

Suffolk's Sunrise Coast

Shaped by wind and tide, Suffolk's coast with its mix of sand, shingle, dunes, heathland and forest has been inviting visitors for generations. With my VW T6 camper, George, I head off to England's Sunrise Coast in search of an Indian summer and to unearth the secrets that East Anglia has to offer.

On the A14 a signpost at junction 50 lifts the spirit: 'A1120 Tourist Route'. The journey east from here gives the traveller a snapshot of rural Suffolk life. Intriguing villages – Stonham Aspal, Earl Soham, Saxtead Green, Peasenhall – nestle amid a rich, verdant, rolling landscape. Each is worthy of a stop for a stroll or a cake at a tearoom along the way.

Our destination for a two-night stay is Cliff House Holiday Park at Dunwich, a 120-pitch clifftop woodland site, a good base from which to explore this stretch of coast. There are miles of beach in both directions, and Dunwich Forest, where Dartmoor ponies graze the open pastures and miles of public paths weave through woods and heath, is a short walk away.

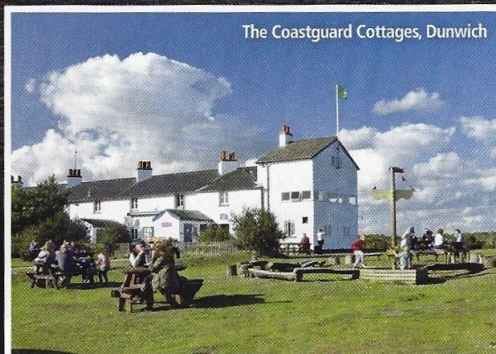
England's Atlantis

Once at the coast the bustle of urban life and the hum of traffic are distant memories. After dinner, and a short walk in the autumn darkness, I settle down. The only sound that accompanies me to sleep is the enchanting call of a red deer stag a few hundred yards away on

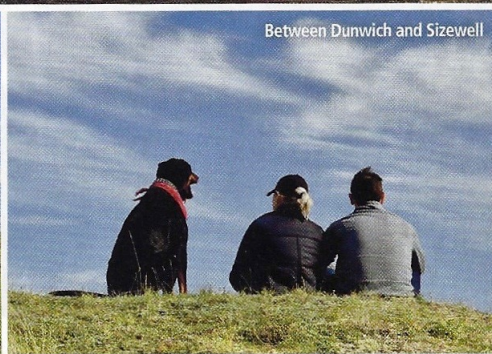
Dunwich Heath. "Rutting season starts at the end of September, so in the early hours, you do hear the stags calling," says Kris Harper, the receptionist.

"You can see the deer throughout the year, but you're more likely to see the stags in the autumn. They come onto Cliff House park at night, and some visitors are lucky enough to see them. Even in the summer they can be seen walking across the heath. It's a wonderful sight."

Dunwich, England's Atlantis as it has affectionately become known, was once the sixth largest trading town in England. In 1328 a storm destroyed its harbour. Most of what remained has since been lost to the sea. Homes, communities and trades have gone.



The Coastguard Cottages, Dunwich



Between Dunwich and Sizewell



Mike Trippitt enjoys the quiet life with a peaceful roam around the Suffolk coastline...

WORDS & PHOTOS MIKE TRIPPITT

By spending just a few hours in this unique landscape, I realise why many so many people return each summer. For some, merely visiting is not enough.

Kris Harper and her partner, Jerry Reed were regular caravan visitors to Cliff House, but both began working here in 2016 and now live on site. Kris says, "I love the fact that we can walk for miles without being near any main roads. We have steps straight down to the beach, and several dog-friendly pubs in walking distance. The wildlife is stunning."

Heathland and Sizewell B

After a still, peaceful night I decide to walk south to a part of Suffolk I had not

seen before. A mile down the coast, the National Trust's Coastguard Cottages are a hub for walkers, birdwatchers and photographers visiting Dunwich Heath or the adjacent Minsmere Nature Reserve.

Within a four-mile walk I am gifted heathlands of heather and gorse, woodlands of chestnut and oak, sea grasses and dunes, former World War II coastal defences, shingle and (once high tide has passed) sandy beaches. A more varied seaside environment is difficult to imagine. Standing tall just metres from the sea, Sizewell power station is in marked contrast to the sleepy beach.

