

# East Sussex

With Eastbourne hosting the Turner Prize exhibition and the region about to hit the big screen in a new film, arty East Sussex is having its moment in the sun, writes Debbie Ward

“These were Lee’s knuckledusters,” explained our guide, pointing to a shelf: “bronze for daywear, silver for eveningwear.” It’s the kind of fact that you just accept about Lee Miller, the late *Vogue* model-turned-war photographer. She wore these “accessories” for protection during the Second World War; now they decorate Farleys House & Gallery, her former home near Chiddingfold, East Sussex.

In the study next door, I spied a photo of Miller bathing contemptuously in Hitler’s Munich apartment on the day of the liberation of Dachau concentration camp, her boots having stained the dictator’s bathmat with mud from the camp. It’s a scene that has been recreated by the actress Kate Winslet, who plays Miller in *Lee*, a new film about the photographer’s life that comes out in 2024.

Miller’s own images, some exhibited in a farm building alongside the house, show an eye for the surreal: the latest fashions set against bomb-damaged buildings, a barrage balloon that looks like it has been hatched by a goose. She married the Surrealist artist Roland Penrose, whose mural – based on the nearby ancient chalk figure the Long Man of Wilmington – graces the huge dining-room fireplace. The pair entertained notable friends from the art movement at their Sussex

home, including Pablo Picasso, whose own work crops up in the kitchen and garden. I did a double take when I recognised his distinctive style in a face painted on a fat-splashed tile above the stove.

But even by the time Miller moved here in 1949, bohemian 20th-century creatives were not new to this slice of Sussex. Decades earlier, artists Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant and writer David Garnett had moved to another farm building nearby, Charleston House, where they entertained fellow members of the Bloomsbury Group, the literary set that included Vanessa’s sister Virginia Woolf. Its highly decorated walls and furniture are worth a visit alone, as is the starry line-up at its annual cultural festival in May.

East Sussex’s further links to Modernism are celebrated in a series of contemporary art galleries linked by a charming coastal cycle path. I followed its trail from Eastbourne – host of the Turner Prize exhibition until mid-April – then pedalled past the kite surfers of Pevensey Bay and called in at the Grade I-listed De La Warr Pavilion, a Modernist wonder in Bexhill. After a hilltop pause above a beach where an 18th-century shipwreck is uncovered at certain low tides, it was a fast descent towards Hastings, to browse the galleries and independent shops of a whole new generation of creatives. ▶



50.9086° N, 0.2494° E

## Ask a local

“Berwick Church is a little-known Sussex gem, just a short walk from Alfriston. The ancient church is lovely in its own right, but it’s a landmark of national importance because of the murals painted by members of the Bloomsbury Group just before the Second World War. These are colourful, respectful of religious tradition and feature models drawn from local farms, making them a part of social history. It’s free to visit and wonderfully joyous.”

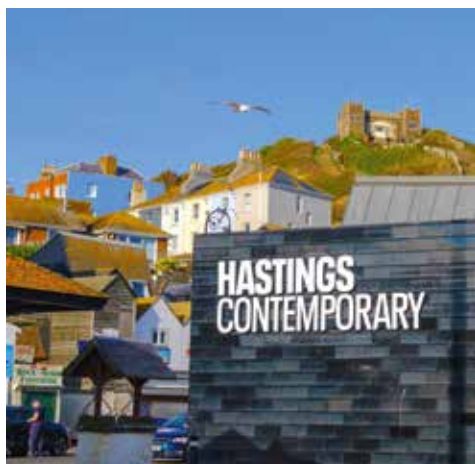
Nash Robbins, co-owner of Much Ado Books in Alfriston



Alamy; Debbie Ward; Lee Miller Archives; Roland Penrose Estate; Shutterstock



**Boho paradise** (this page; clockwise from top left) The Modernist De La Warr Pavilion in Bexhill dates from 1935; the late Surrealist artist Roland Penrose at work in his home; sculptures dot the Coastal Culture Trail; Pevensey Bay was part of England's Napoleonic defences in the early 1800s, when Martello towers were erected between Eastbourne and Hastings; Charleston House was at the heart of the Bloomsbury Group, a set of early-20th-century intellectuals who counted Virginia Woolf among their number; model-cum-war photographer Lee Miller; the charming Much Ado Books; (left page) the eclectic studio at Charleston House



