupies two Victorian townhouses and has a commendable eco-friendly stance; the organic traditional or veggie breakfasts are a nice touch. Its eminently comfortable rooms are designed in Regency, pop culture or Art Deco styles and some have four-poster beds.

our pick Neo Hotel (711104; www.neohotel.com; 19 Oriental Pl; s/d from £45/85; ☎ ☛) At the forefront of Brighton's new wave of boutique properties, this artsy sophisticated spot near the West Pier combines modern Asian design flourishes with cosy home comforts. The mostly en suite bathrooms feature chrome and matte black finishes and the breakfasts – check out the pancakes – are clearly made with love. This may be the future of the venerable British B&B.

Eating

Unlike most British seaside resorts, Brighton has much more to offer than limp fish and chips. The Lanes is a good area for foodie exploring.

BRIGHTON

INFORMATION

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DRINKING

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TRANSPORT

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Nia Cafè

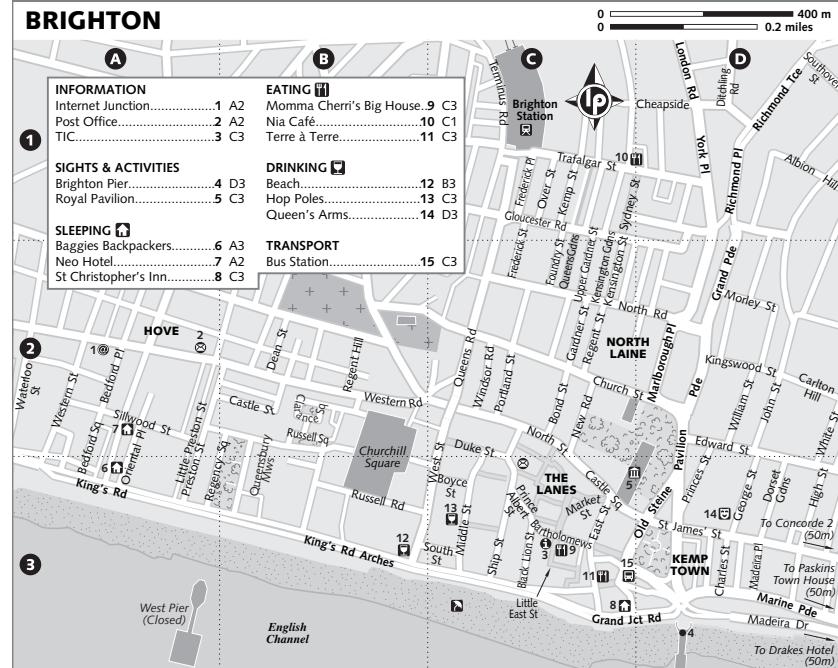
(671 1371; 87 Trafalgar St; mains £6–14; ☎ 9am–11pm Mon–Sat, 9am–6pm Sun) A smashing lunch spot for those craving more than a vacuum-packed sandwich – sesame chicken fillet is recommended – this funky spot attracts chin-stroking trendies to its school desk interiors and popular outdoor seating area. This is also a good afternoon cappuccino spot but beware of the tempting cake selection.

Momma Cherri's Big House

(325305; 2–3 Little East St; mains £8–11; ☎ lunch & dinner) Recently opening this second outlet opposite the original, Momma's is a riot of colourful interiors and exuberant dishes guaranteed to spice up any seaside day. The Southern-style jerk chicken and jambalaya are great but for those who haven't eaten in a month, the two-course 'Soul in a Bowl' dinner is recommended.

Terre à Terre

(729051; 71 East St; mains £12–14; ☎ lunch & dinner Wed–Sun, dinner only Tue) Moving the vegetarian menu away from grungy, stomach-sticking lentil roasts, this creative veggie-restaurant does enough to satisfy the most ardent carnivores. Check out the Parmesan dumplings.



Drinking & Entertainment

Among Brighton's pubs, the **Hop Poles** (710444; 13 Middle St) has an arty, laid-back vibe. Its gastropub menu is a plus but there's also a selection of candy behind the bar for those who like to nibble chocolate with their cask ale.

For clubbers, **Beach** (722272; 171–181 Kings Rd Arches; admission £3–10) is welcoming, mainstream – think '70s and house nights – and massively popular: arrive early on weekends because the queues can be enormous.

One of the city's best gay bars, the **Queen's Arms** (686873; 7 George St) is a kitsch-colourful spot with a plethora of cabaret and karaoke nights to keep the regulars happy.

Getting There & Away

Megabus services arrive from London Victoria (from £1, 2½ hours) three times a day, while National Express buses also arrive twice hourly from London Victoria (£10, 2½ hours). The company runs frequent daily airport services from London Heathrow (£20, two hours) and London Gatwick (£6.40, 45 minutes).

Frequent daily direct train services arrive from London Victoria (£17.30, 1½ hours) and London Bridge (£13.50, one hour) stations. There's also an hourly service from Portsmouth (£13.80, two hours) and a twice-hourly service from Dover (£24.50, 2½ hours).

PORtSMOUTH

023 / pop 187,056

Streets of uninspiring shops fill Portsmouth's centre, so visitors can avoid the unnecessary spadework and head straight for the historic waterfront. The spiritual home of Britain's Royal Navy, Portsmouth has a salty, richly storied past that's still much in evidence.

Orientation & Information

Portsmouth's southern Southsea district houses many of the city's best restaurants, pubs and accommodation but the harbourfront area on the west side – site of the bus station and the end of the train line from London – is its historic heart. This cobblestoned patch is the site of Portsmouth's major maritime attractions.

The main harbourfront TIC (9282 6722; www.visitportsmouth.co.uk; The Hard; 9.30am-5.45pm Apr-Sep, 9.30am-5.15pm Oct-Mar) has an accommodation booking service (£2). The Central Library (9281 9311; Guildhall Sq; 9am-7pm Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm Sat, 12.30-4pm Sun) offers free internet access.

Sights

Dripping with seafaring heritage, Portsmouth's Historic Dockyard (9286 1512; www.flagship.org.uk; all-inclusive ticket adult/child £15.50/12.50; 10am-5.30pm Apr-Oct, 10am-5pm Nov-Mar) is the final resting place for a gaggle of prized vessels. The remains of the Mary Rose (adult/child £9.70/8), Henry VIII's favourite warship, provide an object lesson in shipwreck preservation. In contrast, the handsome, fully intact decks of HMS Victory (adult/child £9.70/8), Lord Nelson's Battle of Trafalgar flagship, memorialises Britain's greatest naval hero and his famous win against the French. Lacking the historic provenance of the other two vessels, HMS Warrior (adult/child £9.70/8), the world's first all-iron battleship, colourfully evokes life aboard ship in the Victorian era.

Sleeping & Eating

Southsea is a hotbed of B&B and dine-out action, but there are also some good options in Old Portsmouth.

Southsea Backpackers Lodge (9283 2495; www.portsmouthbackpackers.co.uk; 4 Florence Rd, Southsea; dm £13, d £30-34;) A quiet, comfortable atmosphere permeates this large, labyrinthine Victorian house in a residential side street near the seafront. The wooden-bedded dorms are mostly small and there's satellite TV and coin-operated internet access (per half-hour £1) in the lounge.

Sailmaker's Loft (9282 3045; 5 Bath Sq; s/d £25/55;) This small, recently renovated B&B is run by a retired merchant seaman with plenty of salty stories about old Portsmouth. It's located on a cobblestone seafront promontory of character-filled taverns and ancient houses, and you'll likely awake to the sound of seagulls hovering overhead. Some of the rooms have great harbour views.

Sallyport Tea Rooms (9281 6265; 35 Broad St; mains £2.50-5.50; 10am-5pm;) This charmingly old-fashioned tea nook is an ideal retreat. Tuck into a large pot of Earl Grey and a fruit bun while gentle jazz plays in the background. It's also a good lunch spot – the freshly made sandwiches are a treat.

Getting There & Away

Direct daily National Express buses arrive from London Victoria (£14, two to three hours) and Heathrow airport (£14, two to four hours). There's also a regular service from Brighton (£3.20, 3½ hours). Megabus services arrive from London Victoria (from £1, 2½ hours) and the discount operator also offers cheap train services under its Megatrain banner from London Waterloo (from £1, 2½ hours). There are regular-priced trains every 10 minutes or so from London Victoria and London Waterloo (from £23, 1½ to 2½ hours), plus hourly trains from Brighton (£13.80, 90 minutes).

WINCHESTER

01962 / pop 107,213

Dripping with ancient sights and attractions, the capital of Saxon England is a history-lover's dream. Its bustling city centre is easy to explore on foot but make sure you duck down the backstreets behind the chain stores to find the historic gems.

The train station is a 10-minute walk west of the centre, and the bus station is on Broadway, opposite the TIC (840500; www.visitwinchester.co.uk; Guildhall, Broadway; 9.30am-5.30pm Mon-Sat, 11am-4pm Sun May-Sep, 10am-5pm Mon-Sat Oct-Apr).

Jamie's Internet Cafe (870880; 10 Parchment St; per hr £3; 10am-5pm Mon-Sat) offers Web access.

Sights

Don't miss glorious **Winchester Cathedral** (857200; www.winchester-cathedral.org.uk; 1 The Close; suggested donation £4; 8.30am-6pm Mon-Sat, 8.30am-5.30pm Sun, free tours 10am-3pm Mon-Sat), a multicolumned melange of architectural styles and the final resting place of Jane Austen, whose discreet gravestone resides on the nave's north side.

The nearby flint-walled **Great Hall** (846476; www.hants.gov.uk/discover/places/great-hall.html; Castle Ave; admission free; 10am-5pm Mar-Oct, 10am-4pm Nov-Feb) is all that remains of a gargantuan 11th-century castle destroyed in 1651. It houses the multicoloured **King Arthur's Round Table**, a medieval commemorative artefact created to celebrate the legendary monarch long after his reputed reign.

Sleeping & Eating

With the recent closure of Winchester's YHA hostel, budget accommodation is hard to come by here.

Mrs Blockley's (852073; roseynblockley@uwclub.net; 54 St Cross Rd; s £30, d £52-60;) This cosy B&B with three rooms and a large shared bathroom is one of the town's best-value sleepovers. It's a 15-minute walk from the centre.

Bethany House (862188; www.bethanyhousebandb.co.uk; 114 Christchurch Rd; s/d £45/65;) Housed in a large former convent that's been expertly renovated with rustic chic ambience, Bethany is also a 15-minute walk from the centre.

Forte Tea Rooms (856840; 78 Parchment St; mains £3-7; 9am-5.30pm Mon-Sat) For a good-value feed, head to this chatter-filled upstairs nook with well-priced home-style dishes, a warming atmosphere and a small shelf of well-thumbed travel books.

Alternatively, head for a beer at the **Wykeham Arms** (853834; 75 Kingsgate St; mains £5-13; lunch & dinner), Winchester's favourite pub. It's a charming combination of trinket-packed old-world décor, fine regional ales and a food menu that's far above the usual bar fare.

Getting There & Away

Direct National Express buses arrive in Winchester centre from London Victoria (£12.60, two hours). Four Megabus services run daily from London Victoria to St Catherine's Park & Ride (from £1, 90 minutes), a 10-minute

local bus ride from the centre. Direct trains arrive throughout the day from London Waterloo (£22, one hour) and Portsmouth (£7.90, one hour).

SOUTHWEST ENGLAND

With two of England's best moorland parks – South Devon's Dartmoor and North Devon's Exmoor – and some superbly craggy coastal walks, the balmy Southwest is one of England's most attractive regions. But it's not all about the outdoors here. History fans will enjoy medieval Salisbury, while nearby Stonehenge and Avebury recall the mysteries of older civilisations. The region's main cities, Bath and Bristol, can keep most visitors busy for days. For information, contact **South West Tourism** (0870 442 0880; www.visitsouthwest.co.uk).

SALISBURY

01722 / pop 43,355

While you can't turn around in Salisbury without seeing a preserved antique pile, this busy market town is far from being a mothballed historic theme park.

The centre is a 10-minute walk from the train station along Fisherton St, and is easily negotiated on foot. The welcoming **TIC** (334956; www.visitsalisbury.com; Fish Row; 9am-5pm Mon-Sat year-round, 10.30am-4.30pm Sun May-Sep) has a free accommodation booking service and there's a nearby **library** (324145; Market Pl; 10am-7pm Mon, 9am-7pm Tue, Wed & Fri, 9am-5pm Thu & Sat) with free internet access.

Beneath its wedding-cake spire, **Salisbury Cathedral** (555120; www.salisburycathedral.org.uk; suggested donation adult/child £4/2; 7.15am-6.15pm) is one of Britain's finest Gothic churches. Free tours run throughout the day, highlighting the intricate stonework interior of flying buttresses and arching vaulted ceilings. Restore the crick in your neck in the octagonal chapter house, before heading out into **cathedral close**, an impressive perimeter of medieval houses.

Find out what happened to the region's first cathedral by taking a 10-minute bus ride (bus 3, 5, 6, 8 or 9) to **Old Sarum Castle** (335398; adult/child £2.90/1.50; 10am-4pm Mar & Oct, 10am-5pm Apr-Jun & Sep, 9am-6pm Jul-Aug, 11am-3pm Nov-Feb), an Iron Age settlement abandoned in 1217. Bricks from the original church here were used to build Salisbury's 'new' cathedral.

The town's accommodation options diminish in summer when the Stonehenge-bound coach parties arrive. **Salisbury YHA Hostel** (✉ 327572; salisbury@yha.org.uk; Milford Hill; dm £17.50-20.50, s/d with shared bathroom £20.50/40.50; ☎ ☒) is in a country house offering solid institutional facilities, a bonus cooked breakfast and small dorms. **Spire House** (✉ 339213; lois.faulkner@talk21.com; 84 Exeter St; d/tw £60/80; ☎ ☒) is close to the cathedral and has brass beds, sparkling bathrooms and gourmet breakfasts.

There are several good-value eateries in central Salisbury. Among the best are **Suzette's Pancake Café** (✉ 326966; 4 Fish Row; mains £3-4; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat, 10am-5.30pm Sun), which specialises in crepe-wrapped light meals with ingredients like brie and bacon; and **Anokaa** (✉ 414142; 60 Fisherton St; mains £7-15; ☎ lunch & dinner), a modern Indian restaurant with a great-value all-you-can-eat lunch buffet (£7.25).

Getting There & Away

Three direct National Express buses arrive daily from London Victoria (£14, three to 3½ hours) via Heathrow (£14, two to 2½ hours). One daily service also arrives from Bath (£8.30, 1½ hours) and another from Bristol (£8.30, two hours). Trains arrive every 30 minutes from London Waterloo (£24.20, 1½ hours). There's also an hourly service from Portsmouth (£12.50, 1½ hours).

STONEHENGE & AVEBURY

Cursed by years of poor site management, **Stonehenge** (✉ 0870 333 1181; www.english-heritage.org.uk/stonehenge; adult/child £5.90/3; ☎ 9.30am-6pm mid-March-May, 9am-7pm Jun-Aug, 9.30am-6pm Sep-mid-Oct, 9.30am-4pm mid-Oct-mid-Mar) can be an underwhelming experience. Most come hoping to feel the site's spooky mysticism or marvel at the engineering project that brought these huge rocks from a Welsh quarry up to 5000 years ago. The reality is a stubby field next to a noisy main road housing a roped-off area where the ring – which may be an ancient calendar or place of pagan worship – sits sullen and unloved. The best time to arrive is early morning: watching the sun filter between the upright stones can still create a flicker of eeriness, especially if you pan around to the ancient burial mounds dotting Salisbury Plain.

Wilts and Dorset public bus 3 travels to Stonehenge from Salisbury every 15 minutes in summer (£6.50 return). The best deal is a

one-day Explorer pass (£6.50), enabling you to take in Avebury.

Older and more eerily tranquil than Stonehenge, **Avebury** (✉ 01672-539250; admission free) is one of Britain's largest stone circles, completely surrounding the pretty village of the same name that's been here for centuries. The 100 stones are smaller than Stonehenge's but the site is far larger and visitors can move around without restriction. For some context, check out the **Alexander Keiller Museum** (✉ 01672-539250; adult/child £4.20/2.10; ☎ 10am-6pm Apr-Oct, 10am-4pm Nov-Mar), which explores the region's mysterious past.

Hourly Wilts and Dorset public buses 5 and 6 travel to Avebury from Salisbury (£6.50 return).

DARTMOOR NATIONAL PARK

There's an undeniably haunting beauty to this bleak south Devon moor that encourages trek-loving visitors to quietly commune with the landscape as if they're meeting Mother Nature face-to-face.

The 368-sq-mile park is a hiker's paradise but with changeable weather it's not a place to stroll unprepared. Princetown, the moor's largest village, houses the region's main **High Moorland Visitor Centre** (✉ 01822-890414; Tavistock Rd; ☎ 10am-5pm Apr-Oct, 10am-4pm Nov-Mar). There are additional centres in **Haytor** (✉ 01364-665120; ☎ 10am-5pm Easter-Oct, 10am-4pm Sat & Sun only Nov-Easter), **Postbridge** (✉ 01822-880272; ☎ 10am-5pm Easter-Oct, 10am-4pm Sat & Sun Nov-Easter) and **Newbridge** (✉ 01364-631303; ☎ 10am-5pm Easter-Oct, 10am-4pm Sat & Sun only Nov-Easter).

Most visitors stick to the eastern side of the park where the main settlements are, while serious hikers prefer the quieter western edge. For further information, contact the **Dartmoor Tourist Association** (✉ 01822-890567; www.discoverdartmoor.com).

As for accommodation: it's generally acceptable to camp in the park but not in areas enclosed by walls, within sight of roads or houses, or near heavily trafficked areas. For a real bed, try **Bellever YHA Hostel** (✉ 0870 770 5692; bellever@yha.org.uk; Bellever; dm £13.95; ☎ ☒), an imposing stone farmhouse that offers tranquil accommodation in mostly small dorms. There's a £1 discount for those arriving on foot, by bike or bus – bus 82 from Plymouth to Exeter stops in nearby Postbridge. Alternatively, **Okehampton YHA Hostel** (✉ 0870 770 5978; okehampton@yha.org.uk; Klondyke Rd, Okehampton;

Getting There & Away

Three direct National Express buses arrive daily from London Victoria (£14, three to 3½ hours) via Heathrow (£14, two to 2½ hours). One daily service also arrives from Bath (£8.30, 1½ hours) and another from Bristol (£8.30, two hours). Trains arrive every 30 minutes from London Waterloo (£24.20, 1½ hours). There's also an hourly service from Portsmouth (£12.50, 1½ hours).

STONEHENGE & AVEBURY

Cursed by years of poor site management, **Stonehenge** (✉ 0870 333 1181; www.english-heritage.org.uk/stonehenge; adult/child £5.90/3; ☎ 9.30am-6pm mid-March-May, 9am-7pm Jun-Aug, 9.30am-6pm Sep-mid-Oct, 9.30am-4pm mid-Oct-mid-Mar) can be an underwhelming experience. Most come hoping to feel the site's spooky mysticism or marvel at the engineering project that brought these huge rocks from a Welsh quarry up to 5000 years ago. The reality is a stubby field next to a noisy main road housing a roped-off area where the ring – which may be an ancient calendar or place of pagan worship – sits sullen and unloved. The best time to arrive is early morning: watching the sun filter between the upright stones can still create a flicker of eeriness, especially if you pan around to the ancient burial mounds dotting Salisbury Plain.

Wilts and Dorset public bus 3 travels to Stonehenge from Salisbury every 15 minutes in summer (£6.50 return). The best deal is a

CORNWALL Penzance

✉ 01736 / pop 20,260

At the end of the rail line from London, Penzance is larger and scruffier than its Cornish neighbours. But there are several good reasons to drop by, including a sea-bound historic castle and a bracing coastal cliff hike.

The **TIC** (✉ 362207; www.visit-westcornwall.com; Station Approach; ☎ 9am-5.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm Sat, 10am-1pm Sun May-Aug, 9am-5pm Mon-Sat, 10am-1pm Sun Sep, 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 10am-1pm Sat Oct-Apr) is opposite the train station.

St Michael's Mount (✉ 710507; www.stmichaelsmount.co.uk; Marazion; adult/child £6/3; ☎ 10.30am-5.30pm Sun-Fri Mar-Oct), a 12th-century castle complex on a tree-covered island off the coast, is well worth a visit. It has beautiful baronial rooms, a lovely priory church and subtropical hanging gardens. You can walk across at low tide and there are ferries at high tide in summer.

Walkers should also check out the 17-mile stretch of the **South West Coast National Trail** (✉ 01752-896237; www.southwestcoastpath.com) between Penzance and Land's End. Head west along the windswept cliffs towards the tip of England's craggy boot for beautiful bays and a symphony of crashing waves.

In a Georgian mansion 1.5 miles from the train station, **Penzance YHA Hostel** (✉ 0870 770 5992; penzance@yha.org.uk; Castle Horneck, Alverton; dm £15.50; ☎ ☒) has great coastal views and its facilities include bike storage and a small library. There's also a wooded garden and some camping spots.

Alternatively, the **Chy-an-Mor Hotel** (✉ 363411; www.chyanmor.co.uk; Regent Tce; s/d from £36/60; ☎ ☒) is a charming listed townhouse B&B with 10 elegantly decorated guestrooms, many with views across Mount's Bay. It's a 10-minute walk to the town centre.

Central Penzance has a handful of good eating spots, including **Yam Parlour** (✉ 366740; 36 Causewayhead; mains £5-8.50; ☎ lunch, dinner & Sat breakfast), a convivial vegetarian café where non-veggies are happy to eat. The ever-changing menu can range from mushroom ravioli to squash and coconut curry, and there's a dinnertime BYOB option.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Five direct National Express buses arrive daily in Penzance from London Victoria (£35.50, nine hours), while two direct services also arrive from Newquay (£5, 1½ hours) and two

dm £15.50; ☎ ☒), on the northern edge of the park, is an activity centre combining standard facilities with archery, pony trekking and gorge scrambling.

Getting There & Away

Transmoor Link bus 82 (three daily Monday to Saturday, five Sunday, weekends only in winter) runs across Dartmoor between Plymouth and Exeter via Postbridge, Princetown and Yelverton. Contact **Devon Bus** (✉ 01392-382800; www.devon.gov.uk/buses) for information.

EXMOOR NATIONAL PARK

Within its 265 sq miles, North Devon's Exmoor offers dramatic sea cliffs, tree-lined coves and romantically expansive moorland. Its attractive villages include Porlock, Dunster and Selworthy, and the **Southwest Coast Path** between Minehead and Padstow is one of its well-marked walking routes.

The park's five visitor centres include the main facility in **Dulverton** (✉ 01398-328341; Fore St; ☎ year-round), as well as centres in **Combe Martin** (✉ 01271-883319; 13 Cross St; ☎ Apr-Oct), **County Gate** (✉ 01598-741321; A39 Countisbury, near Lynton; ☎ Apr-Oct), **Dunster** (✉ 01643-821835; Dunster Steep; ☎ Apr-Oct) and **Lynmouth** (✉ 01598-752509; The Esplanade; ☎ Apr-Oct). For information, contact **Greater Exmoor Tourism** (www.visit-exmoor.info).

