



The East Neuk

Few visitors to Scotland seek out The East Neuk, or corner, a string of fishing villages on the northern shores of the Firth of Forth which retain the living feel of centuries past. As a bonus there's no better place in Britain to enjoy easy coastal paths; it is possible to walk between all the villages.

Part of Fife, the area was, in centuries past, the hub of the nation. Until the 19C villages thrived by exporting coal, salt fish and wool; when sea trade declined it was replaced by the hugely important fishing industry.

Each of the fishing ports has its own individual character. What is common to them all is the mixture of tiny cottages and larger houses, often 16/17C with Flemish crow-stepped gables, lining the narrow "wynds" (lanes) which drop steeply down to the small harbours. A mixture of red pantiles and whitewashed or pastel-shaded walls contrasting with sandstone exteriors provide colourful man-made vistas to the ever-changing sea-scapes and sky-backdrops.

Crail epitomises the visual differences around every corner. In the upper village is the broad, tree-lined Marketgate, with a handsome kirk at one end and the town hall and minute Crail Museum at the other; midway between the two is the 25ft-high Mercat Cross, topped by a stone unicorn.

Crail Harbour is the most protected in The East Neuk. Pat Reilly, at his "kitchen" alongside the harbour, will cook lobsters for you while you wait and always has dressed crabs ready for sale. At the western entrance to the village look out for the leading lights, night-time aids which help boats to line up safely for the harbour entrance.

Anstruther, a "linear" settlement which includes the once independent communities of Cellardyke, Anstruther Easter and Anstruther Wester, is the largest of the ports and the least attractive, but it is certainly worth visiting for the exceptional Scottish Fisheries Museum (open all year). Rarely have I felt so immediately immersed in a community's traditions and way of life as I did at this small group of 16/19C houses, transformed into a visual and living story of the area's history and its herring industry.

Exhibits cover all aspects of fishing life over the centuries: from fish and shellfish in an aquarium and pool, to the various ancient methods of trapping, gathering and hunting fish. Displays include a fish merchant's office, "herrin' lassies" gutting herrings (a Mission provided dressings for sore hands – no wonder as the girls gutted a herring every second) and a wheelhouse, galley, engine room and crews' quarters taken from an original craft, the Brighter Hope III. Do not miss this illuminating museum.

Seek out, too, the North Carr Lightship, now a floating museum in the harbour, and two strange household decorative features which will make you smile: first the jawbone of what is claimed to be the largest whale ever caught in the Arctic – in East Forth Street, above Cellardyke harbour; and the "Buckie House", opposite the most westerly of Anstruther's churches, where scallop shells (buckies) have been used to decorate an exterior wall.

Pittenweem is still very much a working harbour, with an entrance that is both narrow and dangerous. Be sure to walk west from the harbour, beyond the last parked car, and step back in time at West Shore, where only a narrow pavement separates the cottages from the sea.

St-Monans is renowned for its 13C Auld Kirk, built on the rocks beside the shore. The interior has a model sailing boat suspended high above the pews.

Where to eat and stay

The Spindrift, Pittenweem Road, Anstruther KY10 3DT (01333 310573). Modest B&B; meals by arrangement. Better to dine at the Cellar with its seafood *par excellence* (book ahead); 24 East Green, Anstruther KY10 3AA (01333 310378).

The Peat Inn, Peat Inn KY15 5LH (01334 840206). David and Patricia Wilson make super use of local produce. Excellent suites. Fine cellar. Closed: Sun & Mon.

Map OS Landranger 59.