The juxtaposition of this man-made


structure with the coastal landscape created by the power of nature adds an intriguing singularity to this otherwise unspoilt part of Suffolk.

Love it or hate it, Sizewell B draws attention and comment in equal measure. For me, its majestic white dome provides a fascinating backdrop to dunes and a pebbled beach dotted with a dozen small fishing boats.

Cake and classic VWs

While having a sandwich at Sizewell Beach refreshment café, something in the grassy car park catches my eye. I have to take a look. In the autumn sunshine I



Sunrise at Sizewell 

meet 'Herman', a 1978, green and white, VW T2 Westfalia.

"When we bought it, it was imported directly from California. It's a left-hand drive," says Herman's owner, Chris. "We wanted the two-litre engine with reasonable performance, because we wanted to tour in it."

In the five years they have had him, Chris and wife Julie have toured Norfolk, Dorset, Holland and Belgium, including going to the Belgium Grand Prix.

Once I return to George I reflect on the day. I feel fulfilled and uplifted by this amazing landscape, and, of course, my chance meeting with Chris, Julie and Herman. This really is campervan country.

B and Beach

I want to spend more time at Sizewell B, so we drive to Beach View campsite on the sandy cliff line just 500 metres from the beach café. It is a good spot and an easy stroll back through the dunes to the village where The Vulcan Arms pub also has a small campsite. The light is fading fast now and the breeze stiffens. At the beach, fishermen's huts huddle together in the dunes, black and silent like cows sheltering from the wind.

On this stretch of coast, reminders of the dark days of the World War II are part of the landscape. None is more poignant than a simple sculpture of three paddles

at Sizewell Beach.

It's a memorial to 32 young Dutchmen who escaped Holland in kayaks and set off to paddle across the North Sea to join the allied forces. Only eight made it to England; only three survived the war. The memorial and its story move me. In fading light I walk to the pub for a quiet drink, vowing to learn more.

There is one advantage of touring in late season. To catch the sunrise, I do not need to be out and about at 4am. The next morning I leave George at 6.30am to walk to the beach.

For twenty minutes I meander among dog-walkers, and chat to a fisherman clearing shingle deposited by the last tide away from his boat. The sun rises over the horizon painting them black against a golden canvas. The autumn chill nibbles at my ears, but it does not matter. It's worth getting up for. This wild Suffolk environment is breathtaking at this time in the morning. This is why I had come east. The Sunrise Coast has delivered on its promise.

House in the Clouds

The unique coastal village of Thorpeness is a short drive from Sizewell. It is the creation of G Stuart Ogilvie, the then



landowner. Work began on a collection of holiday homes, a country club, golf club and resort for the Ogilvie family and their friends in 1910. Built around a two-and-a-half feet deep lake – 'The Meare' – its varied architecture, almshouses, windmill and boathouse give it a surreal air. Author, J M Barrie was an Ogilvie family friend, so the buildings around The Meare and the islands have a Peter Pan theme.

After morning coffee at the waterside where wavelets lap against tethered rowing boats basking in the morning sunshine, I walk purposefully towards something I couldn't wait to see.

There is nothing on earth like the 'House In The Clouds'. Peering out over the treetops it looks quaint enough, much like any other timber-clad dwelling. But look again. This six-storey building is actually a converted water tower.

Standing red, black and white against a blue October sky and with the white windmill across the lane turning lazily, the 'House In The Clouds' challenged my sense of reality. Is this the land of make-believe?