There are comfortable but basic YHA hostels in **Lynton** (✉ 0870 770 5942; lynton@yha.org.uk; dm £11.95; ☎ Apr-Oct; ☎ ☒), **Exford** (✉ 0870 770 5828; exford@yha.org.uk; Ex Mead; dm £12.95; ☎ ☒) and **Minehead** (✉ 0870 770 5968; minehead@yha.org.uk; Alcombe Combe; dm £11.95; ☎ ☒). Among the guesthouse options, recommendations include Lynton's charming **Sinai House** (✉ 01598-753227; www.sinaihouse.co.uk; Lynway; s/d per person £27-36; ☎ ☒) and Porlock's delightfully thatched **Myrtle Cottage** (✉ 01643-862978; bob.steer@virgin.net; High St; s/d per person £20-30; ☎ ☒).

Getting There & Away

Three direct National Express buses travel daily from London Victoria (£27.50, 5½ hours) to Barnstaple, outside the park's western edge. From here, take the local bus 307 (1¼ hours) to Dulverton or bus 309 or 310 to Lynton (one hour).

Frequent trains arrive in Exeter from London Paddington (from £26.50, two to three hours). From here, pick up the Tarka Line train to Barnstaple (£10.80, one hour, 12 daily Monday to Saturday, six daily Sunday).

from Bristol (£37, 6½ hours). Hourly direct train services arrive from London Paddington (£67, 5½ hours) throughout the day.

Land's End

01736

Check out the end of Britain as it crumbles into the sea here. If you're feeling adventurous, take the coastal path for about 3 miles to Porthcurno's open-air **Minack Theatre** (010181; www.minack.com; adult/child £2.50/1; 9.30am-5.30pm Apr-Oct, 10am-4pm Nov-Mar). Dramatically carved into a cliff, it's open year-round for visitors and stages a roster of plays and musicals from May to September (tickets £6 to £7.50).

Accommodation recommendations include

Whitesands Lodge (01776; www.whitesandslodge.co.uk; Sennen; camp sites per tent £6.50, dm/s/d £12.50/22/44;

), a relaxing holiday spot with tent pitches, dorm accommodation and B&B private rooms. It offers guest activities including surfing, yoga and horse riding. **Land's End YHA Hostel** (0870 770 5906; Letha Vean, St Just-in-Penwith; dm £14; Apr-Oct, Nov-Mar by appointment) is a remote property with small dorms and commanding sea views but no laundry facilities.

Bus 1 from Penzance to Land's End (one hour, hourly) also stops at Porthcurno, providing a late-night exit after the shows at the Minack Theatre. Bus 300 runs between Land's End and St Ives (1½ hours, four daily).

St Ives

01736 / pop 9870

The train from St Erth to St Ives passes curving sandy bays and paradise-blue waters before drawing towards a clutch of stone cottages. Ask at the **TIC** (0796297; www.visit-westernwall.com; Guildhall, Street-an-Pol; 9am-5.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm Sat, 10am-4pm Sun Jun-Sep, 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 10am-1pm Sat Oct-May) for accommodation assistance.

St Ives' streets are stuffed with artist-run galleries but it's the **Tate St Ives** (0796226; www.tate.org.uk; Porthmeor Beach; adult/child £5.50/free; 10am-5.30pm Mar-Oct, 10am-4.30pm Nov-Feb) that is the focal point. The southwest satellite of the London gallery showcases the work of local artists.

For those who'd prefer to hit the waves, consider taking lessons from **Shore Surf** (0755556; www.shoresurf.com; half-/full day £20/35) in nearby Hayle – it operates a free minibus to get you around the area.

St Ives International Backpackers (079944; www.backpackers.co.uk/st-ives; The Stennack; dm £11-17;) is a large, central hostel occupying

a former Wesleyan chapel. There's nothing holy about its grungy interior, funky coloured walls and basic rooms but it's popular with summer surfers.

A dine-out highlight is the **Seafood Café** (0794004; 45 Fore St; mains £5-15; lunch & dinner), a modern, good-value bistro near the harbourfront. One of the best places in town to sample locally caught seafood, it's a cheap lunch spot and a gourmet dinner option that never loses its low-key, informal approach.

National Express buses arrive in St Ives from London Victoria (£35.50, 8½ hours, five daily), Plymouth (£6.50, three hours, four daily) and Newquay (£5, 1hour, two daily). St Ives is on a pretty branch line from St Erth (£3.20, 15 minutes, twice hourly) that hooks up with the main London–Penzance train route.

Newquay

01637 / pop 19,570

The UK's surfing capital, Newquay seems like a giant, open-air nightclub in summer when party-loving drinkers throng the streets. If you're just here for the waves, you'll meet plenty of like-minded souls on the 11 sandy stretches around town, especially the ever-popular **Fistral Beach** to the west and the learner-friendly **Watergate Bay** to the east.

The **TIC** (0854020; www.newquay.co.uk; Marcus Hill; 9.30am-5.30pm Mon-Sat, 9.30am-1pm Sun, reduced hours in winter) is near the bus station. There are surf shops dotted around the town, including the recommended **Offshore Extreme** (0877083; www.offshore-extreme.co.uk; 6 Pentire Ave; per day from £12).

Newquay has many competing hostels, including the bright and modern town-centre **Reef Surf Lodge** (0879058; www.reefsurlodge.info; 10-12 Berry Rd; per person £15-30;). Most of its dorms, each with CD players and TVs, are tiny but the facilities are superior and include a bar, licensed restaurant and regular live music shows. Twin and en suites are available for those who want to upgrade but watch out for the annoying muzak playing in the corridors.

Other recommendations:

Original Backpackers (0874668; www.originalbackpackers.co.uk; 16 Beachfield Ave; dm £8-17) This comfortable 25-year-old backpacker joint, complete with cosy 1970s interiors, overlooks Towan Beach.

Boarding House (0873258; www.theboardinghouse.co.uk; 32 Headland Rd; dm £18-25) Close to Fistral Beach, this excellent hostel has a great sundeck and an on-site surfing school.

National Express buses arrive from London Victoria (£35.50, 7½ hours, seven daily), Exeter (£15.60, 3½ hours, four daily) and Penzance (£5, 1¾ hours, two daily). Four daily trains arrive from Par (£4.80, one hour), which hooks up with the main London–Penzance line.

BATH

01225 / pop 90,144

Getting lost is the first thing any visitor to England's most handsome city should do. Bath's honey-coloured stone streets and teeming back alleys are a stroller's delight that encourage unplanned exploration.

Orientation & Information

The bus and train stations face each other on the southern edge of town.

The **TIC** (0906 711 2000; www.visitbath.co.uk; Abbey Chambers, Abbey Churchyard; phone calls per min £0.50; 9.30am-5pm Mon-Sat & 10am-4pm Sun Oct-May, 9.30am-6pm Mon-Sat & 10am-4pm Sun Jun-Sep) is near the abbey. Internet access is available at **Click** (081008; 13a Manvers St; per 20min £1; 10am-10pm) opposite the train station.

Sights

The highlight of any visit here, the **Roman Baths** (077785; www.romanbaths.co.uk; Abbey Churchyard; adult/child £11/6; 9.30am-5pm Jan & Feb, 9am-5pm Mar-Jun, 9am-9pm Jul & Aug, 9am-5pm Sep & Oct, 9.30am-4.30pm Nov & Dec) are a tangible link with England's distant past. While you won't want to dive into the sickly green pools, check out the ancient engineering for a glimpse of what it was like to be a Roman in Britain. The site is crawling with tourists in summer, so arrive late or early to beat the crowds.

Celebrating the life and times of Bath's most famous resident, the **Jane Austen Centre** (0443000; www.janeausten.co.uk; 40 Gay St; adult/child £5.95/2.95; 10am-5.30pm Mon-Sat, 10.30am-5.30pm Sun) is a must for lit-lovers. Visits start with a 15-minute introductory talk, before you're let loose in rooms full of artefacts. Check out the low-priced top floor teahouse where you can sink your teeth into Mr Darcy (the cake).

Don't miss **Bath Abbey** (0422462; www.bathabbey.org; suggested donation £3; 9am-6pm Mon-Sat, 1-2.30pm & 4.30-5.30pm Sun Apr-Oct, 9am-5.30pm Mon-Sat, 1-2.30pm Sun Nov-Mar) and its extraordinary exterior of angels ascending and descending heavenly ladders. Highlights inside include a spider-web-style vaulted ceiling and intricate

stained-glass windows. Head to the **Heritage Vaults** (adult/child £2.50/free; 9am-4pm Mon-Sat) for an exhibition of the abbey's centuries-old stone carvings.

Sleeping

Bargains are hard to find in summertime Bath when tourists arrive en masse. Book ahead or suffer the consequences.

YMCA (0325900; www.bathymca.co.uk; International House, Broad St Pl; dm £13-15, s £24-28, tw £36-44;) The city's largest hostel is bright, cheerful and right in the centre. The dorms are typically institutional but the compact private rooms are great value. Facilities include laundry and an on-site gym, and continental breakfast is thrown in (not literally).

White Hart Backpackers Inn (0313985; www.whitehartbath.co.uk; Widcombe Hill; dm £14, s £25, d £40-60;)

In a recently renovated heritage pub building, five minutes south of the train station, the White Hart has modern furnishings, a cosy atmosphere and good-value private rooms with a corridor of mid-sized dorms. Most rooms share bathrooms and rates include continental breakfast.

ourpick Henry (0424052; www.thehenry.com; 6 Henry St; s £35, d £60-65;) This smashing, well-located guesthouse has a strong claim to being Bath's best sleepover deal. Its warren of comfortable, recently renovated rooms – all with shared bathrooms – combine period features with IKEA-esque furnishings.

Also recommended:

Bath YHA Hostel (0870 770 5688; bath@yha.org.uk; Bathwick Hill; dm £12.50;) It's a 25-minute uphill climb from the centre to this Italianate-mansion YHA.

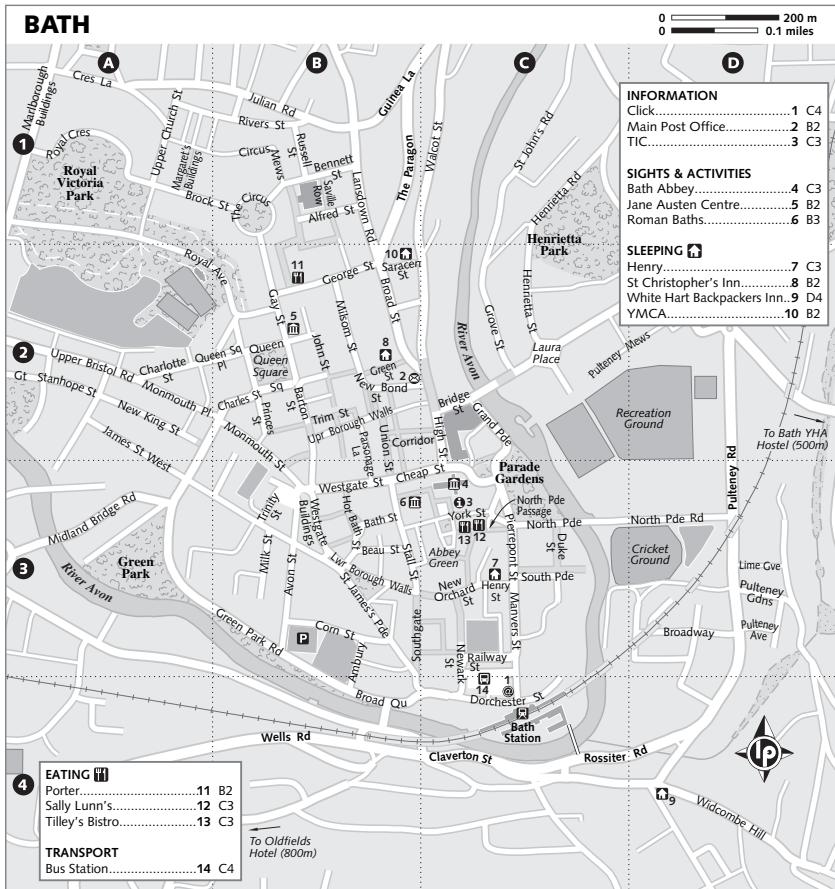
St Christopher's Inn (0481444; www.st-christophers.co.uk; 9 Green St; dm £16;) Party-lovers' hostel in the heart of the city.

Eating & Drinking

Hit Bath's back alleys for the best dine-out deals.

ourpick Porter (0424104; 15 George St; mains £3-6; lunch & dinner) An old-school pub with an unusual twist, Porter's good-value menu is entirely vegetarian, with hearty burgers and crepes well represented. Students dominate the clientele, attracted by a nightly roster of eclectic live music (cover £3 to £5). Sunday is comedy night and there are regular booze specials.

Sally Lunn's (0461634; 4 North Pde Passage; mains £5-10; brunch, lunch & dinner) This 17th-century tearoom is a local favourite. Sample



the Georgian-era Sally Lunn Bun, a triumph of historic marketing that's actually a giant bread roll topped with sweet or savoury toppings.

Tilley's Bistro (01225 84200; 3 North Pde Passage; mains £6-17; lunch & dinner Mon-Sat; This French-influenced restaurant is a romantic dinner destination. There's a large selection of small dishes that diners can mix and match, including the recommended Cornish white crab salad and wild mushroom pancakes.

Getting There & Away

Ten direct National Express buses arrive daily from London Victoria (£16.50, 3½ hours), one direct from Salisbury (£8.30, 1½ hours) and two from Bristol (£3.50, 50 minutes). Direct train services from London Paddington (from

£19, 1½ hours) arrive twice hourly, and hourly direct services arrive from Cardiff (£12.90, one hour). There are also four services an hour from Bristol (£5.20, 15 minutes).

Glastonbury

01458 / pop 8429

Druidic mysticism and straggle-haired hippies converge like ley lines on this pretty Somerset town that's reinvented itself as a New Age capital. The TIC (01458 832954; www.glastonburytic.co.uk; 9 High St; 10am-5pm Sun-Thu, 10am-5.30pm Fri & Sat Apr-Sep, 10am-4pm Sun-Thu, 10am-4.30pm Fri & Sat Oct-Mar) is in the town centre.

The town's main attraction is the ruined **Glastonbury Abbey** (01458 832267; www.glastonburyabbey.com; adult/child £4.50/3; 9.30am-6pm Apr-Sep, 9.30am-

5pm Oct, 9.30am-4.30pm Nov-Jan, 10am-5pm Feb & Mar), where carved arch and pillar remnants indicate a once-stunning structure. Most visitors spend a couple of minutes here in front of an area fancifully marked as **King Arthur's grave** – as with many of Glastonbury's attractions, faith is the key. But even if you don't believe that **Glastonbury Tor**, a derelict hilltop church tower on the edge of town, is a gateway to the underworld, it's a lovely spot to enjoy a picnic and panoramic views.

Drop by in late June for the **Glastonbury Festival** (0870 120 0332; www.glastonburyfestivals.co.uk), a long weekend of music, theatre and New Age shenanigans that's one of England's favourite outdoor events. More than 100,000 punters turn up to write around in the fields at Pilton, 8 miles east of town. Three-day admission costs £125.

The lively **Glastonbury Backpackers** (01458 833353; www.glastonburybackpacker.com; 4 Market Pl; dm/d £12/30;) is perfectly central and has a popular bar. Book ahead: it's very busy in summer. Experience B&B perfection at **AppleTree House** (01458 830803; www.appletreehouse.org.uk; 27 Bere Lane; s/d £30/60;), where you can borrow movies for your VCR, relax in the poppy-covered garden or hang out in your calming, pastel-coloured room.

For a wide array of hearty meals, **Café Galatea** (01458 834284; 5a High St; mains £8-10; lunch Mon, lunch & dinner Wed-Sun;) is recommended. It also has an internet café and a boutique where you can pick up those essential crystals.

Getting There & Away

There's no train station and only one daily direct National Express bus from London Victoria (£18, four hours), so it's best to hook up with the numerous services running to Bristol. Buses 376 and 377 connect Glastonbury with Bristol (hourly, 1½ hours) throughout the day.

BRISTOL

0117 / pop 420,556

This once-decrepit port town is now characterised by its hip cultural scene and wealth of historic and modern attractions. This resurgence is exemplified by the city's Harbourside, a cool Euro-plaza of waterfront cafés and restaurants, complete with high-tech museums and funky galleries.

Orientation & Information

The Harbourside is a 15-minute walk west of Temple Meads train station. The city centre

is a few minutes north of here, while the bus station is further north on Marlborough St.

Ask at the **TIC** (0117 906 711 2191; www.visitbristol.co.uk; Wildscreen Walk, Harbourside; phone calls per min £0.50; 10am-6pm Mar-Oct, 10am-5pm Nov-Feb) for maps. The nearby **Internet Exchange** (0117 9926 27-29 Baldwin St; per hr £4; 10am-8pm Mon-Fri, 11am-7pm Sat, 1-5pm Sun) provides convenient Web access.

Sights

@Bristol (0845 345 1235; www.at-bristol.org.uk; Harbourside; combined admission Explore & Wildwalk adult/child £15/11, Explore & IMAX adult/child £14/10.50, Wildwalk & IMAX adult/child £13/10; 10am-5pm Mon-Fri, 10am-6pm Sun) is a triumvirate of high-tech attractions including **Explore** (adult/child £9/6.50), a kids-of-all-ages hands-on science centre; **IMAX** (adult/child £7/5.50), mostly showing eye-popping documentaries; and **Wildwalk** (adult/child £8/6), an educational trawl through the natural world.

The nearby **Arnolfini** (0117 2300; 16 Narrow Quay; admission free; 10am-6pm Thu, 10am-8pm Fri-Wed), Bristol's version of London's Tate Modern, is a cool, recently reopened arts centre in an atmospheric dockyard venue. Alongside revolving exhibitions of contemporary art, there are cutting-edge dance performances and an art-house cinema.

Sleeping & Eating

Bristol's accommodation is characterised by business hotels and old-school B&Bs, but there are some good options around the city.

Bristol Backpackers (0117 7900; www.bristolbackpackers.co.uk; 17 St Stephen's St; dm/tw/tr £14/36/45;) A centrally located, character-stuffed joint with its own dungeon-style bar, the predominantly mid-sized dorms here are cramped but comfortable. There's free wi-fi.

Bristol YHA Hostel (0870 770 5726; bristol@yha.org.uk; 14 Narrow Quay; dm/tw £19.95/44;) An excellent warehouse renovation in the heart of the Harbourside, the rooms here – mostly four-bedded, en suite dorms – have been refurbished with new furnishings. A free cooked breakfast is included and there's a café serving beer.

Arches Hotel (0117 924 7398; www.arches-hotel.co.uk; 132 Cotham Brow; s/d £35/58;) Go green at this friendly, nine-room guesthouse committed to recycling and low-energy lighting. There are several vegan and vegetarian-only breakfast options: the continental is free, the cooked costs £3 extra.

our pick **St Nicholas Market** (922 4017; entrances High St, Corn St & St Nicholas St; 9.30am-5.30pm Mon-Sat) A smashing undercover Victorian market full of deli-style takeaways. Make a circuit to check out the olive bread, Stilton pasties and Caribbean delicacies before deciding what you're in the mood for.

Mud Dock Café (934 9734; 40 The Grove; mains £7-18; breakfast, lunch & dinner) Occupying an industrial-chic harbour building renovation, Mud Dock offers modern Brit cuisine and a lively, laid-back ambience. The top-floor patio enjoys fab waterfront views and bikes can be rented on the ground floor.

Entertainment

Bristol has some great live venues; pick up a copy of *Venue* (£1.30) for local listings. For local indie faves and quality cover bands, try the **Fleece** (945 0996; www.fleecegigs.co.uk; 12 St Thomas St; admission from £4). If you want to see the next big thing, head to the **Croft** (987 4144; www.thecroft.com; 117-119 Stokes Croft; admission from £3).

Getting There & Away

Eighteen daily direct National Express buses arrive from London Victoria (from £7, 1½ hours), as well as three direct services from Cardiff (£6.50, one hour) and two from Penzance (£37, seven hours). Megabus runs five daily services from London Victoria (from £1, three hours).

Twice-hourly trains arrive from London Paddington (from £20, 1½ hours) every day, with frequent additional services from Bath (£5.20, 15 minutes) and Cardiff (£7.80, 45 minutes).

CENTRAL ENGLAND

The geographic heartland of England is a grab-bag of wildly differing scenes that represent Britain in miniature. There are flower-decked villages studded with ancient cottages in the Cotswolds, windswept rocky vistas in the hiking-friendly Peak District and history around every corner in fascinating towns like Oxford and Stratford-upon-Avon. For information, contact **Heart of England Tourism** (01905-761100; www.visitheartofengland.com).

OXFORD

01865 / pop 143,016

A crowded hot spot in summer, Oxford lives up to its advance billing as a colourful, history-flavoured city – especially if you bypass the

jostling tour groups and turn up early or late in the season.

Orientation & Information

Oxford's train station is a 10-minute stroll west of the centre along George St and Hythe Bridge St – you'll pass the bus station on Gloucester Green (there's no green).

The ever-busy **TIC** (726871; www.visitoxford.org; 15-16 Broad St; 9.30am-5pm Mon-Sat, to 6pm Thu-Sat Jul & Aug, 10am-4pm Sun) is packed with maps and brochures on the region. Pick up an Oxford Visitor Card (£2.50) here for discounts across the city. Web access is available at **Mic@s Internet** (726364; 118 High St; per 30min £1; 9am-11pm Mon-Sat, 10am-11pm Sun).

Sights & Activities

OXFORD UNIVERSITY

It's impossible to miss Oxford's crenulated college buildings, which dominate the centre. The following are some of the university's must-see highlights.

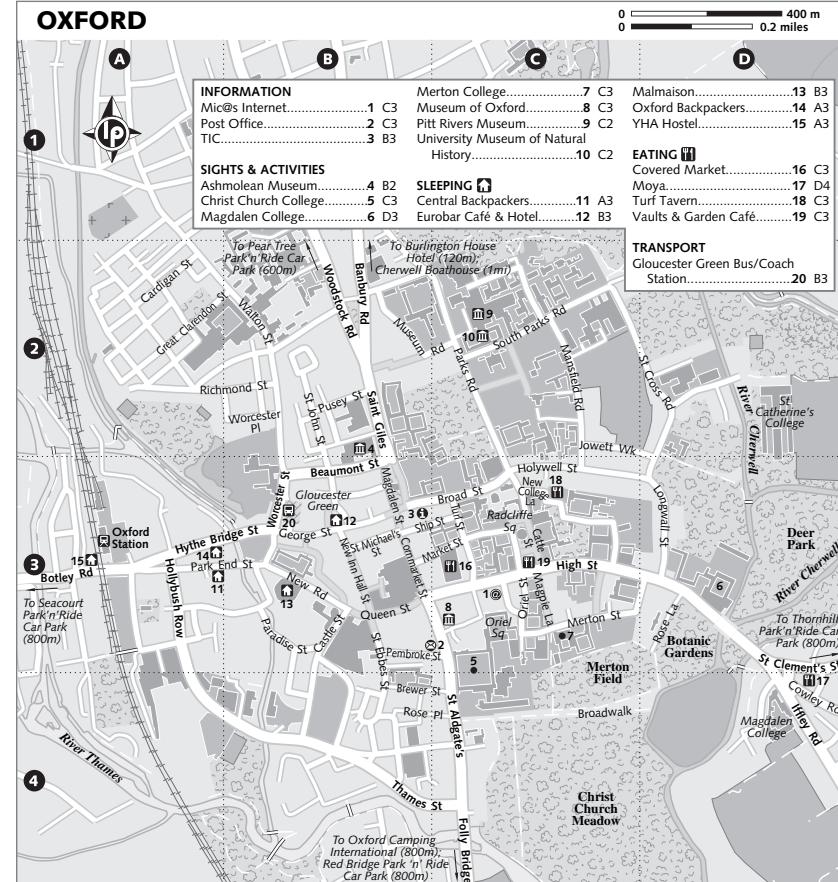
The main entrance to **Christ Church** (286573; www.visitchristchurch.net; Broadwalk; adult/child £4.50/3.50; 9am-5.30pm Mon-Sat, 1-5.30pm Sun), Oxford's most spectacular college, is **Tom Tower**, with its postcard-perfect Christopher Wren-designed dome. Save time for a look at the **Great Hall**, which was copied for the *Harry Potter* movies, and check out lovely **Christ Church Cathedral**, the smallest in Britain.

