

# A Sussex star that's still sparkling

Despite a tough year, residents of Arundel have not held back on the seasonal spruce-up, says James Litston

The view from the top of Arundel's high street could not be more Dickensian. From beneath the faux-medieval walls of this West Sussex town's landmark castle, I'm looking downhill past neat and well-preserved Georgian and Tudor town houses. Beyond the mossy rooftops of the market square's centuries-old shops, the shadowy hump of the South Downs rises up against a darkening sky. The square itself is dominated by a rather large Christmas tree whose twinkly lights are echoed by those on the smaller trees adorning each building: just some of the 350 firs bringing festive cheer to this well-to-do town.

Although it's been a tough year for a community that relies on tourism, Arundel's businesses have not held back on their seasonal spruce-up. Keeping things classy is a town-wide edict that ensures all the lights are an elegant white. "It's lovely here at Christmas," says Jenny, the owner of Juniper café, when the December chill sends me searching for a hot drink and some chocolate-and-Guinness cake. "We normally have an Arundel by Candlelight event in the first week of the month, but of course the pandemic put paid to that. Even so, the town has pulled out the stops in terms of decorations. I think it looks really pretty."

I couldn't agree more. Even with social distancing measures, a polite buzz fills the streets and there's sufficient footfall to keep independent shops and cafés in business. At Pallant of Arundel, an upmarket deli with arguably the best cheese counter in Sussex, I get chatting with the co-owner, Mark. "We're one of the luckier ones. We had a great summer and were able to trade throughout both of the lockdowns. Right now though, it's all about Christmas hampers. Our mail-order business



▲ Go with the flow and the distinctive contours of Arundel Castle can be appreciated at all times

is booming and we can barely keep up with demand."

Not all local businesses are quite so upbeat. Admittedly it's a cold Monday night, but when I head for supper at the Norfolk Tap, I'm the only customer. The bar specialises in craft beers and ales with a particularly strong showing from Arundel Brewery. "It's the Tier 2 restrictions that are killing us," says the barmaid, pulling me a pint. "We'd normally be full of locals popping in after work, but the rules state that we can't serve drinks unless customers order food. I'm sure many pubs won't survive."

Things are a little better across the square at The Swan Hotel, where I'm staying in one of its cosy guestrooms. "Obviously pubs are suffering under Tier 2," the manager, Beata Slapikaitė, had told me when I'd checked in earlier. "We had to cancel our Christmas party bookings, but hotel occupancy is good and the restaurant is holding up."

The Swan turns out to be the perfect base for an Arundel mini-break. The historic country pub has been brought up to date with a boutique makeover, though creaky floorboards and rooms named after Sussex landmarks keep things authentic. Seabird-print fabrics and coastal-themed artworks give a nod to sandy shores four miles downriver. But best of all is a breakfast menu spanning traditional full English to smashed avo on sourdough.

It's precisely the kind of fuel one



▲ Oh Christmas tree... but why have one when you can have 350 festive firs?

needs for a day of wintry exploring. Though magnificent Arundel Castle, the town's main attraction, is closed for the season, it's easy to admire the facade on a stroll out of town up Mill Lane. Further along lies Arundel Wetland Centre, another big crowd-pleaser where colourful waterfowl inhabit 65 acres of wetland paradise. There's another historic castle, a six-mile hike (or a four-minute train ride) upriver in Amberley, which must surely be among Britain's prettiest villages. Its predominantly thatched homes, occupy a chalky bluff between the South Downs and wildlife-rich Amberley Wildbrooks. Rising above the floodplain are the crumbling,

12th-century walls of Amberley Castle, within which lies a manor that houses one of the county's top hotels.

Even though it's midweek in the midst of a pandemic, there's plenty of life. "Of course our international guests aren't travelling right now, so that's had an impact," says the receptionist as she shows me to my room, "but restaurant and afternoon tea bookings are strong."

