

Planning and preparation

Best time of year

The South Downs Way can be a pleasure to walk in any season, but if you're planning to walk the whole distance (100 miles/160 km) in one go, we recommend avoiding winter. The warmer, longer days from spring through to autumn are most likely to afford the best chance of a period of reasonable weather. In winter months, such spells are less likely, and shorter hours of daylight are a certainty.

Winter walking is not to be ruled out, though, one of chief benefits being the greater solitude, and the opportunity of having the superb cliff section at the eastern end – which can get very busy in summer – to yourself. If you live within travelling range, the best approach would be to tackle the route a day or few days at a time, taking advantage of any good weather when it occurs.

May, June and September tend to have the best weather, the earlier two months also being best for spring flowers and birdsong, while September is good if you fancy a swim in the sea on the last stage of the walk. The eastern half can be busier during the English school summer holidays (mid July to end of August), though once away from the car parks it's seldom crowded. The Seven Sisters Country Park, Birling Gap and Beachy Head (on the final stage of the footpath) can be busy on any sunny weekend or bank holiday throughout the year, so are better avoided if possible. Other places that can get busy at such times are Queen Elizabeth Country Park and Devil's Dyke.

West from Itford Hill, in spring

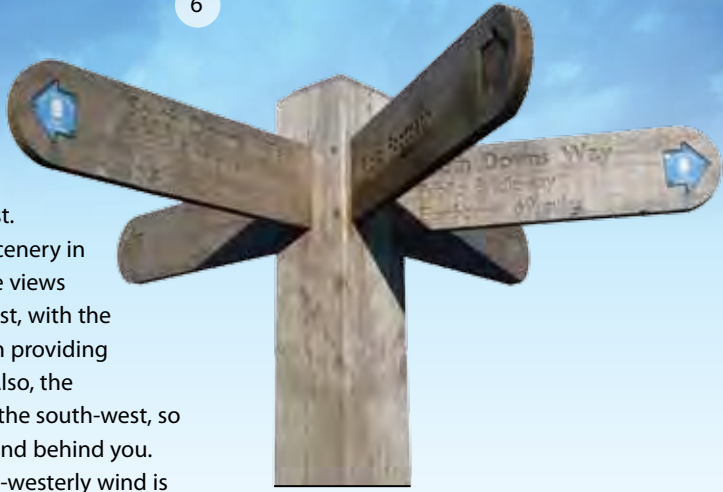


Which direction?

There are pros and cons for either direction, but we recommend west to east.

Attractive though the scenery in the west certainly is, the views improve as you head east, with the dramatic clifftop section providing an appropriate finale. Also, the prevailing wind is from the south-west, so it's easier to have the wind behind you.

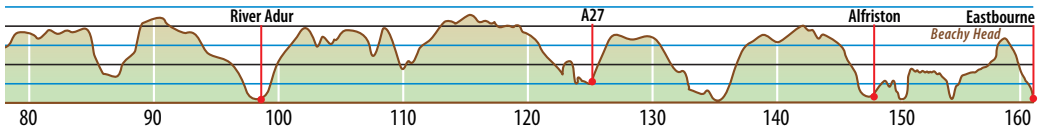
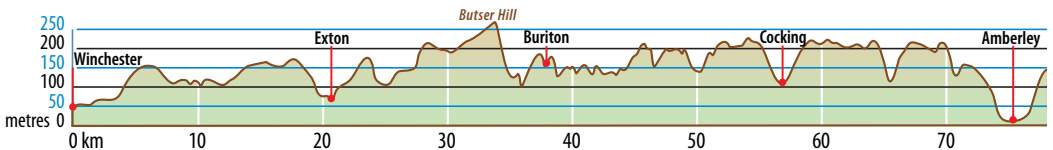
Indeed, when the south-westerly wind is especially strong, it can be quite a struggle to battle against it along the cliffs (and on the rare occasion impossible). Finally, it's a much gentler start from the west: the strenuous clifftop stage is better tackled on your last day.



Terrain and gradients

Much of the route is on good, clear chalk and flint tracks with some stretches in the east over short-cropped downland turf. Chalk drains well, so it's generally firm underfoot, though during or after wet weather certain sections, notably in the west where some tracks are also used by farm vehicles, can get quite sticky. Riverbank paths can also become muddy, but on the whole you can stride out easily.

However, according to official sources, there's a total of about 4150 m (13,600 ft) of ascent and descent, and the less fit you are, the more arduous the route will seem. The profile shows how the sections vary in this respect.



How long will it take?

Fit, experienced walkers with the necessary stamina could complete the South Downs Way in 6 days, but 7 or 8 would be more comfortable. (Participants in the Long Distance Walkers Association annual 100-mile walk have managed it in under 48 hours, and some in less than half that time!) However, most people take 7 to 9 days to walk the route enjoyably.

Keep in mind the extra distance to get to and from accommodation each day. You may be able to walk to the nearest village, and directions are given at the end of each stage in Part 3, but you may also have to catch a bus (or even taxi) if accommodation nearby is booked. On average, allow an hour extra for getting from and to accommodation each day. Also leave time for sightseeing, especially in Winchester, for suggested detours *en route* and diversions for visits to pubs.

Table 1: The total distance (100 mi/160 km) in 8 sections

Winchester	Exton	Buriton	Cocking	Amberley	River Adur	A27	Alfriston	Eastbourne
miles	12	12	11	12	13	15½	14	10½
km	19	19	17½	19	21	25	22½	17

Bridleway alternative from Alfriston to Eastbourne via Jevington is 2½ miles/4 km shorter. Distances from railway stations at either end: ½ mile/1 km from Winchester station at the start, 1½ miles/2.5 km to Eastbourne station at the end.