Arguably Oxford's prettiest college, **Magdalen** (276000; www.magd.ox.ac.uk; High St; adult/child £3/2; noon-6pm Jul-Sep, 1-6pm Oct-Jun) combines a collection of stately buildings with a tapestry of landscaped grounds. The architectural highlight is the **doister**, featuring fantastical carvings of hippos and jesters that are said to have inspired CS Lewis.

The main highlight of **Merton** (276310; www.merton.ox.ac.uk; Merton St; admission free; 2-4pm Mon-Fri, 10am-4pm Sat & Sun) is the 14th-century **Old Library**, the oldest continuously operating college library in the world. Tours (£2) of the building are offered for curious bookworms from July to September.

MUSEUMS

Founded in 1683, the **Ashmolean** (278000; www.ashmol.ox.ac.uk; Beaumont St; admission free; 10am-5pm Tue-Sat, noon-5pm Sun) is Britain's oldest museum and also one of its best. Highlights include priceless Chinese, Egyptian and European artworks and antiquities. There's also a col-



lection of modern British paintings in the Sands Gallery and an ever-changing roster of temporary exhibitions (also free).

In its magnificent Victorian Gothic home, the **University Museum of Natural History** (272950; www.oum.ox.ac.uk; Parks Rd; admission free; noon-5pm) illuminates the natural sciences and attracts visitors to its hulking dinosaur skeletons. The adjacent **Pitt Rivers Museum** (270927; www.prm.ox.ac.uk; South Parks Rd; admission free; noon-4.30pm) displays a menagerie of collected artefacts ranging from shrunken heads to stuffed animals.

The **Museum of Oxford** (252761; St Aldgate's; adult/child £2/0.50; 10am-4.30pm Tue-Fri, 10am-5pm Sat, noon-4pm Sun) is well worth a visit for an introduction to the city's history. Its evoca-

tion of the university's early days – including re-created rooms and college treasures – is fascinating.

Sleeping

Accommodation can be hard to come by in summer, so book well ahead. Abingdon Rd is a B&B hot spot.

Oxford Camping International (426 4551; 426 Abingdon Rd; camp sites per person £9.25) Large, well-serviced camping ground 1½ miles south of town.

YHA Hostel (0870 770 5970; oxford@yha.org.uk; 2a Botley Rd; dm £20.95;) One of England's newest YHA properties, this modern purpose-built hostel is just behind the train station. Its bright and well-maintained rooms mostly

SPLURGE

Malmaison (✉ 268400; www.malmaison-oxford.com; 3 Oxford Castle; dm from £110; ☒) This seriously swanky boutique-chic property is located in the former HM Prison Oxford, an austere Victorian edifice on the site of the old Oxford Castle. Not surprisingly, the rooms – many converted from two or three poky cells – are dripping with stylish modern flourishes, including the kind of large-tub, luxury bathrooms that are very difficult to leave. An ideal place to be incarcerated for the night.

have four to six beds. There's no parking (except for disabled travellers and bikes), but prices include breakfast.

Central Backpackers (✉ 242288; www.centralbackpackers.co.uk; 13 Park End St; dm £14-18; ☒ ☐) Oxford's newest hostel has spick and span facilities, free wi-fi access and a quiet ambience. It also offers free luggage storage, a female-only dorm and a Sky TV lounge. There are plenty of showers and if you get up early enough you can snag the only bath.

Oxford Backpackers (✉ 721761; www.hostels.co.uk; 9a Hythe Bridge St; dm £14-16; ☒) A typically colourful party joint with bright murals, ancient armchairs and a happening bar. Close to town.

Eurobar Café & Hotel (✉ 725087; www.eurhotels.co.uk; 48 George St; s/d £35/50; ☒) Located near the bus station, the Eurobar has the look of a continental pub but the rooms of a standard British B&B. The bar itself is worth a look even if you're not staying here: the food is cheap and cheerful, and there's a good selection of real ales.

Eating & Drinking

There's an array of eateries to suit all budgets in Oxford, so it's not hard to find a place to fill your belly.

Covered Market (Market St; snacks from £1.50; ☒ 8am-5.30pm Mon-Sat) Not everything is edible in this large, airy market hall but it's hard to shake the idea that you're wandering around a gourmet smorgasbord. From samosas to sausages and olives to sticky buns, the quality is a cut above standard market fare.

Vaults & Garden Café (✉ 279112; St Mary's Church, Radcliffe Sq; mains £5-8; ☒ 10am-5pm) The handsome city-centre church of St Mary's is home to this

wholesome spot, which specialises in organic and vegetarian dishes – the tasty pancakes and large salads are recommended.

Moya (✉ 200111; 97 St Clement's St; mains £5-11; ☒ lunch & dinner) This sleek, contemporary-designed restaurant serves an array of well-priced Slovak fusion dishes, including richly sauced venison medallions and an excellent goulash. There's plenty of menu space for vegetarians: check out the goat cheese devil's toast.

Turf Tavern (✉ 243235; 4 Bath Pl; mains £4-8; ☒ lunch & dinner) There's excellent pub grub at this recommended 16th-century watering hole that's hidden along a back alley between Holywell St and New College Lane. Attracting a mix of students, locals and tourists, drinkers spill out into its adjoining courtyards in summer.

Getting There & Away

Direct National Express buses arrive every 20 minutes from London Victoria (£12, 1½ hours), with five additional direct services from Birmingham (£10.20, one to two hours) and one from Bristol (£13, three hours). Megabus services arrive from London Victoria (from £1, 1½ hours) every 15 minutes. **Stagecoach Express** (✉ 01234-212852) runs an hourly bus X5 service from Cambridge (£7, 3½ hours).

Direct trains arrive from London Paddington (from £9.50, 55 minutes) and Birmingham (from £8, one hour) every 30 minutes.

STRATFORD-UPON-AVON

✉ 01789 / pop 111,474

Stratford teeters on the edge of theme park madness in summer, when coachloads of tourists descend to pay camera-wielding homage to England's leading dead playwright. But if you visit early or late in the season it's possible to celebrate Shakespeare's life and works without jostling for space on every street corner.

Orientation & Information

The train station is a 15-minute walk west of the centre. Head south along the Avon riverbank to the main theatres.

You can exchange currency at the **TIC** (✉ 293127; www.shakespeare-country.co.uk; Bridgefoot; ☒ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat, 10am-3pm Sun Oct-Mar, 9am-5.30pm Mon-Sat, 10am-4pm Apr-Sep). For Web access, head to **Cyber Junction** (✉ 263400; 28 Greenhill St; per 30min £3; ☒ 10am-5.30pm Mon-Sat).

Sights & Activities

Like artefacts in glass cases, there's an unreal quality to the five timber-framed Shakespeare-era houses on Stratford's modern streets. The most worthy of a visit is **Shakespeare's Birthplace** (Henley St; adult/child £7/2.75; ☒ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat, 10am-5pm Sun), a scrubbed-clean Tudor building where chatty interpreters explain the history of the house. A mile from the centre, **Anne Hathaway's Cottage** (adult/child £5.50/2; ☒ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat, 10am-5pm Sun) is an idyllic thatched farmhouse where Shakespeare's wife was raised. The **Shakespeare Birthplace Trust** (✉ 204016; www.shakespeare.org.uk) sells two combined-entry ticket options to the houses (three houses adult/child £11/5.50, five houses adult/child £14/6.50).

You can see where the Bard now lies at rest at the immaculate **Holy Trinity Church** (✉ 266316; www.stratford-upon-avon.org; Old Town; suggested donation £1.50; ☒ 8.30am-6pm Mon-Sat, 12.30-5pm Sun Apr-Oct, 9am-4pm Mon-Sat, 12.30-5pm Sun Nov-Mar). The high altar and stained-glass windows are highlights but most come here for the grave in the chancel, a discreet stone slab in the floor.

Check out a performance by the **Royal Shakespeare Company** (✉ 0870 609 1110; www.rsc.org.uk; tickets £5-55; ☒ box office 9.30am-8pm Mon-Sat). Its Royal Shakespeare Theatre (RST) is closed for redevelopment from 2007 until 2010, and plays will temporarily be transferred to the new Courtyard Theatre. The company's other theatre, the Swan, will be closed for refurbishment in 2008 and 2009. It will not produce any plays during this period.

Sleeping & Eating

Grove Rd and Evesham Pl, between the train station and town centre, is B&B central, while Sheep St is Stratford's restaurant row.

YHA Hostel (✉ 0870 770 6052; stratford@yha.org.uk; Hemmingford House, Alveston; dm £19.95; ☒) Nearly 2 miles from the centre, this splendid white stucco Georgian mansion contains mostly small dorms and good facilities. The cycle storage and games room are a nice touch but it's the three acres of verdant grounds that stand-out. Take bus X18 or 77 to Alveston from Stratford's Bridge St.

our pick Hamlet House (✉ 204386; www.hamlethouse.com; 52 Grove Rd; s/d from £22.50/45; ☒ ☐) All rooms at this exceptionally comfortable B&B are scrupulously clean and some include video libraries alongside their TVs. Breakfast options include a gourmet omelette choice and

cooked vegetarian alternative. Guests can freely borrow a couple of mountain bikes.

our pick Baguette Barge (✉ 0796 395 6720; Bancroft Gardens, Waterside; sandwiches £2-3; ☒ lunch & dinner) This charming town-centre boat moored on the Avon River serves superior takeaway sandwiches and baguettes. Expect to wait up to 10 minutes for a burger here – they cook it from scratch.

Garrick Inn (✉ 292186; 25 High St; mains £4-9; ☒ lunch & dinner) A smashing Tudor pub, complete with low ceilings and leaded windows, the Garrick has a varied menu of hearty pub food, with more than the usual share of vegetarian options. Baked potatoes with a huge choice of toppings are the best deal and will likely fill you up for the day.

Getting There & Away

Four direct National Express buses arrive daily from London Victoria (£15, 2½ to 3½ hours), while two direct buses arrive from Birmingham (£6.50, one hour) and two from Oxford (£8.30, one hour). Every two hours, a direct train arrives from London Marylebone (from £10.50, 2¼ hours).

COTSWOLDS

A delightful jumble of implausibly pretty villages – think charming stone churches and dreamy thatched-roofed houses – set in postcard-perfect rolling hills, the Cotswolds is classic English countryside. The region is popular with hikers and bikers but also attracts convoys of summer tour buses.

Running north from Bath for around 100 miles, the region divides into southern and northern areas with the northern half attracting most visitors. With its own train station, Moreton-in-Marsh is a good northern access point. In the south, Cheltenham has good train and bus links. For information, contact the **Cotswold Tourist Board** (✉ 01452-426280; www.cotswolds.com).

Stow-on-the-Wold's YHA Hostel (✉ 0870 770 6050; stow@yha.org.uk; The Square; dm £15; ☒ ☐) is popular with families and has top-notch facilities. For those with bigger budgets, Chipping Camden's **Eight Bells** (✉ 840371; www.eightbellsinn.co.uk; Church St; s/d from £50/85; ☒) is among the region's best options with modern-décor pub rooms.

Five nondirect (change at Cirencester) National Express buses arrive daily from London Victoria at Moreton-in-Marsh (£18.60, three

to four hours) and Stow-on-the-Wold (£18.60, 3½ to 4½ hours). Eleven direct daily London Victoria services also arrive in Cheltenham (from £4, three hours). Direct daily train services arrive every two hours from London Paddington at Moreton-in-Marsh (£23.30, 1½ hours). Regular direct and nondirect trains also arrive at Cheltenham from London Paddington (from £19, two to 2½ hours).

Getting There & Around

Getting around the Cotswolds by public transport isn't easy. If you're trying anything ambitious, contact **Traveline** (0870 608 2608; www.traveline.org.uk). Alternatively, hire a bike from **Cotswold Country Cycles** (01386-438706; www.cotswoldcountrycycles.com; Longlands Farm Cottage, Chipping Campden; per day £12).

BIRMINGHAM

0121 / pop 970,892

Britain's second-largest city, Birmingham has lagged behind post-industrial rivals like Glasgow and Manchester and their successful rebrandings as hip urban centres. But 'Brum' has an increasing cultural vibrancy that makes it a cosmopolitan city on the rise. For a glimpse of the city's future, check out the bizarre Selfridges department store in the **Bull Ring**: with the texture of a silver golf ball, it adds a sci-fi flourish to the skyline. Contact the **TIC** (0870 428 1859; www.beinbirmingham.co.uk; The Rotunda, 150 New St; 9.30am-5.30pm Mon-Sat) for its free accommodation booking service. Free internet access is offered at the **Central Library** (303 4511; Chamberlain Sq; 9am-8pm Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm Sat).

For a fascinating glimpse into Birmingham's tenement housing past, check out the **Back to Backs** (66 7671; 50-54 Inge St; adult/child £4.50/2.20; 10am-5pm Tue-Sun), a carefully preserved courtyard of working-class homes illustrating what life was like here from the 1840s to the 1970s. Take a crash course in the cool new Birmingham over at **IKON Gallery** (248 0708; www.ikon-gallery.co.uk; 1 Oozells Sq, Brindleyplace; admission free; 11am-6pm Tue-Sun), with its ever-changing roster of contemporary artworks.

Opened in early 2006, **Billy's International Backpackers** (07951-745102; 58 Coventry St, Digbeth; dm from £17) is located above a pub in the city centre. It has 30 beds and each room has an en suite shower (toilets are shared). Breakfast and a free luggage room are included and some twin rooms are available.

Reflecting its large Asian population, Birmingham's **Balti Triangle** is a must-do area for curry connoisseurs. Excellent Baltis – Pakistani curries made and served in a flat-bottomed pan – are proffered at the ornate **Punjab Paradise** (449 4110; 377 Ladypool Rd; mains from £7; dinner) and the laid-back **Royal Al Faisel** (449 5695; 136 Stoney Lane; buffet £6; lunch & dinner).

Getting There & Away

Direct National Express buses arrive twice hourly from London Victoria (from £2, 2½ hours). Five direct services also travel from Oxford (from £1, two hours) and eight from Bristol (from £1, two hours). Nine daily direct Megabus services arrive from London Victoria (from £1, three hours). Twice-hourly direct train services arrive at Birmingham New Street from London Euston (from £10, 1½ hours).

PEAK DISTRICT NATIONAL PARK

Squeezed between the industrial Midlands to the south, Manchester to the northwest and Sheffield to the east, the 555-sq-mile Peak District is one of England's wildest outdoor regions. That's not to say it's inhospitable. In fact, the 'peaks' here are often fairly gentle hills, and there are plenty of soft hiking and biking routes.

The region is divided into the more dramatic scenery of the north's Dark Peak area and the gentler, low-lying White Peak areas to the south. Buxton to the west or Matlock to the east are good bases, or you can stay right in the centre at Bakewell or Castleton. From Edale, the **Pennine Way** starts its 250-mile meander northwards.

There are 10 well-resourced visitor information centres in and around the park, including those at **Bakewell** (01629-813227; Old Market Hall, Bridge St; 9.30am-5.30pm Easter-Oct, 10am-5pm Nov-Easter), **Buxton** (01298-25106; The Crescent; 10am-5pm) and **Edale** (01433-670207; Main St; 10am-5pm). For more information, check the **Peak District** (www.visitpeakdistrict.com) website.

There are popular YHA hostels in **Castleton** (0870 770 5758; castleton@yha.org.uk; dm £14;) and **Bakewell** (0870 770 5682; bakewell@yha.org.uk; Fly Hill; dm £14;), and a recommended but often very busy YHA Activity Centre in **Edale** (0870 770 5808; edale@yha.org.uk; Rowland Cote, Nether Booth; dm £12.50;), where you can try your hand at caving, kayaking and abseiling.

Getting There & Around

One daily direct National Express bus travels to Buxton from London Victoria (£21, five hours) and another from Manchester (£6.20, one hour). One daily direct service also arrives in Bakewell from Derby (£6.50, 50 minutes) and another from Manchester (£7.30, 1½ hours). Hourly nondirect (change at Stockport) train services travel to Buxton from London Euston (from £13.50, three hours). A direct hourly service also arrives in Buxton from Manchester (£6.35, one hour).

The local bus system serves the park surprisingly well. Many visitors use the hourly Trent Barton Transpeak service that runs from Nottingham to Manchester via Matlock, Bakewell and Buxton. Visit the online route planner at www.derbyshire.gov.uk/buses.

EAST ENGLAND

Despite the bustling tourist magnet of Cambridge, few visitors to the UK ever make it to the wilds of Norfolk, Suffolk and Lincolnshire, where you'll find pretty market towns, gently undulating farm-strewn landscapes, swathes of beautifully desolate coastline and gallons of colourful history. For information, contact the **East of England Tourist Board** (0870 225 4800; www.visiteastofengland.com).

CAMBRIDGE

01223 / pop 117,717

Hallowed home of one of the world's most prestigious centres of learning, pretty Cambridge is steeped in history and scholarly ambience. The 31-college university, which dominates the town centre, was founded by a 13th-century splinter group that broke off from Oxford – still known locally as the 'other place'. Yet Cambridge doesn't rest on its swotty laurels. Its lively city centre is teeming with locals and visitors.

Orientation & Information

The main university buildings occupy the centre of town in a wide bend of the Cam River. The bus station is also in the centre on Drummer St, but the train station is a 20-minute walk southeast. The most revered colleges are west of Sidney St.

Crowded in summer, the **TIC** (0871 226 8006; www.visitcambridge.org; The Old Library, Wheeler St; 10am-5.30pm Mon-Fri, 10am-5pm Sat year-round, 11am-

4pm Sun Apr-Oct) sells a £2.50 Official Visitor Card that provides small discounts at sights, activities and restaurants. **Budget Internet Café** (464625; 30 Hills Rd; per hr from 90p; 9am-11pm) offers the cheapest Web access in Cambridge.

Sights

There's an uneasy relationship between some of the colleges and the tourists that overrun the city in summer. Colleges frequently close to visitors at short notice, so call ahead if you want to follow in the footsteps of VIP alumni like Isaac Newton and Prince Charles.

Among the university's unmissable highlights is **King's College Chapel** (331212; www.kings.cam.ac.uk; King's Pde; adult/child £4.50/3; 9.30am-3.30pm Mon-Fri, 9.30am-3.15pm Sat, 1.15-2.15pm Sun term time, 9.30am-4.30pm Mon-Sat, 10am-5pm Sun outside term time), a dazzling Tudor testament to Christian devotion that has the power to make the most ardent atheist think twice. After taking in the astonishing **fan-vaulted ceiling**, check out the intricately carved **wooden screen** contributed by Henry VIII.

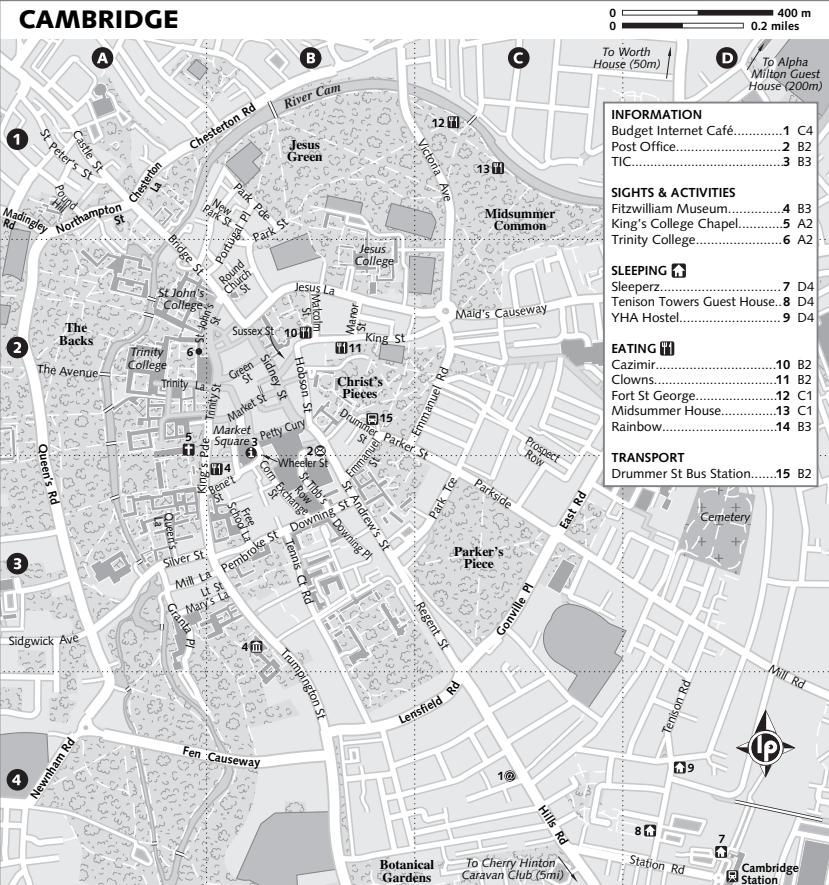
Nearby **Trinity College** (338400; adult/child £2.20/1.30; 10am-5pm) is one of the university's grandest academic piles. Founded in 1546, it includes the **Great Court**, with its acres of manicured lawns and skyline of palatial historic buildings. Don't miss the handsome **Wren Library** (338488; admission free; noon-2pm Mon-Fri year-round, 10.30am-12.30pm Sat term-time). Its collection includes AA Milne's original *Winnie the Pooh*.

Many Cambridge colleges have their own museums covering themes like archaeology, anthropology and polar research. But the university's leading cultural light is the **Fitzwilliam Museum** (332900; www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk; Trumpington St; admission free; 10am-5pm Tue-Sat, noon-5pm Sun). Founded in 1816, highlights include Egyptian, Greek and Roman artefacts, works by Titian, Rembrandt and Monet, and a treasure trove of ceramics, glass and silver ware.

Sleeping

It can be challenging to find good-value accommodation, which is limited in size and overstretched by demand in summer. For peak-season trips, book as far ahead as possible using the www.visitcambridge.org accommodation search engine.

