

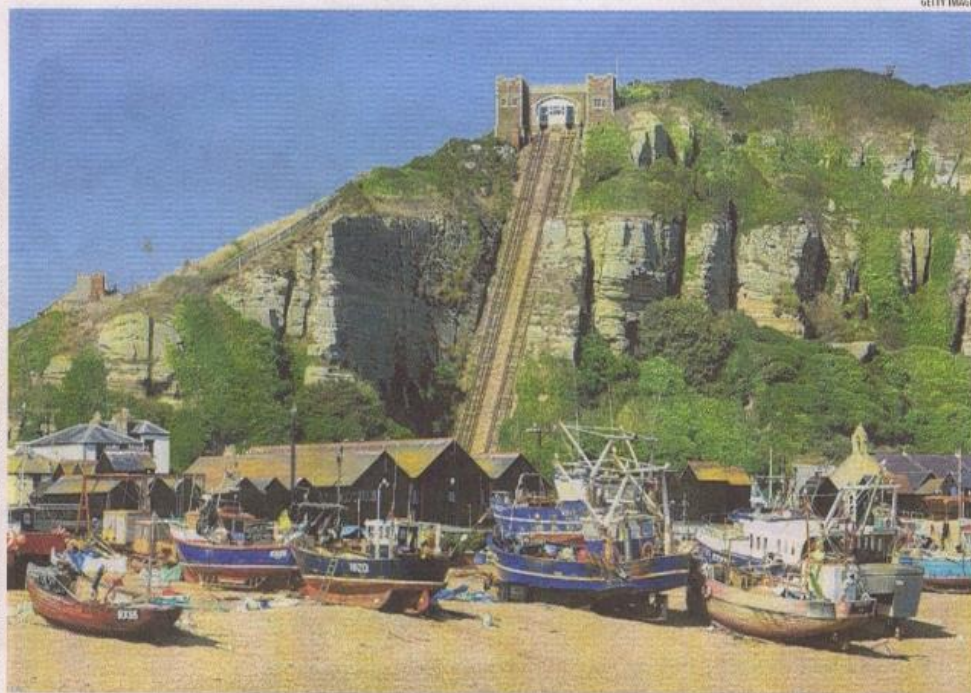
The great British weekend Hastings, East Sussex

Tat and chic have long been at war in Hastings, beery seaside revellers pitched against more upmarket visitors in a tussle for the resort's cheery heart. But now a spanking new art gallery has opened on the seafront, right in the middle of fish-and-chip territory, which sounds like a decisive change in the town's cultural style. So this is where we start our weekend.

First impressions, standing outside the £4 million Jerwood Gallery, is that its dark, pleasantly subdued glazed black tiles sit very well with the fishermen's huts and candyfloss stalls that cluster the east end of town. Walking through the doors clutching £7 tickets, we find that there's no sense of other-worldliness inside. There's no air-conditioning either, it's just us and the art, with the sound of seagulls wafting in from outside, accompanied by the jolly smell of fried fish.

It's uplifting and two hours later we are still patrolling the seven display rooms, stopping only for cakes in the bright café, enjoying the work of mostly 20th and 21st-century artists such as Sir Stanley Spencer and L.S. Lowry. My favourite, though, is Maggi Hambling's *Portrait of Frances Rose*, with a depiction of dignified, almost noble, old age.

But what strikes us most is not simply the pictures, not even the buzzing vibe — it is the town itself that captures our attention, because at every turn Jerwood's



Take the funicular up to the old Hastings Castle, top, or visit the new Jerwood Gallery, above

architects have included gigantic windows that frame and emphasise the ordinary seaside scenes outside. As we stand there looking out, the town itself becomes a picture, a living work of art. No side wins or loses in this style battle: the gallery and town combine very well.

Shrewdly, though, the place has been built at the mouth of Hastings' Old Town, which is the quieter medieval quarter, where old fishermen's houses flow down to the sea, a place full of brilliant pubs and — in All Saints Street — the sweetest road in town. Here, we discover beautiful houses and what claims to be the oldest local pub, The Stag Inn, as well as many tight lanes leading to paths that climb towards distantly towering cliff tops. A walk for later, maybe — though there's a lovely funicular railway that rises to those cliffs from just round the corner, if we feel lazy; and another funicular to the west, leading to other cliffs above the town.

Meanwhile, it all feels pleasingly atmospheric, as do many of the antique

and art shops in the narrow high street, a couple of roads west. Wandering on to nearby George Street, we discover a store called Roomings, which looks at first like an interior design studio. Stepping inside, the place opens us up like the *Tardis*, room after room offering period furniture and fittings, which the owner tells me he imports from Java because it's cheaper.

As night falls we return to the seafront for a meal at Webbe's Rock-a-Nore, which is run by the same people who operate Jerwood's café, and very comfortable they make us, too — my "panache of fish" with sea bass, salmon, mussels and tiger prawns amounting to considerably more than basic knotted-hanky seaside fodder.

The real surprise, however, comes when we check in to our B&B over in St Leonards. A word about St Leonards: it's a westward extension of Hastings and was once quite grand but somehow ended up as a faintly seedy patchwork of rented homes set amid occasionally majestic old houses. The feeling nowadays, however,

is of an area that is moving back up again, and the Cloudesley B&B is part of the new wave. Run by Shahriar Mazandi, an Iranian photographer and garden designer (the winner of a gold medal at Chelsea Flower Show) its rooms are quietly stylish and in the morning Shahriar cooks us one of the most inventive breakfasts I have ever eaten — omelette filled with bananas, blueberries, Cognac and some black pepper.

After which, we drive back to the Old Town, where the Fishermen's Museum and the Shipwreck Museum, almost next door to each other on the seafront, readmit us to the heart of an old-style Hastings that still exists — a workaday down-to-earth place of beach-launched boats, drying nets and seagulls pecking at bins. This is the town's heritage and it doesn't feel at odds with the Jerwood a hundred yards away, only honoured by it.

Nicholas Roe

Need to know

Where to stay

The Cloudesley (01424 722759, thecloudesley.co.uk), St Leonards-on-Sea, offers B&B doubles from £75. Spa treatments are available in-house. Swan House (01424 430014, swanhousehastings.co.uk) is a stylish B&B, in a building dating from the 15th century in Hastings' Old Town, with B&B doubles from £115.

Where to eat

Webbe's Rock-a-Nore (01424 721650, webbesrestaurants.co.uk), opposite the Jerwood, majors on fish but with a wide range of other options; two courses from about £18. A dozen oysters is £15 and a glass of prosecco £5.40.

Further information

1066 Country (visit1066country.com), Jerwood Gallery (jerwoodgallery.org).