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Global GETAWAY ENGLAND



Sunset at Princess Golf Club



Frasers



Kent, the oldest county in England, is known as the Garden of England for its abundance of farms, wineries, beer making from the locally grown hops and fresh from the sea Dover sole and Whitstable oysters. It also has over one hundred golf courses, some of them spectacular links that naturally follow the coast line. A chance to indulge all my passions in one place was irresistible.

I booked a trip with my friend and golfing buddy Anita to check out the bounty of Kent while working off the calories by golfing.

We took the fast train to Gatwick and rented a car from there. Our first stop, Hever Castle, was just half an hour away from that airport. Kent is also known for its historic homes and castles and this one has the distinction of being the childhood home of Anne Boleyn, Henry VIII's second wife. Lodging is in historic buildings close to the castle. www.hevercastle.co.uk

Golf was first introduced at Hever in the 1920s for the personal enjoyment of the owners at that time, the wealthy American Astor family. Today Hever Castle Golf Club consists of a par-72 championship parkland course. We played the championship course, a 7,002-yard layout, with the 644-yard, par-five 17th regarded as its signature. The holes from the 11th to the 13th offered carries over water onto slick greens – and lots of opportunities to lose our balls.

After golf, a visit to the romantic double-moated 13th century castle and a stroll around the property's spectacular gardens, our stomachs were calling out for food. King Henry VIII is a charming pub with a wood fireplace and cosy atmosphere. Crowned pub Food of the Year in the 2016 Shepherd Neame Pub Awards it was a deservedly popular joint. www.kinghenryviiihever.co.uk

Kent is famous for its hops, a key ingredient in beer. Oast Houses – purpose built stores to dry freshly picked hops – dot the district. Micro-breweries and traditional British pubs serving ale can be found everywhere. (England's oldest brewer Shepherd Neame is in Kent.) The Henry's was a classic serving up the likes of bangers (made with Lincolnshire pork) and mash, Kentish beer-battered fish 'n chips, pastry pie of the day, hand made burgers and fish curry.

The next day we went to Hush Heath Winery. There are now over 500 commercial vineyards in the UK (England and Wales)



Hole 6 at Hevers Castle Championship Course

and some 165 wineries. Over 50 of them are in Kent. The majority of the production in Kent (about 66%) is sparkling wine, about a quarter is still white and the rest is red or rosé. Staplehurst's Hush Heath Winery is renowned for its award-winning Balfour Brut Rosé (available at the LCBO for \$41.50), a bubbly made in the champagne method using the same grape varieties as in Champagne, namely chardonnay, pinot noir and pinot meunier.

The family owned 400 acre estate has vineyards, apple orchards and ancient oak woodlands which visitors may tour followed by a tutored tasting of their wines and ciders. I found the Balfour Brut Rosé elegantly worthy of its awards but also enjoyed trying the winery's still wines from chardonnay and pinot noir varietals and sparkling ciders made from Cox, Russet and Bramley apples. www.hushheath.com

Chapel Down in Kent is one of Britain's best-known wineries. Fans of their world-class range of sparkling (also made in the champagne method) and still wines include Gordon Ramsey and Jamie Oliver. Chapel Down has even delivered to No 10 Downing Street, as well as Ascot Racecourse. After taking one of their daily guided tours, one can finish the day in The Swan, Chapel Down's two AA Rosette and Michelin Bib Gourmand restaurant specializing in modern British cuisine. www.chapeldown.com

We continued on to do a tour of Sissinghurst Castle Garden. Kent has world renowned flower gardens and this one is among the most famous. Sissinghurst's garden was created by poet and gardening writer Vita Sackville-West and her husband author and diplomat Harold Nicolson. At the on premises casual café/restaurant, Anita and I sampled their home-grown chicken pot pie and tomato soup.

We ended our day at Frasers, a private guest house and restaurant nestled deep in the countryside at the end of a long private drive. As we neared the guest houses, the countryside opened up to reveal green pastoral vistas. Their luxurious accommodation was offered in three period buildings- a Kentish Ragstone Oast house, a converted former stable block and a former cart-barn.