Cherry Hinton Caravan Club (244088; www.caravanclub.co.uk; Lime Kiln Rd, Cherry Hinton; camp sites £4-7, per person £3.50-5; Mar-Jan) This grassy,



BRITAIN

tree-lined caravan park has plenty of tent pitches and its toilet and shower block includes disabled facilities. It's also just a 10-minute bus ride to the city centre for those who want to camp and commute.

YHA Hostel (✉ 0870 770 5742; cambridge@yha.org.uk; 97 Tenison Rd; dm £17.50; Just 15 minutes from both the city centre and the train station, this red-brick Victorian townhouse is a typically institutional YHA effort, with plenty of solid 1970s furniture. Happily, most dorms are small (including 10 two-bed rooms) and bike storage is available.

Sleeperz (✉ 304050; www.sleeperz.com; Station Rd; s/w/d £39/49/59; An IKEA-esque minimalist makeover has turned this old brick granary building near the station into a good-value

hotel option. The chic bathrooms are a plus and the breakfast of croissants, brie and ham is a refreshing continental start to the day. Some rooms have disabled access.

Other recommendations:

Tenison Towers Guest House (✉ 363924; www.cambridgecitytenisontowers.com; 148 Tenison Rd; s/d £30/55) Clean, great value B&B five minutes from the train station.

Alpha Milton Guest House (✉ 311625; www.alphamiltonguesthouse.co.uk; 61-63 Milton Rd; s/d from £20/40) Comfortable, family-run B&B with some en suite rooms.

Eating & Drinking

Once the regional capital of twee tearooms, Cambridge now has a cosmopolitan selection of cafés, bars and restaurants.

Clowns (✉ 355711; 54 King St; mains £3-6.50; 8am-midnight Mon-Sat, 8am-11pm Sun) If the creepy Clown-themed décor doesn't scare you off, this cosy café is well worth a look. It can be crowded with students at peak times but its toasted sandwiches, hearty pasta dishes and hot chocolate make it a comfortable spot to peruse the local papers.

Cazimir (✉ 355156; 13 King St; mains £4-8; 8.30am-5.30pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-7pm Sat, noon-5pm Sun) The antithesis of the Starbucks chain that permeates many streets here, Cazimir is lined with works by local artists and serves a darn good sandwich. The daily soup specials are hearty enough for most travellers.

Rainbow (✉ 321551; 9a King's Pde; mains £7-9; 10am-10pm Tue-Sat;) Near the gates of King's College, this inviting subterranean vegetarian bistro fuses influences from around the world to keep its menu enticing, even for those not usually interested in a meat-free diet. There are also plenty of vegan options and the service is excellent.

Fort St George (✉ 354327; Midsummer Common; mains £6-12; lunch & dinner) The city's best pub, this lovely 16th-century spot is ideal for sitting outside in summer watching the world float by. There's a hearty selection of real ales and the menu combines well-prepared pub standards with some veggie-friendly options. If you don't drink too much you can rent a punt outside.

Getting There & Away

Fourteen daily direct National Express buses travel from London's Victoria Station (£10, two hours). National Express also runs 20 daily services from Stansted airport (£9.70, 50 minutes) and 29 daily services from Heathrow airport (£25, two to three hours). **Stagecoach Express** (✉ 01234-212852) runs an hourly X5 service from Oxford (£7, 3½ hours). Direct trains arrive every 30 minutes from London King's Cross (£17.50, 50 minutes) and London Liverpool St (£17.50, one hour).

NORTHWEST ENGLAND

Popular culture, the arts, music and big nights out on the town are the main attractions in the decidedly urban southern corner of this region, while to the north there's the wild beauty of the Lake District.

MANCHESTER

(✉ 0161 / pop 439,000)

Manchester was a leading crucible of innovation, invention and social discontent during the Industrial Revolution, but these days the city's music and clubs are what put it on the map. Although the heyday of the 'Madchester' sound and the revolution in club culture witnessed at the (demolished) Hacienda club are now distant memories, it's still a great town to party in.

Orientation & Information

The University of Manchester lies to the south of the city centre, on Oxford St/Rd. Victoria train station caps the city in the north.

The **TIC** (✉ 0871 222 8223; www.visitmanchester.com; Town Hall Extension, Lloyd St, St Peter Sq; 10am-5.30pm Mon-Sat, 10.30am-4.30pm Sun & bank holidays) also has branches in Terminals 1 and 2 at the airport. Internet access is available at **easyEverything** (✉ 832 9200; St Anne's Sq).

Sights & Activities

The excellent **Museum of Science & Industry** (✉ 832 224; Liverpool Rd, Castlefield; admission free, exhibitions adult/child £5/3; 10am-5pm) offers vivid, interactive displays on the city's once proud textile and engineering industries, featuring some excellent live demonstrations of industrial weaving and working steam engines. If you only visit one museum in town, make it this one.

Out in Manchester's rapidly regenerating Quays area (take the Metrolink to either Broadway or Harbour City), the excellent **Imperial War Museum North** (✉ 836 4000; <http://north.iwm.org.uk>; Trafford Wharf Rd, Trafford Park; admission free; 10am-6pm) is a cut above the usual war museums, projecting short films that explore the impact of war on the lives of everyday people. The **Lowry Centre** (www.thelowry.com) with its theatres and galleries is also in the Quays.

You may begin to understand why fans of the city's most famous football club treat its home as hallowed ground if you head to the **Manchester United Football Museum** (✉ 0870 442 1994; www.manutd.com; Old Trafford stadium; museum adult/child £5.50/3.75, incl tour £7.50/5). The entertaining hour-long tours of changing rooms and sacred turf run every 10 minutes. Call or email ahead, as tour times depend on match days and times.

BRITAIN

Sleeping & Eating

Hatters (236 9500; www.hattersgroup.com; 50 Newton St; dm £15-17, s/d £30/45;) The best low-priced option is equidistant from the railway and coach stations in the city centre, and offers 200 beds, cheap high-speed internet access (per 30 minutes £1), no lockout, plus a full restaurant and laundry facilities.

YHA Manchester (839 9960; manchester@yha.org.uk; dm under/over 18yr £15.95/20.95) Across the road from the Museum of Science & Industry in the Castlefield area (well signposted), this hostel has over 140 beds and full facilities.

The most distinctive restaurant zones are Chinatown (bounded by Charlotte, Portland, Oxford and Mosley Sts) and Rusholme in the south, called the Curry Mile for its plethora of Indian restaurants.

Tampopo (819 1966; 16 Albert Sq; mains £6.50-9) Near the town hall in smart, contemporary surroundings you'll find this excellent pan-Asian canteen serving affordable noodle, dumpling, yakitori and satay dishes.

Basement (237 1832; 24 Lever St; mains £2-3;) (noon-6pm Wed-Sat, noon-3pm Sun) Ludicrously cheap organic and vegan fare, including tasty jacket potatoes and fresh juices, are the reason to come to this excellent little community-run, not-for-profit café. That and the free internet access. Don't forget to tip your volunteer staff.

Café And (834 1136; 74-76 High St; sandwiches £3) This café, record store and quirky interiors shop in the up and coming Northern Quarter serves fresh, inexpensive wraps and warming soups.

Drinking & Entertainment

The glory days of early house music and the loose-limbed, guitar-backed 'Madchester' sound may have faded but Manchester still parties hard and offers a huge choice to clubbers.

There are several places to drink close to the canal in Castlefield, including **Dukes 92** (839 8646; 2 Castle St), with high ceilings and outdoor seating for sunny days. **Bar Centro** (835 2863; 72 Tib St) in the cool Northern Quarter has an alternative vibe and is a great place to kick off a big night out.

Two abiding Manchester stalwarts (by the ephemeral standards of clubland) are the intimate **Music Box** (236 9971; 65 Oxford St; admission £5-12;) (Wed-Sat), leaning towards jagged, hard-edged house; and the much larger **Sankey's Soap** (661 9085; Jersey St, Ancoats; admission free-£11;) (Fri & Sat), which is slightly more mainstream and

hosts the biggest names from the international clubbing firmament.

Getting There & Away

National Express operates out of Chorlton St station in the city centre to almost anywhere you'll want to go, including London's Victoria Station (£21 return, 4½ hours, seven to nine per day) and Edinburgh (£24.50, 6½ hours, about five per day).

Piccadilly is the main station for trains to and from the rest of the country, although Victoria serves Halifax and Bradford. The two stations are linked by **Metrolink** (0845 748 4950) light rail. There are frequent train services to London (£92, 2½ hours, hourly) and Liverpool (£8.30, 45 minutes to one hour, three per hour).

LIVERPOOL

0151 / pop 439,000

Visually more striking than Manchester, and with some fantastic architecture, busy nightlife and a grand waterfront facing the broad Mersey estuary, infectiously friendly Liverpool is on the up. Formerly a down-at-heel city trying to evolve from economic depression following its industrial and maritime decline, Europe's City of Culture for 2008 is busily polishing and patching itself for the occasion. Of all northern England's cities, Liverpool has perhaps the strongest sense of its own identity, an identity closely tied up with its most famous sons, the Beatles.

Orientation & Information

Lime St, the main train station, is just to the east of the city centre. The National Express coach station is on the corner of Norton and Islington Sts slightly northeast of the train station. The bus station is in the centre on Paradise St.

Occupying the same building as the information centre in charge of the 2008 Year of Culture celebrations, the **TIC** (233 2008; www.visitliverpool.com; The 08 Place, Whitechapel;) (9am-5.30pm Mon-Sat, 10.30am-4.30pm Sun) also has a branch inside the Merseyside Maritime Museum (both book accommodation). Log on to the internet at **CafféLatte.net** (709 9683; 4 South Hunter St; per 30min £1;) (9am-6pm).

Sights & Activities

Many of the best sights cluster around **Albert Dock** (708 8854; www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk), an

impressively redeveloped dock packed with bars, restaurants and museums. The **Mersey-side Maritime Museum** (478 4499; admission free;) (10am-5pm) has several absorbing exhibition spaces on Liverpool's maritime heritage. Don't miss the exhibits covering the slave trade and the Atlantic War against the Nazis.

For many, a visit to Liverpool wouldn't be complete without a Beatles pilgrimage. A sanitised version of the rise of the Fab Four it may be but **The Beatles Story** (709 1963; www.beatlesstory.com; Britannia Vaults, Albert Dock; adult/child £7.95/5.45;) (10am-5.50pm) still pulls in the punters and includes a re-creation of the famous Cavern Club, which also hosts live music. It's also the departure point for the rather more worthwhile **Magical Mystery Tour** (709 3285; www.caverncitytours.com; tickets £11.95, tours 2.10pm & 2.30pm daily, also 11.40am & noon in summer, on weekends & hols), which takes passengers by a psychedelic bus to the actual Strawberry Fields and Penny Lane (you know, where the banker never wore a mac in the pouring rain).

Sleeping

International Inn (709 8135; www.internationalinn.co.uk; 4 S Hunter St; dm/tw £15/36;) Close to the city centre, off Hardman St, the International is well equipped with a café, kitchen and games room.

Embassie Hostel (707 1089; www.embassie.com; 1 Falkner Sq; dm £12.50-13.50) Named for its former life as the Venezuelan consulate, this comfortable hostel is a labour of love for its owners, a former backpacker and his father, who provide a comfortable environment, summer barbecues on the patio, and free coffee, tea and toast.

YHA Liverpool International (0870 770 5924; liverpool@yha.org.uk; 25 Tabley St, Wapping; dm under/over 18yr £15.95/20.95;) Right across the road from Albert Dock, with all the best hostel amenities including restaurant with breakfast included, 24-hour internet access and laundry facilities.

Eating

Eating out in Liverpool has never been better as good new places are springing up all the time. The area around Hope Street is really buzzing as is the up-and-coming Ropewalks/Chinatown district.

Everyman Bistro (708 9545; 5-9 Hope St; mains £6-8;) (noon-midnight Mon-Sat) The freshly made food here is great value with soups and salads

starting at £2, a reasonable list of beers and wines and some good veggie options.

Flannagan's Apple (231 1957; 18 Mathew St; pub meals £5) In the city centre, this famed pub won't win culinary prizes but it's cheap and fun.

Alma De Cuba (709 7097; St Peter's Church; tapas £2.50-5, mains £11-21;) (lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) A very cool bar/restaurant serving Latin American flavours such as jalapeno rib eye steak or calamari with saffron rice and grilled prawns.

Drinking & Entertainment

The old Beatles stamping ground of Mathew St is still a good place to go for a night out. Slightly southwest to Bold, Seel and Slater Sts you'll stumble on an amazing array of clubs and pubs catering to most punters.

Philharmonic Dining Room (709 1163; cnr Hope & Hardman Sts) One of Britain's most extraordinary pubs, whose interior is resplendent with etched glass, stained glass, wrought iron, mosaics and ceramic tiling, and fitted with wingback armchairs. Even the men's loo is a heritage-listed marble marvel.

Heebie Jeebies (708 7001; 80-82 Seel St; admission £4-7;) (Mon-Sat) Clubbers should head here for house, techno, '50s rock 'n' roll and funk, depending on the night.

Everyman Theatre (709 4776; www.everymanplayhouse.com; Hope St) One of the best repertory theatres in the country, with a proud roll call of past and present talent.

Getting There & Away

National Express bus services link Liverpool to most major towns, including London (£22, 5½ hours, four daily) and Manchester (£5.80, 1½ hours, hourly). Direct trains head to London's Euston station (£94.50, three hours, hourly).

Getting Around

Public transport in the region is coordinated by **Merseytravel** (236 7676; www.merseytravel.gov.uk). The Saveaway ticket (£3.70) offers all day off-peak travel. Bus services are plentiful and frequent.

The **ferry** (330 1444; www.merseyferries.co.uk) across the Mersey, started 800 years ago by Benedictine monks but made famous by Gerry & the Pacemakers, still offers one of the best views of Liverpool. Boats depart from Pier Head ferry terminal, just north of Albert Dock. Special 50-minute commentary cruises run year-round, departing hourly from 10am to 3pm on weekdays and until 6pm on weekends (adult/concession/child £4.95/3.60/2.75).

LAKE DISTRICT

A dramatic landscape of dizzying ridges and huge lakes gouged out by the slow march of Ice Age glaciers, the Lake District is the most beautiful corner of England. The lakes are easily England's most popular wilderness, attracting 14 million-plus visitors each year. Even in summer, day hikes on the mountains – with their swiftly changing microclimates – have proved fatal to experienced hikers so before heading out, prepare thoroughly and check the **Weatherline** (0870-055 0575; www.lake-district.gov.uk/weatherline).

Getting There & Away

National Express buses have direct connections from Windermere to Preston (£9.90, two hours, two daily) and Keswick to Birmingham (£31, 3½ hours, two daily).

For all public transport inquiries contact **Traveline** (0870 608 2608; www.travelcumbria.org.uk). There are several important bus services in the Lake District, including bus 555, which runs about once an hour year-round and links Lancaster with Carlisle, via Kendal, Windermere, Ambleside, Grasmere and Keswick. Bus 599 is an open-top bus that runs during the summer between Windermere and Ambleside, via Grasmere. Bus 505 runs from Ambleside to Coniston via Hawkshead. Ask about Day Ranger (£7.50) and Explorer tickets (four/seven days £17/25), which can offer better value than single tickets.

Windermere is at the end of a spur off the main railway line between London's Euston station and Glasgow. Services include London (£109, four hours, at least six daily) and Manchester (£13.30, two hours, 15 daily).

Getting Around

Walking or cycling are the best ways to get around, but bear in mind that conditions can be treacherous, and the going can be very, very steep. **Country Lanes** (01539-444544; www.countrylanes.co.uk; Windermere train station; per day from £15) rents many sizes of bikes.

Windermere, Bowness & Around

01539 / pop 8500

Thanks to the railway, the Windermere/Bowness conglomeration is the largest tourist town in the Lake District. The two towns are quite strung out, with lakeside Bowness a 30-minute downhill walk from Windermere. The excellent **Windermere TIC** (46499; www.golakes.co.uk;

Victoria St) is conveniently located near the train station at the northern end of town, and also has internet access (30 minutes £3).

Offering beds in small rooms and plenty of camaraderie, **Lake District Backpackers Lodge** (46374 or 44725; High St; dm £12.50) is 200m from the train station; call ahead for reservations. Popular with families and 2 miles from the train station, **Windermere YHA** (0870 770 6094; High Cross, Bridge Lane, Troutbeck; dm under/over 18yr £9.95/13.95) commands a scenic spot on Lake Windermere in the Troutbeck Valley. Numerous buses run past Troutbeck Bridge, and in summer the hostel sends a minibus to meet trains. Windermere is wall-to-wall with B&Bs, which the TIC can book for you. The great-value **Brendan Chase** (45638; www.placetostaywindermere.co.uk; 1 College Rd; s/d from £25/40) is close to the station and serves an excellent cooked breakfast.

Bowness Kitchen (45529; 4 Grosvenor Tce, Bowness) serves tasty toasted sandwiches for £3, while **Old England** (42444; Church St; afternoon tea £11) offers a refined riverside spot for afternoon tea.

Grasmere

015394 / pop 2700

Occupying a graceful spot amid meadows, woods and water, Grasmere is a delight. Unsurprisingly, in summer it's completely overrun. Information can be found at the **TIC** (35245; Red Bank Rd; 9.30am-5.30pm). The homes of poet William Wordsworth are the major attractions here. **Dove Cottage & Museum** (35544; www.wordswoorth.org.uk; adult/concession/child £6.20/5.90; 9.30am-5.30pm) is where Wordsworth wrote much of his most important work. The admission price includes a worthwhile guided tour. Just south of Grasmere, it's accessible by bus 555 or 599 (in summer).

Grasmere Butarlyp How YHA (0870 770 5836; grasmere@yha.org.uk; Easedale Rd; dm under/over 18yr £10.95/15.00) is just north of the village.

Kendal

01539 / pop 28,000

On the eastern outskirts of the Lake District National Park, Kendal is a lively town and makes for a good base from which to explore the region. The **TIC** (725758; Highgate) is in the town hall.

Kendal Youth Hostel (0870 770 5892; kendal@yha.org.uk; 118 Highgate; dm under/over 18yr £13.95/17.50; daily mid-Apr-Aug, Tue-Sat Sep-early Apr) is right next door to the Brewery, a wonderful arts complex with a theatre, cinema and bar/bistro.

Kendal is on the branch railway line from Windermere to Oxenholme, with connections to Manchester.

NORTHEAST ENGLAND

By turns wild, pretty, historic and urban, this corner of England offers excellent walking and hiking country, two of England's most vibrant cities – historic York and resurgent postindustrial Newcastle – plus a hoard of world-class relics and ruins dating back two turbulent millennia. Don't miss Roman emperor Hadrian's vast wall straddling England's narrow neck.

YORK

01904 / pop 181,000

A settlement of military, political, religious and commercial eminence dating from Roman times right up to the Industrial Revolution, this bustling, tourist-friendly city is easily explored on foot, despite the press of visitors, and is one of England's finest urban attractions. Visitors from York's medieval past would recognise, even today, much of its wonderfully preserved heritage, such as the spectacular Minster and the stout medieval wall girdling the city's ancient alleyways.

Orientation

Although the city is relatively small, York's streets are a confusing medieval tangle, further confused by the fact that 'gate' means street and 'bar' means gate. There are five major landmarks: the walkable 2.5 miles of city wall; York Minster at the northern corner; Clifford's Tower, a 13th-century fortification and mound at the southern end; the Ouse River that cuts the centre in two; and the train station just outside the western corner.

Information

City Screen (541155; 13-17 Coney St; per 30min £2; 10am-5pm) Internet access.

TIC (www.visityork.org) Exhibition Sq (621756; De Grey Rooms; 9am-5pm Mon-Sat, 10am-4pm Sun Nov-Mar, 9am-6pm Mon-Sat, 10am-5pm Sun Apr-Oct); Train Station (621756; 9am-5pm Mon-Sat, 10am-4pm Sun Nov-Mar, 9am-6pm Mon-Sat, 9.30am-4.30pm Sun Apr-Oct) The website is useful for accommodation listings and special offers.

What's on York (www.whatsonyork.com) Up-to-date events listings.

Sights

Northern Europe's largest Gothic cathedral, **York Minster** (557216; www.yorkminster.org; Minster Yard; adult/concession £5/4; 9am-5pm Mon-Sat, noon-6.30pm Sun) is the city's highlight and a 1000-year-old treasure house of architecture and richly coloured stained glass, especially the giant **Great Eastern Window**, whose 117 detailed panels cost £58 to create in 1408. Take an audio tour of the **Undercroft** (adult/concession £3/2, combined ticket £7/5) for subterranean Roman, Norman and Viking remains and treasure, and the atmospheric crypt. The view past gargoyles and over the city atop the Minster's 275-step **tower** is spectacular.

In a big train shed near the train station, the **National Railway Museum** (621261; www.nrm.org.uk; Leeman Rd; admission free; 10am-6pm) is one giant train set offering you the chance to get up close to dozens of steam-age Leviathans, including the legendary *Mallard* and *Flying Scotsman*, the liveried splendour of various royal trains and a Japanese bullet train.

Also recommended is **York Castle Museum** (687687; www.yorkcastlemuseum.org.uk; Eye of York; adult/child £6.50/4; 9.30am-5pm Apr-Oct, 9.30am-4.30pm Nov-Mar), a labyrinth of rooms exploring 600 years of British life from medieval prisons to Victorian parlours and where you can try the bed of York's most famous prisoner, the notorious highwayman Dick Turpin.

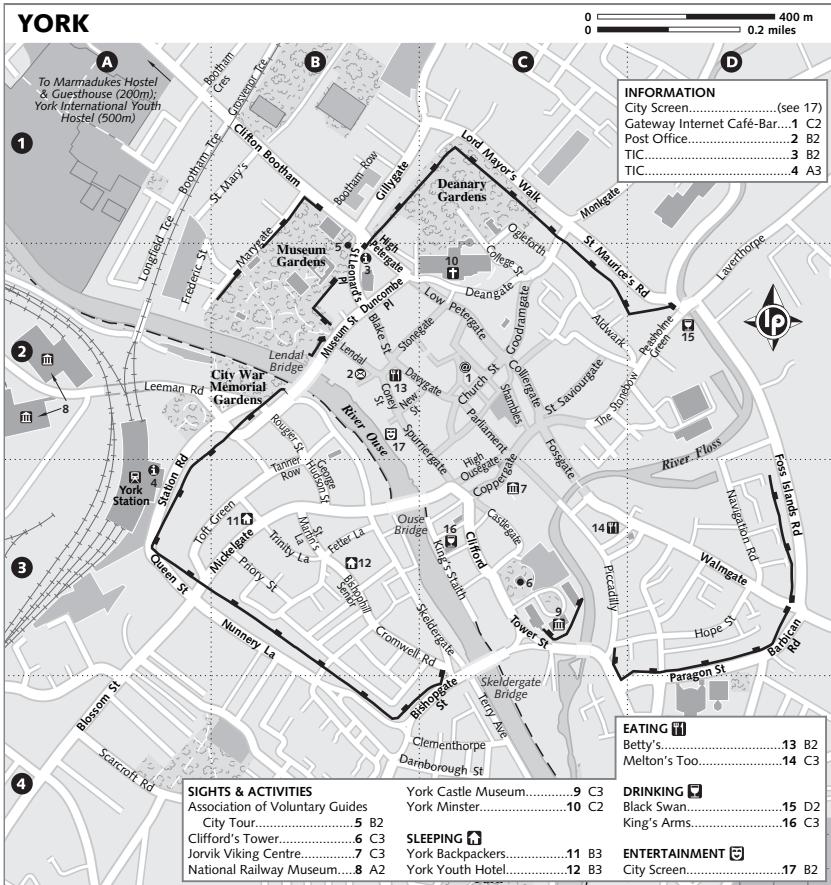
York's most popular visitor attraction, the **Jorvik Viking Centre** (543402; www.jorvik-viking-centre.co.uk; Coppergate; adult/concession/child £7.20/6.10/5.10; 10am-5pm Apr-Oct, 10am-4pm Nov-Mar) offers a time-machine ride through re-created Viking streets.

