



Windsor Royal Station is situated near the heart of the town



Apart from the Queen, Windsor's most famous residents are the swans...



View of the Long Walk leading up to the Castle

Weekend IN WINDSOR

Lucy Dodsworth rediscovers the Royal Borough

SET on the banks of the River Thames and dominated by its grand hilltop castle, Windsor has over 1,000 years of history to explore. It's a popular day trip from London, but with many of us travelling from farther afield, it's more than worth making a weekend of it. And you'll be in good

company if you do – it's one of the Queen's favourite getaways.

Following in the footsteps of royalty with a visit to the castle is a must, though you'll soon realise there's much more to the Royal Borough, be it deer-filled parks, locally brewed beers or scenic boat trips...

Friday night

Once you arrive in Windsor, check in to the MGallery Castle Hotel on the high street. It's just a few minutes away from Windsor Castle and opposite the Guildhall where Prince Charles and Camilla Parker Bowles

got married. The hotel is one of the oldest buildings in Windsor and started life as the Mermaid Inn, brewing beer and cider.

It's been awarded eight Royal Warrants for supplying goods or services to the Royal Household and hosted the Duke of Wellington after his victory over Napoleon at Waterloo. Today it's a relaxed, friendly boutique hotel. The 108 guest rooms have a smart, contemporary feel, but there's plenty of original charm and character.

Call into the hotel bar for a pre-dinner drink – their Mermaid cocktail is inspired by the hotel's days as a brewery and uses a combination of hop vodka and barley liquor. Then have dinner at the Marco Pierre White Restaurant, with upmarket versions of British classics such as shepherd's pie or haddock and triple-cooked chips on the menu, all made with local produce.



Look out for the Windsor & Eton Brewery team who still use draft horses to deliver beer



Windsor Castle can just be seen from the hotel

Saturday morning

To get a feel for the town, plump for a tour with Windsor Tourist Guides.

Their private guided walking tours are customisable to your interests – our one-hour tour with Blue Badge Guide Amanda took us to the castle, the river and the old heart of town. Along the way we discovered some of Windsor's unique spots, from a crooked house which was once the oldest tearoom in England to a rare blue Royal Mail post box, originally used for air mail letters – as well as where best to spot the Queen when she's in town!

More walking awaits in Windsor Great Park. This giant park stretches over 4,800 acres, and for centuries it was the private hunting ground of Windsor Castle. Now it's open to the public and is a favourite with runners, walkers and a herd of 500 red deer who've made it their home after being introduced by the Duke of Edinburgh in 1979. Photos are particularly atmospheric on a misty morning when the deer are silhouetted against the trees.



Thames Street is flanked by the Castle's formidable stone walls

Stroll along the tree-lined Long Walk with its neatly manicured lawns and ancient oak trees, which were starting to turn gold and red when we visited in autumn. The Long Walk runs for 2.7 miles from Windsor Castle's George IV Gate to the Copper Horse statue on the top of Snow Hill – which legend has it was where Henry VIII once waited for news of Anne Boleyn's execution.

Retrace your steps back into Windsor. It's around 45 minutes each way to walk to the Copper Horse, with fantastic views of the path stretching off towards the Castle along the way. Call into the Two Brewers for lunch, a flower-decked 18th-century pub just outside the park gates on what was originally the main road from Windsor to London. They do chunky sandwiches at lunchtime and classic pub fare.

Saturday afternoon

By now a visit to Windsor Castle beckons. This awe-inspiring building was built in the 11th century by William the Conqueror. It has over 1,000 rooms – though only a fraction are open to the public as it's still used by the Queen. If you want to know if she's at home, check the Round Tower and if you see the Royal Standard flag flying it means she's in residence.

The lavish State Apartments,

decorated with sparkling chandeliers, gilded mirrors and swags of rich fabrics, are filled with antique furniture, suits of armour and priceless artworks. A large section of the palace was damaged by a devastating fire in 1992 but has been lovingly restored.

Don't miss Queen Mary's Dolls' House, a mini aristocrat's house designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens, and call in to the café, where you'll often

find delicately crafted cakes originally created for the Queen's latest Garden Party on the menu.

In the grounds of the Castle, and covered by the same entrance ticket, St George's Chapel is the home of the Order of the Garter – England's grandest Order of Chivalry whose 24 members are chosen by the Queen.

