



Viewpoint

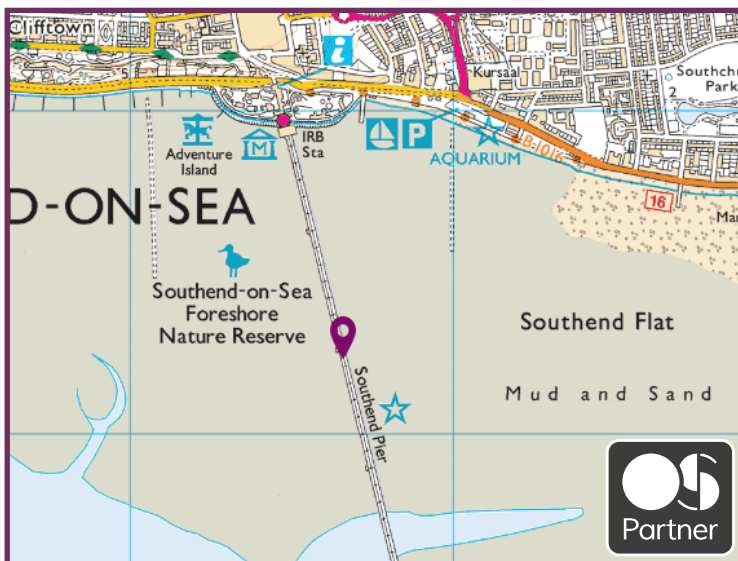
Pier pressure



Time: 15 mins

Region: East of England

Landscape: coastal



Location:

Southend Pier, Western Esplanade,
Southend-on-Sea, Essex SS1 1EE

Grid reference:

TQ 88486 84941

Keep an eye out for:

Wading birds and the masts of a wrecked Second World War ship, the SS Richard Montgomery

1.3 miles, 2.2 kilometres, 2,158 metres, 7,080 feet – however you measure it, Southend's pleasure pier is the longest in the world.

On hot days walking to the end can feel like making a pilgrimage to the sun. No wonder most of the pier's 200,000 annual visitors hop aboard one of the special trains.

From this proud symbol of Britain's seaside you can enjoy sweeping views across the Essex Estuary, sample various amusements and send a postcard from the pier's own letterbox.

Why does Southend have the world's longest pleasure pier?



To begin let's think about where we are. Southend Pier is in Southend-on-Sea. The 'on-Sea' part is an important reminder of why piers were built. Today most of us enjoy them from dry land but they were originally for travelling on water. Piers developed for docking boats.

Landing at Southend is difficult though. If you are here at low tide, look for small boats stranded on sheets of mud. The water retreats a mile from the seafront. Even at high tide the sea is never deeper than six metres, so large boats can't dock near the beach.

If landing here was so much trouble, why go through the time and expense of building a huge pier?

It's no coincidence that many of Britain's seaside piers date from the early 19th century. At that time doctors recommended fresh sea air to treat many illnesses. Visiting the coast for health reasons became fashionable and soon working seaside towns attracted new visitors - holidaymakers.

In the days before railways and motor vehicles, most people travelled to their nearest seaside town. Southend is just 40 miles from central London, so it was ideally placed to capitalise from the capital. But as Thames holiday steamers couldn't dock here, they passed by for further places like Margate and Clacton. Southend lost out on visitors and their money.

The solution was to build a pier long enough to span Southend's tides. The first 180 metre (600 foot) section opened in 1830. This was soon extended then rebuilt in iron until the record-breaking Southend Pier we can see today opened in 1890.

It was an instant success. Visitors flocked to the town and by the 1940s Southend Pier welcomed over 4 million people annually.

Wading out towards the horizon, Southend Pier is not just an icon of today's coast. It's also a reminder of why and how Britain's seaside resorts developed.



The end of the pier?

Southend Pier is now a celebrated icon but it nearly didn't make it into the 21st century. The pier has survived major fires and collisions with ships. It's biggest threat though was changing tastes. After the Second World War, the rise of European package holidays meant the Pier's visitor numbers declined. It fell into disrepair and closed in 1980. It was saved from demolition when the Historic Buildings Committee funded restoration work. Southend Pier is one of the lucky ones. In the Victorian era over 100 pleasure piers lined Britain's coast but today only half of them remain.