The Association of Voluntary Guides offers free two-hour **walking tours** (10.15am & 2.15pm Apr-Oct & 6.45pm Jun-Aug), departing across the street from the TIC.

Sleeping

York is always crowded in summer and finding a bed can be trying. Use the TIC's accommodation booking service (£3).

Marmadukes Hostel (0870 066 0156; www.marmadukeshostels.com; St Peter's Grove; dm £10-18, d from £18;) Easily the best hostel in town, newcomer Marmadukes offers plush, modern surroundings, small dorms (the largest holds 10 beds) and plush doubles with wood floors. The owners also run a smart, good-value guesthouse next door; there's a summer garden and a cosy little bar/café. It's all a five-minute walk from the city walls.



York International Youth Hostel (0870 770 6102; york@yha.org.uk; 42 Water End, Clifton; dm £13.50–18.50; Large and busy, this hostel is reached via a riverside footpath from the city centre. Most rooms have four beds, and there's a good café/bar and private garden. Book in advance to avoid the summer crush.

York Youth Hotel (0870 770 6104; www.yorkyouthhotel.com; 11–13 Bishophill Senior; dm £12–18) Located in a smart Georgian townhouse, this popular, if basic hostel offers decent four-, six- and eight-bed dorms, and a comfortable bar serving hearty pub grub.

York Backpackers (087720; www.yorkbackpackers.co.uk; 88–90 Micklegate; dm £13–14, d £35; A group-oriented place offering spartan dorm accommodation beneath elaborately corniced

ceilings in a splendid 18th-century historic house. Pros? It has a lively bar selling cheap beer. Cons? The wooden bunks are rickety and there's one huge, sleep-defying 36-bed dorm.

Eating

York is awash with individual and inexpensive little tearooms serving light lunches and snacks. There's a vast array of restaurants too.

Betty's (069142; St Helen's Sq; lunch mains £6–8, cream tea £7; 9am–9pm) A high-class treat complete with a pianist tickling the ivories, this tearoom serves excellent lunches and breakfasts along with dainty pastries and great cream teas.

Melton's Too (069222; 25 Walmgate; tapas £3–5, mains £7.50–12; 10.30am–10pm) Unpretentious (and often locally sourced) British fare such

as Yorkshire steak and kidney pie and Whitby smoked haddock croquettes. Good tapas too.

Drinking & Entertainment

York is hardly party central, but the profusion of atmospheric city-centre pubs more than compensate.

King's Arms (069435; King's Staith) An enduringly popular riverside pub that really comes into its own in summer.

Black Swan (0686911; Peasholme Green) A rambling, higgledy-piggledy Tudor boozer hosting live blues and jazz on Sundays and serving great cask ales.

City Screen (0541144; 13–17 Coney St; admission from £4) A great little independent art-house cinema that also hosts regular live music and comedy gigs.

Getting There & Away

National Express buses arrive throughout the day from London (£22.50, five to seven hours) and four from Edinburgh (£30.50, six to eight hours). There are numerous daily trains from London's King's Cross (£83.50, two hours) and from Edinburgh (£63.50, 2½ hours).

NORTH YORK MOORS NATIONAL PARK

Wilder and more dramatic than the Dales, but no less beautiful, the brooding **North York Moors** (www.moors.uk.net) cover 550 sq miles of wild and wonderful terrain coloured purple by heather between July and September, and dotted with old stone farmhouses and romantic ruins.

The moors run east to west, from the craggy coastline that includes Whitby and Scarborough to the gentle rolling hills and steep cliffs of Hambleton and Cleveland Hills.

The **Moors Centre** (01439 772737; Lodge Lane, Danby; 10am–5pm Apr–Oct, 11am–4pm Nov, Dec & Mar, 11am–4pm Sat & Sun only Jan & Feb) offers good information on activities including the 110-mile Cleveland Way from Helmsley to Filey. The steam trains of the **North Yorkshire Moors Railway** (NYMR; 01751 473799; www.nymr.demon.co.uk; 1-day pass adult/concession/child £14/12/7; Apr–Oct) offer a more relaxing way to traverse the region, running the picturesque 18 miles between Pickering and Grosmont. Limited services run in winter.

Starting point for the Cleveland Way, Helmsley boasts a fine 13th-century ruined **castle** (0770442; adult/concession/child £4/3/2; 10am–6pm Apr–Sep, 10am–4pm Oct–Mar). There are several camping grounds in the area but it is worth

pitching your tent at **Foxholme Caravan Park** (0177241; www.ukparks.co.uk/foxholme; Harome; camp sites £8.50–12.50; Mar–Oct), 4 miles from Helmsley. **Helmsley Youth Hostel** (0870 770 5860; helmsley@yha.org.uk; Carlton Lane; dm £13.95) is a friendly backpacker option.

Getting There & Around

The **Moorbus** (01845 597426; www.moors.uk.net) services a network of stops (daily June to September, Sunday April to October) throughout the region. **Scarborough & District buses** (01723 507300; www.eyms.co.uk) runs the regular bus 128 service to Helmsley from Scarborough via Pickering (£3.55, 90 minutes, hourly).

DURHAM

0191 / pop 100,000

Worth a day trip at the very least, Durham is a magnificent natural hill fortress defended on three sides by a loop of the river Wear. Crowned by a magnificent castle and Britain's finest Norman cathedral, it's a hugely atmospheric place right down to the cobbles of its medieval streets. Being a posh university town, it's also a lively place packed with busy pubs and bars.

The compact town centre is best explored on foot and it's hard to get lost with the cathedral looming permanently above. The train station is northwest of the cathedral while the bus station is on the western side.

The **TIC** (084 3720; www.durhamtourism.co.uk; Millennium Pl; 9.30am–5.30pm Mon–Sat, 10am–4pm Sun) has a free accommodation booking service.

Durham Cathedral (086 4266; www.durhamcathedral.co.uk; Palace Green; admission free, tour adult/child £3.50/free; 9.30am–6pm Mon–Sat, 12.30–5pm Sun, 9.30am–8pm daily mid-Jun–early Sep) is a magnificent Unesco-listed landmark. Climb the 66m **tower** (adult/child £3/1.50) for spectacular city views.

Accommodation vacancies are virtually nonexistent during university graduation in late June. Eleven **colleges** (0334 5878; www.dur.ac.uk/conference_tourism; r per person from £20) – including the castle's medieval University College – offer a variety of rooms outside term time. There's no youth hostel so the best budget bet is to stay with the friendly **Mrs Metcalfe** (084 1020; 12 The Ave; s £22) book ahead.

The best food, drink and partying option is **Brown Sugar Bistro** (086 5050; 81–83 New Elvet; dishes £4–7; 7am–11pm), a great little bar, café and bistro for filling breakfasts and good ciabatta sandwiches. Also try the **Shakespeare** (63 Saddler St) or the **Varsity** (46 Saddler St), a bright, backpacker-

friendly, three-level pub with a good beer selection, cheap bar food and a covered garden.

Getting There & Away

Six National Express buses run from London daily (£27.50, six to eight hours) and three arrive from Edinburgh (£21.50, four to five hours). The Arriva X1 service runs throughout the day to Newcastle, excluding Sunday (£5 one way, one hour).

Trains arrive from London (£90.40, three hours) and Edinburgh (£44, two hours) throughout the day via the main London-Edinburgh line. Trains also arrive every few minutes from York (£18.90, 45 minutes).

Newcastle-Upon-Tyne

0191 / pop 450,000 (including Gateshead)

Once synonymous with postindustrial decline and decay, these days Newcastle is brimming with confidence and a hedonistic yen to have fun. With its distinctive Geordie accent that's thicker than molasses, this unfailingly friendly city has kick-started a vibrant arts and entertainment scene (although its riotous nightlife is a bit more of an established tradition).

Orientation & Information

Newcastle's compact city centre is easy to navigate on foot and there's also an excellent public transport system including a metro system circling the centre and connecting the suburbs. The Central train and coach station is just south of the centre.

Tourist information is available at the **TIC** (0191 277 8000; www.visitnewcastlegateshead.com; Market St; 9.30am-5.30pm Mon-Sat).

Sights

Make sure to stroll the riverside where many of Newcastle's great buildings and structures jostle for your attention.

The contemporary **Baltic** (0191 478 1810; www.balticmill.com; Gateshead Quay; admission free; 10am-7pm Mon-Sat, 10am-5pm Sun; **M** Gateshead) art centre is the North's answer to London's Tate Modern. It occupies a vast former flourmill just across the **Gateshead Millennium Bridge**.

The **Sage Music Centre** (0191 443 4666; www.thesagegateshead.org; Gateshead Quays; 10am-11.30pm; **M** Gateshead), is an architecturally amazing live music venue. Even if you're not attending a concert, it's well worth popping into the vast lobby for a peek and spending a few moments at the jazz and classical music listening posts.

If a museum dedicated to the science of genetics sounds dull, think again because **Life** (0191 243 8210; Times Sq; adult/concession £6.95/5.50; 10am-6pm Mon-Sat, 11am-6pm Sun; **M** Central Station) is a brilliantly realised audiovisual treat with great simulated rides that take you on hair-raising taxi trips through Newcastle and bungee jumping off its bridge.

Sleeping

Albatross Backpackers (0191 233 1330; www.albatrossnewcastle.com; 51 Grainger St; dm £16.50-19.50, s/d £45/47; **M** Central Station) Finally, the city centre has good budget accommodation at this new hostel with no curfew and 24-hour reception.

Newcastle YHA (0870 770 5972; www.yha.org.uk; 107 Jesmond Rd; dm £12; **M** Jesmond) A basic but clean YHA property in quiet Jesmond. It fills up quickly, so book ahead.

Eating

Many Newcastle restaurants have early-bird dinner specials.

El Torero (0191 233 1122; The Side, Quayside; mains £4-6; noon-11pm Mon-Sat; **M** Central Station) Decent tapas right in the centre of town, perfect for a light lunch or a later beer ballast pit stop.

Blake's Coffee House (0191 261 5463; 53 Grey St; breakfast £2-4; 9am-6pm; **M** Monument) This central, popular, high-ceilinged café is the perfect spot to gently recover from the night before.

Drinking & Entertainment

If you like the idea, as so many locals do, of staggering from one packed drinking shed to another to chase the seemingly eternal happy hour then simply head to the Bigg Market and Quayside areas. Local listings magazine the *Crack* has the latest clubbing intelligence.

World Headquarters (0191 7007; Curtis Mayfield House, Carliol Sq; **M** Monument) Fantastic club sounds ranging from funk, soul and old school R&B to rare groove, northern soul and a smattering of house. Newcastle's coolest nightclub.

Trent House Soul Bar (0191 2154; 1-2 Leazes Lane; **M** Haymarket) Easygoing and run by the World Headquarters folk (which explains the fantastic jukebox), this is a great place to kick the night off.

Baja Beach Club (0191 6205; Hillgate Quay; **M** Gateshead) The pumping pop, bikini-clad barmaids, tropical theming and roaring drunk crowd take this place so far over the top (and that's saying something for this town) it's compelling (in a multicar pileup kind of way).

Getting There & Around

Daily flights to **Newcastle International Airport** (code NCL; 0191 243 1488; www.newcastleairport.com), 20 minutes from the city centre, arrive from London's Heathrow and Gatwick airports, as well as Amsterdam and Paris, with other cities served on a less regular basis; see p155 for more. Regular ferries arrive at Royal Quays from Norway, Sweden and the Netherlands; see p154 for details.

National Express coaches travel from many major UK cities, including London (£25.50, 6½ hours) and Edinburgh (£11, 2½ hours).

There are frequent trains from Edinburgh (£39, 1¾ hours), London (£90.40, three hours) and York (£19.50, one hour).

The excellent metro (underground railway) is quicker and more efficient than many local buses. Unlimited travel for one day is £3.20.

Northumberland

Relatively unknown and unhyphenated, Northumberland offers wild, empty spaces, a rugged coastline and acres of empty beaches. Inland you'll find vast expanses of forested land, much of it a dedicated national park, its horizons dotted with the jagged remains of immense fortifications that speak of centuries of bloody conflict, mostly with the Scots.

Visitor information centres in the region include **Hexham TIC** (01434 652220; www.northumberland.gov.uk).

The most significant of these ruins is **Hadrian's Wall**. Brainchild of Roman Emperor Hadrian in 122 AD, it stretches for 73 miles from Newcastle to Bowness-on-Solway near Carlisle, and was the northern frontier of the empire for almost 300 years. It was superseded in Norman times by dozens of castles and fortified houses, some of which remain largely intact. One of the best examples of the fortifications is **Chesters Roman Fort** (01434 681379; www.hadrianswallcountry.org; adult/concession £3.80/2.90; 9.30am-6pm Apr-Sep, 10am-4pm Oct-Mar) near Chollerford. Its museum displays a fascinating array of Roman sculptures and drawings found in the area.

Sleeping

Corbridge, Hexham, Haltwhistle and Brampton make ideal bases for exploring the wall and are stuffed with B&Bs and a number of cheap, convenient YHA hostels.

Once Brewed Youth Hostel (0870 770 5980; oncebrewed@yha.org.uk; Military Rd, Bardon Mill; dm £13.95; Feb-Nov, closed Sun Feb & Oct, Mon Mar & Nov) Modern, well equipped and next to an information

centre, it is only 3 miles from Housesteads Roman Fort. Northumbria bus 685 (from Hexham or Haltwhistle stations) drops you at Henshaw. From there head north through Henshaw for a mile following the signs for Vindolanda until you see the visitor centre.

Greenhead Youth Hostel (016977 47401; greenhead@yha.org.uk; Greenhead, Brampton; dm £11.95; Apr-Oct) A charming chapel-conversion beside a babbling brook, with better facilities than most. It's 3 miles west of Haltwhistle station and is also served by the trusty bus 685 and the White Star bus 185 from Carlisle. Opening hours vary so call ahead.

GETTING THERE & AROUND

The Newcastle to Carlisle rail line has stations at Hexham, Haydon Bridge, Bardon Mill, Haltwhistle and Brampton but not all trains stop at all stations. There are hourly services from Carlisle and Newcastle on bus 685. From June to September the hail-and-ride **Hadrian's Wall Bus** (www.northumberland-national-park.org.uk) links Hexham, Haltwhistle and Carlisle with all the main sites.

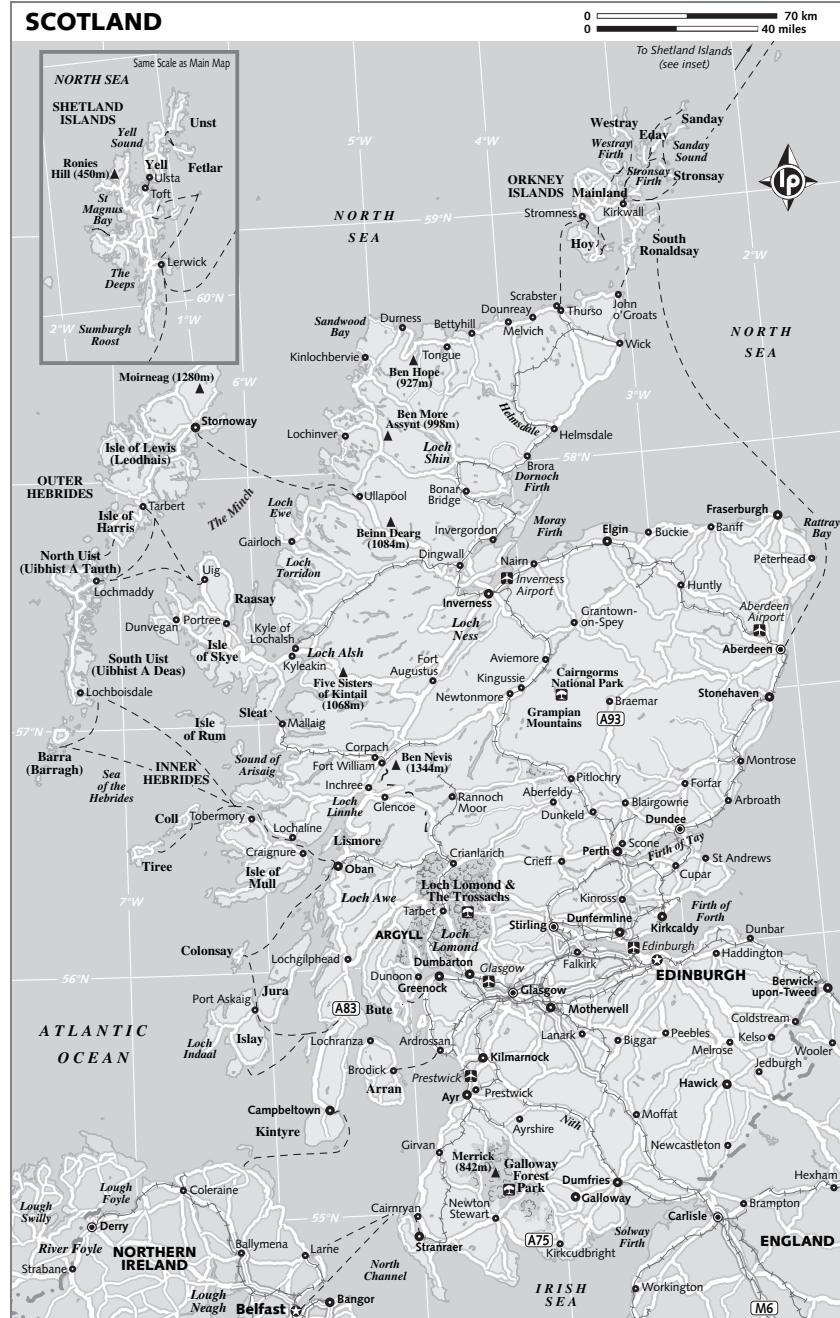
SCOTLAND

Don't make the mistake of thinking Scotland is just a continuation of England. It's a dramatically different, proudly independent country that deserves as much time as possible in your itinerary. Its vast wilderness areas of wild coast, remote islands, high moorland, vast lochs, stone-hewn villages and snow-capped mountains are an obvious draw outshining and outsizing anything in England or Wales. The array of terrain makes it an outward-bound and adventure sport enthusiast's playground, and one that's easily accessible from its cities. The principal cities, Edinburgh and Glasgow, are important and thriving centres rich with historical, cultural and social interest (and where the locals know how to party).

EDINBURGH

0131 / pop 448,000

Scotland's proud and historic capital city is a visual delight, built on a grand scale around an imposing castle. Among the large, well-proportioned Georgian buildings and the tangle of arches and walkways you'll find a rich haul of excellent museums, galleries, pubs, restaurants and entertainment options to suit



Sights

EDINBURGH CASTLE

Dominating the skyline like a city in the clouds, the hilltop complex of **Edinburgh Castle** (225 9846; www.historic-scotland.gov.uk/Castle_Hill; adult/concession/child £10.30/8.50/4.50; 9.30am-6pm Apr-Oct, 9.30am-5pm Nov-Mar) should be the first stop for any visitor. Perched on an extinct volcano, it's a hodge-podge of architectural styles, representing centuries of myriad historic uses. The Romanesque 11th-century **St Margaret's Chapel** is Edinburgh's oldest building; the **Scottish Crown Jewels** are among the oldest in Europe; and the **Stone of Destiny**, symbol of Scottish nationhood, resides here. The castle's darker history is recorded in its newly opened permanent **Prisoners of War** exhibition, where disembodied wails permeate the shadows.

REAL MARY KING'S CLOSE

A formerly plague-ridden nest of hidden streets, homes and shops, built over and preserved intact for centuries, comes to life at **Real Mary King's Close** (430160; www.realmarykingsclose.com; adult/concession/child £8.6/5.2; 2 Wariston's Cl, High St; 10am-9pm Apr-Oct, 10am-4pm Nov-Mar) on the Royal Mile. This fascinating underground tour gives insight into the lives of the ordinary folk who once lived here. A great crash course in Edinburgh history but not for the claustrophobic.

PALACE OF HOLYROODHOUSE & SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT BUILDING

At the foot of the Royal Mile, the **Palace of Holyroodhouse** (556 5100; www.royalcollection.org.uk; Canongate; adult/concession/child £8.80/7.70/4.80; 9.30am-6pm Apr-Oct, 9.30am-4.30pm Nov-Mar) is a beautiful baroque confection mostly dating from a reconstruction by Charles II in 1671. Best known as the home of Mary Queen of Scots, it's the official Scottish residence of the British royal family – which means it's closed when the Queen turns up. Don't miss the elaborate plaster ceiling and Brussels tapestries in the **State Apartments**.

The controversial new **Scottish Parliament Building** (348 5000; Canongate; admission free) is just opposite and well worth a look when Parliament isn't sitting. The project was jaw-droppingly expensive, finished unforgivably late and at the time of writing is still dogged with problems, but its concrete, stone and wood construction cleverly references Scottish history.

GETTING INTO TOWN

An Airlink service, operated by **Lothian Buses** (www.lothianbuses.co.uk), shuttles between the airport and city centre (£3, 30 minutes, every 15 minutes).

every taste and budget. With all this and the UK's most popular, vast and comprehensive summer arts festival scene, visitors who plan a brief stopover often end up staying longer.

Orientation

Edinburgh's two most distinctive landmarks are Arthur's Seat, the 251m rocky peak southeast of the centre, and the castle, which dominates Princes St Gardens. The Old and New Towns are separated by Princes St Gardens and Waverley train station. Buildings are restricted to the northern side of Princes St, which is lined with high-street chains. The Royal Mile (Lawnmarket, High St and Canongate) is Princes St's parallel equivalent in the Old Town. The bus station is in the New Town, off the northeastern corner of St Andrew Sq, north of Princes St.

Information

INTERNET ACCESS

connect@edinburgh (473 3800; 3 Princes St; per 15min £0.50; 9am-8pm Jul & Aug, 9am-5pm Sep-Jun) Inside the visitor information centre near Waverley train station.
e-Corner (558 7858; 54 Blackfriars St; per 30min £1; 10am-9pm Mon-Sat, 11am-9pm Sun) Fast internet access.

MEDICAL SERVICES

Edinburgh Royal Infirmary (536 1000; 51 Little France Cres, Old Dalkeith Rd; 24hr) For accidents and emergencies.

