



DISCOVER

THE NORTHUMBERLAND COAST PATH

With dramatic castles, wide beaches and warm hospitality, is Northumberland's Coast Path one of the most distinctive walks in the world? Travel writer **Peter Elia** laces up his boots – and packs a pair of flip-flops – to find out

Cross rolling dunes behind the white sands of Embleton Beach on the Northumberland Coast Path to reach the magnificent ruins of 14th-century Dunstanburgh Castle, one of several history-laden fortifications along the 62-mile trail. This varied route offers a constantly changing landscape, pretty coastal villages and two wildlife-rich national nature reserves



from the Northumberland coast, but my high hopes of a connection with the landscape remained the same.

DUNES AND DYNASTIES

From the cosy outpost of Cresswell's Drift Café, Lisa – my hiking buddy – and I set off along the beach, each armed with a slab of chocolate tiffin. At least if it rained, we'd have something sweet to lift our spirits.

A wall of cloud greeted our first sandy steps along Druridge Bay, a broad, sweeping beach that stretches for seven miles to **Amble**. Rugged dunes and long blonde marram grass lay to the left and the formidable North Sea – although less angry than usual – on our right. Immediately, I felt myself relax: everything lay ahead of us, and with the sea always to the right and signs to mark any twists in the route, there would be little demand for navigation skills.

As the tide came in, we turned from the hard sand at the shoreline and climbed the dunes to join the official Northumberland Coast Path. At the attractive village of Amble, on the mouth of the Coquet River, I bagged a couple of pies for lunch from master butcher Peter Forsyth. I chose his celebrated 'Northumbrian', filled with lamb, turnip, onion and haggis, a delicacy they have eaten in these parts at least as long as the Scots. We ate them by the waterfront. When were pies ever this good?

The coast path crosses the Coquet a mile inland at **Warkworth**. After 20 minutes beside the busy A1068, we found ourselves gazing at the impressive 12th-century Warkworth Castle, moated by a loop of the Coquet. Once a stronghold for the Percy family – the dynasty that dominated this county from the 14th century – the castle provided the setting for several scenes from Shakespeare's Henry IV plays.

Soon the path rejoined the coast, giving a distant view of our destination, **Alnmouth** village – its brightly painted houses clustered on a steep hill cradled in a bend of the river Aln and surrounded by sand dunes. Fortunately, we arrived at Alnmouth Bay at low tide, when the Aln was shallow enough to ford.

Our first night's accommodation was in Shoreside Camping Huts, an off-grid, solar-powered cabin just a pebble's throw from the beach. Inside, I fired up the log burner while Lisa set the outside table for dinner. The sun finally began to peek through, briefly illuminating the flowering

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP Second World War anti-tank blocks and defensive pill boxes can still be seen behind Druridge Bay's pristine sweep of white sand; clear signing makes any detours easy to navigate; the approach to the village of Amble takes you through beautiful rolling dunes

"I COULD SEE THE NORTHERN LIGHTS ON THE HORIZON, SWIRLING WITH DARK ORANGE AND YELLOW HUES"

The Northumberland coast may not be Britain's best-known seaside destination, but the locals are fully aware of its beauty. When one resident, Dale, referred to the nearby Farne Islands as "the Geordie Galapagos", we laughed, but it wasn't just banter – we soon realised that he had a point. This is a really special landscape.

The light-hearted nature of Northumberlanders such as Dale would provide an intermittent warmth throughout our journey – 62 miles of pathways along the North Sea coast between the village of **Cresswell** in the county's south and the spectacular border town of **Berwick-upon-Tweed** on the Scottish frontier. And the locals have many reasons to be cheerful, whether it's the rugged mix of romantic ruins rising above the golden-duned beaches or a surprise guest visit from a grey seal popping its head above water. The Northumberland coast has a beguiling nature, and comparisons can be drawn to the Cornish coast – but without the crowds.

Hiking along paths less travelled has been a passion of mine for many years. My previous adventures in Kyrgyzstan, Greenland and Peru may seem a world away



Rowing on the River Coquet is made all the more romantic with the crumbling ruins of medieval Warkworth Castle as the backdrop. The first Earl of Northumberland, Henry Percy (1341–1408) transformed the castle with ambitious works, including commissioning the great tower, built in the shape of a Greek cross

Photos: Alamy, Getty, Peter Ellis



The Craster family made improvements to the village's charming harbour in 1904, in memory of Captain Charles Craster, who died in Tibet while serving in the British Army – look for his memorial on the harbour wall

thistles and goldenrods between our lodgings and the beach. I set my alarm for 5am, in the hope of witnessing a flaming east-coast sunrise. There's something special about first light. Maybe it's the possibilities of new beginnings, or perhaps it's the comfort of waking up before most of the world and experiencing a moment that belongs solely to you.

