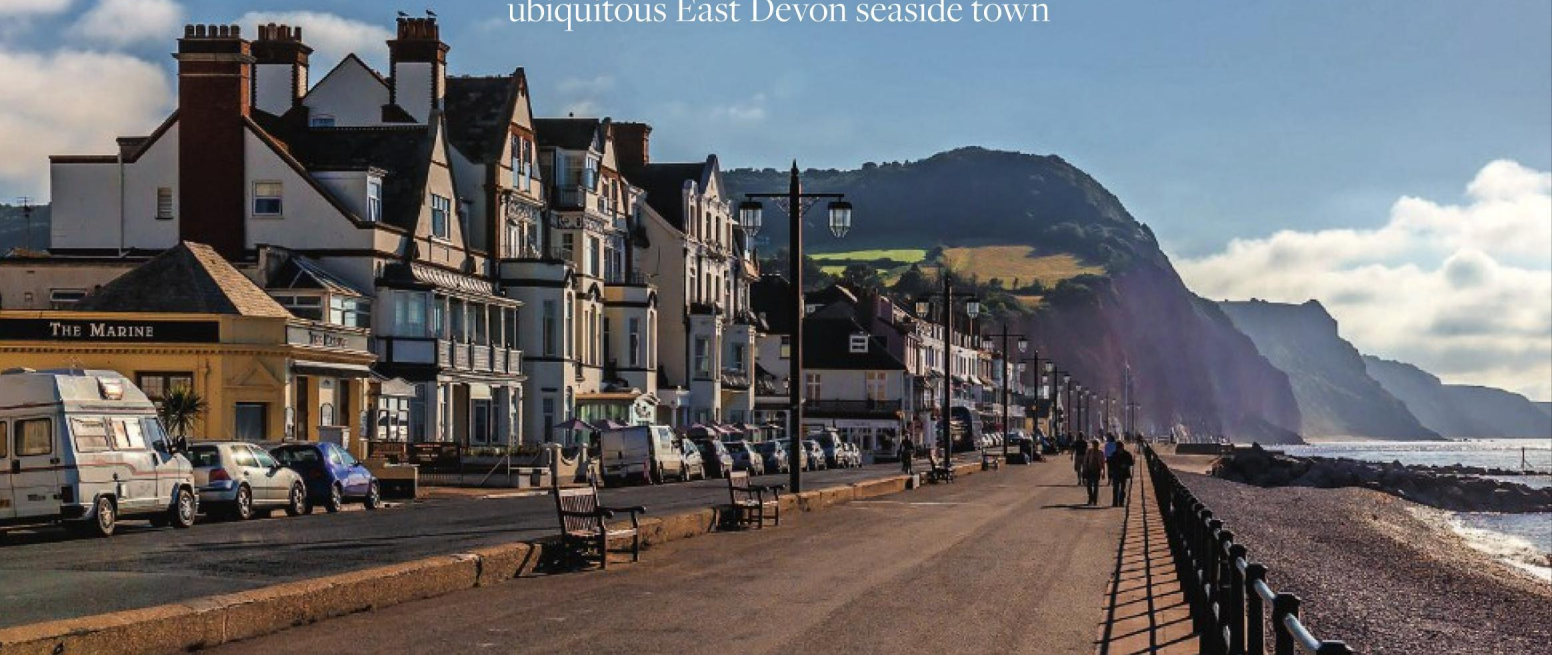


Why SIDMOUTH is so SPECIAL

SUE CADE discovers some of the hidden secrets and gems of this ubiquitous East Devon seaside town



When I first visited Sidmouth, I was four years old with a distinctive pudding basin haircut. In the family archives there's a cine film clip of me clambering up the steps at Jacobs Ladder towards what's now the Clock Tower Café – where many years later I ate the largest slice of coffee cake I've ever encountered.

Moving to East Devon in the 1990s, the town had big draws for me and my young family; a safe beach to take the children paddling, great fish and chip shops and a lovely playpark. Fast forward to the present day and visiting Sidmouth remains a real treat.

I often park a little way out of the town centre and stroll along the Byes, a riverside walk made up of fields and meadows that follows the River Sid – very popular with families, dog walkers and cyclists.

The Byes are pretty at any time of the year, but especially in the spring when there's a wonderful display of flowers including crocuses and daffs, whilst in summer a wildflower meadow abounds with colour. The many native trees are always glorious and include sweet chestnuts and English oaks. At the end of the walk is the Toll House, an odd little building with Greek pillars that dates back to the early 19th century. It was restored in 2011 and, I learned, home to a council tenant.

Turn right along Salcombe Road and you pass a private house that achieved 15 minutes of fame in 2017 when a rare Mexican agave plant grew to a great height and burst into bloom attracting national media attention for homeowner Julia Hardy. Although the plant died after flowering, a young offshoot is visible, although



Photo: mlimgonda/Getty Images/Stockphoto

ABOVE: Jacob's Ladder and the beach in Sidmouth

MAIN: Sidmouth seafront

TOP RIGHT: Sidmouth has long been a popular seaside destination

this will take decades to flower like its parent plant.

