

A weekend in... Seaview, Isle of Wight



Seaview beach, Isle of Wight Alamy

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At the Old Fort Bar and Café, the owner, chatting amiably to his clientele, asked our table in the friendliest manner: “So, you’re over from the North Island, are you?”

It’s a joke that he no doubt trots out to many a visitor. And it works because it’s patently ludicrous. Seaview is a quintessentially south of England holiday village, with genteel Victorian houses and a pretty little high street that backs on to gentle rolling countryside. It’s about as foreign as roast beef.

The Old Fort is in an enviable position, bang on The Esplanade, with a group of tables and benches on the sea wall and a fine prospect across the Solent. With a pint of the Isle of Wight-brewed Goddards bitter in your hand, there is no better place to watch a good old British sunset.

Boats bob on their moorings, a young lad rows towards the yacht club, sails slant in the distance and ferries slide through Spithead towards France. Indeed, on this peaceful

waterfront it is Portsmouth and the “mainland” — as the islanders call it, just as the Isle of Wight is simply the “island” — that from this vantage point do indeed feel foreign.

The seaside village of Seaview, largely created as a Victorian holiday destination, is a singular place. Turn west from the Old Fort and stroll past the yacht club, all early 20th century with its flag fluttering above a huge terrace and striped awning. Go past the traditional boat builders, along a sea wall and thence the Duver, a coastal road that at low tide looks out upon miles of sand stretching to the nearby town of Ryde, whose pier pierces the horizon.

Inland lies the modest 20-acre Hersey Nature Reserve (named after the former county, borough and parish councillor, Alan Hersey), where, with drainage possible only at low tide, an inland lake with reedbeds has formed. It's eerily quiet so close to the sea, and with patience you'll as likely as not catch sight of a lapwing, oystercatcher or greenshank.

Head east and the rewards are different again. The High Street, with the tastefully traditional Seaview Hotel, ends at a public slipway and a public noticeboard on which is posted an A4 sheet telling you of the leviathans that will glide through the Solent that day; liners and container ships from Southampton, warships and ferries from Portsmouth.

From there, another sea wall leads to the small, intimate Seagrove Bay, fringed by elegant Edwardian houses before it bumps into Horestone Point, a beautiful promontory below National Trust woods.

Seaview is essentially unchanged from the Fifties, save for SUVs replacing Austin Cambridges and blazers giving way to Boden sweaters. This is the solidly tasteful territory of the DFL (Down From London), as also to be seen in the similar habitats of Rock or Wells-next-the-Sea.

Many a generation of children has nosed about the rock pools at Horestone Point, and many a family has traversed it to Priory Bay beyond, a wood-fringed paradise invaded by yachties and powerboaters cruising over from the marinas of the mainland on sunny weekends. Off season it is sandy, unspoilt and peaceful. Walkers can press on, either heading inland through the woods and footpaths or along the shore to the village of St Helens and Bembridge Harbour — or take in both and make an easy circuit, with the Baywatch on the Beach café on St Helens waterfront as a break if you're there in season. It's a little pricey, and basically an upscale prefab, but I love the food, children's menus, lovely views and its jolly informality.

For more formal dining the Seaview Hotel is a class act, with a three-course menu at £28. If that's all too fancy, a walk farther westward leads to Puckpool Park, complete with tennis courts, playground, crazy golf course and bowling green. You lose the rarefied, solidly middle-class atmosphere of Seaview, but it's heaven for children and ice creams and burgers are served from the caff within.

And if you want something in between, the Boat House, formerly the dowdy Battery Inn,

two minutes' walk away, offers food and drink that fit somewhere between the Seaview Hotel and the Old Fort. It's on the beach too, and on a windy day it's fun to sit in the sheltered garden and watch the kite-surfers blast out to sea and back . . . and enjoy being away from the rat race of the North Island.

Need to know

Where to stay

The Victorian Seaview Hotel has double rooms from £80 off season (01983 612711, seaviewhotel.co.uk)

Where to eat

The Seaview Hotel has a three-course menu, £28, with food from its own farm in its restaurant and cheaper bar options. The Old Fort, (01983 612363, oldfortbarcafe.co.uk) has good, basic pub fare while the Boathouse offers something in between the two using some local ingredients (01983 873572, theboathouseiow.co.uk). It has B&B doubles from £105

Further information

Isle of Wight tourist board (visitisleofwight.co.uk); wightlink.co.uk

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