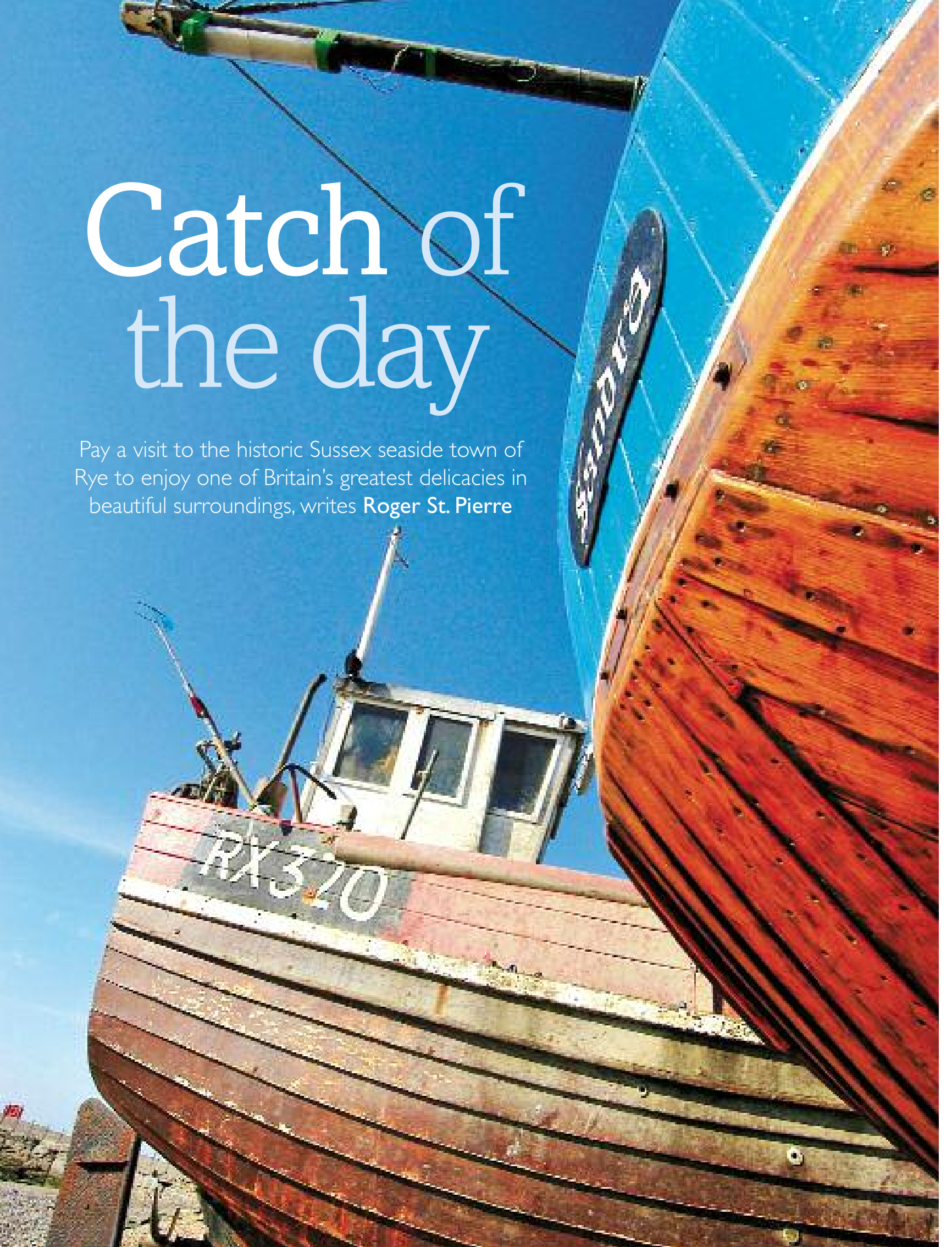
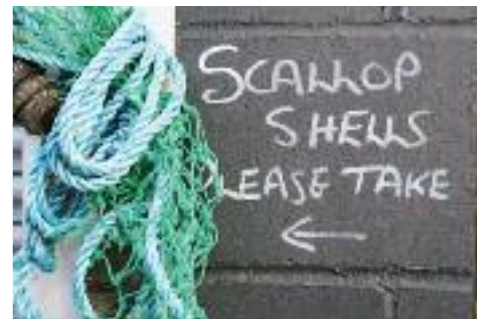


# Catch of the day

Pay a visit to the historic Sussex seaside town of Rye to enjoy one of Britain's greatest delicacies in beautiful surroundings, writes **Roger St. Pierre**





Every February seafood enthusiasts flock to the pretty seaside town of Rye on the Sussex coast to sample what are reputed to be the world's finest scallops at its annual Scallop Festival.