MONEY

American Express (718 2501; 69 George St; 9am-5pm Mon, Tue & Thu-Sat, 9.30am-5pm Wed)

TOURIST INFORMATION

Edinburgh & Scotland Information Centre (0845 225 5121; www.edinburgh.org; 3 Princes St; 9am-8pm Jul & Aug, 9am-5pm Sep-Jun) Accommodation reservations, currency exchange and coach booking services. Free city guide and pocket map.

Eventful Ed (www.eventful-edinburgh.com) Guide to city festivals.

The List (www.list.co.uk) Local listings magazine's events site.

**MUSEUMS**

Edinburgh has five impressive national art galleries, linked by a free bus. First stop for many is the **National Gallery of Scotland** (624 6200; www.natgalscot.ac.uk; The Mound; admission free; 10am-5pm Fri-Wed, 10am-7pm Thu), a beautifully housed collection of European blockbusters by the likes of Titian, Rembrandt and Monet.

The **Museum of Scotland** (247 4422; www.nms.ac.uk; Chambers St; admission free; 10am-5pm Mon-Sat, noon-5pm Sun) offers a thorough telling of Scotland's story from its days as volcanic magma to devolution.

Sleeping

It's essential to book for festival, New Year and peak summer periods, and it's never too early to do so.

Smart City Hostel (0870 892 3000; www.smartcityhostels.com; 50 Blackfriars St; dm from £16.50, 2-bed r from £28.50) This huge new hostel was still a building site when we visited but should be worth checking out. It promises a high-end, 620-bed hostel, including women-only dorms, laundry and café.

Edinburgh Backpackers Hostel (220 1717; www.hoppo.com; 65 Cockburn St; dm £14-20, d/tr/q from £50/64/78) Bright and friendly, and close to pubs, this is a good bet. It has a large TV and pool room, and a few quiet doubles over the road, but the shower/bed ratio could be higher.

Brodies Backpackers (556 6770; www.brodieshostels.co.uk; 12 & 93 High St, Royal Mile; dm £10-19.50, s/d £35/40;) Occupying two sites (go for the slightly smarter one at number 93, which also has the private rooms), the dorms are fine with superior mattresses, although new carpets in the older block wouldn't hurt.

St Christopher's Inn (226 1446; www.st-christophers.co.uk; 9-13 Market St; dm £13-19;) With two bars and proximity to city-centre nightlife, this is the party hostel. All dorms have en suites and there's an inexpensive restaurant attached.

Lined with solid Georgian townhouses, Pilrig St is a 10-minute walk from the centre and has about a dozen B&Bs. Our favourite is **Balmoral Guest House** (554 1857; www.balmoralguesthouse.co.uk; 32 Pilrig St; s/d from £30/45), quiet and friendly, with comfortable beds and attractive period décor.

Also recommended:

High St Hostel (557 3984; www.scotlands-top-hostels.com; 8 Blackfriars St; dm £11-12.50) With luck a major renovation programme will see the old carpets chucked out and the lingering aroma of stale socks banished forever.

Belford Hostel (225 6209; www.hoppo.com; 6/8 Douglas Gardens; dm incl breakfast £15-17, d/tr/q from £40/58/79;) Church conversion with excellent bar lounge. Close to two major galleries and a 10-minute walk from the city centre.

Eating

Many of the city's 700 bars also offer good budget- to mid-priced meals. Self-caterers have easy access to several small urban supermarkets including **Tesco Metro** (94 Nicolson St; 7am-midnight) along Nicolson Street.

Always Sunday (622 0667; 170 High St, Royal Mile; mains £4-6; 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-6pm Sun) This elegant, modern café is the best on the Royal Mile serving Fairtrade coffee, wheat-free dishes, good light lunches and plenty of vegetarian options.

our pick Valvona & Crolla (556 6066; 19 Elm Row; 8am-6pm Mon-Sat, 11am-4.30pm Sun) The makings of a luxury picnic including a great array of cheeses, bread and deli goodies such as Spanish ham and Scottish smoked salmon await at this atmospheric old providore.

Monster Mash (225 7069; 4 Forrest Rd; mains £5-9; 8am-10pm) A greasy spoon café reinvented, Monster Mash serves generous portions of Brit comfort food – fried breakfasts, sausage and mash, shepherd's pie, steak pie – fast and without fuss.

Drinking & Clubbing

The array of pubs and bars is vast, as you'd expect from a capital city, tourist hot spot and student town. Edinburgh also has a frenetic arts and entertainment scene that stretches well beyond the traditional festival period. Pick up fortnightly local magazine the *List* (£2.20) for the latest info .

Belushi's (226 1446; 9-13 Market St; noon-1am) Attached to St Christopher's Inn, Belushi's has a ready client base of young partygoers but the late licence, live music and lively DJ sets make this worth considering even if you're not sleeping upstairs.

Bow Bar (226 7667; 80 The West Bow, Victoria St) Small and popular, and attracting a slightly older crowd. You'll find a good real ale and single malt whisky selection at the bar.

Sandy Bells (225 2751; 25 Forrest Rd; 11.30-1am Mon-Sat, 12.30-11.30pm Sun) This tiny pub is the best spot in the city to experience traditional Scottish music, with free performances almost every night and also on Sunday afternoons. Fills up quickly on weekends.

Liquid Room (225 2564; 9c Victoria St; admission £4-8; 10.30pm-3am Mon-Sat, 11pm-3am Sun) A popular mid-sized club, the subterranean Liquid Room has the best indie night in town every Friday. It's also a good live venue attracting some big rock acts.

Entertainment

Filmhouse (228 2688; www.filmhousecinema.com; 88 Lothian Rd; tickets £5.50) is a great independent movie house. Its eclectic programme runs the gamut of the classic, the obscure and the downright weird. Also the home of the August Edinburgh International Film Festival (www.edfilmfest.org.uk).

Getting There & Away

AIR

The number of connections between **Edinburgh International Airport** (333 1000) and other European cities is increasing all the time, including to Amsterdam, Paris and Madrid, while US flights also arrive from New York. There are many arrivals from the rest of the UK – via such hubs as London, Bristol, Birmingham, Cardiff, Luton and Manchester – and from other Scottish cities including Aberdeen and Inverness; see p155 for more details.

BUS

National Express and **Scottish Citylink** (0870 550 5050; www.citylink.co.uk) services arrive from a multitude of locations throughout the UK at St Andrew Sq bus and coach station. Citylink buses travel from Aberdeen (£17.20, 3½ hours, hourly), Glasgow (£4.20, 1½ hours, every 20 minutes) and Inverness (£16.70, four hours, hourly), while National Express services arrive from London (£31, nine to 12 hours, seven daily), Newcastle (£15.20, three hours, three daily) and York (£30.50, 5½ to nine hours, four daily).

Megabus (01738-639095; www.megabus.com) runs frequent refurbished double-decker bus services to Edinburgh from Glasgow (1½ hours), Dundee (two hours) and Perth (1½ hours). Fares are as low as £1 (plus £0.50 booking fee).

TRAIN

Up to 20 trains run daily from London's King's Cross station (4½ to 5½ hours) and fares vary considerably. **ScotRail** (0845 748 4950; www.firstgroup.com/scotrail) runs two northern lines to Edinburgh from Inverness (£34.90, 3½ hours)

and Aberdeen (£34.90, 2½ hours), with trains throughout the day. There are trains every 15 minutes from Glasgow (£9.90, 45 minutes).

Getting Around

Local adult bus fares start at £1 and exact change is required. For full information – including details on the night bus system – pick up a free *Edinburgh Travelmap* from the visitor information centre.

GLASGOW

0141 / pop 577,000

It may not be as picturesque as its richer neighbour Edinburgh, but the former industrial powerhouse of Glasgow is grittier, edgier and arguably more fun. Overflowing with good museums and galleries, the best nightlife in Scotland and a lively arts scene (kept vibrant and cutting edge by the presence of a good art school), Glasgow also makes a good jumping-off point for the Highlands.

Orientation

The two train stations (Central and Queen St), Buchanan St bus station and the TIC are all within a couple of blocks of George Sq, the city's main public space. Running along a ridge in the northern part of the city, Sauchiehall (pronounced sokky-hall) St is a busy pedestrian mall with high-street shops at its eastern end and pubs and restaurants to the west. It connects with Buchanan St, a second major thoroughfare.

Information

American Express (222 1401; 115 Hope St; 8.30am-5.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat) **easylInternet** (222 2364; 57 St Vincent St; per hr £1.40; 24hr)

Glasgow Royal Infirmary (211 4000; 84-86 Castle St, 24hr) For accident and emergency care.

TIC (204 4400; www.seeglasgow.com; 11 George Sq; 9am-6pm Mon-Sat Oct-Apr, 9am-7pm Mon-Sat, 10am-6pm Sun May, Jun & Sep, 9am-8pm Mon-Sat, 10am-6pm Sun Jul & Aug) Has a currency exchange. The website offers online accommodation bookings.

Sights

If you only visit one museum in Glasgow make it **Kelvingrove Art Gallery & Museum** (287 2699; www.glasgowmuseums.com; Argyle St; admission free; 10am-5pm Mon-Thu & Sat, 11am-5pm Fri & Sun). Contained in this Victorian fairy tale of a stately home is a magpies' nest of oddities – suits of armour, a

giraffe plus a Spitfire fighter plane hanging from the ceiling. There's also plenty of serious art including Renaissance paintings from the likes of Botticelli, impressionists including, Whistler and Monet, works from local boy Charles Rennie Mackintosh and, in pride of place, Salvador Dalí's *Christ of St John of the Cross*.

Mackintosh's greatest architectural achievement is the **Glasgow School of Art** (353 4526; www.gsa.ac.uk; 167 Renfrew St; tour adult/concession £6.50/4.80). Call or check the website for tour times.

The **Gallery of Modern Art** (229 1996; www.glasgowmuseums.com; Queen St; admission free; 10am-5pm Mon-Thu & Sat, 11am-5pm Fri & Sun) is a most accessible and very popular collection of works housed in a beautiful neoclassical building in the city centre. A good introduction to some of Scotland's finest contemporary artists.

Looming on a hill above the nearby cathedral, Glasgow's atmospheric **necropolis** (287 3961; Wishart St; admission free; dawn-dusk) is like no other cemetery in Scotland. A fascinating glimpse into the vanity and wealth of a bygone age, there are also some of the best views of the city from between the crooked tombs.

Sleeping

Glasgow Youth Hostel (0870 004 1119; 7-8 Park Tce; dm £14-16;) A grand hostel with acres of wood panelling and a good address next to a leafy park. The four- and eight-bed dorms are excellent.

our pick Euro Hostel (222 2828; www.euro-hostels.co.uk; 318 Clyde St; dm £14-19, s/d £35/40;) A large, party-friendly mega hostel in a high-rise close to Central Station. Clean and recently refurbished, with a women-only floor, a bar, TV room and plenty of other facilities.

Campus Village (553 4148; www.rescat.strath.ac.uk; off Collins St; r per person incl breakfast £27-33; Jun-Sep) A large, modern complex of student accommodation at the University of Strathclyde. Well located near the cathedral, facilities are clean but basic. Some singles have shared bathrooms; phonecards have to be purchased to use the in-suite phones.

Eating

Glasgow offers some great, fresh, inexpensive dining options.

Mono (552 9458; 12 King's Court; mains £2.50-6; 9pm-9pm Sun-Thu, noon-10pm Fri & Sat) An endearingly scruffy veggie café, bar, health-food shop and leftfield record store. Tofu jerk with basmati rice, hummus, falafel and veggie burgers

GETTING INTO TOWN

The bus 905 shuttle service runs from Glasgow International Airport to Buchanan bus station. Services cost £3.30 and run from 6am Monday (from 7am Sunday) to midnight Saturday, every 10 to 15 minutes during the week and every 30 minutes at weekends.

are some of the options, washed down with an excellent Fraoch Heather Ale.

Wee Curry Shop (353 0777; 7 Butech St; noon-2pm Mon-Sat, 5.30-10.30pm Sat) A great little south Indian restaurant with a two-course £4.75 lunch special. Prices jump a bit at night but with a bring-your-own beer policy, you'll save anyway. Book ahead, it's not called 'wee' for nothing.

Café Andaluz (339 1111; 2 Cresswell Lane; tapas £2.75-5; noon-10.30pm Mon-Thu, noon-11pm Fri & Sat, 6-10.30pm Sun) Once you've fashioned some earplugs from the Manchego cheese to keep out the interminable muzak, you'll be ready to enjoy the inexpensive hot and cold tapas here.

Fresh (552 5532; 51-53 Cochrane St; juices & smoothies £2.50; 8am-7pm Mon-Fri, 9am-6pm Sat, 11am-6pm Sun) The city-centre's only fresh-juice bar has the décor of a day spa to complement its wide range of fruity pick-me-ups.

Drinking & Clubbing

Glasgow has plenty of good pubs and street cafés – the piazza around the Gallery of Modern Art is a great spot for sitting outside and watching the world go by. Glasgow is also Scotland's entertainment and nightlife capital. Plug in to what's on by picking up a copy of the *List* (£2.20) or the monthly *Gig Guide*, available free in many pubs. Tickets can be booked via **Ticket Scotland** (204 5151; www.ticketscotland.com).

Blackfriars (552 5924; 36 Bell St; noon-midnight Mon-Sat, 12.30pm-midnight Sun) Glasgow's best traditional pub couldn't be more laid-back, attracting a healthy mix of locals, students and visitors.

Bar 10 (572 1448; 10 Mitchell Lane; 10am-midnight Mon-Sat, noon-midnight Sun) A busy, metropolitan Euro-bar offering drinks specials and DJs on most nights.

King Tut's Wah Wah Hut (221 5279; 272a St Vincent St; noon-midnight Mon-Sat, 6pm-midnight Sun) A legendary live music spot where the early indie versions of Oasis and Radiohead started out. Live music nightly.



Barrowlands (552 4601; www.glasgow-barrowland.com; 244 Gallowgate) Legendary old dancehall venue where some of the larger visiting bands crack open their guitar cases. Check online and book ahead.

Arches (565 1000; 253 Argyle St; admission £5-12; 11pm-3am Wed-Sat) A fantastic, modular club space that can turn from an intimate multi-venue scene to pumping mega club (hosting the likes of Carl Cox and Laurent Garnier). There's also live music and an excellent bar and café (open 11am to late Monday to Saturday) under one of the high brick arches.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Ten miles west of the city, **Glasgow International Airport** (887 1111) receives flights from the UK and the rest of the world. Several no-frills airlines, including easyJet, BMI Baby and Ryanair, provide domestic services from London and other cities; see p155 for more details. Don't confuse GIA with Glasgow Prestwick, a smaller airport, much, much further out.

BUS

All long-distance buses arrive and depart from **Buchanan St Bus Station** (333 3708; Killermont St). **Silver Choice** (01355 230403; www.silverchoicetravel.co.uk) offers the best deal from London (£25, 8½ hours).

National Express services arrive from London (£31, 8½ to 10 hours, seven daily) and York (£30.50, seven to 10 hours). Scottish Citylink connects Glasgow with most of Scotland's towns and cities, including frequent services to Edinburgh (£4.20, 1¼ hours, every 20 minutes), Aberdeen (£17.20, four hours), Fort William (£14, three hours), Inverness (£16.70, four hours), Oban (£13.10, three hours), Skye (£24.80, 6¼ hours) and Stirling (£4.20, 45 minutes). Megabus runs to three Scottish cities: Dundee (two to three hours), Edinburgh (1½ hours) and Perth (two hours). Fares are as low as £1 (plus £0.50 booking fee).

TRAIN

Trains arrive through the day from London Euston and London King's Cross. It's more comfortable than a long-haul bus trek but prices can vary considerably (from £30) for the five-hour direct trip. ScotRail operates the West Highland line north to Oban and Fort William and to Dundee (£23.10, 1½ hours), Aberdeen (£34.90, 3¼ to four hours) and Inver-

ness (£34.90, 3½ hours). There are many trains from Edinburgh (from £9.90, 50 minutes).

Getting Around

The city is covered by a good bus system but passengers often need exact change. The First-Day ticket allows unlimited all-day travel after 9.30am for £2.45.

The highly efficient **SPT subway** (0870 608 2608; www.spt.co.uk) loop connects 15 stations in the centre, west and south of the city; single SPT tickets cost £1. For travel after 9.30am, there's an unlimited-trip Discovery Ticket for £1.90.

SOUTHWEST SCOTLAND

Southwest Scotland offers some fine Scottish scenery – bare hills, moors, woods and a craggy coastline – without the attendant tour buses and crowds you might find in the Highlands. Warmed by Gulf Stream currents, it enjoys the region's mildest climate (we're speaking relatively here) and was the home of Robbie Burns, Scotland's national poet.

Isle of Arran

The Isle of Arran is often described as 'Scotland in miniature' because of its compact variety of scenery including sheep-strewn farmland, rock-sheltered beaches, looming peaks such as **Goat Fell** and a coastal road that's perfect for cycling. The **Brodick TIC** (303774; www.ayrshire-arran.com; The Pier; 9am-5pm Mon-Thu & Sat; 9am-7.30pm Fri, 10am-5pm Sun May-Sep, 9am-5pm Mon-Sat Oct-Apr) is stocked with helpful information.

The highly recommended **Brodick Castle** (302202; adult/child £10/7; 11am-4.30pm Apr-Sep, 11am-3.30pm Oct), 2.5 miles north of the TIC, is a magnificent 13th-century sandstone pile full of silver, porcelain and hunting trophies of the stuffed head variety.

Call the TIC for accommodation assistance or head for the **Belvedere Guest House** (302397; stb@vision-unlimited.co.uk; Alma Rd, Brodick; s/d £20/40). The nearest **SYHA hostel** (0870 004 1140; dm £12-14; Mar-Oct) is 14 miles north in Lochranza.

GETTING THERE & AROUND

Brodick is only an hour by **CalMac** (302166; www.calmac.co.uk passenger/car £5/36.50) ferry ride from Ardrossan (four to six daily). Six buses run daily Monday to Saturday from Brodick to Lochranza (£2, 45 minutes) and there are additional services around the island or rent two wheeled transport from **Mini Golf Cycle Hire** (07968-024040; Shore Rd, Brodick).

CENTRAL SCOTLAND

North of the big cities but before the Highlands start their climb north, this area of gently rolling hills is home to some of Scotland's most important secondary towns, including striking and historic Stirling. On the coast near Dundee, the ancient university town of St Andrews and spiritual home of the game of golf is well worth the detour.

Stirling

01786 / pop 45,000

Commanding spectacular views over the surrounding plains and snow-capped mountains, Stirling Castle is one of Scotland's two most spectacular fortifications and is the main reason for a visit to this lively little town.

Head up the steep streets from the train station and you'll find some fascinating old stone buildings, the SYHA hostel and the windswept castle itself. Take a slight detour to the TIC (08707-200620; 41 Dumbarton Rd; 9am-7.30pm Mon-Sat, 9.30am-6.30pm Sun Jul & Aug, hours vary Sep-Jun) for local information.

The thick, grey walls of **Stirling Castle** (045000; www.historic-scotland.gov.uk; adult/concession/child £8/6; 9.30am-6pm Apr-Oct, 9.30am-5pm Nov-Mar), perched dramatically on an extinct volcano, contain some excellent sights and experiences, including an absorbing guided tour.

One of Scotland's best SYHA properties, **Stirling Youth Hostel** (0870 004 1149; St John St; dm £14-15, tw £35;) occupies a large old church building near the castle. Rooms are small and each has en suite facilities. The huge dining room/lounge area is a great hang-out spot.

Munro Guesthouse (072695; www.munroquesthouse.com; 14 Princes St; s/d £35/48) is a cosy little B&B right in the heart of town. If you're after refreshment, **Peckham's** (047047; 52 Port St; mains £7-9; 10am-10pm) is a great little delicatessen with an inexpensive bistro and café serving some good-value wines.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Scottish Citylink buses arrive during the day from Aberdeen (£14.50, 3½ hours, four daily), Edinburgh (£6.20, one hour, three daily) and Glasgow (£4.20, 45 minutes, hourly), as well as other towns and cities.

ScotRail services arrive from Dundee (£13.70, 50 minutes), Edinburgh (£5.90, 50 minutes, twice hourly), Glasgow (£6.10, 40 minutes, every two hours) and other cities during the day.

St Andrews

01334 / pop 14,200

An ancient university town and Scotland's former ecclesiastical capital, St Andrews is best known for its affiliations with the game of golf.

The TIC (072021; www.visit-standrews.co.uk; 70 Market St; 9.30am-5pm Mon-Sat Oct-Mar, 9.30am-5pm daily Apr-Sep) has a free town guide with a street map.

The turmoil of the Reformation reduced Scotland's largest church, **St Andrews Cathedral** (072563; www.historic-scotland.gov.uk; The Pends; adult/child incl St Andrews Castle £6/2.70; 9.30am-6.30pm Apr-Sep, 9.30am-4.30pm Oct-Mar), to rubble in 1559. Half-demolished walls hint at its past splendour while a visitor centre explains its turbulent history. The 12th-century tower offers spectacular views. A short, windswept walk away is the ruined **St Andrews Castle** (077196; The Scores; adult/child £4.50/2; 9.30am-6.30pm Apr-Sep, 9.30am-4.30pm Oct-Mar).

Golf fans take over the town's accommodation during major tournaments and throughout the summer, so make peak bookings well in advance. Five minutes from the bus station, the only hostel in town is **St Andrews Tourist Hostel** (079911; www.standrewshotel.com; St Mary's Pl; dm £12-16; 7am-11pm). It's clean, basic and friendly, with only a few bunks per room.

There are several good eating options, including the **Eating Place** (075671; 177-179 South St; mains £4-7; 9.30am-5pm Mon-Sat, 11am-5pm Sun), which serves sweet and savoury Scottish pancakes and tapas upstairs. **Ma Bells** (072611; 40 The Scores) is where students and backpackers spend most of their drinking time.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Stagecoach Fife (01334-474238) runs buses from Edinburgh (£7, two hours, hourly) and Dundee (£3.10, 30 minutes, half-hourly).

The nearest train station is at Leuchars (a £10 taxi or £2.10 bus 96 or 99 ride away), with trains from Aberdeen, Dundee, Edinburgh and Inverness.

EASTERN HIGHLANDS

Like a craggy nose jutting defiantly into the North Sea, the land between Perth and the Firth of Tay in the south and Inverness and Moray Firth in the north offers great expanses of empty beach, craggy cliffs teeming with seabirds and tiny stone fishing villages. Aberdeen is the region's biggest city, providing the main ferry port for Shetland.

Aberdeen

01224 / pop 203,450

Founded in part on the demand for whale oil, today granite-hewn Aberdeen is booming on oil again, black gold this time from the North Sea. This busy working town and harbour lacks the historical charms of other Scottish towns of its size and is really only worth visiting if you're heading on to another part of the nearby coast or some of the remote northern isles.

The TIC (028882; www.aberdeen-grampian.com; 23 Union St; 9am-6.30pm Mon-Sat, 10am-4pm Sun Jul & Aug, hours vary Sep-Jun) is on the corner of Union St and Shiprow.

SLEEPING

The booming oil economy means beds fill up during the working week when oilfield workers monopolise much of the city's accommodation. Look for weekend deals.