Advance to Aldeburgh

By late morning normality had returned with my arrival in Aldeburgh, where I

1 Maggi Hambling's 'Scallop' on Aldeburgh Beach

2 The author and George his 'van

3 Sizewell B

4 Aldeburgh

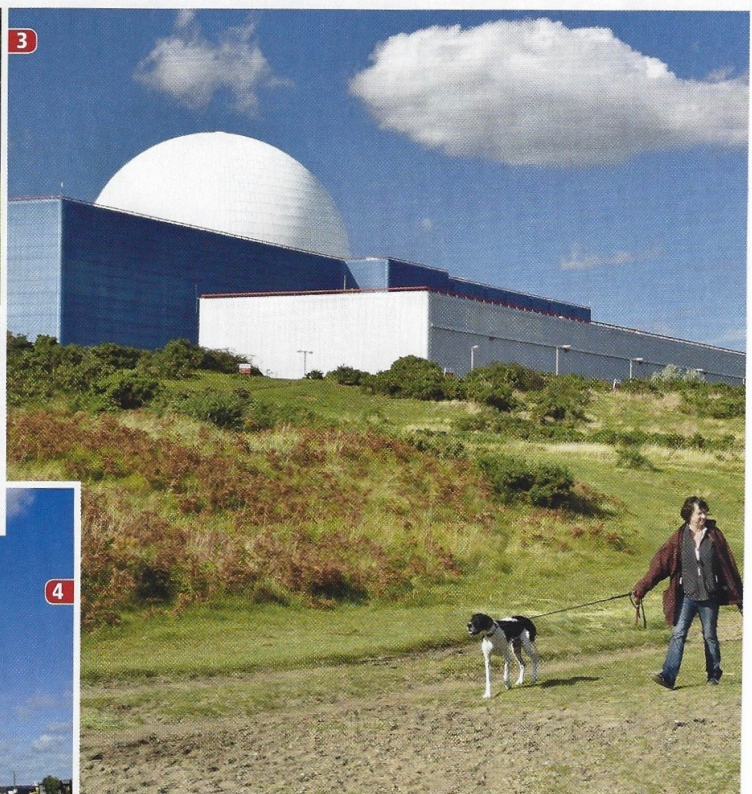
5 The 'House in the Clouds', Thorpeness



GEORGE THE CAMPERVAN

Mike's campervan is a 2016 VW T6 Highline Transporter 102bhp 2.0-litre TDI, converted by Needingworth Campers, St Ives, Cambridgeshire. As well as providing comfortable touring and sleeping, he acts as their second car and fits a standard parking space and driveway.

Needingworth Campers, High Street, Needingworth, St Ives, Cambridgeshire PE27 4SA
 ☎ 01480 464100 🌐 needingworthcampers.co.uk



plan to stay the night. This fashionable town nestles on land between the sea to the east and the River Alde to the south and west. Boats moored on the river have a long sail south to reach the sea, though it is but a stones-throw over the shingle bank.

Aldeburgh has everything a visitor needs: shops, boutiques, traditional pubs, restaurants, a film theatre and an attractive seafront. It has one of the remaining fishing fleets to launch from a beach. Fish sold here from fishermen's sheds could not be fresher.

Providing something of a landmark and focal point to the waterfront the town's lifeboat station is both impressive to look at and interesting to visit. Housing both inshore and offshore vessels, it opened in 1993, although there has been a lifeboat in the town since 1851.

Further up the promenade Aldeburgh's 16th century Moot Hall stands in marked contrast to the RNLI building. It still acts as the Town Hall and houses a museum.

Adjacent to it on the boating lake a solitary unattended pond yacht tacks and gybes in the light breeze, while a group of retired folk plays boule on one of four seafront courts. The scene could not be more quintessentially British.

Before I return to George, camped up at Church Farm site, I have a thought. Once the seed is sown, there was no



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“Intriguing villages – Stonham Aspal, Earl Soham, Saxtead Green, Peasenhall – nestle amid a rich, verdant, rolling landscape. Each is worthy of a stop for a stroll or cake...”



INFORMATION

Miles covered	235
Campsite fees paid	£103

going back. There is one thing I have to do. “Medium or extra large?” says the homely, pleasant lady behind the counter.

“Medium please,” I reply, thinking that an extra-large piece of haddock at the famous Aldeburgh Fish and Chip Shop would be beyond my appetite.

My lunch is fresh, cooked beautifully and well presented. Eating it from paper sitting on the seawall makes it taste even better. No wonder the lunchtime queues stretch well down the street.

Fun in Felixstowe

The last stop on my journey is to be Felixstowe. We follow the country route from Aldeburgh calling briefly at Snape Maltings, an arts, crafts and music venue famous for its opera and music concerts.

A further short drive leads us into Orford. Although I do not stop at the village, it is deserving of a return visit. A quay, harbour, tearoom, castle, hotel,

craft shop, and the inviting Butley Orford Oysterage restaurant all give good reason to spend a day and evening here. Its cottages and grass verges give the village an almost Cotswold-like feel.

