

# Condé Nast Traveller

SEPTEMBER 2019

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TREND

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ON BALI

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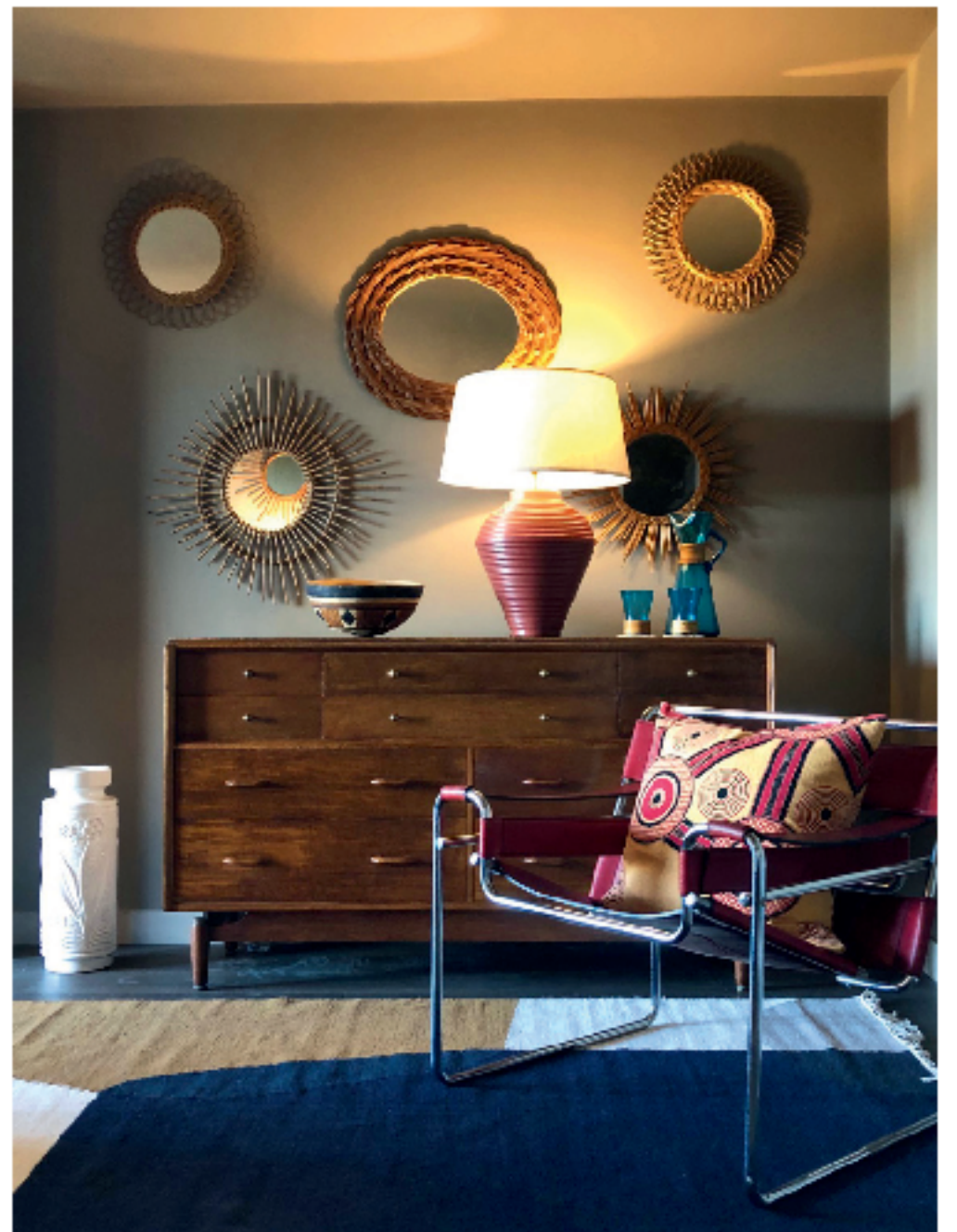
IN BRITAIN



## STAYCATION

# RYE

INVADED VIA THE SEA FOR CENTURIES AND ONCE EVEN UNDER FRENCH RULE, MEDIEVAL RYE WAS A HOTBED OF SWASHBUCKLING RUM-RUNNERS. NOW A NEW WAVE OF MORE PEACEFUL, BOHO BLOW-INS IS ADDING A MODERN TALE. BY ANNA PRENDERGAST



RYE'S TOWN CRIER, who announces bashful newlyweds and rallies crowds at local events, can't pronounce the letter 'r', so when he launches his voice like a cannon through the cobbled streets, the town's name lands heavy like a question: why? Monty Python would see a missed opportunity, but residents are too polite to laugh. More to the point, the answer to that particular question is no longer their secret alone.