SPECTACLE AT SUNRISE

Outside the hut the following morning, I could see the Northern Lights on the horizon, swirling with dark orange and yellow hues. Following this grand opening, a blanket of cloud then subdued the sunlight. Fortunately, all was not lost. Lisa brought me a hot cup of tea and the clouds lifted. Today was going to be one of the warmest days of the year.

By midday, Mediterranean-style heat had arrived. Our progress was slower than usual as we walked along craggy clifftops with the sound of waves crashing on the rocks below. This was how I had imagined the north-east coastline: brimming with raw and abandoned energy – all the elements my body was now lacking. Fortunately, the fishing village of **Craster** was around the



TOP Overlooking Alnmouth, a solitary **St Cuthbert's Cross** sits on Church Hill, said to be the site where St Cuthbert was chosen as the Bishop of Lindisfarne in 684
ABOVE Wake with the sun to witness a fiery dawn over the shores of Alnmouth Beach

corner, offering the chance to refuel on delicious fresh crab and plenty of liquids.

After lunch, we met fisher Neil Robson, whose family has been smoking the famous Craster kipper for four generations. He explained that the smokehouse process hasn't changed – they have used the same traditional methods for 130 years. Neil proudly told us that his daughter Olivia was just as passionate as Neil's ancestors

Photos: Getty, Alamy, Peter Eira



CLOCKWISE FROM MIDDLE ROW, LEFT Wildflowers line the path to Craster; **L Robson & Sons**, home of the Craster kipper; **Dunstanburgh Castle** was built on the remains of an Iron Age fort

about the business and would one day follow in the family footsteps. We exchanged elbow bumps and said our goodbyes, vowing to have a kipper breakfast before going home.

FREE AS A BIRD

Within a short distance of the smokehouse lie the ruins of Dunstanburgh Castle. If ever a structure screamed haunting romanticism, this is it. Northumberland has more castles – 70 in total – than any other county in England, and surely none is more atmospheric than Dunstanborough.

We walked barefoot in the sand towards the old smugglers' bay of **Beadnell**, the only west-facing harbour on the east coast of England. Our hiking day finished at the harbour village of **Seahouses**, the gateway to the 'Galapagos' – that is, the Farne Islands, famously teeming with seabirds.

With the knowledge that rain was on its way, we joined a sunset boat cruise around the islands. It was worth it, despite the weather – watching the last-remaining puffins of the season heading out to sea on their migration and guillemots tightly packed together on steep ledges gave us a fantastic insight into the lives of these wondrous birds.



village of **Belford**, I decided to shorten my route and return to the coast by taxi.

Perhaps I had been missing the romantic castles or the raw energy of the sea, but when the taxi reached Beal Causeway, it was like returning home. Maybe this was the moment when I connected with the landscape – or rather, seascape.

HAUNTING HOLY HISTORY

After a night in **Beal's** Lindisfarne Inn, our final day got off to a great start: Craster kippers for breakfast. Happily, Lisa's foot had improved, too. With just 11 miles to our journey's end, we decided to spend the morning on Holy Island, or Lindisfarne, which was settled by Irish monks in 635 and became a key site in early English Christianity. Holy Island is cut off twice a day from the mainland by fast-moving tides, leaving us with just a few hours to visit.

Crossing the causeway felt like entering a lost world. The island, prey to Viking raids from the 8th century, brings history to life with the majestic ruins of a 12th-century priory built on the site of the early monastery. A meandering cobbled path leads up to impressive Lindisfarne Castle. In 1903–1906, architect Edwin Lutyens converted this 16th-century fort into a grand holiday home for the publisher Edward Hudson.

Back on the mainland, we set off along the coast path to our final stop, **Berwick-Upon-Tweed**. Like most of the trail, the track was almost flat. We took refreshments at the 19th hole of a golf club and befriended a herd of Aberdeen Angus cows who appeared to be walking in the opposite direction.

After passing the Victorian promenade of **Spittal**, we followed the estuary into Berwick. Four gorgeous days filled with beaches, castles, wildlife and local dishes left us wishing we could have continued our walk across the border into Scotland, but it was almost time to head home.

We had one more person to meet: Derek Sharman MBE, also known as 'Derek from Berwick', who gave us a fascinating guided tour of the city's Elizabethan walls. Derek revealed Berwick has changed hands between the English and Scots 15 times in its volatile history. A remarkable fact to conclude an extraordinary journey. ☺



Peter Elia is a freelance journalist and photographer. He loves to document his travels on his Instagram account, which continues to grow with over 80,000 followers. @themanwhohikedtheworld

Photos: Alamy, Getty

We arrived at our hotel a little weary after an eventful day. Lisa's foot had developed blisters and she needed a recovery day, so the next day, I would hike alone.