SYHA Aberdeen Youth Hostel (0870 004 1100; 8 Queen's Rd; dm £13-15;) This imposing granite house a mile west of the train station is clean and welcoming but a bit too clinical to be truly cosy.

Clusters of B&Bs line Bon Accord St and Springbank Tce (both close to the centre). **Dunrovin Guest House** (086081; 186 Bon Accord St; s/d £30/50, with shared bathroom £27/40) gets our vote for its hearty Scottish breakfast (with fresh fruit and vegetarian options). Book ahead.

EATING & DRINKING

Many cafés, bars and restaurants cluster close to the TIC along scrubbed and refurbished Belmont St.

Prince of Wales (0640597; 7 St Nicholas Lane; mains £5) The area's best pub for a cheap and cheerful lunch. The city-centre institution offers some great Scottish ales to help the chips slip down.

Ashvale Fish Restaurant (0596581; 42-48 Great Western Rd; mains £6-9, takeaway £3; 11.45am-11pm) Further out of town, you'll find this quality, award-winning fish-and-chip joint.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Six miles northeast of the city centre, **Aberdeen Airport** (code ABZ; 0870 040 0006; www.aberdeenaeroport.com) receives flights from 34 destinations in 21 countries. There are also regular but expensive **Loganair** (0870 850 9850; www.loganair.co.uk) flights from Orkney (from £147) and Shetland.

The passenger ferry terminal is a short walk east of the train and bus stations. **NorthLink Ferries**

(0845 600 0449; www.northlinkferries.co.uk) runs to Orkney (passenger/car from £15.60/61.50, six hours, daily) and Shetland (passenger/car from £20.40/82.80, 12½ hours, three weekly).

There are National Express buses from London (£40, 12 hours, five daily). Scottish Citylink runs frequent services from Edinburgh (£17.20, three hours), Glasgow (£17.20, four hours) and other Scottish cities.

Rail services include departures to London Kings Cross (£122.50, 7½ hours) and Scottish destinations including Dundee (£20.70, one hour) and Inverness (£21.50, 2¼ hours).

WESTERN HIGHLANDS

If you choose to explore just one part of Scotland's vast wilderness, make it the Western Highlands. Stretching from Rannoch Moor to Fort William on the west coast, this is a majestically wild region of mist-covered glens, ice-cold lochs and towering snow-covered mountains, including Ben Nevis, Britain's highest peak. To the south lies Loch Lomond, the largest lake in Scotland; to the west, the rugged Isle of Mull. The 95-mile **West Highland Way** (www.west-highland-way.co.uk) between Fort William and Glasgow is one of Britain's best hiking trails (for moderately accomplished ramblers).

Fort William

01397 / pop 10,000

Situated on the banks of Loch Linnhe and at the bottom of the great Caledonian Canal, Fort William is no great shakes as a destination in itself but useful as a base for exploring the local mountains. There's at least one of everything here that a visitor might need – including hiking shops, cafés, pubs and accommodation. The TIC (0703781; www.discover-fortwilliam.com; Cameron Sq; 9am-8pm Mon-Sat, 10am-6pm Sun) has local information.

The lively, convivial **Fort William Backpackers** (0700711; www.scotlands-top-hostels.com; Alma Rd; dm £12;) is a short walk from the bus and train stations and has impressive hillside views. **Bank St Lodge** (0700070; www.accommodation-fortwilliam.com; dm £13; d/tr/q £45/55/65) is a tad sterile but very central.

GETTING THERE & AROUND

Scottish Citylink services connect to Glasgow (£14, three hours, four daily) and Edinburgh (£19.90, 3½ hours, three daily), both via Glencoe. The spectacular **West Highland Line**

(www.scotrail.co.uk) has three daily trains from Glasgow (£20.30, 3½ hours).

Some local buses are run by **Rapsons/Highland Country** (012373; www.rapsons.co.uk), but call ahead for timetables since services are seasonal. **Off-Beat Bikes** (074008; 117 High St; 9am–5.30pm) rents bikes from £10 per half-day.

Oban

01631 / pop 8500

A hub for summertime holidaymakers, Oban is a traditional resort town combining pretty bay-front vistas with a raft of visitor amenities. The bus, train and ferry terminals are together beside the harbour. The **TIC** (563122; Argyll Sq; 9am–7pm summer) is in a former church nearby.

Oban Backpackers Lodge (562107; www.scotlands-top-hostels.com; Breadalbane St; dm £12–13;) is less than a mile from the train station and has a welcoming ambience, including a friendly lounge area. The SYHA **Oban Youth Hostel** (0870 004 1144; Corran Esplanade; dm £13–15, s/d £17.50/35;) is a little more institutional but has great views across the bay and a smart new block of private rooms.

GETTING THERE & AROUND

There are Scottish Citylink buses from Glasgow (£13.10, three hours, four daily), Fort William (£8.20, 1½ hours, four daily) and other Scottish destinations. Three daily trains travel from Glasgow (£16.80, three hours). **Cal-Mac** (566688; www.calmac.co.uk) ferries link Oban with the Inner and Outer Hebrides.

Isle of Mull

Scotland's third-largest island abounds with great mountain views and pretty seascapes, drawing thousands of visitors to its charming shores every summer, along with the especially bloodthirsty strain of Mull midge (thankfully only a pest in summer). While most visitors arrive at the Craignure ferry terminal, many quickly head north to the capital and picture-perfect fishing port of Tobermory, whose quaysides are lined with houses in cheerful primary colours and cosy pubs.

There are TICs in both towns but only the **Craignure TIC** (01680-812377; opposite the ferry terminal; 8.30am–7pm Mon–Thu, 8.30am–5.15pm Fri, 9am–5pm Sat, 10am–5pm Sun) is open year-round. Call ahead for accommodation options.

Don't expect to turn up and easily find a bed in summer, as accommodation is often booked out. Call in advance for the tiny SYHA

Tobermory Youth Hostel (0870 004 1151; Main St; dm £12.50).

For a filling pub lunch or weekend evening of live music, **MacGochan's** (01688 302350; Ledalg, Tobermory; mains £3.50–£6) is popular with locals and visitors.

Caledonian MacBrayne (08705-650000; www.calmac.co.uk) ferries depart at least five times daily in summer and twice in winter between Oban and Craignure. The journey takes 45 minutes and costs £4.05 per person one way. Bicycles cost £1 and cars £36.

NORTHERN HIGHLANDS & ISLANDS

One of Europe's last great wildernesses, this breathtakingly beautiful swathe of endless moors, glassy lochs and wind-buffed coastal cliffs gets you as close to nature as you could wish to be. It's also the ancient homeland of Gaelic culture, and home to the British mainland's northernmost village, John o'Groats.

It's easy to underestimate the size of the region, so give yourself extra time to explore here via air, bus, train or ferry. Public transport outside the main centres can be as rare as a wild haggis sighting, and some services are severely curtailed out of season.

The Cairngorms

The Cairngorms are as dramatic and demanding as any of the Scottish ranges, and the coastline, especially from Stonehaven to Buckie, is exceptional. With its excellent visitor amenities, **Aviemore** makes a good base. This is where hikers, bikers and climbers congregate to take on the Scottish outdoors, and it's the country's skiing and snowboarding action centre. While the ski season traditionally runs from December until April, recent light snowfalls have seen closures as early as February.

The **Cairngorms National Park** (www.cairngorms.co.uk) doesn't rely on snow to show its visitors a good time. Combining wild mountain tundras and secluded ancient pinewoods, it's bursting with unique wildlife and lush colours year-round.

Aviemore Youth Hostel (0870 004 1104; 25 Grampian Rd; dm £12.50–14;) is modern, well equipped and close to the tourist office.

Inverness

01463 / pop 61,000

The capital of the Highlands, rapidly expanding Inverness is the perfect base for planning a trip through the region. It's an attractive town

straddling the Ness River, although it has few attractions of its own.

The town centre is on the river's eastern bank, along with the bus and train stations, new Eastgate shopping centre and several hostels. The **TIC** (234353; Castle Wynd; 9am–6pm Mon–Sat, 10am–5pm Sun) is near the castle and offers currency exchange and internet access (per 20 minutes £1).

No visit to Inverness is complete without a trek to legendary **Loch Ness**, a vast, deep body of water reputed to be the home of Nessie the monster. While tourists by the coach load roll up here every few minutes in the summer, there's no doubt that a half-day excursion is worth the Citylink bus fare (adult return £7.30). The romantic ruin of **Urquhart Castle** (01456-450551; adult/concession/child £6/4.50/1.20; 9.30am–6.30pm Apr–Sep, 9.30am–4.30pm Mon–Sat & 2–4.30pm Sun Oct–Mar) commands a great spot above the loch. Entry includes a movie presentation on the castle history.

Nearby Drumnadrochit earns a largely tacky living from the cult of the monster. **Loch Ness 2000** (01456-450573; adult/concession/child £5.95/4.50/3.50; 9am–8pm Jul & Aug, 9am–6pm Jun & Sep, 9am–5.30pm Oct, 9.30am–5pm Easter–May, 10am–3.30pm Nov–Easter) traces the historic hunts for Nessie.

SLEEPING

Inverness fills quickly in the summer so book ahead.

Backpackers Backpackers Hostel (717663; 4 Culduthel Rd; dm £10–15;) Clean and compact with some great views across the river. The homey feel is enhanced by a wood-burning stove.

Inverness Millburn Youth Hostel (0970 004 2227; Victoria Dr; dm £11.50–13.50;) A large, modern property that's one of the SYHA's best, although the location set far back from the river on the other side of the town centre is not ideal.

Inverness Tourist Hostel (241962; 24 Rose St; dm £13–14;) The town's newest backpacker option is located right at the bus station, with a swanky fitted kitchen, black leather couches and a helpful band of staff.

Eastgate Backpackers Hostel (718756; www.eastgatehostel.com; 38 Eastgate; dm £10–16) A well-situated, lively hostel with power showers, metal bunks and mixed and single-sex dorms.

Bluebell House (238201; www.bluebell-house.co.uk; 31 Kenneth St) The three good-value rooms at this delightful place, set just back from the northern side of Loch Ness, have been decorated

with care by the charming landlady who has an eye for interiors and antiques.

EATING & DRINKING

Castle Restaurant (230925; 41–43 Castle St; mains £4–7; 8am–8.30pm Mon–Sat) A backpacker favourite, this cheap and cheery café serves up heaping plates of simple comfort food that provides enough fuel for a giant hike around the region.

Hootananny Ceilidh Café Bar (233651; 67 Church St; noon–midnight) This excellent, sociable and folk-music-friendly pub easily wins prize for best boozier in town. A host of Scottish beer specials are on offer, and there's rip-roaring traditional music on the ground floor every night and a host of rock and comedy events upstairs almost as regularly. Shows are free throughout the week and there's a £2 charge, covering both floors, on Friday and Saturday.

GETTING THERE & AROUND

Ten miles east of town **Inverness airport** (code INV; 01667-464000) receives flights from Edinburgh, Glasgow, London, Orkney and Shetland, among others.

National Express coach services arrive from London (£40, 13 hours, four daily), while Citylink buses arrive from Edinburgh (£16.70, four hours, hourly), Fort William (£8.80, two hours, six daily), Glasgow (£15.50, four hours, hourly) and other Scottish destinations.

There are several daily trains from London (£12.80, eight to 10 hours), including the overnight *Caledonian Sleeper*, along with services from Glasgow (£34.90, 3½ hours) and Edinburgh (£34.90, 3¼ hours). The picturesque **Kyle of Lochalsh Line** (www.scotrail.co.uk) delivers passengers from the bridge across to the Isle of Skye (£15.90, 2½ hours, two to four daily), while the line from Thurso (£14, 3½ hours, two to three daily) connects with the ferry from Orkney.

Highland Country (710555; www.rapsons.com) operates local buses, with destination information and advice available at the TIC. A Rover ticket costs £6 for unlimited one-day travel.

Orkney Islands

01856 / pop 19,950

Just 6 miles off the north coast of Scotland, this magical group of islands is known for its dramatic coastal scenery (which ranges from soaring cliffs to white sandy beaches), abundant marine bird life and a plethora of mysterious prehistoric finds.

Sixteen of the 70 Orkney Islands are inhabited, but Kirkwall is the main town and Stromness is the major port. They're both on Mainland, the largest island. Contact the **Kirkwall TIC** (✉ 872856; www.visitorkney.com; 6 Broad St; ☎ Mon-Sat 9am-6pm) for more information.

Stenness, a village a short bus ride from Kirkwall or Stromness, is the most accessible spot for exploring prehistoric Orkney. The **Standing Stones of Stenness, Barnhouse Neolithic Village** and **Skara Brae**, a 5000-year-old village uncovered 150 years ago, are all close by. Particularly recommended is **Maes Howe** (✉ 761606; adult/child £3/1; ☎ 9.30am-6.30pm Apr-Sep, 9.30am-4.30pm Mon-Sat, 2-4.30pm Sun Oct-Mar), a 5000-year-old earth-mound tomb that's an impressive engineering feat by any standards and an atmospheric place.

There's a good selection of low-priced B&Bs in the area – especially on Mainland – and numerous hostels dot the region. In Stromness, **Brown's Hostel** (✉ 850661; 45 Victoria St; dm £11) is popular and close to the ferry.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Flights run by **Loganair** (✉ 0845 773 3377) arrive daily in Kirkwall from Aberdeen (from £147, one hour), Glasgow (from £184, 1½ hours) and other Scottish cities, while British Airways provides affiliated connections to London, Manchester and the rest of the UK.

Services operated by **Northlink Ferries** (✉ 0845 600 0449; www.northlinkferries.co.uk) run from Aberdeen, Scrabster and the Shetlands, while **John o'Groats Ferries** (✉ 01955 611353; www.jogferry.co.uk) also operates a passenger-only run from the mainland.

Shetland Islands

✉ 01959 / pop 21,998

Sixty miles north of Orkney, the Shetland Islands remained under Norse rule until 1469, when they were given to Scotland as part of a Danish princess' dowry. For information, visit the **Lerwick TIC** (✉ 693434; www.shetland-tourism.co.uk; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 8am-4pm Sat & 10am-1pm Sun Apr-Sep, 9am-5pm Mon-Fri Oct).

Much bleaker than Orkney, Shetland is famous for its varied bird life, rugged coastline and 4000-year-old archaeological heritage. It's worth taking a **boat** (✉ 01950 431367; www.mousaboottrips.co.uk) to the astounding and mysterious prehistoric engineering marvel of **Mousa Broch**, an amazingly preserved lookout tower on a tiny island south of Lerwick.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Small ferries connect a handful of the smaller islands. Contact the TIC for information on B&Bs and camping barns, or stay at **Lerwick Youth Hostel** (✉ 692114; King Harald St; dm £11; ☎ mid-Apr-Sep), which has a good café attached.

NorthLink Ferries (✉ 01856 851144) runs services from Aberdeen and Kirkwall to Lerwick.

North & West Coast

The coast from Dounreay west around to Ullapool is nothing short of spectacular. Everything is on a massive scale: vast emptiness, enormous lochs and snow-capped mountains. Unreliable weather and limited public transport are the only drawbacks.

From the tiny town of Durness you can make forays out to the savagely beautiful **Cape Wrath**, play extreme golf (at the most northerly course in Britain) or explore mile after mile of empty beach. The **Durness TIC** (✉ 01971 511259) can help with accommodation and sightseeing.

Ullapool is the jumping-off point for the Isle of Lewis; contact the **Ullapool TIC** (✉ 01854-612135; 6 Argyle St; ☎ daily Apr-Sep, Mon-Sat Oct, Mon-Fri Nov-Mar) for information. The coastline keeps getting better round to Gairloch, along Loch Maree and down to the Kyle of Lochalsh and Skye. From there, you're back in the land of the tour bus; civilisation (and main roads) can be a shock after all the empty space.

Kyle of Lochalsh ('Kyle') is a small village overlooking the lovely island of Skye across narrow Loch Alsh. There's a **TIC** (✉ 01599-534276; ☎ 9am-5.30pm Mon-Sat Easter-Oct) beside the seafront car park but the nearest hostels are on Skye. Kyle can be reached by bus and train from Inverness and also by direct Citylink buses from Glasgow (£22.40, 5½ hours).

Isle of Skye

pop 8850

Skye is a large, rugged island, measuring 50 miles north to south and 25 miles east to west. It's ringed by stunning coastline and dominated by the magnificent Cuillin Hills. The remote west coast is especially beautiful and is teaming with wildlife; seals and otters are frequently sighted. You can contact the **Portree TIC** (✉ 01478-612137; Bayfield Rd) for more information.

The SYHA hostels most relevant to ferry users are at **Uig** (✉ 0870 004 1155; dm £12; ☎ Apr-Sep) for the north and the Outer Hebrides (Western Isles), and **Armadale** (✉ 0870 004 1103; dm £12; ☎ Apr-Sep) for Mallaig. The best independent hostel is

the welcoming **Skye Backpackers** (✉ 01599-534510; www.scotlands-top-hostels.com; Kyleakin; dm £12-13), a short walk from the Skye Bridge.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

A road bridge connects Skye to the mainland. **CalMac** (✉ 0147-844248; www.calmac.co.uk) operates a ferry service from the mainland between Mallaig and Armadale (passenger/car £2.60/15.05, 30 minutes, four daily). It's wise to book, especially during the summer.

Outer Hebrides (Western Isles)

Home to Harris Tweed, the windiest place in Britain and prehistoric standing stones and brochs, there's more to these bleak, remote and treeless islands than you might think. The gale-swept island climate is fierce, however, and it rains more than 250 days of the year. Check out www.withb.co.uk for resources.

Lewis is reached by ferry from Ullapool, and its largest town, Stornoway, has a **TIC** (✉ 01851-703088; 26 Cromwell St) and several banks. On Harris (which can be reached from Uig on Skye), the **TIC** (✉ 01859-502011; Pier Rd) is in Tarbert. North Uist sports a **TIC** (✉ 01876-500321) in Lochmaddy, while South Uist has a **TIC** (✉ 01878-700286) in Barra.

WALES (CYMRU)

You don't have to travel far from the urban southeastern corner of Wales to hit its vast rolling hills and sparsely populated coastline. You'll get the most from a visit to Wales by heading into its great outdoors, tramping some of its glorious national park wildernesses and exploring remote inland towns and coastal villages. It is in these more remote spots that you'll get a real feel for the distinctive Welsh history, language and millennia-long literary and musical traditions that live on in some villages and towns.

SOUTH WALES

The villages that form a continuous chain along the valleys have their own stark beauty.

The **Big Pit** (✉ 01495-790311; admission free), near Blaenafon, closed as a coal mine in 1980. These days it gives you a chance to experience life underground, and the guided tours conducted by former miners are highly recommended.

Cardiff (Caerdydd)

✉ 029 / pop 315,000

Poor Cardiff. There's absolutely nothing wrong with it. It's a handsome town, with a castle, a large park, pleasant riverside walks, a few good museums and galleries, some interesting civic architecture and a reasonably lively cultural scene (helped by the presence of a university), yet these parts add up to a less than compelling whole and there's little to keep you here for long.

Stock up on maps and information from the **TIC** (✉ 2022 7281; www.visitcardiff.info; The Hayes; ☎ 9.30am-6pm Mon-Sat, 10am-4pm Sun) for all of Wales. Free internet access is available at **Cardiff Central Library** (✉ 2038 2116; Frederick St).

SIGHTS

The gargoyle-like animals guarding the outer walls give some clue to the lavish Victorian interior of **Cardiff Castle** (✉ 2087 8100; www.cardiffcastle.com; Castle St; grounds only adult/student £3.50/2.95; ☎ 9am-6pm Mar-Oct, to 5pm Nov-Feb). Nearby, the **National Museum & Gallery of Wales** (✉ 2039 7951; www.museumwales.ac.uk; Cathays Park; admission free; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun) offers a good crash course in Welsh culture and has one of the finest collections of impressionist art in Britain.

The port area at **Cardiff Bay**, about 2 miles from the centre, is a good place to stop for lunch. Here you'll find the imposing, modern, slate-sided performance and arts space of the **Wales Millennium Centre**, and the glass and wood marvel, with a roof like an upturned boat that is the new **Welsh Assembly Building**. You can find out all about it opposite at the **Pierhead** (✉ 2089 8477; admission free; ☎ 9.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 10.30am-4.30pm Sat & Sun).

SLEEPING & EATING

The city's beds can fill up when there's a big rugby match in town. A good, central newcomer is **Riverbank** (✉ 2037 8866; www.sleepcheap.co.uk; 53-59 Dispenser St, Riverside; s/d £40/50; ☎), close to the Millennium Stadium. The lively **Cardiff Backpacker** (✉ 2034 5577; www.cardiffbackpacker.com; 98 Neville St, Riverside; dm from £17.70; ☎) is a five- to 10-minute walk from most sights in the city centre. The **YHA Cardiff** (✉ 0870 770 5750; cardiff@yah.org.uk; 2 Wedal Rd; dm £14.90) is in a hip student area; take bus 28 or 29 to get there.

Cathedral Rd, which runs alongside the Taff River, is lined with B&Bs occupying large, solid houses. They include the **Church Hotel** (✉ 340881; 126 Cathedral Rd; s/d/f from £30/50/60).

**WALES**0 40 km
0 20 miles

Finding good, fresh food that's not out of a fryer or from familiar chain outlets is surprisingly hard in the city centre. Your best bet is to head to Cardiff Bay, which offers lots of options including the pretty, white-weatherboarded **Norwegian Church** (2045 4899; mains £3-5; 10am-6pm).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

National Express has buses to/from London (£19, 3½ hours, seven daily) and Bristol (£6.50, 50 minutes, every half-hour). Trains come from all over the southeast and head west to Swansea and as far as Haverfordwest.

Brecon Beacons National Park

The Brecon Beacons National Park covers 519 sq miles of high bare hills, surrounded on the northern flanks by a number of attractive market towns; Llandovery, Brecon, Crickhowell, Talgarth and Hay-on-Wye make good bases. The railhead is at Abergavenny (with a Norman castle). A 55-mile cycleway/footpath, the **Taff Trail**, connects Cardiff with Brecon.

The **National Park Visitor Centre** (01874-623366; www.visitbreconbeacons.com), near Libanus, is close to many walking trails. Other information offices are in **Brecon** (01874-622485) and **Llandovery** (01550-720693; Kings Rd; 10am-1pm & 1.45-4pm Mon-Sat, 2-4pm Sun). All make B&B bookings.

Brecon is an attractive, historic market town with a cathedral dating from the 13th century. A market is held here on Tuesday and Friday, and a highly acclaimed jazz festival in August. The **TIC** (622485; brectic@powys.gov.uk; 9am-5pm) can help with further information and offers a useful miniguide to the national park.

The **YHA Brecon** (0870 770 5718; brecon@yha.org.uk; Groesford; dm £13.95) is popular with trekkers and cyclists. The enchanting and central **B&B Cantre Selyf** (622904; www.cantreselyf.co.uk; Lion St; s £48, d £60-72;) occupies a spacious Georgian townhouse, and has décor that harks back to the 17th century, scrubbed floors and a lovely garden. The walker-friendly **Bridge Café** (622024; www.bridgecafe.co.uk; 7 Bridge St; mains £4-8; 11am-6pm Wed-Sat) offers delicious, fresh, creative homemade food and also has a couple of appealing, comfortable rooms (£40 to £50).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Brecon has no train station, but there are regular bus links. **Stagecoach Red & White** (01685-385539) has regular buses to Swansea and Abergavenny, and to Hereford via Hay-on-Wye.

