

Bristol and the Clifton Suspension Bridge walk

Bristol's waterfront and historic centre, Clifton's grand houses and Suspension Bridge over the dramatic Avon Gorge.

Start and Finish Bristol Temple Meads

Length 7.0 miles (11.2 km). Allow 3 hours plus sightseeing.

Toughness 3 / 10. 500 feet (150 m) of ascent. All tarmac.

Map OS Explorer 155 (Bristol and Bath) or 154 (Bristol West), but Google Maps / Openstreetmap on your phone / a city map (in Visit Bristol tourist pamphlets) is better

Walk Notes This is a city walk through Bristol's historic centre to the wealthy hillside suburb of Clifton, which has a picturesque iconic suspension bridge across the dramatic River Aon gorge just off its village green.

Starting from the main station, pass St Mary Redcliffe Church (free), Queen Square (restored Georgian Square), the floating harbour (waterfront area), Spike Island (historic dockyard buildings, cranes and railway), M Shed (museum of Bristol life and history, free), The Matthew (museum ship replica, free), Arnolfini Gallery (free), Bordeaux Quay (bars and restaurants), Millennium Square, We Are Curious (kids science museum, pay), Bristol Cathedral (free), College Green, Brandon Hill (hillside park), Cabot Tower (free), Bristol Museum and Art Gallery (free), RWA (Royal West of England Academy, pay), Clifton's grand houses and crescents, Clifton Village (independent shops and cafes), Clifton Suspension Bridge (free) and visitor centre (museum, free), street murals, the old town, St Nicholas (covered) Market. St Peter's Church (ruin), Castle park (riverside park with ruins).

The highlight of the walk is the iconic suspension bridge over the river Avon Gorge. Lots of photo opportunities off the bridge and gorge! Just over it is the recommended visitor centre / museum.

Walk Options This is one of 2 Bristol walks, the other is around the harbour. You could combine them.

You could extend the walk (OS map or google maps required) north from Clifton, along the gorge rim to Clifton Downs.

You could spend time exploring the old town

Eat/Drink Too many to choose from.

Travel Trains from London Paddington to Bristol Temple Meads are 2 per hour, and take 1 hour 30 mins. £63 off peak.

Slower but cheaper trains from London Waterloo via Salisbury are hourly (a few direct, most change at Salisbury), and take 3 hours. £41 off-peak.

Consider Advance tickets. Beware of clashing with sports events (the Advance tickets will have sold out), especially on Saturdays. There are occasional special offers.

By Car

Bristol is in a Mon-Sat CPZ, so free parking outside the very centre on Sundays. Free parking anytime in the industrial area east of the station, or residential area (Totterdown) south of it (and the river), but on weekdays, commuters will have beaten you to it. Try Googling Bristol CPZ map. The SS Great Britain car park is good value at £5 for 5 hours (max).

Clifton is in a weekday CPZ. There are no car parks, pay and display street parking is 5 hours max, but over the suspension bridge is outside the CPZ

Walks

- [Bristol via the harbour and old town to Clifton Suspension Bridge](#) 7 miles (11km) with 150m ascent
- [Short walk around Bristol Harbour](#) 5 miles (8 km), flat

History **Bristol**

Bristol is situated inland, up the Avon river from the Bristol Channel, and protected by the narrow Avon gorge. It has a fascinating history.

It had a major Norman Castle in the middle ages (at what is now Castle Green). From the 13th to the 18th centuries, it was a major port, among the 3 largest towns (along with York and Norwich) outside London. In 1497, John Cabot's voyage of exploration accidentally (re)discovered America which searching for a shortcut to Asia. In the 1700's, it took part in the triangular slave trade (manufactured good to Africa, slaves to America, tobacco and cotton to Europe).

The Severn Estuary (which Bristol's river flows in to) has an enormous tidal range - 8m - the second highest in the world. To get around this, and stop ships becoming grounded on mud twice a day at low tide, the river was dammed, with large lock gates, creating a "floating harbour". However, expensive port charges to pay for it, caused trade to move to competing ports like Liverpool.

In 1838, [Brunel](#) designed the successful SS Great Western paddle steamer, which was built in Bristol. It was the first regular transatlantic steam (i.e. not sail powered) ship.

