

Sailing with Coastal  
Explorations Co. in  
Norfolk, England.  
*Right:* A windmill  
in the village of  
Cley-next-the-Sea,  
in Norfolk.

# THE WIND AT THEIR BACKS

On a road trip through the unassuming towns of Norfolk, in England's far east, **Jessica Vincent** meets the entrepreneurs and chefs charting a sustainable future while honoring the region's seafaring past.



**COMPARED WITH DEVON** and Cornwall, Norfolk—the English county with more waterways than either Venice or Amsterdam—has historically managed to avoid attracting crowds. This is partly because the region is hard to reach: tucked away in the far east of England, there's no motorway connecting it to London, and it's a two-hour train ride from the capital to Norfolk's main hub, Norwich.

It is that sense of seclusion, perhaps, that has attracted kings, queens, and wealthy landowners to this windmill-dotted area for more than a millennium. England's fifth-largest county has

PHOTOGRAPHS BY KIRA TURNBULL





dozens of stately residences, including Houghton Hall—the home of Britain’s first prime minister, Robert Walpole—and Sandringham Estate, Queen Elizabeth II’s beloved country retreat. But it’s only in recent years that the royals have brought international attention to Norfolk: the presence of William and Kate, who’ve owned a property in the North Norfolk town of Anmer since 2011, has created a buzz that has attracted award-winning young chefs, boutique hoteliers, and pioneering tour companies.

A strong sense of identity—deeply rooted in the county’s seafaring history and a passion for sustainability—remains. On a wet August weekend, I sailed, walked, and ate my way through Norfolk to meet the people building its future.

#### FRIDAY

With one hand desperately clinging to a rope swaying in the wind, I curled my toes over the boat’s rain-soaked hull before stepping forward and plunging myself into the fast-moving gray below.

I had just leaped off *My Girls*, a 1960s crab boat that, in 2016, **Coastal Exploration Co.** ([coastalexplorationcompany.co.uk](http://coastalexplorationcompany.co.uk)) repurposed to sail visitors along the creeks and open waters of the North Norfolk coast. Founded by Henry Chamberlain, a former Royal Marine raised in nearby Houghton, the eco-conscious sailing company hopes to promote wind-powered adventure while



preserving the county’s last remaining wooden fishing boats.

“Norfolk’s not that different from Afghanistan,” Chamberlain said as we let the cold water carry our tingling bodies toward purple-hued marshland. Noticing my confused expression, he added with a laugh: “No, really. Being caught in a storm in the North Sea can be just as scary as being on the battlefield. It’s wild and unpredictable—adventure in its purest form.”

We had left Coastal Exploration’s base in Wells-next-the-Sea—a historically Anglo-Saxon port town where pastel-colored cafés serve lemon-dressed crab straight from their wire pots—at 6 a.m. to ride the high tide into Norfolk’s salt marshes, one of the U.K.’s key bird-breeding areas. Allowing the wind to decide our pace, we moved silently past swaying sea lavender and swooping swamp sparrows before anchoring up for an open-water swim and a bacon-and-egg breakfast cooked on deck.



“I think this is one of the most beautiful places in the world, but we can’t continue as we are,” Chamberlain told me. “Our roads are full; our waters are polluted. If we don’t innovate, we’ll be left behind.” He’s doing his part to promote more sustainable transportation solutions by using one of his larger fishing boats to deliver cargo under sail between the towns of Wells-next-the-Sea and King’s Lynn for the first time in decades.

#### SATURDAY

I woke to the smell of lavender in the **Harper** ([theharper.co.uk](http://theharper.co.uk); doubles from \$237), a new 32-room property in Langham housed inside a former glass-blowing factory, where contemporary furniture in saturated tones pops against the original flint walls. “Norfolk is behind Cornwall and Devon when it comes to this kind of luxury,” said house manager Jules Keirle, pointing to canary-yellow velvet armchairs and exposed brick inside the hotel bar. “We wanted to offer something that appeals to the younger, more design-conscious crowd.”

*Clockwise from top left: Wild swimming with Coastal Exploration Co.; Henry Chamberlain, the company’s founder; the Yard at the Harper, a hotel in Langham; the seafood platter at the White Horse, in Brancaster Staithe; a negroni at the Harper; beach huts in Wells-next-the-Sea.*



After a breakfast of poached eggs and locally smoked bacon, the sea was calling again. In hopes of spotting gray or harbor seals, I had booked an outing with **North Norfolk Paddleboards** ([northnorfolkpaddleboards.co.uk](http://northnorfolkpaddleboards.co.uk)). Our route would take us from Burnham Overy Staithe to Scoll Head Island, a protected offshore barrier that rises out of the marsh before tumbling into the crashing North Sea. It was only when we paddled deep into

the water, past flooded mudflats swaying with samphire, that a jet-black head, smooth and slick as oil, popped up just feet from my board. After taking a quick sniff of the salt air, the seal was gone—as if I’d imagined the whole thing.

