

GOING ASHORE:

VISITING WINDSOR CASTLE

A guide for day trips to England's most historic royal residence.

by

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There are several reasons to visit Windsor Castle. Having been a royal residence since medieval times, the Castle is steeped in history. It is the largest castle in Britain and thus is architecturally interesting. It has an art collection that surpasses most museums.

But, Windsor is not a museum. Not only is it still used for state occasions but it is still a royal residence and home to the Queen. It has living functions. As such, it has a vitality that even the best of museums lack.

Windsor Castle dates back to the days of William the Conqueror. After the Norman Conquest in 1066, William wanted to strengthen his hold on his new realm by building a series of castles to defend London. Windsor, with its chalk cliff overlooking the Thames, was a natural choice for one of the castles.

Because of its proximity to London and because

of the good hunting in the surrounding area, the Castle became a royal residence. Edward III engaged in a major building program and made Windsor into a magnificent castle. In 1348, he founded the Order of the Garter, England's highest order of chivalry. The Garter knights - - today mostly honored statesmen - - still gather at Windsor each year for a thanksgiving ceremony led by the Queen. Other kings who played a significant role in building the Castle include: Edward IV, Henry VII, Henry VIII, Charles II and George IV.

A number of dramatic events have occurred here. The Castle was besieged after King John attempted to repudiate the promises that he had made in the Magna Carta. King Charles I was held prisoner here by the Parliamentarians after losing the English Civil War. More recently, King Edward VIII made his famous radio broadcast from Windsor, explaining that he was abdicating the throne for "the woman I love."

The Castle is on a hill and is divided into three sections. The Lower Ward is at the bottom of the hill. Up the slope is the Middle Ward and the Upper Ward extends along from there. After leaving the visitors center, you enter through a gate into the Middle Ward.

Soon you will be standing below the Round Tower. The original Castle was based on a motte and bailey design. In such designs, a keep or strongpoint would be built on top of a man-made mound or motte. Surrounding the motte would be the castle walls or bailey. At Windsor, the Round Tower, which dates from the time of Henry II, sits atop the original motte made by William the Conqueror. Its slope now descends to a pleasant garden.

One might well expect that a complex of buildings that were built over the course of ten centuries would be an amalgamation of different architectural styles. However, in the early 19th Century, George IV commissioned Sir Jeffry Wyattville to remodel the Castle. In the process, he harmonized the buildings in the then-popular Gothic style so that the Castle has a united look. Much of what we see today reflects Wyattville's work.

This is not to say that the Castle is the same throughout. For example, the Lower Ward has something of a medieval atmosphere with half timbered buildings close by the Castle walls. The East Terrace has a formal continental-style garden giving it the East Face the look of a European palace.

When the Queen is not in residence, a number of rooms in the Castle are usually open to the public. These are known as the State Apartments. At one time, these rooms were where the royals ate, slept and carried on their daily routines. Now, they are for the most part, used for ceremony and official functions.

The State Apartments have been transformed over the centuries and do not reflect the Castle's original medieval architecture. Rather, their present look chiefly reflects the work of two architects. Following the restoration of the monarchy, King Charles II commissioned Hugh May to adapt and decorate the rooms in the Baroque style, which the King had admired while in exile on the Continent. A century and a half later, Wyattville modernized and remodeled most of the rooms. His work reflects elements of Gothic design and early 19th Century tastes.

All of the rooms are visually stunning both



Inside Windsor Castle - -From the Lower Ward, looking up to the Round Tower.

overall and in their detail. Indeed, on the walls you can find works by Rembrandt, Vermeer, Canletto, Lawrence, Gainsborough, Rubens, Van Dyke and seemingly countless other masters. But do not overlook the wood carving by Grinling Gibbons, the Goebelin tapestries or the impressive display of antique weapons.

Amongst other things, the State Apartments are used today for state banquets. St. George's Hall, now restored after the devastating fire of November 1992, is often used to entertain visiting heads of state. The vast Waterloo Chamber, with its portraits of the monarchs, statesmen and generals who played prominent roles in the defeat of Napoleon, is also used for state dinners. Visiting these rooms, you get an impression of the scale of these events.