The Great Western and even larger Great Britain (see below) marked end of an era, both for the age of sail, and for Bristol as a port. The port wasn't deep enough or wide enough for the new larger iron ships, and new docks were built downstream on the Severn Estuary itself. In the 19thC Bristol declined relative to the industrial northern towns.

Bristol suffered badly during WW2 bombing - much of the old town was lost.

Things are now looking up, Queen's Square has been restored, pedestrianised areas created, and new hi tech industries have moved in to the town. Today, the floating harbour is used for leisure - the warehouses, docks and wharfs have become apartments, art galleries, cafes and museums.

SS Great Britain

In 1847, a few years later after the SS Great Western, Brunel built the revolutionary SS Great Britain, easily the world's largest ship at the time. It was the first modern large iron hulled, propeller driven vessel. It was too revolutionary for its owners. The ship's new hull and engines were costly to build. The harbour gates had to be modified to allow it to even leave port. The new technology had several flaws which made it unsuitable for transatlantic passenger service. The propellers broke in use, and the the large size caused the ship to roll, even in calm weather. It eventually ran aground during its third season after a navigational error, bankrupting the company that built it. It was eventually re-floated, sold, refitted, and was used in Australia, before eventually being converted to a coal carrier, and ended up as a floating coal bunker in the Falklands. It is now a museum ship in Bristol's harbour.

Brunel later built the Great Eastern (in London), 5 times bigger than any ship then afloat. It too was not a commercial success for its builders. Although neither ship was a success, they were prototypes for the move from the age of wooden sailing ships to the modern large engine powered, screw propeller driven, double iron hulled ships. Besides ships, he is famous for bridges, tunnels, railways and harbours.

Clifton

Clifton is a wealthy hillside suburb with many grand houses, Bristol University housing, crescents (long curved terraces of grand houses) with harbour views, a suspension bridge over a dramatic gorge, and a shopping district with independent shops and cafes.

Clifton Suspension Bridge

The suspension bridge ([wikipedia](#)) is Bristol's iconic landmark, and crosses the 75m high River Avon gorge. It's a remarkable location, just off Clifton's village green is a very steep gorge with the iconic bridge.

Besides the dramatic location, the bridge has an interesting history. In the age of sail, a Bristol merchant left money in his will for a free bridge across the river. The Admiralty had stipulated that a bridge had to be 30m high so (sail powered) warships could enter the port. This meant the narrowest part of the gorge, with 75m high cliffs, was the only suitable location. It would have been the longest bridge span in the world at the time.

Some 75 years later, in 1829, still in the age of sail, a competition was held to design the bridge, and parliament was asked to alter the will to allow a toll bridge to recoup the cost of construction. Thomas Telford, who designed the Menai Straits bridge, was asked to judge a competition to design the bridge. There wasn't a winner. Telford himself produced a design but it was too expensive, so a second competition was held which Brunel won. Construction started, but stopped after the [1831 Bristol riots](#) sapped confidence in the scheme. Eventually the act of Parliament expired, and the steel for the cables was sold off.

Thirty years later, after Brunel's death, the Institute of Civil Engineers decided to complete the scheme as a memorial. Brunel's design was modernised, and the bridge opened in 1864. However, by the time the bridge opened, Bristol's time as a major port was almost over. New steam powered iron ships were larger, and couldn't navigate the tidal river to the inland port. New docks were built on the Severn Estuary at the mouth of the river. Ironically, it was the SS Great Britain, built in Bristol, which started the coal powered steamship era, crossing the Atlantic in 1838, which led to the demise of Bristol as a port. By the time the bridge opened, it was something of a white elephant.

Today, the bridge charges a £1 toll for cars, or you can walk over for free. Nowadays as there is no need for tall ship clearances, motorways and rail lines cross the Avon in the town centre.

Tourism

The smaller free attractions are weekend only from December to March. Most "free" attractions suggest donations. .

St Mary Redcliffe Church

[St Mary Redcliffe](#) is a grade I listed 15thC church, free entry.

Queen Square

[Queen Square](#) is a Regency Square, now a public park, named for Queen Anne. The wealthy soon moved away from the docks up the hill to Clifton, and it went into decline after the 1831 Bristol Riots (neo Corbynistas got massacred by the Dragoons, but enough of them, as their Lieutenant-Colonel was court martialled for leniency), and more recently by being part of Bristol's ring road. Now restored as a pedestrian park.