## DAY 1

Start with a visit to the **Towner** gallery in Eastbourne ([townereastbourne.org.uk](http://townereastbourne.org.uk)), which is free to enter. You can catch the Turner Prize exhibition here (until 14 April), but don't miss the large collection of works by Eric Ravilious, known for his Modernist watercolours of the South Downs and wartime Britain. On the seafront, look for a series of unusually designed beach huts, among them the rotating **Spyglass**, which has been created to resemble pier binoculars. Grab lunch and sea views at **The Beach Deck** ([thebeachdeck.co.uk](http://thebeachdeck.co.uk)), a great pit stop for *moules frites* and chowder, then cycle the Coastal Culture Trail ([coastalculturetrail.com](http://coastalculturetrail.com)), or just take a train, to reach Bexhill. Here you'll find the seafront **De la Warr Pavilion**, one of the UK's first major Modernist buildings. Its 1930s curves now house a gallery and gig venue. From Bexhill, Hastings is a further 9.5km pedal east; this is the most rewarding part of the journey if you're cycling. Close to the tall net huts of the largest beach-launched fishing fleet in Europe is another sea-view gallery, the **Hastings Contemporary** ([hastingscontemporary.org](http://hastingscontemporary.org); *pictured*), formerly known as the Jerwood. It includes works by its patron, the illustrator Sir Quentin Blake. Finish with fresh fish (opposite the boats that caught it) at **Webbe's Rock-a-Nore Restaurant** ([webbesrestaurants.co.uk](http://webbesrestaurants.co.uk)).

**Getting there:** Charleston House, Farleys House & Gallery and Eastbourne are clustered around the A27; Bexhill and Hastings are on the A259. The 29km Coastal Culture Trail connects Eastbourne, Bexhill and Hastings, as does Southern Rail's train lines (the route connecting London also services Brighton and Lewes). Lewes is the closest major station to Chiddingly and Firle. A Sussex Art Shuttle bus service ([sussexmodern.org.uk/artshuttle](http://sussexmodern.org.uk/artshuttle)) links Lewes, Charleston and the Towner.

**Stay at:** Alfriston is the perfect base for village charm. Here, the 15th-century beamed inn **The Star** ([thepolizzicollection.com](http://thepolizzicollection.com); from £240pn) has been magnificently revamped, while the villa-style **Wingrove House** ([thewingrove.com](http://thewingrove.com); from £155pn) overlooks the village green. Above the village, **B Corp** vineyard **Rathfinny** ([rathfinnyestate.com](http://rathfinnyestate.com)) also offers B&B doubles from £100pn.



## DAY 2

Enter the surreal world of **Farleys House & Gallery** ([farleyshouseandgallery.co.uk](http://farleyshouseandgallery.co.uk); *pictured*) at Muddles Green, Chiddingly, where the late photographer Lee Miller and her Surrealist artist husband Roland Penrose once lived. Its traditional exterior belies a wealth of wall murals, Picasso sketches and eclectic *objet d'art*, including a giant silver King Kong table ornament. Picnic in the grounds if warm enough, or grab a simple lunch at community-run **Chiddingly Village Shop & Café** next door ([chiddinglyshop.org](http://chiddinglyshop.org)). Next, continue on to another boho escape, **Charleston House** ([charleston.org.uk](http://charleston.org.uk)), near Firle, where you can admire the decorative flourishes left by its former Bloomsbury Group inhabitants. If that's not enough culture, time your visit to catch an opera at **Glyndebourne** ([glyndebourne.com](http://glyndebourne.com)). Look out too for the pop-up **Charleston Gallery** in Lewes, which has been given a permanent green light. Finish in pretty Ditchling, a village that produced many Modernist creatives, including Edward Johnston, whose London Underground typeface is still used today. Amid the many cafés and pubs lies **Ditchling Museum of Art + Craft** ([ditchlingmuseumartcraft.org.uk](http://ditchlingmuseumartcraft.org.uk)). End your day at **The Rows & Vine** ([ridgeview.co.uk](http://ridgeview.co.uk)) restaurant, which serves a seasonal menu at the nearby Ridgeview wine estate.



# 4 TOP THINGS TO DO

**WALK** the South Downs Way, which runs pleasingly close to East Sussex's Modernist attractions – Ditchling and Firle Beacons are favourite viewpoints. The route, which can be accessed from Alfriston, also ends with a glorious descent into Eastbourne across the Seven Sisters cliffs. [southdownsway.org](http://southdownsway.org)

**SHOP** at Much Ado Books in Alfriston, which has driftwood sculptures and free-range hens in its yard. Inside, you'll find antique, used and new volumes on its shelves, along with collage kits and notebooks crafted from old book covers. The owners also run literacy charity Prospero's Project. [muchadobooks.com](http://muchadobooks.com)

**LEARN** a new skill at the Ditchling Museum of Art + Craft or Charleston House. Both run workshops year-round, teaching everything from lino cut and letterpress printing to natural dyeing, lampshade making and life writing. Charleston also runs art appreciation classes, while Farleys House & Gallery even offers the odd surrealist cookery lesson. Cauliflower breasts, anyone?

## EAT AND DRINK

in the South Downs at some of England's most acclaimed vineyards. One of the best picks is the lofty **Rathfinny Wine Estate**, above Alfriston, which has a fine restaurant overlooking the vines; it sometimes offers glimpses of hovering kestrels nearby. [rathfinnyestate.com](http://rathfinnyestate.com) 