Plump and delicious, these prized molluscs have been harvested off the shore of Rye for as long as they have anchored here, although scalloping only became a major industry during the middle of the 20th century.

These days, strict local bye-laws restrict the fishermen to harvesting their scallop catch from November to April, while stocks are regularly monitored. Much of the catch – up to 80 per cent – finds its way to Boulogne in France, home of Europe's largest port, although Rye's restaurants also take their share of the bounty, with local chefs vying to come up with the most inventive, mouth-watering recipes. This year over 15 restaurants will be

servicing up their latest creations.

At Rye's Market Fisheries and Simmons Quay they'll be looking to sell several tons of the most recent catch to the public. Usually sold on the shell, the scallops are shucked (opened) by experts at the market before being bagged and taken home to cook.

#### Molluscs on the menu

Other events taking place during Scallop Week will include demonstrations on scallop shucking and preparation, free tastings, cookery workshops and presentations on how to select the perfect bottle of wine to accompany your scallop dish.

Local chef Paul Webbe, owner of the aptly named Fish Café bistro, is a Rye Bay scallop enthusiast of the highest

order: "The Rye scallops are especially sweet and succulent," he says. "During the festival we will serve up around 3,000 of them and they will feature in around 30 per cent of our menus."

To help you to learn his trade secrets, Paul runs highly popular cookery classes in his other venue, the Wild Mushroom, a converted farmhouse at nearby Westfield.

"The key is not to overcook them – they just take half-a-minute per side on a high heat," he adds. "You can serve them with bacon, black pudding, or Spanish chorizo sausage, which is especially popular right now. I like to prepare them as a ceviche, marinated in freshly squeezed lime juice."

If you want a change from scallops, there is plenty of other locally caught →

**Clockwise from facing page:** Rye's fishing fleet; boats moored along River Rother; pick up a shell at Rye's Market Fisheries; a tempting offer of fresh scallops; Rye's Church Square from St Mary's graveyard

Strict local bye-laws restrict the fishermen to harvesting their scallop catch from November to April, while stocks are regularly monitored



seafood on offer. Down on the quayside the daily catch includes fresh Dover sole, plaice, monkfish, whiting, lobster and the recently resurgent gurnard.

During your visit it is well worth taking the opportunity to explore historic Rye itself. At one time the waters of the English Channel would have lapped at the foot of the bluff on which this ancient settlement sits, encircled by the remains of its once formidable medieval walls. Today, this picturesque town stands two miles inland, thanks to the build-up of sediment carried by the lazily winding River Rother, where the local fishing fleet are now moored, as well as the erosion of gravel and sandbanks that have been washed down the Channel to form dunes and glorious sky-wide beaches beyond the marshes.

It's a curious mirror image of Montreuil-sur-Mer across the Channel, where raids on England were orchestrated as late as Napoleon's time. This once important port town now also stands marooned some 12 miles inland from the coast.

### Defending the border

Although incursions from France are now limited to the hordes of Gallic schoolchildren that regularly descend upon Rye and its surrounding area, the threat of attack from the Continent has played an important part in shaping the

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## A taste sensation

Everything you need to know about Rye Bay's internationally acclaimed delicacy



Unlike mussels, which are grown on ropes in placid tidal waters, scallops, of which there are around 300 known varieties, live free. They are able to propel themselves backwards, forwards, sideways – in whichever way they choose – by rapidly opening and closing their shells. They are, in fact, the only bivalve that can swim.