The rooms were lovely, but the best part was dining in the 2 AA Rosette winning restaurant in a traditionally constructed oak-framed Kentish Barn. We both went for the tasting menu which started with truffled artichoke soup, followed by



The Lodge at Princes from its championship links

pigeon with wild mushroom, sole with sweetcorn and cauliflower and roast partridge with juniper reduction, bacon and parsnips. The meal ended with a pressed apple with cobnut crumb and cider sorbet and then Kentish cheese. www.frasers-events.co.uk

Back to the links the next day – this time hitting the undulating fairways of Littlestone, located between the Romney Marsh and the English Channel in the south-east corner of Kent. Founded in 1888, it's home to The Championship Links and The Warren courses. Playing here was like a step back in time. www.littlestonegolfclub.org.uk

Then we drove past the white cliffs of Dover to the medieval town of Sandwich where Pieter Van Zyl of Chequers Cooking School had invited us to dinner. Pieter converted a pub that he owned and ran on Golf Road in Deal (near Sandwich) into the school, but kept a small bar area so customers can still pop in for a drink. Pieter treated Anita and me to an amazing seafood paella cooked at the historic home he shares with his spouse, Gary Rose, in Sandwich. www.chequersdeal.co.uk

Time to work off the eating again. We spent the next two nights at The Lodge at Prince's in Sandwich Bay amidst the golf courses of Prince's Golf Club. The Club has three nine-hole loops: The Shore, The Dunes and The Himalayas.



Chef Pieter Van Zyl from Chequers Cooking School

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GOLF GETAWAY



12th Hole Royal St. George Golf Course



Salutations Restaurant

My room overlooked the fairways – the other side of the hotel had a view to the English Channel.

Prince's has hosted many Amateur and Professional Championships since it was opened in 1907 and the golf was quite challenging but fair. That is, except for some of the bunkers, especially the enormous one on the ninth fairway of Himalayas named in honour of American pro golfer Gene Sarazen who used the golf world's first sand wedge during The Open in 1932 (which he won). When I landed in the giant bunker, I resorted to the 'hand wedge' to finally get out. www.princesgolfclub.co.uk

Our most challenging game was at Royal St. George's, often called the greatest seaside golf course in the world. In 1894 it hosted the first Open Championship played outside Scotland: in all there have been 14 Open Championships at St. George's, more than any course outside of Scotland. In 2020 it will play host to the 149th Open. www.royalstgeorges.com

St. George's legendary member, Ian Fleming, author of the James Bond books, used the course (thinly disguised as the fictional Royal St. Mark's) as the setting for the tense match between Bond and Goldfinger in his 1959 novel Goldfinger. Fleming maintained a weekend house in Sandwich which it is said was formerly owned by Noel Coward.

At night the town of Sandwich, the most medieval town in the UK, lured us in with its charm and fine dining. Sandwich means "market-town-on-the-sand" and the village next door Ham, was named for the old English word for village. The road sign Ham-Sandwich has been stolen so many times that the council stopped replacing it.

Sandwich is where the Romans launched their first successful invasion of England, where in 1192 Richard the Lionhearted landed on his return from the Crusades and where the curfew bell still rings every night at 8pm, just as it always has. And yes, it gave its name to the sandwich, after the 4th Earl of Sandwich who invented the convenient meal.

That night we ate at Salutations Restaurant. We enjoyed an awesome tasting menu prepared by Chef Shane Hughes, who has cooked at Michelin starred restaurants including Whatley Manor, Ynyshir Hall and Thackeray's. Every dish we bit into was memorable, including the smoked langoustine with celeriac, pigeon breast with chestnut gnocchi, diver scallops with smoked haddock sauce, quail and bacon sausage with black truffle and pork cheek in cider. www.the-salutation.com

We played one more course before heading home: the London Golf Club, situated just 40 km from the capital with 36 holes of championship golf designed by Jack Nicklaus. We played the International considered one of the finest downland courses in Europe with fast, undulating fairways. www.londongolf.co.uk

If I've tempted you to visit Kent, you can find stay and play offerings, attractions and other useful information at www.golfinkent.co.uk. ◇◇◇