At the top of the road is the wonderful Radway Cinema, probably my favourite cinema ever. When I first watched a film there in the 1990s the interior reminded me of a funeral parlour, but the cinema has been extensively refurbished over the years and now there's nothing better than watching a National Theatre

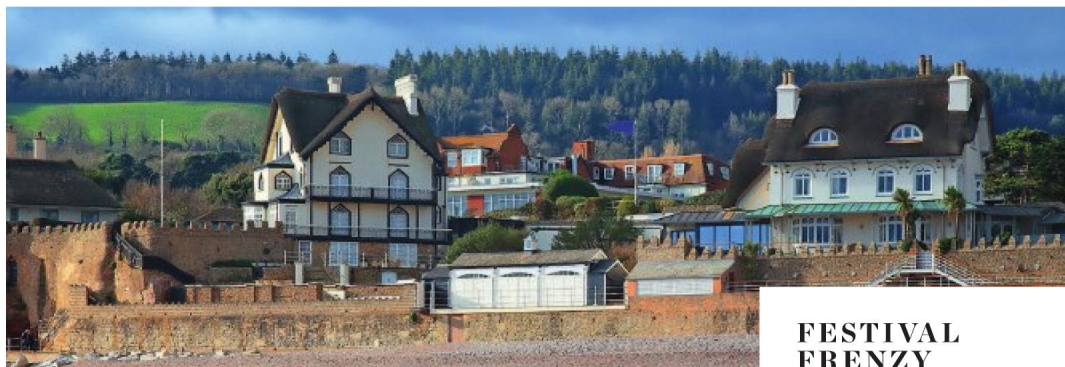


Photo: savollic/Getty Images/Stockphoto

Live screening with a drink from the well-stocked bar. The front of house team are always game, dressing up when a blockbuster comes to town. Manager Mandy knows her regulars by name and is very helpful in suggesting which gin you might like to try.

I love a town that flaunts its independence and although Sidmouth has a number of high street shops there are plenty of independents to browse. Pop into Potburys, Polka, Pobby & Blue, Paper Moon, Daffy-down-dilly and independent bookshop Winstones, also the official bookseller to the literary festival. A visit to Sidmouth isn't complete without a foray into Fields, which retains the feel of a traditional department store with a cornucopia of delights on offer and the type of customer service increasingly rare to find. Great galleries too, particularly Azure on Old Fore Street.

The jewel in the crown of Sidmouth is, of course, the seafront and beach. The long promenade is ideal for a stroll and to take

the sea air – Sidmouth after all was a seaside destination for the Victorians. The beach is mainly pebble although there are some good stretches of sand at low tide just right for bucket-and-spade fun. Many folk enjoy a daily dip, even in the colder months and especially on Boxing Day when locals take to the sea in fancy dress for what's become an annual event.

Climbing the steps at Jacob's Ladder brings you not just to the aforementioned café but also Connaught Gardens. The gardens, crammed with colour in the flowering season, were created in the 1930s and yes, there's a bandstand used for summer entertainment and theatre shows and exhibitions take place too. But the best treat has to be the stunning views of the Jurassic Coast.

'The Byes are pretty at any time of the year, but especially in the spring'

Veering away from the seafront and a walk along the very long Cotmaton Road towards Sidmouth Golf Club there's a lovely secret surprise - a wall into which are set some very unusual faces, apparently the work of a sometime resident who liked zany art.

In its independent way there's no shortage of places to eat out in the town with The Pea Green Boat, Neil's Restaurant, Duke's and The Chatterry, with Rockfish soon to open at the historic Drill Hall, situated right at the end of the Esplanade, perfectly positioned for fantastic sea views. This is the ninth Rockfish for celebrity chef Mitch Tonks and as with his other restaurants the focus will be firmly on fresh seafood delivered daily from Brixham – adding yet another good reason to visit Sidmouth! ♦

FESTIVAL FRENZY

For a small town, Sidmouth has a surfeit of festivals – four in total

First in the festival year is **Sidmouth Literary Festival** held every June. Always providing an impressive line-up of big names in the literary world, events take place across the town with talks, readings and workshops on offer. 12-14 June. sidmouthlitfest.co.uk

The annual knees-up that is the **Sidmouth Folk Festival** has been running since 1955. Whether you want to see a particular musician or just wander the streets and chance upon performances in pubs around the town there really is something for everyone. Fantastic food, workshops and lots of dancing; everyone just goes to have a good time. You don't need a ticket just to potter but remember that parking is always an issue!

31 July to 7 August 2020
sidmouthfolkfestival.co.uk

Sea Fest is a one day event that does what it says on the tin, celebrating '...the opportunities afforded on, in and from the sea.' This year it has a theme of environmental responsibility – the festival was the first single-use plastics free festival in Sidmouth. With music, entertainment, traditional crafts, activities for children and lots of fishy food the day celebrates the heritage of the local community's relationship with the sea. 16 May. sidmouthcoastalcommunityhub.org/sidmouth-sea-fest

Rounding off the year is the **Science Festival**, a week-long festival that takes place in October, featuring fossils, dinosaurs, stars, energy, light, weather, brains, rockets and more. sidmouthsciencefestival.org

DISSENTING WELCOMED!

The Dissenters Hall at the top of the High Street is a fascinating part of the town's history. It was built by Protestant non-Conformists to provide an alternative church for Free Christians. A dissenting congregation has met there for the best part of three centuries, accepting anyone of any religion to enjoy creative activity, intellectual enquiry and political debate. Sisters Thomazine Mary and Annie Leigh Browne, descendants of Dissenting family the Carslakes, were responsible for the opening of Sidmouth's first maternity hospital. They also landscaped The Byes and bequeathed the area to the local people. Still very much part of the local community, the hall is home to the Sid Valley Food Bank; used regularly by East Devon Dance Academy; and is where the Poetry Group meets. The door is often open to visitors and all are, naturally, welcome!

Photo: Alexey Fedoren/Getty Images/Stockphoto