

MOTHER & SON *Adventure*

Catherine Mack takes her son on their annual cycling trip and discovers a circular route around Ramsgate



AS I LOOK OUT AT THE CALM WATERS AROUND Ramsgate in Kent, I should keep my eyes peeled for lurking gremlins apparently. Or 'Goodwins', to be precise. The Goodwin Sands is a ten mile sandbank just off the coast which has to be remapped every six months due to its constant movement. There have been numerous wrecks over the years. 'These sands can swallow up ships in seconds,' says Dr. Alasdair Bruce, our walking guide for the day. 'Sometimes, when the sands suddenly shift, an old wreck is regurgitated. We get a U-Boat popping up every fifteen years or so along here.'

This concept of movement fascinates me as I continue my stroll along the coastline from Ramsgate to Broadstairs with our guide who is otherwise known as the Rock Doc. Alasdair is the fossil expert of the area, a coastline which is a gorgeous stretch

of white cliffs and sands to me, but to him is one big, geological pinata. Bash it a bit and treats fly out at you in all different directions. And judging from the bits of chalk everywhere, some in small scattered piles, others in giant rock falls, these cliffs are also constantly moving. This pedagogical promenade is thanks to a superb initiative called Active Ramsgate (ramsgatetown.org) set up by Ramsgate Town Council to show people the walking and cycling possibilities on this fascinating stretch of coastline. They offer regular and free guided walks, making this one veritable treat filled town. Because not only does the Rock Doc have us picking out vertebrates and plant fossils; he also shows us bee colonies thriving on coastal flowering ivy and has us foraging for wild sea spinach, samphire and rocket. This man is not just a rock doc. He's a gem. >

PHOTO: CATHERINE MACK



A Cycling Adventure

I have actually come to Ramsgate with my son, now fourteen, for movement of another kind. To cycle. Off road cycle routes have always been a thing of ours, since we discovered the Tarka Trail in Devon years ago. Much smaller then, and barely out of stabilisers, he threw off his urban shackles and cycled for hours and hours relishing his new found freedom, as I relished the tireless joy oozing from every pore of his body. 'Promise me that you will still make me come cycling with you, even when I am seventy,' I said, as we flew along together all those years ago, and he promised.

So every year, we seek out a cycle route just for me and him. And this year our little off road odyssey has brought us to the unlikely getaway of Ramsgate. Firstly, it is close to our home town of London, secondly it is easily accessible by train, and last but not least, its Viking Coastal Cycle Trail has a lot to offer along the way. The Trail is 32 miles long and is actually a circular route which goes inland, and back on roads, at various sections. It is so called because it takes in the whole Isle of Thanet, the land first taken by the Vikings in their inimitable style back in 449 AD. We wanted to cling to the shore, however, having optimistically packed shorty wetsuits for a quick dip at the end of a day in the saddle. The Isle of Thanet is the most eastern part of Kent, and was actually an island five hundred years ago.

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But we were going to take in all of the coastal bits of the "island" on this trip and, aiming for a linear rather than circular trip. Thanks to the superb bike hire company Kent Cycle Hire (kentcyclehire.com), we were able to pick up bikes in Ramsgate for a couple of days and arranged to drop them back to Whitstable, a good thirty miles away, where we could pick up a train back to Ramsgate.

We were staying at a B&B within walking distance of the station. I must admit that I had preconceptions about a Ramsgate B&B, with images of dated and slightly shabby seaside-ness coming to mind. Wrong. Glendevon Guest House (glendevonguesthouse.com) was the perfect family spot to stay, as the charming owners Charlie and Rebekah Smith have converted it into small self-catering units, so you can have breakfast with them if you like (and we did like) or chill out in your own space if that is your thing. That was most definitely our thing after one day out on the coast, when we blissed out with fish and chips in our own little lounge, watching a movie from the B&B's extensive collection.

The other wonderful thing about Glendevon is that these guys are walkers and know the Isle of Thanet like the back of their hand. Rebekah pointed out that 'this is the only place in England where, on a walk, you can face south in the morning, east by mid-morning, north by lunchtime and west for the sunset in the evening' – one of the best facts we heard about the Isle of Thanet.

Royal Revelation

Stepping straight out on to the coast path from the B&B, I can honestly say that Ramsgate was a revelation. It is also a royal one. Because Ramsgate is the only Royal Harbour in the country, so designated by King George IV in 1821 as he used the harbour regularly en route to his other realm of Hanover. This same King had been Prince Regent before ascending to the throne, which explains the well preserved regency architecture hidden away in Ramsgate's backstreets. A stroll round the

town takes in the pretty fishing harbour, the more modern marina and, not to be missed, the arches under the cliffs which are home to an eclectic mix of nautical and antique shops, galleries and cafes. These are the hidden dens of Ramsgate.

