



Brighton

by Linda Rapp

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Brighton Beach in 2004.
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A popular seaside resort with a reputation for attracting the chic, the artistic, and the "bohemian," Brighton was a favorite get-away spot for Oscar Wilde, Ivor Novello, J. R. Ackerley, and Noël Coward, among others. Following a period of decline, in recent decades Brighton is once again vibrant, thanks in no small part to a flourishing glbtq community.

Long a sleepy little fishing village on the Sussex coast about fifty miles south of London, Brighthelmstone, as Brighton was then known, became a popular destination in 1754 when Dr. Richard Russell extolled the health benefits of its clean sea air. Among those seeking its salutary effects was the Prince of Wales, later George IV, who first visited in 1783. After his secret--and illegal--marriage to the Catholic Maria Fitzherbert in 1785 he lived with her at Brighton until 1794.

The prince--by then Prince Regent--chose Brighton for his spectacular Royal Pavilion. Designed and built by architect John Nash over the period of 1815 to 1823, the exotic building features Indian-style turrets and minarets and has Chinese-inspired interior décor. The prince lived there with his mistress Lady Conyngham until 1827, which caused Brighton to draw the fashionable set. Buildings from the Regency period still contribute to the city's charm.

Queen Victoria and her family occasionally lodged at the Pavilion, but Brighton did not suit her. In 1845 she packed up the furniture and abandoned the building. The town of Brighton bought and restored it and eventually brought back many of the original furnishings, turning the Pavilion into a tourist attraction.

Despite the royal absence Brighton remained a choice destination in Victorian times. The town built the West Pier to accommodate steamer traffic and in the 1890s added the Palace Pier, an amusement center, to attract families for seaside vacations.

During the early part of the twentieth century tourists began seeking chic spots on the continent, and Brighton began to decline. By the 1960s and 1970s it was drawing a young and unruly element. The seashore became the site of violent confrontations between groups of youths known as mods and rockers.

In the succeeding decades, however, Brighton experienced a new phase of growth and development. Lured by the lower cost of living, some people moved from London and commuted, often by train, to jobs in the capital. The town began to flourish again.

Contributing to this revitalization were a large number of glbtq entrepreneurs and retirees. Gay- and lesbian-owned shops, tourist lodgings, restaurants, and bars began to spring up, especially in the Kemp Town--known to the locals as Camp Town--section of Brighton. It is estimated that twenty percent of the city's present population is gay or lesbian.

Brighton has demonstrated a generally positive attitude toward its glbtq citizens and visitors. The city's official website includes a section on gay Brighton, and the Tourist Information Centre offers a Gay

Information Sheet to guide visitors to lodging and clubs. *G-Scene* magazine, distributed free in many local establishments, also provides information to members of the glbtq community.

Most tourist guidebooks about England offer tips for the glbtq visitor to Brighton, although the Fodor guide somehow manages to get through its entire entry on the city without mentioning the words *gay* or *lesbian*. (Imagine the surprise of holiday-makers who arrive in Brighton with only a *Fodor's* in hand!)

Visitors to Brighton will find no shortage of gay- and lesbian-friendly hostelrys, including many bed-and-breakfasts. Brighton also boasts an active glbtq club scene. The bars, mainly clustered in Kemp Town, range from traditional pubs to cabarets featuring drag entertainers to leather bars.

The beaches of Brighton are pebbly rather than sandy, and the water is rather polluted, so beachfront visitors tend to "promenade" or sunbathe rather than swim. Telescombe Beach, the first in Britain to be declared clothing-optional, is popular with gay men and lesbians.

The Palace Pier, restored in the 1990s, is now home to arcade games and fast food. The long-disused West Pier has deteriorated badly. Over the years various repair projects have been proposed, but none has been implemented. The adjoining beach is a popular cruising spot for gay men.

Brighton holds two annual festivals, the Brighton International Festival, celebrating the arts, in May, and Brighton Pride in August.

The highlight of the Pride festival is a parade culminating in a grand party in Preston Park with bands, dance tents, and carnival rides. Over ninety thousand people attended Pride 2003. The mayor led the parade, and among those participating in the festivities were drag queens, dance troupes, rainbow flag-waving supporters of the glbtq community, picnicking families of all varieties, and officers from the Brighton and Kent and Essex police staffing booths in hopes of recruiting gay and lesbian applicants to join their forces. Pride events also include a well-attended and light-hearted dog show that raises considerable funds for community projects.

Brighton's recent development has attracted new residents, and demand has driven up housing prices. The influx has also made the city more interesting, with a wide variety of shops, eateries, and clubs enlivening previously run-down quarters. The glbtq community has played a prominent role in Brighton's renaissance.

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