SOUTHWEST WALES

The coastline northeast of St David's to Cardigan is particularly beautiful and, as it is protected by national park, it remains delightfully unspoilt. The **Pembrokeshire Coast Path** begins at Amroth, north of Tenby, on the western side of Carmarthen Bay and continues to St Dogmaels to the west of Cardigan.

Carmarthen Bay is often referred to as Dylan Thomas Country. The moving **Dylan's Boathouse** (01994-427420; adult/concession £3/2; 10am-5.30pm May-Oct, 10.30am-3.30pm Nov-Apr) at Laugharne, where he wrote *Under Milk Wood*, has been preserved as he left it. Llansteffan has a beautiful Norman castle overlooking sandy beaches. The west-facing beaches have good surf.

From Pembroke Dock **Irish Ferries** (08705-171717) leave for Rosslare in Ireland; ferries connect with buses from Cardiff and destinations east. **Stena Line** (08705-707070) has ferries to Rosslare from Fishguard; these connect with buses and trains.

Pembrokeshire National Park (www.pcnpa.org.uk) protects a narrow band of magnificent coastline. The free paper, *Coast to Coast*, has detailed local information.

The linchpin for the southwest is beautiful **St David's**, one of Europe's smallest 'cities', referred to as such because of its cathedral. There's a web of interesting streets and, concealed in the Vale of Roses, beautiful **St David's Cathedral** (01437-720517; www.stdaviscathedral.org.uk; 8am-6pm Mon-Sat, shorter hours in winter), an imposing structure that's spectacularly well preserved with a striking wood ceiling. Contact the **TIC** (01437-720392; www.stdavids.co.uk; High St, 9.30am-5.30pm) for more information.

There are several handy youth hostels: near **St David's** (0870 770 6042); at **Trefin** (0870 770 6074), 11 miles from St David's; and the superb **Pwll Deri** (0870 770 6004), on the cliffs 8 miles from Trefin and 4.5 miles from Fishguard.

Fishguard is on a beautiful bay. The train station and harbour (for ferries to Rosslare) are at Goodwick, a 20-minute walk away. There's a **TIC** (873484; www.fishguardonline.com; 9.30am-5pm Mon, Thu & Fri, 9.30am-1pm Tue & Sat), but the **Hamilton Guest House & Backpackers Lodge** (01348-874797; www.fishguard-backpackers.com; 21 Hamilton St; dm/d £12/30) is even more helpful, and has a sauna.

Getting There & Away

Regular **Richards Bros** (01239-613756) buses run between St David's and Fishguard (45 minutes, every two hours Monday to Saturday). The

SPLURGE

Big Sleep Hotel (✉ 2063 6363; www.thebigsleephotel.com; Bute Tce; r from £45) The top spot in town for value and interior cool. The high-rise Big Sleep Hotel offers really great value, given the amazingly stylish 'modern retro' rooms occupying a former office block. The penthouses have commanding views over town and there's a small bar downstairs. It's also right in the city centre, handy for dozens of bars and several clubs.

closest train station is Haverfordwest, from where bus 411 runs hourly into St David's.

MID WALES

In the early 1970s a group of folk interested in an alternative and above all sustainable way of living set up home in a Welsh quarry. Still an endearingly idealistic bunch, they communicate a serious and practical message through their **Centre for Alternative Technology** (CAT; ✉ 01654-702400; www.cat.org.uk; concession/child summer £8/4, winter £6/4; ✎ 10am-5.30pm, 10am-4pm in winter). It's home to seven interactive acres of experimentation and information about renewable energy and sustainable living, and is an inspiring place from which you can take ideas to apply in your own life.

The centre is reachable by car, 3 miles north of Machynlleth on the A487 to Dolgellau, or by bus from the Machynlleth train station, accessible from Shrewsbury or Birmingham. For more details see the CAT website.

NORTH WALES

North Wales is dominated by the Snowdonia Mountains, which loom over the beautiful coastline. The Red Rover day ticket (£16.90) covers most of the region.

Llandudno

✉ 01492 / pop 22,000

Developed as a Victorian holiday town, Llandudno has retained much of its 19th-century architecture and antiquated atmosphere, and seethes with visitors in summer. There's a wonderful pier and promenade, and donkeys on the beach.

Llandudno sits on its own peninsula between two sweeping beaches, and is dominated by the spectacular limestone headland,

the **Great Orme**, with the mountains of Snowdonia as a backdrop. The Great Orme, with its tramway (adult/child £3.95/2.80), superb views and Bronze Age mine, is fascinating.

About 3 miles south of Llandudno is **Conwy Castle** (✉ 592358; adult/concession £4.50/4; ✎ 9.30am-6pm Jun-Sep, 9.30am-4pm Oct-May), one of the grandest of Edward I's castles and a medieval masterpiece.

There are hundreds of guesthouses, but it can be difficult to find somewhere in the peak July/August season. Contact the TIC (✉ 876413; www.llandudno-tourism.co.uk; 1/2 Chapel St) for more information.

Snowdonia National Park

The Snowdonia Mountains offer easily the most spectacular scenery in Wales. The most popular region is in the north around Mt Snowdon, at 1085m the highest peak in Britain south of the Scottish Highlands. Hikers must be prepared to deal with hostile conditions at any time of the year. Check www.visitsnowdonia.info or www.snowdonia-npa.gov.uk for more information.

There are several National Park Information Centres, including **Betws-y-Coed** (✉ 01690-710426; tictbetws@hotmail.com; ✎ 9.30am-5.30pm), **Blaenau Ffestiniog** (✉ 01766-830360; ✎ 9.30am-12.30pm & 1.30-5.30pm) and **Harlech** (✉ 01766-780658; ✎ 9.30am-12.30pm & 1.30-5.30pm). They all have a wealth of information, and all make B&B bookings.

The beautiful, if crowded, hamlet of **Betws-y-Coed** is a lovely base from which to explore Snowdonia. The nearest hostel to Betws-y-Coed is **Capel Curig** (✉ 0870 770 5746; capelcurig@yha.org.uk; dm adult/child £16/12.50), 5 miles west. B&Bs and hotels are plentiful, including the welcoming **Royal Oak Hotel** (✉ 710219; www.royaloakhotel.net; r per person £40-60; Ⓜ), a former coaching inn located right in the heart of Betws-y-Coed.

In Llanberis, you can take the **Snowdon Mountain Railway** (✉ 0870 458 0033; www.snowdonrailway.co.uk; adult/child £21/14) for the ride to the top and back. The **Llanberis TIC** (✉ 870765; www.llanberis.org; 41a High St; ✎ 9am-5pm Fri-Wed) is helpful.

The best hostel in the Llanberis area is the **Pen-y-Pass Youth Hostel** (✉ 0870 770 5990; penypass@yha.org.uk; Nantgwynant, Caernarfon; dm adult/child £13.95/9.95), 6 miles up the valley in a spectacular site at the start of one of the paths up Snowdon. The **Heights** (✉ 871179; www.heightshotel.co.uk; 74 High St; dm/d £14/50, f£60-100) is a hotel/hostel with a pub/restaurant where climbers hang out in the evenings. **Pete's Eats** (✉ 870358; mains £2-5) is a warm café

opposite the Llanberis TIC where hikers swap information over large portions of hearty food, like chip butties, and big mugs of tea.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Snowdon Sherpa buses run along the major mountain routes within the national park, with connections to Llandudno from Betws-y-Coed, to Caernarfon from Waunfawr, and to Caernarfon/Bangor from Llanberis.

Llangollen

✉ 01978 / pop 2600

Famous for its **International Musical Eisteddfod** (✉ 862001; www.international-eisteddfod.co.uk), Llangollen is just 8 miles from England. This six-day music, song and dance festival, held in July, attracts folk groups from around the world.

The town makes an excellent base for outdoor activities – walks to ruined **Valle Crucis Abbey** and the Horseshoe Pass, horse-drawn canal-boat trips and canoeing on the Dee River.

The intimate **Henllys Guest House** (✉ 710534; www.jhaddy.freemail.co.uk; Old Church Rd; per person from £15) is a converted Victorian magistrate's court set next to the Conwy River. The **Llangollen Youth Hostel & Activity Centre** (✉ 0870 770 5932; llangollen@yha.org.uk; Tyndwr Rd; under/over 18yrs £8.95/11.95) is 1.5 miles from the centre.

BRITAIN DIRECTORY**ACCOMMODATION**

Reflecting the wide array of options available in Britain, accommodation in this chapter has been listed in budget order, with the lowest-priced first. Budget listings are usually hostels or backpacker joints; midrange options are often B&Bs or small guesthouses; and top-end spots are typically swish hotels. Remember that local TICs will find and book accommodation for you ahead of your arrival if you tell them your budget and what you're looking for. This service is sometimes free but usually costs around £3.

Free camping is rarely possible in Britain, except in remote areas, but there's a surfeit of pay-per-pitch sites across the country. Rates can range from £2 to £15 per night, depending on location and season, and facilities can run from shared cold-water taps to hot showers and laundry facilities. The best-selling **AA Caravan and Camping Britain & Ireland** (£9.99) guide is widely available and comprehensive.

Also visit **UK Campsite** (www.ukcampsite.co.uk) for thousands of listings and user reviews.

The separate Youth Hostel Associations for **England & Wales** (✉ 0870 770 8868; www.yha.org.uk) and **Scotland** (✉ 0870 155 3255; www.syha.org.uk) offer similar dorm bed rates from £9 to £20 per night. Their facilities vary from institutionalised basic to IKEA-chic modern, with some larger hostels now offering private rooms and free breakfasts to compete with independent operators. Prices in this chapter are for adults but per-night discounts are available to those aged under 18 (usually about 25%) and Hostelling International (HI) members (usually £1 to £2). Not all hostels are open year-round, so book or call ahead before you arrive.

There's a growing array of independent hostels and backpackers across Britain and they vary widely in quality, facilities and price (typically from £10 to £25). Some are quiet and cosy, while others are for serious party travellers. The online **Independent Hostel Guide** (www.independenthostelguide.co.uk) is a listing resource for tracking down some of these hostels. For Scotland-only, check **Scottish Independent Hostels** (www.hostel-scotland.co.uk) for online listings.

Many universities offer student accommodation to visitors during Christmas, Easter and summer holidays, usually in basic single study rooms. Rates typically range from £15 to £35 per person. For information, contact **Venuemasters** (✉ 0114-249 3090; www.venuemasters.com), which represents 100 British universities and offers online bookings.

A great British institution and often the best-value accommodation in town, B&Bs and guesthouses can range from £15 per person for a bedroom in a family home to more than £50 for a warm and fuzzy stay in a characterful heritage house. The common link is the heaping cooked breakfast that's intended to keep you fuelled until well into the afternoon. For comprehensive listings, pick up the annual **AA Bed & Breakfast Guide** (£12.99).

Hotels can run from poky pub rooms (£20 to £50) to a night of luxury in a sleek boutique property (upwards of £75). In between is a growing roster of competitive midrange chains, including **Ibis** (www.ibishotel.com), **Premier Travel Inn** (www.premiertavelinn.com), **Travelodge** (www.travelodge.co.uk) and **Holiday Inn Express** (www.hiexpress.co.uk).

Note that most B&Bs, guesthouses and hotels charge per room but some charge per person – make sure you know what you're paying before you unpack your bag. Room

rates always include VAT (Value-Added Tax) at the rate of 17.5%.

ACTIVITIES

Britain is a great destination for outdoor enthusiasts, from daredevil rock climbers to beach bum surfer dudes and leisurely day hikers. There are clubs and associations across the land, and useful brochures and maps available from **Visit Britain** (www.visitbritain.com). Its website has some good recommendations and links under its Get Active section.

Cycling

Compact Britain is an excellent destination to explore by bike. Not all cities are cycle-friendly (Oxford, Bristol and Bath are among the best) but there are plenty of designated routes through some of the nation's best countryside. Popular routes and regions include the Yorkshire Dales Cycleway, Derbyshire's Peak District and the Scottish Borders.

The 10,000-mile **National Cycle Network** (0845 113 0065; www.nationalcyclenetwork.org.uk) crisscrosses Britain with one-day and multiday rides and is actively expanding. Contact the network for excellent maps and other cycling resources. The **Cyclists' Touring Club** (0870 873 0060; www.ctc.org.uk) is the leading national organisation for biking enthusiasts, and can help with route information and general inquiries about cycling in Britain.

Hiring bikes is easy in the UK, with prices typically ranging from £6 for a half-day to £60 for a week – book ahead for summer rentals.

Hiking

Britain's cornucopia of picturesque terrains makes for great hiking country. Day hikes are a popular and accessible way to escape from the crowded cities and there are hundreds of longer routes waiting for more adventurous travellers. Popular hiking trails include the 191-mile **Coast to Coast Walk** (www.coast2coast.co.uk) across three northern England national parks; the 100-mile **Cotswold Way** (www.cotswold-way.co.uk) between Bath and Chipping Campden; and the 84-mile **Dales Way** (www.thedalesway.co.uk) through Yorkshire's charming countryside. Other routes crisscross **Exmoor National Park** (see p183) and **Dartmoor National Park** (see p182), **Pembrokeshire National Park** (p219) in Wales and the highlands and islands of Scotland.

The **Ramblers Association** (020-7339 8500; www.ramblers.org.uk) is a voluntary organisation with

a wealth of experience on hiking and walking across Britain. It produces dozens of maps, guides and accommodation listings for local and visiting hoofers. For additional information and resources (some for free download), check out **National Trails** (www.nationaltrails.co.uk).

Water Sports

Surrounded by water and dripping with lakes, lochs and canals, Britain offers a brimming bucket full of coastal and inland water-based activities.

The Devon and Cornwall region is England's surfing Mecca, with rideable swells at more than 100 closely linked beaches, including Newquay's Fistral Beach (p184). Scotland is opening up to its surfing potential, with the north coast proving popular among adventurous board fans. Southwest Wales also has some great waves around Newgale and Whitesands. Equipment hire centres are widespread. The **British Surfing Association** (0870 011 4240; www.britsurf.org) should be your first stop for information and resources. Windsurfers can also check out Brit-based options via the **Royal Yachting Association** (0845 345 0400; www.rya.org.uk).

With hundreds of shipwrecks strewn around its coast, diving is also popular. Some of the best wetsuit haunts are along the English south coast, where hapless medieval and WWII vessels jostle for space. The diveable area around St Abbs, Scotland's first marine nature reserve, is also recommended. The **British Sub-Aqua Club** (0151-350 6200; www.bsac.com) offers courses and information for dive fans.

BUSINESS HOURS

Usual business hours in Britain:

Banks ☎ 9.30am-5pm Mon-Fri; larger branches also open on Saturday morning

Offices ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri

Post offices ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri & Sat until noon

Pubs ☎ 11am to 11pm Mon-Saturday & noon-10.30pm Sun; many – particularly in cities – stay open later, especially on weekends

Restaurants ☎ lunch 11am-3pm, dinner 6pm-10pm; specific hours can vary widely

Shops ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat; larger shops may open 10am-4pm Sun, & many also stay open late one night per week, usually Thursday or Friday.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

Embassies & Consulates in Britain

Australia (Map pp162-3; ☎ 020-7379 4334; www.australia.org.uk; Australia House, The Strand, London WC2B 4LA)

Canada (Map pp162-3; ☎ 020-7258 6600; Macdonald House, 1 Grosvenor Sq, London W1K 4AB)

France (Map pp170-1; ☎ 020-7073 1200; www.ambafrance-uk.org; 58 Knightsbridge, London SW1X 7JT)

Germany (☎ 020-7824 1300; www.german-embassy.org.uk; 23 Belgrave Sq, London SW1 8PZ)

Ireland (Map pp162-3 ☎ 020-7235 2171; 17 Grosvenor Pl, London SW1X 7HR)

Japan (Map pp162-3; ☎ 020-7465 6500; www.uk.emb-japan.go.jp; 101-104 Piccadilly, London W1J 7JT)

Netherlands (Map pp170-1; ☎ 020-7590 3200; www.netherlands-embassy.org.uk; 38 Hyde Park Gate, London SW7 5DP)

New Zealand (Map pp162-3; ☎ 020-7930 8422; www.nzembassy.com; 80 Haymarket, London SW1Y 4TQ)

USA (☎ 020-7499 9000; www.usembassy.org.uk; 24 Grosvenor Sq, London W1A 1AE)

British Embassies & Consulates Abroad

For more British embassies, visit the website of the **Foreign & Commonwealth Office** (www.fco.gov.uk).

Australia (☎ 02-6270 6666; www.britausa.net; Commonwealth Ave, Yarralumla, Canberra, ACT 2600)

Canada (☎ 613-237 1530; www.britainincanada.org; 80 Elgin St, Ottawa, ON K1P 5K7)

France (☎ 01 44 51 31 00; www.amb-grandebretagne.fr; 35 rue du Faubourg St Honoré, 75383 Paris Cedex 08)

Germany (☎ 030-204570; www.britischesbotschaft.de; Wilhelmstrasse 70, 10117 Berlin)

Ireland (☎ 01-205 3700; www.britishembassy.ie; 29 Merrion Rd, Ballsbridge, Dublin 4)

Japan (☎ 03-5211 1100; www.uknow.or.jp; 1 Ichibancho, Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo 102-8381)

Netherlands (☎ 070-427 04 27; www.britain.nl; Lange Voorhout 10, 2514 ED, The Hague)

New Zealand (☎ 04-924 2888; www.britain.org.nz; 44 Hill St, Wellington 1)

USA (☎ 202-588 6500; www.britainusa.com; 3100 Massachusetts Ave NW, Washington DC 20008)

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

There are countless diverse special events around Britain throughout the year, many based on traditional customs initiated centuries ago.

January

Hogmanay/New Year

(www.edinburghshogmanay.com) Huge, raucous New Year's Eve party in Princes St, Edinburgh, echoed by smaller versions throughout the UK.

April

Grand National (www.aintree.co.uk) Britain's top annual horse race is held at Aintree, Liverpool, in early April.

May

FA Cup Final (www.thefa.com) The nail-biting conclusion to England's annual knock-out football club competition takes place at London's Wembley Stadium in mid-May.

June

Trooping the Colour (www.royal.gov.uk) The Queen's 'other birthday' is celebrated with pomp, pageantry and parades at London's Horse Guards Pde in mid-June.

Glastonbury Festival (www.glastonburyfestivals.co.uk) Giant open-air music extravaganza held in Somerset in late June.

July

Llangollen International Musical Eisteddfod

(www.international-eisteddfod.co.uk) The 60-year-old celebration of international folk music and dance takes place at Llangollen in Wales in early July.

T in the Park (www.tinthe park.com) Scotland's leading open-air music festival is held in Glasgow in mid-July.

Farnborough International Air Show (www.farnborough.com) The world's largest airplane display takes place in Surrey in mid-July.

August

Edinburgh Fringe Festival (www.edfringe.com) The three-week comedy and avant-garde performance fest kicks off in early August.

Brecon Jazz Festival (www.brecon jazz.co.uk) Indoor and outdoor jazz concerts are held in the Welsh countryside around Brecon in mid-August.

Reading Festival (www.readingfestival.com) Popular annual live music (and camping) fest in late August.

September

Braemar Gathering

(www.braemergathering.org) Haggis scoffing and caber-tossing in the Scottish Highlands around Braemar, Deeside, attended by a kilted Royal Family in early September.

November

Guy Fawkes Night Bonfires and fireworks on 5 November nationwide recall a failed antigovernment plot from the 1600s.

HOLIDAYS

Public Holidays

Called bank holidays in Britain, these affect most businesses, although larger shops increasingly remain open.

New Year's Day 1 January

New Year's Holiday 2 January (Scotland only)

Good Friday March/April, Friday before Easter

Easter Monday March/April (except Scotland)

May Day First Monday in May

Spring Bank Holiday Last Monday in May

Summer Bank Holiday First Monday in August
(Scotland only)

Summer Bank Holiday Last Monday in August (England and Wales only)

Christmas Day 25 December

Boxing Day 26 December

INTERNET RESOURCES

The website of **Visit Britain** (www.visitbritain.com) is stuffed with resources and its ever-eager to send brochures and information on request.

England (www.enjoyengland.com), **Scotland** (www.visit-scotland.com) and **Wales** (www.visitwales.com) also have dedicated tourism agencies.

MONEY

Currency

Britain's currency is the pound sterling (£), split among a variety of coins and banknotes each bearing the Queen's image. Scotland and Northern Ireland also issue banknotes, which are legal tender across the UK: if you have any trouble using them in England, exchange them at any bank for free. The euro (€) is accepted at some major tourist attractions, larger hotels and at increasing numbers of businesses in London and the Southeast.

Exchange

Be careful with bureaux de change: they may advertise good exchange rates but they sometimes levy outrageous fees and commissions. Always ask what the 'extras' are before making a transaction. Banks are a safe money-changing option and some larger post offices will also exchange your foreign dosh. Travellers' cheques are inconvenient in Britain – they are rarely accepted at businesses but can be exchanged for cash at banks or exchanges.

ATMs

It's not hard to find an ATM – usually called 'cashpoints' – in Britain, where they're often located outside banks, building societies and large supermarkets. They accept a wide variety of cards, including Visa, MasterCard and American Express (Amex). Some cashpoints, particularly those in unusual locations like pubs, charge extra fees for withdrawals.

POST

Within the UK, 1st-class mail is quicker and more expensive (£0.32 per letter) than 2nd-class mail (£0.23). Postcards sent overseas cost £0.44 (Europe) and £0.50 (outside Europe). Stamp-vending machines are located outside some post offices, and larger newsagents and supermarkets sell stamps in books of four or 10. Single stamps are often available at larger attractions and some TICs.

TELEPHONE

Phone Codes

For international direct calls, dial **00** followed by the country code, area code (drop the first zero if there is one) and local number. Dial **155** for the international operator. Mobile phone numbers usually begin with **07**. For calls within Britain, dial **100** for operator assistance and **118118** for directory inquiries. For international directories dial **118 661**. Useful codes to know:

- 0800** – free call
- 0845** – local-rate call
- 0870** – national-rate call
- 0871** – local-rate call
- 0891** – premium-rate call
- 0906** – premium-rate call

Call boxes, mostly operated by British Telecom (BT), are a common sight on UK streets. Most take coins, credit cards, phonecards or a combination of all three. Coin phones do not give change and they charge a minimum of £0.20. Local calls are charged by time while national calls are by time and distance: it's cheaper to call before 8am or after 6pm Monday to Friday or at any time on weekends. Many hotels charge high fees for in-room phone usage.

VISAS

You don't need a visitor visa if you are a citizen of EU countries, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, South Africa or the USA. Tourists are generally permitted to stay for up to six months, but are prohibited from working. All other nationalities should apply for a visitor visa through their nearest British diplomatic mission. These currently cost around £50. For more information, visit www.ukvisas.gov.uk.

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