

Forget the Hamptons. I'd rather go to Kent

A clapboard house, sea breezes and fresh oysters: there's a strong flavour of New England at this idyllic seaside retreat in Whitstable, says **Joanne O'Connor**

If you were to ask someone to describe their fantasy beach house, they'd probably conjure up something that looks a bit like the Beacon House: weather-beaten white clapboard, a wraparound veranda with comfy sofa and artfully distressed wooden table scattered with seashells and pebbles, doors and windows that open up to uninterrupted views of the sea and the sound of the waves lapping against the shore to lull you to sleep.

Though it would not look out of place in New England, Beacon House is actually in Whitstable, Kent, a town that has seen a remarkable turnaround in its fortunes, from down-at-heel seaside resort for day-tripping Londoners to chic weekend retreat for second-homers attracted by its jaunty maritime air, narrow lanes and sweet fishermen's cottages.

On a good day Whitstable is an easy 75-minute drive from London. But set off, as we did, during rush hour on a Friday afternoon and it can take a laborious two hours. We arrive just as the sun is setting. As soon as I see the house my shoulders drop a few inches and my bad mood starts to evaporate. Set on a steep slope surrounded by woodland, it has nothing between it and the pebble beach but a narrow private road. To the east is a row of candy-coloured beach huts

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stretching to Herne Bay; to the west is Whitstable's fishing harbour. It's such a perfect picture that I am loath to park my angry red little Nissan Micra outside for fear of breaking the spell.

We have a reservation at Wheelers Oyster House in the high street, so we drop off our bags and walk into town. Whitstable is famous for its oysters, which have been harvested here since Roman times. Half a dozen obscenely large native oysters (the first time I've ever had to eat an oyster with a knife and fork), a perfectly cooked piece of sea bass and a few glasses of Sauvignon Blanc later the last vestiges of motorway angst slip away.

That night I sleep with the window open but when the tide comes in the sound of the waves slapping on the shingle is so loud – and so alien to my city-dweller's ears – that I have to get up and close it. In the morning the sea is calm and milky, the sky's hazy and there's not a soul on the beach. In the distance I can just make out the turbines of an offshore wind farm and the outline of the Isle of Sheppey. I eat a bacon sandwich on the veranda and read the *Whitstable Gazette* (front-page story: Oyster numbers are on the rise).

As I look out to sea, something strange starts to happen. At low tide a narrow promontory of shingle slowly emerges from the water directly in front of the house, stretching to the horizon. This spit of land is known as the Street and



this faintly Old Testament parting of the waves occurs daily. From where we are sitting the people standing at the end of the Street, half a mile out to sea, look as though they are walking on water.

The house is too lovely not to share, so we've invited friends for a barbecue. We buy sardines, cockles and samphire from the fish market, just a short stroll along the beach; homemade cakes and local strawberries from the organic farmers' market on the high street; and lamb chops from the butcher. As our friends arrive I give them the guided tour – the huge kitchen with its tongue-and-groove panelling and lovely pine dresser; the arts-and-crafts-style living room with its open fire, wood panelling and patio doors that open onto the sea; the beautiful oak staircase; the breezy white bedrooms with their tasteful nautical theme; the fabulous outdoor shower.

"I feel like I've stepped into a copy of *Homes and Gardens*," says Lauren, and in a sense we have. When the house is not being rented out as a holiday let, it's used for fashion and interiors shoots. There's a stack of lifestyle and interiors magazines featuring the house and I'm just thinking how perfect this would be for a *Roden* catalogue shoot when I spot the Winter 2006 catalogue. And look, here's hunky David (vice gadget) with his striped pyjamas and white teeth on the veranda (our veranda!) drinking coffee out of a big mug while his blonde girlfriend hugs him from behind.

We spend the afternoon on the deck,

ESSENTIALS

The Beacon House (www.tranquil-beacon.co.uk) sleeps eight to 10 and costs from a night. For enquiries email

Wheelers Oyster Bar, 8 High Street, Whitstable (01227 273371; www.whitstable-shell-fish.co.uk). For more information visit www.seewhitstable.com.



Beacon House is just a pebble's throw from the beach with sea views from every room and a prime spot overlooking 'The Street'. Photographs by Mark Nicholson/James Drury

MORE SEASIDE HIDEAWAYS

BURNFOOT COTTAGE, DUMFRIES AND GALLOWAY

Right on the shore of Dhoo Bay, this four-bedroom cottage is in a magical location. A front gate leads directly to a sheltered beach and there are two acres of woodland garden for exploratory walks, where you might chance upon some wildlife. Warned by the Gulf stream, the area has a mild climate and is ideal for fishing, watersports or sunbathing. The artists' town of Kirkcudbright (three miles away) has many delightful restaurants.

Sleeps eight. £1,200 a week. Book through Seaside Cottages (www.seasidecottages.co.uk)

HARBOUR VIEW, CORNWALL

Set on the water's edge at beautiful Lamorna Cove, this first-floor apartment is above an old-fashioned seaside cafe which is open from April to October. The decor is bright and modern with clear views of sea and sky. It has French windows that open on to a spacious balcony for an evening meal or to watch the sunrise at breakfast.

Sleeps four. £246 a week. Book through Classic Cottages (01326 555555; www.classiccottages.co.uk)

CABLE HUT, PEMBROKESHIRE

The first submarine telegraph cable was laid on the seabed to Ireland from here, hence the name of this compact and functional beach house. Set back 200 yards from the beach at Abermawr, with sea views, it's right on the coastal path and perfect for walkers and nature lovers, who will



The Cable Hut in Pembrokeshire.



Enjoy beach views at Thurleston Rock.

appreciate the seal colonies and the birds that visit the wildflowers in the garden. **Sleeps two.** £367 a week. Book through Coastal Cottages of Pembrokeshire (01437 765765; www.coastalcottages.co.uk)

THURLESTON ROCK PENTHOUSE, DEVON

These luxury marine apartments look directly over the beach at Thurleston Sands, right on the South Devon coastal path. Eat supper on the veranda with breathtaking views over the bay and to Burgh Island. There's a heated outdoor swimming pool and large patio areas with barbecue facilities.

Sleeps six. £1,350 a week. Book through Coast and Country (0870 4050530; www.coastandcountry.co.uk)

OVERSTRAND, KENT

You can step out of your front door and on to the pebble beach at Herne Bay from this cottage. The back garden rises steeply to give dramatic sea and sunset views.

Sleeps five plus a cot. £650 a week. Book through Fairhaven Holidays (01208 821255; www.fairhaven-holidays.co.uk)

SANDERLING COTTAGE, NORTHUMBERLAND

Part of a cute collection of fishermen's cottages in Low Hauxley just metres from the unspoilt coastline of Druridge Bay, with its long walking paths, bird hides and nature reserves. The enclosed front garden has a barbecue if you tire of sandy patios.

Sleeps six. £620 a week with Northumbria Coast and Country (01665 830 783; www.northumbria-cottages.co.uk)

All prices are based on a week's rental in July.