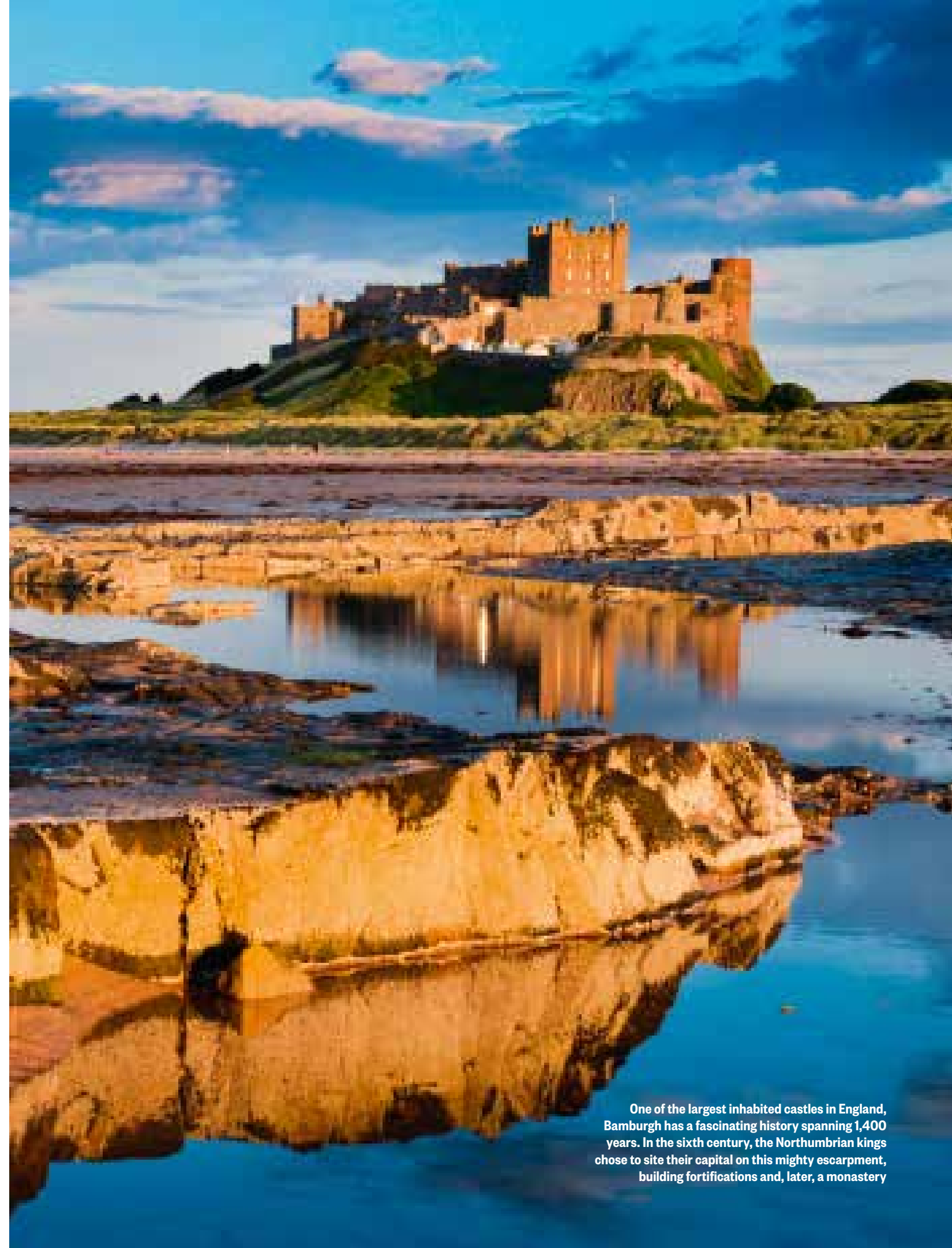
COASTLINE AND CASTLES

The walk across three miles of golden sand from Seahouses was dominated by the looming presence of Bamburgh Castle. Its appearance – perched on a large rock – became more dramatic with each step. Victorian industrialist William Armstrong bought the castle in 1894 then restored it, and it is still owned by his family. The fortress is conveniently integrated within the Northumberland Coast Path and is open to the public. I strolled around the castle grounds, before entering to gaze at the impressive King's Hall, with its magnificent false hammerbeam ceiling made of teak.