This book divides the route into 8 stages, all of a manageable length at any time of year, though stage 6 might be slightly too long for some in winter. If you want to squeeze the first four stages into three days, you could walk from Winchester to East Meon on day 1, East Meon to South Harting on day 2 and reach Amberley on the third. Both East Meon and South Harting are about 1 mile (1.5 km) off route, adding about 4 miles (6.5 km) to the distance: that makes a three-day total of about 51 miles/82 km – feasible for most walkers, especially during the long hours of summer daylight.

If stage 6 seems too long, you could break it into two, overnighting in Pyecombe, Clayton or Ditchling. You could also add the first couple of miles beyond the A27 to your next day, descending from the ridge to Kingston near Lewes for the night: see page 48, second bullet. That would reduce your eighth day (to Alfriston) to about 12 miles (19 km), finishing on the ninth day at Eastbourne.

Fitness and preparation

The South Downs Way (SDW) is ideal as your first long-distance path: it's well waymarked, generally has good going underfoot and you're never too far from a village or town. There's good public transport for every stage of the route, allowing plenty of flexibility: see page 11. If you are new to long-distance walking, try a few all-day walks beforehand to build up your stamina, and obtain our *Notes for novices*: see page 62. Most healthy people can manage 12-15 miles a day if they build up their distances and look after their feet.

Waymarking

The route is very well waymarked throughout by the National Trail acorn symbol and usually the words *South Downs Way*, or, occasionally, *SDW*. The odd signpost could be missing or broken, and although much of the Way is fairly direct, there are a number of turns – some of them unexpected. Misty or foggy conditions can occur on hills and near the coast, so follow instructions in Part 3 carefully and stay alert.



Accommodation

The website www.nationaltrail.co.uk/southdowns is a good starting point. Its interactive map shows accommodation in relation to the route, and you can search by different categories, eg hotel, B&B, accommodation that accepts dogs etc. You can also download (or buy a printed copy of) the *South Downs Way Accommodation Guide* booklet which lists B&Bs, hotels, inns and some self-catering near the Trail. Each entry gives you the approximate distance (in miles) from the SDW. There is a separate download for campsites, hostels and bunkhouses. Legally, you are not allowed to wild camp on any land without permission: ask the local landowner or farmer first.

Other sources of information include tourist information centres (see page 61) and our detailed online route map which has links to accommodation: see page 62.

Accommodation should be booked well in advance, especially over weekends and throughout July and August. During major events – notably Glorious Goodwood (horse racing) and the Festival of Speed – accommodation nearby can get booked up months ahead. Eastbourne is especially busy during the pre-Wimbledon International Tennis Championships in June and the Airshow in August. It's worth checking the National Trail's website list of annual events along the SDW. For a list of holiday companies providing baggage transfer or a complete booking service, visit www.rucsacs.com/sdw or the NT website above.

George Inn, Alfriston



Facilities

		<i>km offroute</i>	<i>B&B/ hotel</i>	<i>hostel/ bunkhouse</i>	<i>campsite</i>	<i>pub/ café</i>	<i>shop</i>
3-1	Winchester		✓			✓	✓
3-1	Chilcomb		✓		✓		
3-1	near Beauworth					✓	
3-2	Exton (and nearby)	0-2	✓		✓	✓	
3-2	Meon Springs				✓	✓	
3-2	East Meon		✓		✓	✓	
3-2	Mercury Park			✓		✓	✓
3-2	QECP Visitor Centre					✓	✓
3-3	Buriton	0-6	✓			✓	
3-3	Petersfield	4-5	✓			✓	✓
3-3	South Harting	1	✓			✓	
3-3	Hooksway	1				✓	
3-4	Cocking	1	✓			✓	✓
3-4	Heyshott / Graffham	1-8	✓		✓		✓
3-4	Gumber Bothy	1-8		✓	✓		
3-5	Amberley	0-8	✓			✓	✓
3-5	Houghton / H Bridge	0-3	✓		✓	✓	
3-5	Bury	1-5	✓			✓	
3-6	Washington		✓		✓	✓	
3-6	Upper Beeding / Bramber	1-5	✓			✓	✓
3-6	Truleigh Hill YH			✓			
3-6	Fulking / Poynings	1	✓			✓	
3-6	Devils' Dyke / Saddlescombe					✓	
3-6	Pyecombe		✓			✓	
3-6	Clayton	1	✓			✓	
3-6	Ditchling	2-5	✓			✓	✓
3-6	Plumpton	1				✓	
3-6	Lewes	5	✓	✓		✓	✓
3-6	Kingston	1	✓		✓	✓	✓
3-7	Rodmell	1	✓			✓	
3-7	Telscombe	1-7		✓			
3-7	Itford Farm, Southease			✓			
3-8a	Alfriston		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
3-8a	Litlington					✓	
3-8a	Exceat		✓			✓	
3-8a	Birling Gap/ Belle Tout		✓			✓	
3-8a	Beachy Head					✓	
3-8a	Eastbourne		✓	✓		✓	✓
3-8b	Jevington		✓			✓	

Apart from Winchester and Eastbourne at either end, the SDW doesn't pass through any towns, although these can be reached from the end of each section, usually by a short bus ride. Post offices, cash machines and local shops will be found in villages and towns off route. There are pubs and cafés both on and near the route, as well as a number of drinking water points.