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The Rough Guide to Walks in London & Southeast England

Few cities can rival London's distinctive mix of the urban and the pastoral. Despite being the largest city in Western Europe, home to a staggering 7.5 million people, the capital preserves surprisingly extensive stretches of green space.

Satellite images of the metropolis reveal that over a third of it is made up of greenery, not only in the city's famous parks and gardens, but also in less obvious places – canalside paths, disused railway tracks and reclaimed industrial land – as well as along the banks of the Thames as it winds through the city. The capital's hidden footpaths are thoroughly enjoyable in themselves, and also offer a fascinating insight into the social, architectural and industrial history which went into the making of one of the world's most absorbing cities.

Many parts of southeast England also remain, contrary to what you might expect, almost miraculously unspoilt. Despite the sprawl of suburbs which girdles the city, fast train services make it very easy to reach open countryside from just about anywhere in London – indeed, it's surprising just how far from the capital you can get in a single day and still have time for a rewarding walk and a great pub lunch.

To the south and west of the capital there's sweeping downland: the lush North Downs, and the barer and more open North Wessex and South Downs. You'll find spectacular stretches of coast – from the towering sandstone cliffs at Hastings to the wavy chalk formations further west – as well as areas of dense ancient woodland, at their most extensive in the New Forest. The Thames cuts a green swathe west of the capital, linking a chain of attractive towns and villages, while to the north are the pristine wooded hills of the Chilterns and the limitless flatlands of the Fens around Ely. The striking variety of landscapes is part of the attraction – from the prettily manicured landscapes of the Kent Weald to the hauntingly bleak chalk uplands of the Wessex downs.

As with London itself, the southeast has always been a densely inhabited area, and the impact of human activity on the land, while more diffuse, is no less profound, visible in Iron Age forts, medieval field terraces, and Georgian stately homes. All the landscapes described in this guide, even the bogs of the New Forest and the windswept crests of the South Downs, bear the marks of cultivation, comprising a vast testament to the people who cleared, drained, shaped and even – in the case of the prehistoric chalk figures which dot the region – actually drew upon the land for millennia.