

CENTRAL ENGLAND

Central England is the most diffuse region of the country, bracketed to the west by the Welsh border and to the east by the North Sea, but otherwise difficult to define geographically. At least there can be no doubt about the location of its economic and demographic focus - Birmingham, Britain's second city and once the world's greatest industrial metropolis. Long saddled with a reputation as a culture-hating, car-loving backwater, Birmingham has redefined its image in recent years with some bold artistic and redevelopment projects, most notably the construction of the complex that houses the country's best concert hall. Although it may still be few people's idea of a good-looking town, it's certainly one of the liveliest spots in the region, with nightlife encompassing everything from Royal Ballet productions to all-night raves, and a great spread of restaurants and pubs.

The urban sprawl clinging to the western side of Birmingham, known as the Black Country, more amply fulfils the negative stereotypes, although even here you'll find a few pleasant surprises, in the shape of several excellent museums and galleries. In the region to the south of this giant West Midlands conurbation lie the wide and fertile vales of the rivers Severn and Avon. These hold central England's biggest tourist draws - Stratford-upon-Avon, a place now perhaps over-burdened with Shakespeare-related paraphernalia, and the castle of nearby Warwick. However, the crowds and commercialism of these two towns fade away in neighbouring Worcestershire, a predominantly pastoral county typified by the handsome hills around the spa town of Great Malvern and by the low-key old cathedral city of Worcester itself.

Further west still is Herefordshire, a large and sparsely populated county that's home to several charming Market towns, most notably the cathedral city of Hereford, pocket-sized Ross-on-Wye and Hay-on-Wye, where there's the largest concentration of second-hand bookshops in the world. Next door, rural Shropshire weighs in with Ludlow, one of the region's prettiest towns, awash with antique half timbered buildings, and the amiable county town of Shrewsbury. Shropshire has a fascinating industrial history too, for it was here in the Ironbridge Gorge that British industrialists built the first iron bridge and pioneered the use of coal as a smelting fuel - two key events of the Industrial Revolution. To the north lies Staffordshire, where the halcyon days when the potteries of Stoke-on-Trent dominated the world market are recalled by an outstanding museum or two, and Derbyshire, whose northern reaches incorporate the region's finest scenery in the rough landscapes of the Peak District. Most tourists bypass the counties of the East Midlands - Nottinghamshire, Leicestershire, Northamptonshire and Lincolnshire - on their way to more obvious destinations. It's true they miss little of overriding interest, though Nottingham and Leicester are boisterous cities and the rural charms of much of Northamptonshire hold some appeal. Lincolnshire is an agricultural backwater in comparison to its neighbours, but its sights - as distinct from the mostly dreary landscape - are far more diverting, most remarkably the cathedral at Lincoln, the alluring stone-built town of Stamford and the superb parish churches that are spread out across the county.

Travel in this region is simple. Birmingham sits at the heart of central England's rail and coach networks, with most of the region's main towns and cities enjoying easy links from there, as well as from London, Bristol, Manchester and points farther north. It is only really when you get into the outbacks of Shropshire, Herefordshire or Lincolnshire that public transport can be problematic.