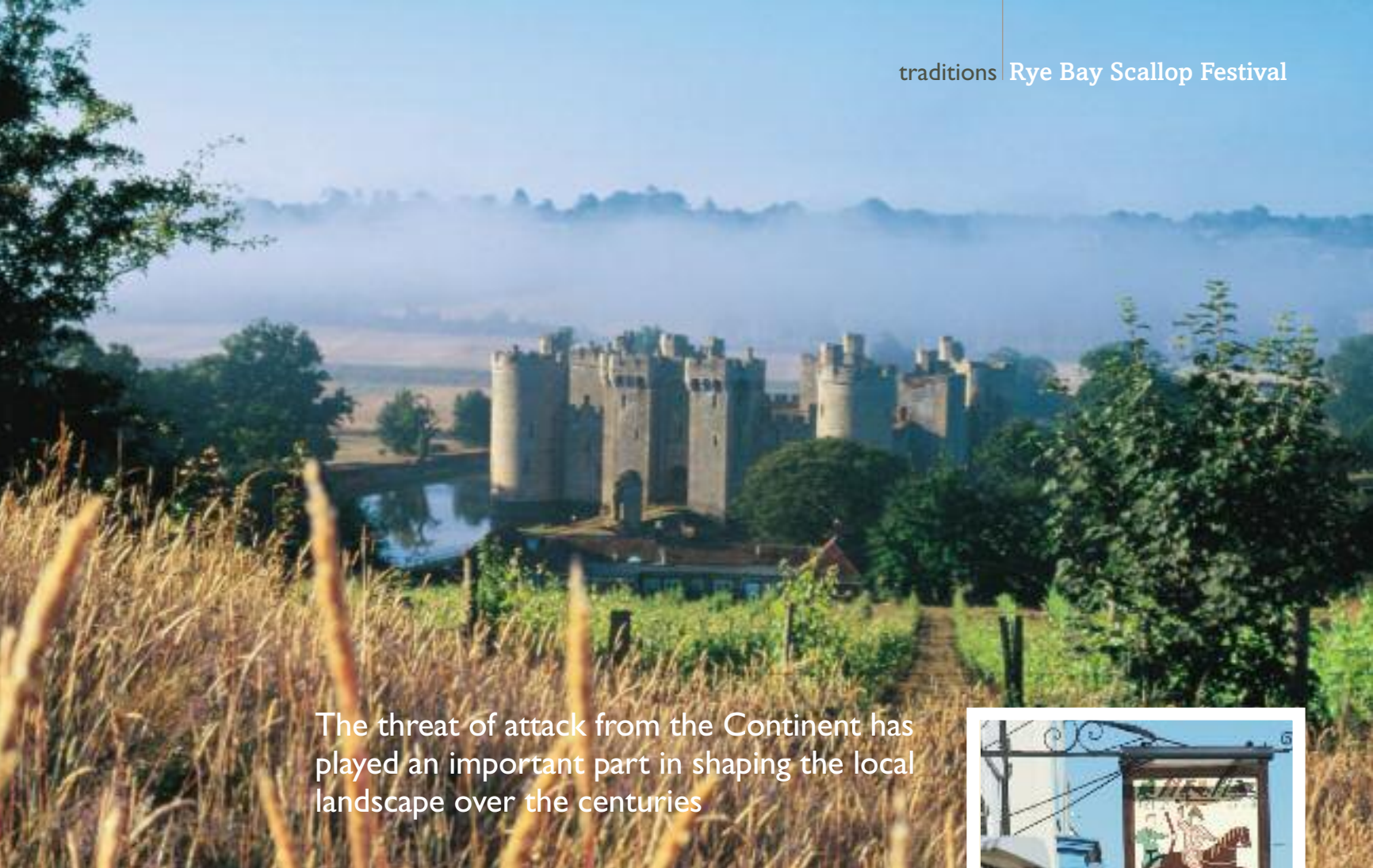
As hermaphrodites, each scallop performs both male and female sexual functions. The beautifully coloured bright orange coral that the fishermen call 'the tongue' – and which trendy modern chefs choose to discard for some bizarre reason, despite its distinctive flavour so perfectly complementing the plump, succulent meat – is the roe, or eggs, which are eventually emitted in a cloud to provide the beginnings of the next generation.

You can tell a scallop's age by the rings on its shell, with a new one being added each year. There are fishing quotas and scallops that are too small are

returned to the sea. They like to half bury themselves in soft sand but the best are usually found where the seabed is littered with rocks.

In shallower waters they can be harvested by divers, but in the 12-18ft deep waters of Rye Bay, dredgers, specially designed to minimise damage to the environment, rake them up.

So what makes Rye Bay scallops so special? According to veteran Rye fisherman and sprightly septuagenarian Ronnie Simmons, the secret is in the local landscape. "Scallops thrive in deep, clean, highly salty waters, which makes Rye Bay perfect," he says. Ronnie likes his scallops simply pan-fried. "That way they make a perfect breakfast dish," he says. But are they good for you? The good news is that the calorific value of scallops is very low, while they are an excellent source of protein, calcium, iron and vitamin B12. Although they are expensive, you do not need many for an enticing starter or filling main.



The threat of attack from the Continent has played an important part in shaping the local landscape over the centuries

**Clockwise from facing page:** Rye offers a colourful retail experience; sand dunes of Camber, near Rye; Rye's cobbled Mermaid Street; the nearby medieval moated Bodiam Castle; Battle's historic high street; the 13th-century Ypres Tower was a part of Rye's defences

local landscape over the centuries. Defensive relics dotted along the Sussex coast include the numerous Martello Towers (small circular forts built from the time of the Napoleonic Wars) that have become treasured local curiosities, the formidable Bodiam Castle, with its impenetrable moat and solid outer walls, and Rye's own defensive towers, complete with a cannon, perched on a lofty esplanade and aimed out to sea.