Another must-see feature of Windsor is Queen Mary's Dolls House. Do not let the name mislead you. This has nothing to do with Barbie or Raggedy Ann. Rather, it is an amazing miniature version of a British stately home in the early 20th century.

The story goes that Queen Mary, wife of King George V and grandmother of the current monarch, liked to collect miniature objects to decorate a small dolls house. Noticing this, Princess Marie Louise decided a fitting gift for this beloved Queen would be a dolls house designed and furnished by the foremost architects, artists, authors, and craftsmen of the day.

A miniature Palladian country house was the result. The exterior walls rise up to reveal the interior rooms. On the walls are actual paintings done by the leading artists of the day. The library has tiny books

written specifically for this project by the likes of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Thomas Hardy and Rudyard Kipling. There are miniature working copies of household articles and furnishings. Even the taps in the bathroom have hot and cold running water.

It is a marvel how the people who worked on this project were able to create these miniature masterpieces. However, Queen Mary's Dolls House is also fascinating because it preserves a way of life, a moment frozen in time. The people who worked on this project were trying to produce a miniaturized version of the world that they knew. Unlike the full-size royal residences and country homes, this house has not been updated and altered over the intervening years. Thus, it is a true representation of such a home during that period.

Near the Dolls House is the Drawings Gallery. The Queen has one of the most extensive art collections in the world including not only paintings but photographs, books, manuscripts, drawings and prints. Items from this collection are shown in rotating exhibits in the Drawings Gallery.

Dominating the lower ward is St. George's Chapel. The name is somewhat misleading as this building is more like a small cathedral than a chapel. It is the final resting place of eight kings including Henry VIII and Charles I, who was buried here secretly after his execution by the Parliamentarians. Thus, it is a place with much history.

It is also a visually impressive building. Begun by Edward IV and altered numerous times over the years, it has soaring ceilings and large glass windows. In it there is detailed wood carving and stained glass. You will also see some excellent examples of heraldry as this is the chapel of the Knights of the Garter. The banners of the knights and their coats of arms adorn the stalls where the knights sit during services.

As you walk about the grounds of the Castle, you will see sentries wearing bright red tunics and tall bearskin helmets. These are not re-enactors but serving soldiers in the British Army. When they are not doing public duties such as guarding the sovereign, they do the same type of service including fighting for the nation. Indeed, they have a long and distinguished martial history that extends up to the present day.

There are five regiments of foot guards and you can tell which regiment a soldier is from by the buttons on his tunic. Evenly-spaced - - Grenadier Guards; grouped in twos - - Coldstream Guards; grouped in threes - - Scots Guards; grouped in fours - - Irish Guards; grouped in fives - - Welsh Guards. You can also identify the regiment by the plume (or, in the case of the Scots Guards, absence of a plume) on their bear skins.

During the summer months, there is a changing of the guard ceremony, each day at 11 a.m. The rest of the year, the ceremony is every other day. However, during the course of the day, you can see small groups of guards marching around the Castle as the various sentries are relieved.

You exit the Castle through the Henry VIII gate, which brings you out into the town. There are shops and restaurants nearby.

Although the town borders the Castle on one side, there is extensive parkland adjoining it on the other. Windsor Great Park is quite picturesque and includes many areas of interest that are open to the public such as the beautiful Savill Garden. Other points of interest such as Frogmore House where Queen Victoria is buried are only open occasionally.

Practical information.

Some ships calling in Southampton offer a shore excursion to Windsor Castle. However, most cruisers visit the Castle as a day trip either before or after a cruise embarking from Southampton.

Several companies offer motor coach tours to Windsor from London. But it is not difficult to get there independently. Trains run from London's Waterloo and Paddington stations to the station in Windsor, which is practically across the street from the Castle.

Admission prices vary depending upon whether the State Apartments are open. As of this writing, the price for an adult is 17 pounds sterling when they are open and 9.50 when they are not.

An audio tour of the Castle, which lasts about an hour and a half, is included in the price of admission. There are also free tours conducted by Castle guides that last 30 minutes.

Windsor is a very popular destination during the summer. The crowds are significantly less in the fall and in the spring.