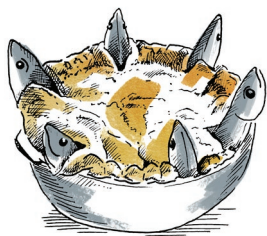
“Beautiful, isn’t she?” said one of my fellow paddleboarders, a woman in her early 40s who was traveling alone. When I asked why she’d come to Norfolk, she said that the unexpected passing of her



friend had encouraged her to try new things. “Norfolk has everything I’m scared of, and I love it.”

I returned to the Harper for a cocktail in the Yard, a stone-and-brick courtyard strung with fairy lights and scented with rosemary. Next to me a family played Scrabble under an olive tree, while a young couple sipped a sparkling Norfolk rosé with a Yorkshire terrier at their feet. Dinner—smoked Cley mackerel and wood-fired sea bass with snappy samphire and decadent bites of marrow—was served in Stanley’s, a home-away-from-home dining room with wooden beams and midnight-blue velvet banquettes.





## Great British Bites

### STARGAZY PIE

#### WHAT IS IT?

With fish heads poking out of its pastry crust, this seafood specialty can be unnerving when encountered face-to-face. But if you can avoid making eye contact, you'll be rewarded with a tasty filling of sardines, eggs, and potatoes.

#### WHERE IS IT FROM?

Mousehole, a fishing village in Cornwall, England.

#### WHERE CAN I FIND IT?

You can eat the pie on December 23, known as Tom Bawcock's Eve—it's a lively time to experience Mousehole's devotion to the dish. Follow a lantern parade around the village, then head to the **Ship Inn** ([shipinnmousehole.co.uk](http://shipinnmousehole.co.uk)) for a piece of pie.

#### TELL ME MORE.

Legend has it that during a particularly stormy winter in the 16th century, when Mousehole's boats were prevented from leaving the harbor for weeks, a fisherman named Tom Bawcock rescued his village from famine by braving the tempest and catching enough fish to bake an enormous pie for the entire town. —R.M.

## SUNDAY

With the sun shining for the first time that weekend, I laced up my walking boots and picked up the **Norfolk Coast Path** ([nationaltrail.co.uk](http://nationaltrail.co.uk)) from Wells-next-the-Sea. Running from Hunstanton to Hopton-on-Sea, the trail makes up the eastern part of the 2,800-mile England Coast Path, which, when completed, will become the longest coastal route in the world.



I walked west toward Brancaster Staithe, past the Technicolor beach huts of Holkham Beach, a stretch of sand that made its major film debut in *The Eagle Has Landed*. The North Sea crashing in my ears, I turned inland and followed the river Burn. Before long I passed towering dunes that melted into flat marshland flecked with yellow and purple blooms.

Two hours later, I spotted picnic tables laden with oysters and North Sea lobster—a clear sign I'd reached the **White Horse** ([whitehorsebrancaster.co.uk](http://whitehorsebrancaster.co.uk); entrées \$22–\$40), famed for its fresh-off-the-boat seafood and marsh views. I savored the signature platter—its saffron-pickled cockles capturing yet another dimension of the terroir. As I headed south that evening, I stopped for a quick pilsner at **Duration Brewing**



Clockwise from top left: A guest suite at the Harper; Derek Bates and Miranda Hudson, founders of Duration Brewing, in King's Lynn; beer on tap at Duration Brewing.

([durationbeer.com](http://durationbeer.com)), a small-batch, farm-based operation in King's Lynn known for its wild ales.

From there, I traveled about an hour more to Norwich, Norfolk's medieval capital, for dinner at **Farmyard** ([farmyardrestaurant.com](http://farmyardrestaurant.com); entrées \$18–\$32). In 2017, London-trained chef Andrew Jones, who previously worked for European heavyweights Richard Corrigan and Claude Bosi, and his television director wife, Hannah Springham, opened the restaurant to champion seasonal Norfolk ingredients. I ordered an appetizer, grilled octopus with Urfa chile, off the snack menu before moving on to Wagyu beef with a cream of foraged lovage and lightly battered zucchini flowers with black truffle.

As rain began to fall, I watched the chef in the open kitchen finish preparing my stonebass and rainbow-chard entrée with sea herbs and vanilla. A window had been left cracked open, and the smell of Norfolk came drifting in. Damp earth, pine and wildflowers, the sharp bitterness of the sea—a heady combination that will forever remind me of this wild and beautiful corner of England. 🌐

*Rachel Shoemaker, a T+L A-List advisor, can organize sailing trips in Norfolk, as well as visits to historic homes like Holkham Hall and Sandringham. [rachel@louisawhite.com](mailto:rachel@louisawhite.com).*