Getting to Stansted Airport

London’s ‘third airport’ after Heathrow and Gatwick, Stansted is located in the countryside of Essex at Stansted Mountfitchet, some 48kms to the northwest of London. The airport is a somewhat uncomfortable neighbour for the surrounding sleepy Essex villages which maintain traditional ways of life.

Stansted’s role as a major hub for a plethora of low-cost airlines has made the third-busiest airport in the UK, with Ryanair its biggest user serving over 100 international destinations. As many as 13 other budget carriers are served here, including easyJet, Air Berlin, BMIbaby, Germanwings and even AirAsia, with a flight to Kuala Lumpur and Albanian Airlines running to Tirana.

In addition, Stansted Airport hosts seasonal charters to holiday destinations across Europe, the Mediterranean and North Africa via Thomas Cook Airlines, Thomson and several other travel companies. Frequent-flyer holidaymakers are almost certain to have used Stansted at least once.

Getting there

Provided there isn’t a big freeze, getting to Stansted Airport from London is fairly straightforward. By road, connections to northeast London and Cambridge are provided by the M11, which links with the M25 motorway around the capital and thence to the M1 northbound and other motorway links across England.

The airport’s own rail station is found beneath the complex, with regular Stansted Express services to London’s Liverpool Street Station, connecting with the Tube system for onward travel. Cross country services operate every hour to Cambridge, Leicester and the Midlands. Express bus services run from Stratford on the Central Tube line and from Victoria Coach Station in central London, taking between 45 and 75 minutes. Hourly services from Cambridge are run by National Express, with a scheduled but infrequent service from Oxford.

Climate

Stansted’s comparative proximity to the urban sprawl of northeast London and the coast moderates slightly the UK’s maritime climate, heavily influenced by the Gulf Stream. The airport is fairly low-lying, making it vulnerable to fog, particularly in the early morning, and its easterly position gives it a slight temperature advantage over the central areas of the southeast.

Essex is one of the driest counties in the UK, with summer daytime highs rarely topping 29˚C and little diurnal variation. Spring and autumn see highs of around 20 to 22˚C and the winter season sees averages of some 5 to 10˚C above freezing, although the traditionally unsettled English weather occasionally brings chilly surprises. One drawback here is that, if heavy snow occurs, the motorway is notorious for heavy drifts, with motorists being stuck for hours and occasionally overnight as there are few exit roads giving access to rescue vehicles.

Culture

For hundreds of years, Essex was isolated from the mainstream cultural developments of England’s major cities and urban areas due to few roads and a mostly agricultural lifestyle. Even nowadays, away from recently developed commercial centres such as Chelmsford, its villages tend to be sleepy and often
occupied mostly by commuters working in the capital. Agriculture is still a mainstay of its flat countryside, with its slowly eroding coastline home to isolated creeks, rivers and streams.

**Eating out**

Eateries at Stansted airport cater to every meal of the day, from breakfast through to late night supper. Whether you are looking for a sandwich on the go or you wish to dine in style at a full service restaurant, the airport has a venue to suit your eating needs. Healthy eating is provided at cafés and restaurants alongside family favourites such as steak and pizza. On-site pubs offer typical British pub fare along with alcoholic beverages. As is typical at airports the world over, prices are inflated.

Apart from major towns such as Chelmsford, Colchester, Brentwood and small conurbations closer to the London suburbs, eating out around Stansted Airport is best done in the large number of traditional pubs scattered around the villages. Pub grub varies from traditional roast dinners through an approximation of Italian food including pizzas right up to pub restaurants well-known locally for fine dining. Chinese and Indian takeaways and small local eateries can be found, as can the British favourite, the fish and chip shop. The usual selections of fast food outlets satisfy the need for food on the run.

**Sightseeing**

Taking the area around Stansted Airport as a starting point and radiating outwards, the avid sightseer can take in the magnificent and ancient city of London, the medieval university city of Cambridge, the mysterious English Channel coastline around Maldon, a historic town in its own right. A day’s drive around the county’s pretty villages is somewhat of a journey back in time, with village greens, duck ponds, Sunday cricket matches, the local pub and charming old churches. Surprisingly, there are over 14,000 listed buildings of historical interest in this neglected county.

