

## BEST PLACES TO LIVE

### SOUTHEAST

Property prices in the southeast rose faster than they did in London last year. And it's no wonder. It's easy to reach the capital from most of these places, but even easier to live well in the home counties. You can still find the heart of England amid the half-timbered villages, cricket pitches and pubs where people know your name, and send your child to school without fear of gangs or need for an oxygen mask. But you also have access to metropolitan treats: a Gail's artisan bakery (Farnham), homemade falafel (Godalming), a two-Michelin-starred restaurant (Marlow) and edgy art (Margate). You can frolic in sea or forest, Weald or Down, then hop on a train to earn your crust, or build a career locally – this is Britain's most populous region. The good life indeed.

#### HOT

■ **Narrow misses for Chesham, Guildford and Wendover.** Keep the bunting flying.

■ **And yes, Sevenoaks and Tunbridge Wells,** we know your value too – and your high house prices.

■ **Whitstable** may have reached peak gentrification, but **Deal** is improving all the time. When Margate's glitter starts to fade, its time will come. And after Hastings, there's always **Eastbourne.** Possibly.



#### NOT

■ **Reigate** has been dropped – a petition for Wagamama, really? Haven't you had your fill of chain eateries? Come on, Dorking, surely you can make it next year.

■ **Canterbury** ought to make it, but we couldn't face all those tourists and students.

■ **Just a note to home-counties towns:** remember you are **not London suburbs.** Please keep your regional charm and character.



#### AVERAGE PROPERTY PRICE

# £404,940

Source: Countrywide/O NS/Land Registry



Rural life in Finchampstead

You'll love it, actually Hove offers a more refined lifestyle than its bigger, brasher neighbour, Brighton

Vicki Couchman, Slawek Staszczuk/Greg Ballour Evans/Alamy, David Courtenay/Getty Images

### 1 CROWBOROUGH, EAST SUSSEX

If Tunbridge Wells feels too starchy, this market town just seven miles south could be for you. Though unknown to many outsiders, Crowborough is not exactly a backwater – with more than 20,000 residents, it's the biggest inland town in East Sussex, and the A26 runs through the middle. It's in the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, near the 5,900-acre Ashdown Forest – backdrop for AA Milne's Winnie-the-Pooh tales – and its location, coupled with the seaside attractions of Brighton, 25 miles away, makes it a firm favourite for families. Highly rated independent schools close by include Tonbridge, Ardingly College, Benenden and Mayfield; prep schools such as Skippers Hill Manor and Holmewood House further smarten the town's blazer appeal.

Crowborough's big events are appropriately wholesome and indicate that the place still regards itself as rural, not urban or yet another extended suburb of London. There's a well-supported community hike each May; Sussex Day, in June, is all vintage car displays and dog competitions; and in July, beekeeping, jam-making and bake-offing take centre stage at the Summer Fair. The community infrastructure is strong, with several health centres, a community hospital, a large sports centre and supermarkets from Lidl to Waitrose.

For commuters, there are trains (well, sometimes – Crowborough station is on the Southern network) reaching London Bridge in 67 minutes. If you're sticking to the roads, Gatwick airport

and the M25 are a 45-minute drive away.

**What the locals say** No trains running today? How about a car share?

**Why we love it** A wide open community with big open spaces.

🏠 **£191,700 [£775 pcm]**  
 🏡 **£341,492 [£1,111 pcm]**  
 🏢 **£659,294 [£1,910 pcm]**

### 2 FARNHAM, SURREY

The debate about pedestrianising parts of central Farnham and reducing the choking traffic (a pet project of the local MP, Jeremy Hunt) rumbles on, as do the sotto voce conversations about new housing developments sprouting up around the town. But, golly gosh, it's nice here. Overlooked by a 12th-century castle, historic Farnham has stayed pertly pretty through the years, as a pit stop for Jane Austen on her way to London, then as the original pink-shirted stockbrokers' belt.

Today it caters to young families who manage to find their way not just from southwest London, but from the north, lured by the bow-fronted shops, dinky Georgian and Queen Anne houses and striped shopfront awnings. There's a Laura Ashley store, of course, a great children's toyshop and an emphasis on sourdough and drop scones – pick some up at the local branch of Gail's artisan bakery, or take a bread-making class at Farnham Pottery. On Downing Street, you'll actually find a butcher, a baker and a candlestick-maker (OK, Robert Dyas), as well as Mr Simms Olde Sweet Shoppe.

With a kiln, a darkroom and a youth theatre, Farnham Maltings caters for arty types. As for parents, well, no wonder they have a reputation

for being just a teensy bit self-satisfied here. There are music and drama groups on every street corner, the kids can run amok in a 320-acre medieval deer park, and good state schools include Highfield South Farnham and Weydon – though liberal types send their kids to the independent co-ed Frensham Heights (not nearby Bedales), where the mantra is "Think, create, explore". Oh, and Farnham is in the borough of Waverley, where average life expectancy is a healthy 82 years for men and 85 for women – diesel fumes notwithstanding.

**What the locals say** Go on, have one more cupcake. **Why we love it** It's so cute, you couldn't make it up.

🏠 **£324,387 [£989 pcm]**  
 🏡 **£426,767 [£1,434 pcm]**  
 🏢 **£668,602 [£1,706 pcm]**

### 3 FINCHAMPSTEAD, BERKSHIRE

The market town of Wokingham and the north Hampshire district of Hart are both regular fixtures on lists of the most coveted addresses in Britain – and you'll find Finchampstead sandwiched between them. While Wokingham expands ever further, its neighbour retains a rural feel, with several small centres scattered in woodlands and open farmland. To the north, the more modern estates around Nine Mile Ride (where you'll find the supermarket, surgery and restaurants) almost blur into Wokingham; further south, "the village" offers a mixture of cottages, semis and detached homes, as

well as the riverside Tally Ho pub (great on a summer evening).

Families love it: the primary school in the village is rated outstanding by Ofsted, and there are other good options; older children move on to Wokingham, where last year a new secondary, Bohunt, joined the existing St Crispin's and Emmbrook (both judged good) and the outstanding Holt School for girls. Parents who can stretch to one of the gated piles that line the National Trust-protected Ridges may have their eye on nearby Wellington College: it costs £9,040 a term for day pupils, but at least you'll be saving on boarding fees. When school's out,