My son and I had a lovely moment of reflection in The Sailor's Church, just a little further down the quays. Created in 1878, it was not only a spiritual haven but also a physical one for young sailors, or Smack Boys, who were young apprentices on Ramsgate's fishing ships. Often orphans, the rooms above the church became their home. It was also used to receive sailors rescued from wrecks, which were all too frequent during these times, as well as those who came home through this harbour after the World Wars. You can feel the history and hospitality in the walls of this poignant living museum, a place which gave us much food for thought. The day we had chosen for our big cycle was a blustery one. The skies were blue, but boy, did the wind blow. But we were determined to get round the island to Whitstable, in order to get that >





> full south, east, north and west experience. Although we were cycling into the wind most of the time, it didn't really matter, as there were so many places along the way that gave us an excuse to stop. Broadstairs is just a few miles from Ramsgate and is a cove of sublime cosiness even on a winter's day. The signs disappeared here, so we ended up pushing our bikes across the beach boardwalk, but I guess you are meant to cycle through the town instead. We continued on a short section of road past some extraordinarily chic houses - great for property ogling - but we were relieved to descend back down to the shoreline cycle path again at Joss Bay, where paddle boarders were paddling, and surfers were waiting for those winds to kick in properly. We locked our bikes and walked out to the stunning sea arch at Kingsgate Bay which turned out to be quite the sunbathing spot: the white boulders which are scattered on the sands around the arch reflect the sun back to blissful effect.

Margate's Regeneration

And then there's Margate, a town where regeneration is the word on everyone's lips, although it still felt pretty run down to us. The dilapidated lidos broke my heart, for example, just waiting for some tender loving care. However, regeneration doesn't happen overnight, and when we turned another corner and saw the new Turner Contemporary Gallery (turner-contemporary.org) gleaming with pride in front of us, I swallowed my words. It must have taken some guts to convince funders that this was just what Margate needed,

but blessings to whoever pulled it off.

The Turner Contemporary is also a great spot for lunch, with an impressive menu of named locally sourced goodies, and it gave us the energy we needed to keep pedalling. The descent down to Epple Bay revealed one of the most gorgeous beaches I have seen in a long time, and the only one to momentarily tempt me into its waters. But as the winds whipped up and clouds drew in, we decided to do the Kent thing, and just "keep moving". We hit a wild and wonderful stretch between Birchington and Reculver which, slightly more inland but still very much open to the elements, must be magical on a calm day, with swans flying in to savour the salt marsh as well as views across vast expanses of Kent countryside.

Pushing against the wind, however, we puffed our way in the direction of the

Reculver Towers in the distance. An imposing landmark, these 12th-century towers of a ruined church felt almost like a mirage at one point, never actually getting closer, but we finally got there. After that, the Viking Trail leads into the Oyster Bay Trail, taking us away from the cliffs and up over a grassy hill, the steepest part of the cycle so far, with a special cycling surface placed to prevent erosion of the farmland. Once at the top, we could see Herne Bay with promises of ice cream in the distance, and a mostly downhill cycle back down to its coastline.

Whitstable was only a few miles from here, but we decided, rather sadly, to call it a day, as the winds had defeated us at last. Luckily, Kent Cycle Hire has a drop off spot in Herne Bay, and we were able to get a train back to Ramsgate so logistics were easy, even if we were a little disappointed not to hit our goal. But now we have another reason to return, according to Bernard Wright, the founder of Kent Cycle. We can come back to Whitstable, take on the off-road Crab and Winkle Way, head inland back across some country roads which lead to Herne Bay and then the final coastal stretch back to Whitstable. As we contemplated this on the train back to Ramsgate, we managed to fit in one last treat. The glow of the sunset in the west. Then, within a matter of seconds the train turned a bend, and it was gone. Night seemed to have fallen and, with perfect timing, my son had too. Fast asleep.

■ Catherine Mack specialises in writing about responsible tourism. You can follow her travels on her blog ethicaltraveller.co.uk, @catherinemack on Twitter and Ethical Traveller on Facebook.

HOW TO GET THERE

To get to Ramsgate, take the train with South Eastern Railway (southeasternrailway.co.uk), with the new high speed route from London's St. Pancras station highly recommended but be careful to buy the special ticket for this service, or you will be charged a supplement. And don't forget to get a Family and Friends Railcard. (familyandfriends-railcard.co.uk) Download a copy of the Discover Kent by Bike booklet from kent.gov.uk or request a copy to be sent to you by post.

Catherine and her son stayed at Glendevon Guest House (glendevonguesthouse.co.uk). Rooms from £70 per night for two people sharing on a self-catering basis, or £85 per night with breakfast.

Another very interesting place to stay in Ramsgate is The Grange, run by the conservation organisation Landmark Trust. Sleeping eight, and in the heart of Ramsgate, this was the former family home of renowned architect Augustus Pugin whose most famous work was the interior design of the Palace of Westminster (landmarktrust.org.uk).