**Attractions**

**Mountfitchet Castle**

The village of Stansted Mountfitchet is mentioned in the Domesday Book, with its castle a Norman stone mott and bailey fortification erected by the Duke of Bologne after the Norman conquest in 1066 and now listed as a historic monument. Excavations have proved the site to have been in use in the Iron Age as well as being a Roman, Saxon and Viking settlement. Reconstructed today as part of a theme park, it’s still well worth a visit.

**Stansted Mountfitchet Windmill**

Built in 1787, the Stansted Mountfitchet windmill’s giant white sails still turn when the wind blows in the right direction. Now staffed by volunteers, the mill was originally owned by Joseph Linsell and his wife, who also owned a malthouse. Over the next 100 years, the windmill was modified to take advantage of new technology such as the change to wooden slatted sails from canvas. Until the industrial revolution changed everything, the mill ground grain for the entire area and last worked crushing oats in 1910. It’s now enjoying a long and happy retirement as an ancient monument and a Grade II listed building.

**Excursions**

**Waltham Abbey Church**

Not so far from Stansted in the pretty town of Waltham Abbey is one of England’s most historic churches. Its recorded history dates to the time of King Canute, when a miraculous stone crucifix was donated to the church, rebuilt in 1050 just before the Battle of Hastings. Traditionally, the last Saxon king, Harold, killed during the battle, is buried here, beneath the high altar. The main church dates from 1120, with 14th century...
and later alterations, and has a unique atmosphere usually only found in the Christian world’s great cathedrals.

Maldon
The ancient, historic town of Maldon lies on the mysteriously wild area of the Essex coastline, criss-crossed by creeks, small rivers and beloved in former times by smugglers bringing in brandy and wine from France. Its history stretches back to Saxon times and it’s mentioned in the Domesday Book. Nowadays, it’s the centre for the magnificent Thames sailing barges, with some 15 of the surviving vessels using Maldon as their home port and the original boatyard on Maldon’s harbour quay still working.

Hedingham Castle
The stark sandstone keep of Hedingham Castle, built in 1140 by local nobleman Aubrey de Vere, is 100 feet high and is still owned by one of the builder’s direct descendents. Set in beautiful grounds, the castle contains four storeys, a superb banqueting hall spanned by an amazing 28 foot Norman arch, a minstrels’ gallery and 12 foot thick walls.

Waltham Abbey Royal Gunpowder Mills
Shrouded in secrecy for most of its working life and surrounded by rivers and woodland, the Royal Gunpowder Mills were opened 300 years ago and soon became the leading English manufacturer of the explosive. As gunpowder was gradually superseded by more modern ways of death, nature took over and hid the workings from view. Now opened up and restored, the site is a fascinating reminder of history as well as a protected wildlife sanctuary.

Cambridge
This ancient city of learning has to be a must for anyone touring the region. Founded in the 13th century by monks who found Oxford too distracting, the city has been in the forefront of world academia for hundreds of years. The focus here is on the splendid architecture of the various colleges, with the world-famous Kings’ College Chapel towering over the town. St John’s and Magdalene colleges also contain architectural gems.

Chelmers and Blackwater Canal
This artificial waterway winds through the countryside from Chelmsford to Maldon on the coast and incorporates part of the Blackwater River. Dug by hand between 1795 and 1797, it became a major transportation medium for goods going to and from the coast. Commercial traffic on the canal ended as late as 1972, and its waters are now a hub for leisure, including towpath walks and the colourfully decorated traditional narrow boats. The infrastructure of the locks, bridges and towpaths is slowly being upgraded by Essex Waterways.

Southend on Sea
Set on the vast estuary of the River Thames, the Essex seaside town was the traditional holiday spot for London’s Eastenders, the Cockneys born within the sound of the Bow Church bells. A seaside resort since the Georgian era, Southend became famous throughout the first half of the 20th century for its Kursaal funfair, its shellfish stalls, its pubs, its fish and chip shops and its pier, one of the longest in the world. After WWII, with the East End of London badly affected by German bombing, the original communities began to be moved out to new high-rise developments and Southend went into a steady decline. Nowadays, it’s on the rise again, with local council efforts to rejuvenate the town beginning to bear fruit.