On the face of it, this is Hovis-advert Norman England, an old town set on a sandstone outcrop like a Tuscan citadel, close enough to the winding waterways of the harbour and dunes of Camber Sands that the briny air is often filled with seagull shrieks. The 20th-century poet Patric Dickinson described Rye as a 'beautifully jewelled brooch worn at South England's throat'. He wasn't the only one inspired by the place: JMW Turner feverishly sketched it from the bird-speckled wetlands that run beside River Rother down to the sea, while Henry James escaped London's literary scene to live and write at the stately Lamb

newcomers, many self-declared DFLs (down-from-Londoners), have followed Hackney creatives Katie and Alex Clarke, who reinvigorated tired coaching inn The George more than a decade ago. 'Rye has always been a gem, but there's a real buzz about it right now,' says silver-quiffed interior designer Alex MacArthur, who took over a 14th-century monastery and turned it into a temple of statement furniture. She's one of many breathing life into ancient spaces. Medieval needn't mean twee or chintzy; like the stiff westerlies that draw kitesurfers to Camber Sands, it can be bracingly fresh.

#### REVAMPED ROOMS

Set designer Katie Clarke and her husband Alex broke the mould in 2006, when they transformed **The George in Rye** from a place of swirly carpets and tinkling teacups to one of airy, Farrow-and-Balled Georgian modernism. George Clooney stayed in room 32 in 2013 while on location for *The Monuments Men*; earlier this year,

modern, converted from a Fifties St John Ambulance station into an airy, bare-brick four-bedroom house. *themintinrye.com*; from £915 for seven nights. *domstayandlive.com*; from £400 per night

#### GRAND DESIGNS

Clients from private estates and hotels across the world make the pilgrimage to **Alex MacArthur Interiors**, a cavernous former monastery that looks like a museum of large-scale curiosities. MacArthur left Brighton purely for the 'brutalist-meets-14th-century' space and its attached cottage, which hadn't been inhabited since the 1960s. 'Whether it's a baroque original or a piece of Eighties bling, I only buy what I love, and I take big risks,' says the designer, who recently sold a pair of lioness and tigress skeletons in glass cases and a sofa set from an 18th-century Italian palazzo. Her current stock includes huge, mid-century Murano chandeliers, 15ft French château doors and an oil painting from the 1600s depicting amorous sheep. Most of it

## NO ONE'S MESSING WITH HIGGLEDY-PIGGLEDY MERMAID STREET, A REGULAR ON LISTS OF BRITAIN'S PRETTIEST STRIPS, OR ITS TIMBER-FRAMED 12TH-CENTURY INN

House, where George I also sought refuge when his ship ran aground in 1726.

With all of this historical baggage, and a huge concentration of Grade II-listed houses, the town's danger has always been that it might ossify into a quaint ghost of itself. Down the road in Hastings, there's plenty of jaunty seaside Victoriana to retro-gentrify; but no one's messing with Rye's higgledy-piggledy Mermaid Street, a regular on lists of Britain's prettiest strips. There's only so much one can do to the timber-framed Mermaid Inn, which dates back to the 1150s and is said to be haunted by a gang of gun-toting, 18th-century smugglers, who built a secret passageway to the similarly ancient Old Bell tavern. When the Mermaid's owner Judith Blincow discovered a quote from *Love's Labour's Lost* on a wall beneath layers of paint and nicotine, it appeared to be the Bard's own version of 'Shakespeare woz 'ere' from 1597.

Yet Rye feels spurred on, rather than weighed down, by all its heritage, with Toby jugs and tea rooms offset by smart places to stay, eat and buy things to decorate the most modishly curated lofts. A wave of

Helena Bonham Carter preferred room eight when filming *The Crown*. At the restaurant, the menu is classic locavore, heavy on Romney Marsh lamb and Rye Bay scallops that are so good they warrant their own annual festival. And the charming manager lets guests take their G&Ts with black pepper to bed. *thegorgeinrye.com*; doubles from £125

#### HOMES FROM HOME

With three-bedroom holiday rental **The Mint in Rye**, designers Barrie and Jo Stewart proved that Tudor can be fun rather than fusty. The couple's three-year restoration of the 15th-century building involved hand-stripping the beams and replastering the original laths in the bathroom with traditional materials such as goat and horse hair. A knee-high smuggler's door is exposed in the attic, while a marotte wig stand and vintage textiles nod to its past as a wig maker's and linen wright's studio. There are more surprising touches, too: a hallway table whose surface curves like a meniscus; a cluster of Peruvian *milagro* folk charms. Round the corner, **Dom Stay and Live St John** is more conventionally

is quirkily off-kilter, like MacArthur, and oversized, like Quin, the resident great dane who is almost as tall as she is. *alexmacarthur.co.uk*; by appointment only