Later, I tear myself from my room - all exposed timber beams and generous proportions - and head for dinner beneath the Queen's Room restaurant's vaulted ceiling. With its walls decorated with muskets, swords and stern-looking portraits, it's a suitably grand environment for exceptional fine-dining. Christmas lights twinkle on every surface. It all makes me feel rather jolly. So what if it's been a challenging year? This Arun Valley mini-break is delivering ample festive cheer to round off my 2020 with much-needed sparkle.

*Rooms (with breakfast) at The Swan Hotel ([swanarundel.co.uk](http://swanarundel.co.uk)) start at £85 per night, and from £195 at Amberley Castle ([amberleycastle.co.uk](http://amberleycastle.co.uk)). Southern (southernrailway.com) serves Arundel and Amberley on its twice-hourly trains between London and Portsmouth. Further information: [visit.arundel.co.uk](http://visit.arundel.co.uk), [experiencewestsussex.com](http://experiencewestsussex.com).*

*Travel within the UK is currently subject to restrictions. See Page 2.*

## BETTER LATE THAN NEVER

Last-minute booking guide

### ARUBA

Tui has recently restarted flights to Aruba, which means there's another quarantine-free Caribbean holiday option this winter. The island asks visitors to show evidence of a recent negative PCR test, which can be booked through Tui for a discounted rate. Usually a popular cruise spot, it'll be easier to avoid the crowds on jaunts to the many white-sand beaches or colourful Dutch-influenced capital Oranjestad. Do make time to visit the arid Arikok National Park, which comprises a fifth of the island. Stay at Riu Palace Antillas, an all-inclusive, adults-only hotel on popular Palm Beach. This



details and natural fabrics. Breakfast, taken on a sheltered terrace, is a lavish affair and includes sparkling wine. *Away Holidays ([awayholidays.co.uk](http://awayholidays.co.uk)) offers seven nights from £1,332pp half-board, including flights. Departs Jan 26.*

### BERMUDA

The British overseas territory of Bermuda has been practising social distancing long before it was fashionable, sitting an isolated 700 miles from the nearest land. Covid protocols are extensive: visitors must organise a pre-departure PCR test, take another on arrival and wear a "traveller wristband" for the first 14 days of their stay. Family-owned Grotto Bay Beach Resort & Spa attracts repeat guests, perhaps due to its friendly staff and range of activities, including wreck diving and speed boat outings. *British Airways Holidays ([ba.com](http://ba.com)) is offering seven nights from £1,284pp, departing on Jan 22, including flights.*

### RAS AL KHAIMAH (UAE)

For a more affordable resort holiday in the Middle East, try the overlooked emirate of Ras al Khaimah. Fly to Dubai (where you can show a recent negative PCR result or take a test on arrival) before hopping on your hotel's shuttle - it's 45 miles to the most northerly of the UAE's seven states. Rixos Bab Al Bahr is a mega-resort set on a cluster of man-made islands. The five-star hotel, spread across six pyramid-shaped buildings, does not hold back with a stylised souk, eight swimming pools, an aqua park and private stretch of beach. The 14 restaurants and bars, plus unlimited happy hours, mean you are unlikely to tire of its all-inclusive nature.

*Travelbag ([travelbag.co.uk](http://travelbag.co.uk)) offers seven nights from £1,039pp all-inclusive, on selected January dates. Includes flights and transfers.*

### SEYCHELLES

To reach the white sands and clear seas of the Seychelles requires some effort. Negative PCR test results must be dated a tight 48 hours before departure. But with more private testing options and the festive rush over, this shouldn't cause undue stress. Visitors are required to stay at their accommodation for six days before taking another test; the wide range of world-class resorts, many with their own stretches of sand, should stave off cabin fever. The five-star Savoy Resort & Spa, set on a sweeping bay on the main island of Mahé, has the largest pool in the archipelago. Though larger than its neighbours, the hotel is softened with lots of wooden

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Emma Beaumont

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