Ten kings and many other members of the Royal Family are buried in the chapel – from Henry VII to the Queen's father George VI. St George's Chapel has also hosted a string of royal weddings in a beautiful setting with its gothic vaulted ceilings and stained-glass windows.

From here, take a short walk to the Queen Charlotte pub to drink a toast to Harry and Meghan, the latest royal couple to get married at St George's Chapel. The pub created a special gin called the Gin&'er to mark the occasion, flavoured with lemon peel, lime flower and (of course) plenty of ginger. Then head to Sebastian's for dinner, a cosy Italian restaurant tucked away on Goswell Hill that does delicious wood-fired pizzas.



Splendid in gold and red: the Castle's Crimson Drawing Room

Sunday morning

Start the day in the best possible way with a post-breakfast boat trip along the river with French Brothers. Pick up a bag of swan food while you wait for the tour to begin and you'll be instantly popular with the hordes of swans who gather on the riverbank.

Windsor's swans are counted in an annual ceremony known as the Swan Upping, which has taken place for hundreds of years. Half of the swans belong to the Queen, and the others are shared between two London Guilds.

The 40-minute boat trip takes you along the Thames as far as the Boveney Lock and Weir, and there's

also a longer two-hour tour available. It's a relaxing way to let the scenery float past you, with a commentary pointing out local landmarks and great views of Windsor Castle, the Brocas Meadows and Windsor's unusual island racecourse along the way.

Back on dry land, cross the Windsor Bridge to neighbouring Eton and call in to The George Inn, the flagship pub of the Windsor and Eton Brewery. The brewery was founded in 2010 and has already won over 60 awards for its beers, which are made using barley grown on the royal estate's Windsor Farm. It's possible to try them out alongside a traditional Sunday lunch.



A boat trip with French Brothers takes you sedately along the Thames

Sunday afternoon

A wander through the pretty streets of Eton, home to one of the world's most famous schools – Eton College – is a lovely way to wrap things up.

This exclusive (and expensive) boys' boarding school was founded in 1440 by Henry VI and has a long list of famous ex-pupils, including Princes William and Harry and, unbelievably, 20 British Prime Ministers.



Eton's pretty high street

You can't go inside the college but you can see some of its buildings at the end of the high street, including the college chapel.

Eton's high street is lined with small independent shops selling antiques, jewellery, art, vintage books and Eton College uniforms – you'll likely see the distinctive black tailcoat and white tie modelled by the pupils as you walk around.

Finally, head back to Windsor for a final stop at the Windsor Royal Station. This Victorian railway station was used by Queen Victoria, who had her own waiting room on the platform – it's now a branch of All Bar One, but has kept some original features including, strangely enough, Victoria's very own toilet! The building houses Windsor and Eton Central and, feeling full of inspiration, it's where we board the train which will take us back home.

GETTING THERE

Windsor is only 30 miles west of London, and it's easy to get to by train. Frequent services run between London Paddington and Windsor and Eton Central station (35 minutes) or from London Waterloo to Windsor and Eton Riverside station (50 minutes), both close to the town centre. You can also easily get to Windsor from Heathrow Airport by either bus or train.

MGallery Castle Hotel
18 High St, Windsor SL4 1LJ;
castlehotelwindsor.com;
01753 851577. From £124, B&B

Windsor Castle
Windsor SL4 1NJ;
rct.uk/visit/windsor-castle;
0303 123 7304
Entry £23.50 adults, £21.20 over 60s/students, £13.50 under 17s/
disabled, and you must book in advance

French Brothers
The Clewer Boathouse, Clewer Court Road, Windsor SL4 5JH;
01753 851900. 40-minute Windsor Round Trip costs £9.80 adults, £9 over 65s, £6.55 children aged 3-13

Windsor Tourist Guides
windsortouristguides.co.uk;
01753 850580. Tours are custom designed so prices will depend on length and group size

Two Brewers
34 Park Street, Windsor SL4 1LB;
twobrewerswindsor.co.uk;
01753 855426

Queen Charlotte Pub
6 Church Lane, Windsor SL4 1PA;
queencharlottewindsor.co.uk;
01753 859268

The George Inn
77 High St, Eton SL4 6AF;
georgeinn-eton.co.uk;
01753 861797