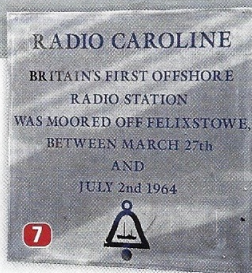
Felixstowe is a town of fascinating contrast. Established in Victorian times, it was known as Suffolk's Garden Resort.

The tide of economic prosperity has ebbed and flowed over the years, but recent refurbishments at the seafront gardens, the reopening of the Spa Pavilion and the rebuilding of its pier, make Felixstowe look and feel on the up.

Its main street, with a Tesco, Boots, M&S, Specsavers and Costa is testament to the fact that this a living town, a real community rather than a centre for second homes and those down from the city. It successfully meets the needs of its residents yet provides attractions and venues to bring tourists in.

Driving along the cliff line past the golf

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club and expensive white, flat-roofed seaside dwellings we travel just north of the resort to the quiet hamlet of Felixstowe Ferry; a cluster of a dozen houses, two cafés, a pub and a boatyard at the mouth of the River Deben.

I make for the Ferry Café. The twenty first century has yet to be invited into this time capsule. Everyone else, though, is most welcome.

Foot-tapping songs of the 50s and 60s play out around plastic tableclothes, tubular-framed tables and vinyl covered chairs. Old '78' records and vintage musical instruments adorn the painted timber walls.

Opened in 1953, change at the café is slow and service uncomplicated. But it works beautifully. It is tempting to stay

6 Felixstowe Docks

7 The Radio Caroline stone at Felixstowe

8 Thorpeness Meare

for a decade or two longer.

Just three miles south, and a comfortable walk around Landguard Point, Felixstowe's huge docks jolt the tourist back into the modern world. So popular is the sight of the world's largest container ships arriving in the port that the purpose-built viewing area and café are always busy.

Today I was in luck. No sooner had I parked at Harwich harbour and Felixstowe port, a team of tugboats set to work. With precision and grace the two vessels pull, nudge and cajole the 399-metre-long 'Mathilde Maersk' away from the quayside and on her way. It is great to watch.

Felixstowe has a rich military history. Landguard Fort defended the port from

seaborne attack for 400 years. It closed in 1971, but is now open to the public and houses Felixstowe's museum. The fort's history and the story of Felixstowe's World War II seaplanes are well told.

The town's more recent past was commemorated in September 2017 by a stone laid into Wolsey Gardens overlooking the North Sea. In 1964 Britain's first pirate radio station, Radio Caroline, began broadcasting just three miles off Felixstowe beach.

Brian Nichols, co-founder of The Felixstowe and Offshore Radio Group, and one of those instrumental in getting the stone laid, says: "Most associate Radio Caroline with the Essex coast as that's where it was for the vast majority of the time. And that was partly why I wanted to do what I did, because this was a part of the town's history that I felt was in danger of being forgotten. With the stone in the ground, we have a permanent memorial."

Standing here looking out to sea, it is easy to be drawn into the days of the pirate stations, the days of culture revolution, the days of the Mini Moke and the days of the good old Split-screen.

After five nights, the last one in Felixstowe, my time on the Suffolk coast comes to an end. George and I have covered 235 miles by the time we get home and paid £103 in site fees.

Temperate East Anglia weather, spectacular coastal scenery, glorious sunrises and tales from a diverse past combined to give a rewarding tour at a reasonable cost. The secrets that Suffolk holds and the surprises it delivers make it a place to visit at any time of year.



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WHERE WE STAYED

Cliff House Holiday Park
Minsmere Road, Dunwich,
Saxmundham IP17 3DQ
☎ 01728 648282
🌐 cliffhouseholidays.co.uk
📅 All year

Beach View Holiday Park
Sizewell Common, Sizewell,
Leiston IP16 4TU
☎ 01728 830724
🌐 beachviewholidaypark.co.uk
📅 1 March – 31 October

Church Farm Holiday Park
Church Farm Road, Aldeburgh
IP15 5DW
☎ 01728 453433
🌐 churchfarmparkaldeburgh.co.uk
📅 1 April – 2 January