Arnolfini

Waterfront art gallery with cafe

Bristol Dockyards / The Floating Harbour

The River Avon's natural 8m tidal range is controlled by lock gates, so its always 'high tide'. The working docks are long gone, and the riverfront is now used for leisure. There are many historic buildings, a dockyard railways, dock cranes, attractions including M Shed museum and The Matthew and SS Great Britain museum ships, and Underfall Yard. [Wikipedia](#)

Spike Island

When the floating harbour was created, a bypass channel had to be created (the tidal New Cut), this created Spike Island. You can cross the New Cut on the pedestrian Gaol Ferry bridge.

M Shed

[Bristol \(Social\) History](#). Free. Covers a bit too much, a bit too simply. Nice cafe, trains, rooftop terrace viewpoint, heritage cranes.

The Matthew

[Museum ship](#), free, weekends only Dec-Mar, a replica of the ship John Cabot used to (re)discover the Americas/ [Wikipedia](#)

Bristol Harbour Railway

The former docks railway ([blog](#)). Short [steam trips](#) some weekends

Even if you don't ride, there are tracks and wagons for selfies

SS Great Britain and Being Brunel harbour walk only

[Restored museum ship](#) of Brunel's revolutionary but unsuccessful ship , and [the Being Brunel museum](#). £17 / £9.40 child. ([wikipedia](#))

Underfall Yard harbour walk only

The pumps that managed the sluice gates that regulated the river height. Boatyard with a visitor centre. Long (10m) aerial photo table of the docks area. Cafe with terrace overlooking the harbour. Recommended. [website](#), [Wikipedia](#)

Millennium Square

One of a number of linked pedestrian squares, has a large outside screen and a large reflective silver ball (part of We Are Curious museum)

We The Curious

[Kids science museum](#) with a planetarium (£4 extra). £15 adults. £10 kids.

Bristol Cathedral and College Green

Free entry.

Georgian House Museum Clifton walk only

18thC [historic town house museum](#), free entry. Open Sat-Tue, Apr-Dec. On Gt George Street, north of the Cathedral. BS1 5RR.

Brandon Hill and Cabot Tower Clifton walk only

A hillside park with harbour views, and an 1890's Tower (free entry) that commemorates the 400th anniversary of the explorer's (re)discovery of the Americas. Its viewing gallery is 334 feet (102 m) above sea level.

Bristol Museum and Art Gallery Clifton walk only

"[Art, nature and history.](#)" (just not Bristol's). Free entry. Pretty building. There's the University Wetherspoons opposite.

Royal Fort Gardens Clifton walk only

Pretty gardens, part of the University, but usually open to the public, with some interesting sculptures. No website.

RWA - Royal West of England Academy Clifton walk only

[Art gallery](#) with changing exhibitions.

Clifton Clifton walk only

A suburb of large grand houses built for merchants during Bristol's golden era, and crescents of terraced houses overlooking the harbour.

Today there's Bristol University buildings, and a village of independent shops and cafes leading to the green and the suspension bridge.

Suspension Bridge Clifton walk only

See above. Iconic and picturesque bridge over a dramatic steep gorge. Across the bridge is a small visitor centre that tells the story of its building is recommended. Also recommended is the vantage point above the road on the Clifton side. Free to cross for walkers, £1 for cars.

Downs Clifton walk only

Just by the Observatory (a cafe and pay tunnel to a cave overlooking the gorge) there is a nice outlook over the gorge and bridge.

You could follow the ridge to the Downs proper.

Red Lodge Museum Clifton walk only

[Historic house museum](#) with an "Elizabethan Knot" Garden, free entry. Open Sat-Tue, Apr-Dec. Near the Bristol Art Gallery. BS1 5LJ.

Old Town

On a "peninsular" between the river and Bordeaux Quay, north of Queen Square is what's left after WW2 bombing of the old town.

Highlights include the St Nicholas market. Best just to wonder around.

Nelson Street Murals

Look up for murals on drab 1960's concrete buildings, from a 2011 street art festival

Castle Park

The site of the 11thC [Bristol Castle](#) (demolished 1656), and the former old town which was destroyed in WW2 bombing, it is now a riverside park, with remains (walls, no roof) of 2 churches, St Mary-le-Port and St Peters.

Knights Templar Church

Temple Church is a ruined Knights Templar church (WW2 bombing) with a leaning tower. Walls and tower, but no roof. Free.