From the mudflats of Budle Bay, the coast path heads inland, looping west and north through farmland and woodland. There are still inland detours like this along several stretches of the English coast; the process of approving and making a new coast path along the shores of Fenham Flats to Holy Island is a work in progress. Initially, I welcomed a different landscape, but when, after five miles or so, I reached the quiet

“THE LOOMING PRESENCE OF BAMBURGH CASTLE BECAME MORE DRAMATIC WITH EACH STEP”

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP Fishers now store their lobster and crab pots in the old lime kilns at pretty Beadnell Harbour; Lindisfarne Castle was built in the 16th century using stones taken from the ruins of Lindisfarne Priory; from April, puffins return to the Farne Islands to breed, leaving again by late July



One of the largest inhabited castles in England, Bamburgh has a fascinating history spanning 1,400 years. In the sixth century, the Northumbrian kings chose to site their capital on this mighty escarpment, building fortifications and, later, a monastery

NOW GO THERE

Where to eat and sleep along the Northumberland Coast Path, by **Peter Elia**



GETTING THERE

Going to Cresswell: advance single from London to Widdrington (change at Morpeth) from £22.50; **0345 722 5333, Iner.co.uk**. From Widdrington Station, take the Line 1 bus operated by Arriva North East direct to Cresswell. **arrivabus.co.uk/north-east/**

Coming back from Berwick, the train station is within walking distance of the town centre. Advance single from Berwick to London direct, £22.50; **Iner.co.uk**

COVID-19
Please abide by Government advice on travel, and remain at home if recommended to do so. The information on these pages is meant to assist you once restrictions have been lifted.

CAFÉS



1 Scott's of Alnmouth

A café and deli, beautifully designed Scott's offers freshly prepared breakfasts and lunches (ideal for picnics), great coffee and tasty treats. Lots of veggie and vegan options, too. **scottsfofalmouth.com**



2 Pilgrims Coffee House, Holy Island

In the walled garden of a lovely property, Pilgrims serves up excellent quality coffee that they roast themselves. They also offer a hearty selection of pies and delicious cakes. **pilgrimscoffee.com**



3 Lowry's at the Chandlery, Berwick

The breakfast after the hike before! A real crowd-pleaser with a great quayside location and offering everything from a hearty full English to fantastic coffees and cakes. **facebook.com/Lowrysatthechandlery**



ATTRACTIONS

4 Boat cruises

'Serenity' at Seahouses operates guided wildlife tours around the Farne Islands. This small family-run company also offers seasonal tours, such as dolphin- and whale-watching and trips at sunset. **farneislandstours.co.uk**

5 Castles

Marvel at the grand King's Hall, explore the castle grounds and admire the striking sea views at **Bamburgh Castle**. **bamburghcastle.com** Other castle favourites include **Dunstanburgh** and **Warkworth**.

6 The Holy Island of Lindisfarne

Explore the impressive priory ruins – don't forget to check the tide times. **hiol.co.uk** To get there and back, you can walk along the Pilgrim's Way or catch the 477 bus. **bordersbuses.co.uk**

7 Historical walking tour

Berwick-upon-Tweed has a unique and colourful history. Learn more on a fascinating walk around the town's Elizabethan fortifications with Derek Sharman MBE (pictured). **explore-northumberland.co.uk**

RESTAURANTS



8 The Jolly Fisherman, Craster

This historic inn oozes with seaside character. Homemade specialities include crab soup and the famous Craster smoked kippers. There's also a large selection of real ales and roaring open fires on chilly nights. **thejollyfishermancraster.co.uk**



9 The Queens Head, Berwick

Contemporary elegance in the old part of town. This restaurant serves great classics with a modern twist. Try the home-cured salmon, and finish with the lime and coconut pannacotta. **queensheadberwick.co.uk/restaurant**

PLACES TO STAY



10 Barnacre, Longhirst

A beautiful family-run cottage just outside of Cresswell. Perfect for an overnight stay for walkers before starting the coast path. Doubles from £80 per night. Note, there is no accommodation in Cresswell Village. **01670 790116, barnacre.com**



11 Shoreside Huts, Alnmouth

Artistically designed camping huts overlooking the beach. Each cabin has a log burner, super-comfortable double bed, small kitchen and toilet. Prices from £80 per hut (minimum two-night stay). **01665 830554, alnmouthhuts.com**



12 Bamburgh Castle Inn, Seahouses

This friendly waterfront inn has an elevated beer garden with amazing views of the Farne Islands. There's even a spa and swimming-pool area for guests. Prices from £99 for a double. **01665 720283; inncollectiongroup.com/bamburgh-castle-inn**



13 The Lindisfarne Inn, Beal

A traditional country pub with comfortable rooms. This inn is ideally situated on the edge of the mainland causeway overlooking Holy Island. Doubles from £80. **01289 381223; inncollectiongroup.com/lindisfarne-inn**



14 Berwick YHA, Berwick-upon-Tweed

Located on the quayside beside the River Tweed, this unique youth hostel mixes modern and original features and has a quirky Tower of Pisa-like lean. Rooms are basic and clean. Doubles from £39. **0345 3719676; yha.org.uk/hostel/yha-berwick**