### Neighbourhood watch

Just a few miles west of Rye is Hastings, home to the largest beach-launched fishing fleet in Europe and the spot where Guillaume le Bâtard, or William the Conqueror, as we now know him, staged the invasion that changed the course of English history. The old town, with its narrow, winding streets and Norman castle ruins, is well worth a visit before setting off for the aptly named Battle, where the aforementioned William won a country and the ill-fated King Harold II lost his life in 1066. Shortly after, William had the abbey erected in remembrance of the English soldiers who died during the conflict. The enduring fear of attack that has plagued this coastline saw Rye join the

confederation of the Cinque Ports. In return for maintaining ships ready for the Crown in times of need, a Royal Charter of 1155 dictated that the town's citizens would benefit from various privileges, including self-government, exemption from tax and tolls, permission to levy tolls and to punish those who shed blood or fled justice and possession of lost goods unclaimed after a year, including goods thrown overboard or floating wreckage.

Although the town has changed considerably over the years that have passed since, Rye's oldest quarters remain remarkably untouched and even more remarkably traffic-free. Along its cobbled lanes and alleyways only the occasional sound of footsteps breaks the blissful silence, while the high street and the regular farmers' market are bustling hives of human activity. Heading along the high street, you'll find plenty of lovely Victorian and Georgian buildings, but it's Rye's medieval edifices, with their exposed timbers, that make this an artist's paradise.

For a well-earned break – and a spot of people watching – there's an abundance of ancient houses, tea shops and welcoming hostleries, some dating as far back as the 14th and 15th



centuries. Local historic visitor attractions include the landmark parish church and the forbidding Ypres Tower, which was built in 1249 and is now home to Rye Castle Museum, offering panoramic views over the marshes. For an aerial plan of the town's winding streets, don't miss the remarkable model of Rye in the town's Heritage Centre.

### A place to stay

Reflecting its popularity as a weekend hideaway, long reputed as a discrete out-of-town celebrity bolthole, Rye has an abundance of fine accommodation. There's the atmospheric and ancient, half-timbered Mermaid Inn, with its roaring log fires, as well as the elegant Georgian hotel known appropriately as The George. Alternatively, a five-minute taxi ride or stiff 20-minute uphill walk →





*Clockwise from above:* the medieval "Landgate" at the north-east corner of Rye; a bird's eye view of Rye Bay; boats go scallop dredging off Rye Bay; local fisherman Russell Drew with his catch

from the town, you could opt for the stunning Saltcote Place. This magnificent early-Edwardian red brick mansion was built for the Hennessy family, of Cognac brandy fame, and was often visited by the late Queen Mother when she was a child. Inside, the house has been transformed into a charmingly welcoming B&B, with cossetting bedrooms and gargantuan breakfasts, while the sweeping lawns offer glorious views over the Romney Marshes, Royal Military Canal and sea. In the distance is a new wind farm that somehow manages to enhance rather than blight the panorama.

Make time to explore the town after sampling the delicious delights of the harbour and you will discover that Rye is no pickled-in-aspic tourist trap, but a real living town – a wonderful place to live and an enticing town to visit. **h**

Rye Bay Scallop Week begins on 28 February. For more information on the event please visit [www.ryebayscallops.co.uk](http://www.ryebayscallops.co.uk)

## heritage trail



### Getting there

If you are travelling by car, Rye is on the A259, between Hastings to the West and Folkestone to the East, and on the A268 from the North. If you are travelling by train from London Charing Cross, London Bridge or Waterloo East, change at Ashford International for Rye. If you are travelling from London Victoria or Gatwick Airport, change at Hastings for Rye.

### Where to stay

**Budget:** At Wisteria Corner B&B ([www.wisteriacorner.co.uk](http://www.wisteriacorner.co.uk)) is situated only three minutes' walk from the centre of the ancient town of Rye, with rooms from £50 per night. Tel: 01797 225 011.

**Luxury:** Saltcote Place ([www.saltcote.co.uk](http://www.saltcote.co.uk)) is a pretty Queen Anne-style manor house that has been converted into a five-star B&B, with double rooms from £85 pppn. Tel: 01797 222 220.

### More information

For the latest tourist information on Rye, go to [www.visitrye.co.uk](http://www.visitrye.co.uk) or call Rye Tourist Information Centre on 01797 229 049.

For details on Rye Heritage Centre visit [www.ryeheritage.co.uk](http://www.ryeheritage.co.uk) or call 01797 226 696. To learn more about some of the local wildlife go to [www.wildrye.info](http://www.wildrye.info), [www.RXwildlife.org.uk](http://www.RXwildlife.org.uk) or [www.ryeharbour.net](http://www.ryeharbour.net) for updates on the latest birdlife sightings and local news.