#### LEFTFIELD ART

Coastal quaintness is forgotten at **McCully and Crane** on Cinque Ports Street. Walls are covered in Picasso-esque abstractions; there's a mustachioed papier-mâché head on a table and a blindfolded, taxidermied caribou one on a spike, the latter by Hastings-based Rowan Corkill. East London escapees Marcus Crane and Gareth McCully, the partners behind The George in Rye's slick interiors, run this eccentric, rough-luxe gallery-store, which displays pieces by local artists such as Luke Hannam, East Sussex's answer to Matisse. *mccullyandcrane.com*

#### INDIE FINDS

At the aptly named **Tiny Book Store**, owner Antonio Gomez accepts euros and gives old pennies to children with their change. Aoife Coleman at **Rye Old Books** tells wonderful stories on post-work walks towards the former home of pioneering lesbian author

Opposite, clockwise from top left: a cosy den at The Gallivant; Grammar School Records on Rye High Street; bedroom at Dom; cakes at Whitehouse Rye; Tillingham guesthouse in Peamarsh; Dom entrance; Rye Bay scallops in puff pastry at Globe Inn Marsh pub; open-plan living room at Dom; Old Bell inn



Radclyffe Hall. The best take-away treasures are to be found in the bundle of shops near the River Brede at the Strand: **The Confit Pot** is named for its collection of Provençal stoneware; **Strand House Interiors**, run by Michele and Keith Banham, veterans of East London's Columbia Road Flower Market, sells striking antiques such as hand-painted French *boulangerie* signs and studded leather club chairs. [facebook.com/tinybookstore.rye](https://www.facebook.com/tinybookstore.rye). *Rye Old Books* (+44 179 722 5410). *The Confit Pot* (+44 179 722 7333). [strandhouseinteriors.com](http://strandhouseinteriors.com)

PROPER PLATES

**Whitehouse Rye** is a bakery with rooms, and also the best brunch spot in town – the halloumi hash is an essential prelude to a blustery walk around the dunes. Wander for long enough and it's possible to justify slow-cooked beef brisket from **Tatner's** food truck, which rolls in at lunchtime, and a pale ale from local microbrewery Three Legs at the Tudor-beamed **Standard Inn**. Three doors away, Neon Poyadjis serves harbour-fresh cod and chips at **Marino's Fish Bar**, his sarcasm as saucy as any sauce. At **Tuscan Rye**, chef Franco

Bochicchio does *osteria*-style '*cucina povera*', or food of the poor, with such charm that tables were booked up for the next three months at the time of my visit. *whitehouse rye.co.uk*; about £20 for two. [tatners.com](http://tatners.com); about £15 for two. [thestandardinnrye.co.uk](http://thestandardinnrye.co.uk); about £45 for two. *Marino's Fish Bar* (+44 179 722 3268); about £15 for two. [tuscan kitchenrye.co.uk](http://tuscan kitchenrye.co.uk); about £35 for two

POINT OF VIEW

The top of the bell tower at **St Mary's Church** is the go-to place for taking in the town, its reddish rooftops somehow recalling Lisbon. From the platform, beyond the neon sign of Kino arthouse cinema, there's a tall building with windows on only two sides, thought to have been purpose-built by a jealous man to spy on his unfaithful wife. [ryeparishchurch.org.uk](http://ryeparishchurch.org.uk)

GET OUT OF TOWN

The river that flows through the town to the Channel runs parallel to **Rye Harbour Nature Reserve**, its wetlands brimming with little tern and oystercatchers, and wooden hides packed with hush-hush twitchers. The nearby dunes of Camber Sands still feel

untouched at dawn, when galloping horses' hooves drum out a bassline in the shallows. Low tide at Pett Level further west is spectacular, too, when a nearly 6,000-year-old sunken forest reveals itself. To the east, the preternatural desert landscape of Dungeness has skeletons of its own: the bones of old ships and fishing winches rust and decay on the shingle. [sussexwildlifetrust.org.uk](http://sussexwildlifetrust.org.uk)

AND STAY OUT OF TOWN

Rye's surroundings are also blessed with cool stays. Inspired by Californian road trips, smoothie entrepreneur Harry Cragoe created **The Gallivant**, a single-storey motel peeping over Camber Sands. Design is elemental – driftwood, marble, patinated copper – and there are framed vintage swimsuits on the walls. Expect to be packed off to the beach with flip-flops, towels and a bottle of British bubbles. Meanwhile, **Tillingham**, a working farm and biodynamic vineyard in Peammarsh village, recently added a smart guesthouse, designed by Crane of McCully and Crane, with graphic prints and angular Wassily chairs. [thegallivant.co.uk](http://thegallivant.co.uk); doubles from £95. [tillingham.com](http://tillingham.com); doubles from £145

Above from left: freshly made sourdough loaves by the Lazy Bakery, based at Whitehouse Rye; Strand House Interiors shop