



Above: Looking along the beach towards Bournemouth Pier. © Bournemouth Tourism.

BEACHSIDE IN BOURNEMOUTH

THE QUINTESSENTIAL SEASIDE RESORT, BOURNEMOUTH OFFERS SEVEN MILES OF BEACHES, VICTORIAN ARCHITECTURE, CENTRAL GARDENS, AND A REVITALISED PIER, NOW AN ACTIVITY CENTRE. GISELLE WHITEAKER EXPLORES THIS COASTAL ENCLAVE.



Bournemouth Pier. © Bournemouth Tourism.



The sandy beach. © Bournemouth Tourism.

Standing on the cliff top in Southbourne, I look over the broad expanse of sand, where the water of Poole Bay laps the shore. A light sea breeze kisses my skin and in the distance, I can make out the outline of a series of white cliffs. Wildflowers line the hairpin ramp twisting to the sand, and colourful beach huts stand sentinel over the near-empty beach. It's dusk and bar a few intrepid dog owners, I have the shore to myself.

My accommodation, the lovely Cliff House Hotel, is a short stroll away. From its contemporary décor, it's hard to believe the building dates back to the 1880s, despite the Victorian features that have been carefully retained. It has housed many a happy family and was once a boys' school, but it was given an extensive facelift in 2003 and in 2014, took on its modern incarnation as a boutique hotel. I checked in to my delightfully light and airy attic room a little under an hour ago – each of the 14 bedrooms are individually styled – and I'll soon return to the hotel's Bar 13 for a bite.

Feeling refreshed after a peaceful night's sleep, I catch the bus to Bournemouth to begin my exploration of the seaside resort town, kick-starting the day with a dose of adrenalin. Bournemouth Pier houses an activity centre, with an obstacle course, climbing wall and a zip line. Harnessed and climbing the twisting metal stairs up the tower from where I'm expected to launch myself and zip past the pier and over the water, all the way to the shore, my knees are trembling. It's a leap of faith stepping into mid-air, but the exhilarating rush is worth the pre-launch nerves.

The sun peeks out from behind the clouds as I make my way along the beach, watching families frolic on the sand. It feels like I should have a 99 Flake in my hand, but it's a bit early in the day for me to deal with the sugar rush. Instead, I earn one on a walking tour with John Parnell.

We meet by the revitalised plaza area in front of the pier, from where John expertly guides me through a section of the two-mile long Bournemouth Gardens, with its rockery, bandstand and plant species from three continents.

Wandering through the town, he points out a series of interesting buildings, outlining the history in fascinating bite-sized pieces. John's no slouch when it comes to the present day either, also pointing out the modern developments of Bournemouth that keep the town vibrant. I'll be dining at one later – the recently opened Schpoons & Forx Restaurant at Hilton Bournemouth Hotel.

I while away the rest of the afternoon on City Sightseeing Bournemouth's hop on, hop off bus, the optimal way to see more of the area in a limited amount of time. I complete a full loop, from Bournemouth Pier to Poole and back, taking in the history via the excellent narrative broadcast through personal headsets in a range of languages. With more time, I would have taken a stroll at Branksome Chine, one of the old wooded valleys that runs some mile and a half down to the sea, and hopped on the harbour cruise from Pool Quay to admire the coast.

By the time I return, I have worked up an appetite. I'm excited about sampling the fare at Schpoons & Forx; the quirky décor that artfully exemplifies the name has me from the get go. The table centrepieces are copper vases sprouting antique knives and forks; wooden implements dangle from the ceiling; the light fittings feature upside down cloches filled with cutlery; and an unusual take on *The Last Supper* adorns the wall.

The menu is equally as engaging. I start with wild mushrooms on toast, topped with a square of deep fried camembert, before moving on to crisp pork belly, seared scallops and mash, with an apple and balsamic vinaigrette. For the grand finale, I look no further than the decadent Cambridge burnt cream with honeycomb, pistachio and raspberry. It is simply superb.

The next morning once again finds me at a beach, this time by Boscombe Pier. I'm looking at the choppy surface of the water, regretting my decision to sign up for a surf lesson with Surf Steps. I've never been brave enough to enter the ocean in the UK; the water temperature doesn't come close



Cliff House Hotel.



Crisp pork belly, seared scallops, mash and apple and balsamic vinaigrette at Schpoons and Forx.

Wildflowers line the hairpin ramp twisting to the sand, and colourful beach huts stand sentinel over the near-empty beach.



Bournemouth town centre. © Bournemouth Tourism.



The Lower Gardens. © Bournemouth Tourism.



One of the cosy rooms at Cliff House Hotel.
© Bournemouth Tourism.

to meeting my tropically oriented requirements. "If it's too cold, I might finish early," I warn the instructor, who patiently indicates that will not be a problem.

After kitting up in wetsuits and booties, we assemble on the sand. Within minutes we've absorbed enough information to merit entering the water. I brace myself for a shock, but before I know it, I'm lying on the board, watching the swell over my shoulder for the right wave, almost feeling the part.

I wish I could say I was riding waves by the end of the session, but it seems learning to surf is not a short-term endeavour. It is, however, an enormous amount of fun, regardless of the water temperature, and it's with no small amount of reluctance that I drag myself away from the search for the perfect wave to head back to my city life. I'll use the train journey to plan my next escape to Bournemouth. ■

INFO

- Visit Bournemouth: www.visitbournemouth.com
- The Cliff House Hotel: www.cliffhouse-hotel.com
- Guided Walking Tours: www.bournemouthguidedwalkingtours.co.uk
- Hop on, hop off bus: www.citysightseeing-bournemouth.co.uk
- Schpoons & Forx: www.schpoonsandforx.com
- Surf Steps: www.surfsteps.co.uk

Here are four other beachside beauties:

TALLAND BAY HOTEL, CORNWALL

Fast garnering a reputation as one of Cornwall's top foodie retreats, head chef Nick Hawke's superb food is trumped only by the hotel's captivating cliff-top setting, just yards from the South West Coast Path and Talland Bay beach - a smugglers cove in years gone by. There is a range of sea view suites, classic rooms, garden rooms and cottages, with pine-fringed lawns stretching down towards the ocean.

www.tallandbayhotel.co.uk



THE GRAND HOTEL, EAST SUSSEX

The Grand Hotel in Eastbourne is a five-star luxury hotel, located on the seafront. The 152-room hotel offers guests two in-house restaurants, relaxing health club facilities with both indoor and outdoor pools and breathtaking views of Eastbourne's iconic coastline. Affectionately known as 'The White Palace', The Grand is famed for its warm and welcoming hospitality.

www.grandeastbourne.com



THE LIGHTHOUSE KEEPERS COTTAGE, DEVON

For something a little bit different, this unique building that sleeps six offers a simpler style of accommodation, ideal for anyone who loves remoteness, spotting wildlife and extraordinary scenery. You may get a chance to see dolphins, porpoise and gannets fishing at high tide from the lighthouse, which is still operational.

www.nationaltrustholidays.org.uk



THE BAMBURGH CASTLE INN, NORTHUMBERLAND

When it comes to waterfront locations, The Bamburgh Castle Inn in the fishing village of Seahouses takes some beating. This relaxed inn has rooms overlooks the harbour in the bustling coastal village. Guests have spotted dolphins, whales and seals off the coast from its panoramic sea views towards the Farne Islands and its namesake, Bamburgh Castle.

www.bamburghcastlehotel.co.uk