Street Murals


[Banksy is a street artist from Bristol](#) - think murals - and there are many other local graffiti artists as well.

There are many Banksy's around the city ([map](#)), as well as murals by others ([map of 180+ murals](#)). A good place to start is Stokes Croft, a suburb north of Castle Park. Further out is Easton.

See [Visit Bristol - Street Art](#) for festivals, guided tour, and a self guided via app Banksy tour

Help Us!

After the walk, we would love to get your [feedback](#)

You can upload photos to the [SWC Group on Flickr](#) ([upload your photos](#)) and [videos to](#)  [Youtube](#). This walk's tags are:



Help National Rail: 03457 48 49 50 • Travelline (bus times): 0871 200 22 33 (12p/min) • TFL (London) : 0343 222 1234

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Walk Directions

The station to the bridge via the waterfront and Cabot Tower

1. Exit Bristol Temple Meads by the main exit, down the roadway
2. Cross the road, turn left (past the Holiday Inn), and left along Redcliffe Way.
3. Pass the large St Mary Redcliffe church (free). Continue straight on at the roundabout.
4. Cross the river into the Hole in the Wall pub
5. Continue ahead down a pedestrian path to Queen Square. Walk along its south side.
6. Detour left (Prince Street) and cross the bridge to the harbour and Spike Island, and turn right along the waterfront to M Shed (large museum free), disused cranes, the Dockyard Railway, The Matthew (replica museum ship, free). Return to this point.
7. Continue ahead to a quay with many bars and cafes.
8. Turn left to the waterfront for the Arnolfini gallery (free)
9. Cross the pedestrian bridge, and continue ahead into Millennium Square, with We Are Curious museum (kids science museum, free), a large glitter ball, and a big screen TV.
10. Turn right at the start of the square, uphill, crossing a road, then up again (Trinity Street) for College Green and the Cathedral.
11. Continue, and veer left for Brandon Hill and Cabot Tower (free)
12. Exit on the right hand side of the green, and go left, uphill, along College Road which becomes Park Road
13. Look right by the bridge (over Frog Lane / Frogmore Street), there's a Banksy mural, "Well Hung Lover"
14. Turn left on Gt George Street. Pass the Georgian House museum (free).
15. Enter Brandon Park, head for, and climb the tower.

16. From the tower entrance (at the back of the tower), go right, then second left to come out on Upper Byron Road. Cross diagonally Berkeley Square, and come out by the Bristol Museum and Art Gallery (free), with a tower next to it (part of Bristol University).
17. Go up University Street (next to the museum), the left at the end on Woodland Road, for Royal Fort Gardens. Afterwards, retrace your steps.
18. Head left, up Queens Road to the RWA building (Royal West of England Academy).
19. Just before it go left on Richmond Hill, a residential road
20. Go left (now back on Queens Road)
21. Veer right, now on Clifton Road, and diagonally cross Victoria Square.
22. Go down an ally, passing shops and the Clifton Arcade
23. Come a shopping street. Go left, and immediately right onto Princess Victoria Street (more shops)
24. Go right on The Mall (more shops)
25. Come out on to a green
26. Turn left, and in 100m, cross the suspension bridge to its visitor centre.

From the bridge to the station via the old town and Castle park

1. Cross back over the bridge, and climb up to the viewpoint by the observatory for photos.
2. For a longer walk, head north, along the rim, to the Downs
3. Alternate route back to town. Longer, but with river and harbour views via a crescent. By the bridge go downhill on Sion Hill. Where a road veers off to your right, there is a path down to the river. Follow it (out and back) to **The Lookout Lectern, a bridge viewpoint. Continue downhill on Sion Hill. Turn left on Royal York Crescent with harbour views. At the end turn left, uphill on Regent Street, then right on Boyce's Avenue (the alley), then continue as below.**
4. **Retrace your steps to the Bristol Museum. That's down The Mall, left on Princess Victoria Street. Cross the road and down the Boyce's Avenue (the alley). Diagonally across the square. Right on Clifton Road / Queens Road. Right on Richmond Hill. Down Queens Road to the museum.**
5. **Continue past the museum to the junction**
6. **Veer left for the Red Lodge Museum (free)**
7. **Veer right, downhill, along College Green.**
8. **At the bottom, turn left, away from the river.**
9. **Go right on Baldwin Street. This is what's left of the old town. Left, uphill on Marsh Street. St Stephan's Church is to your left. Continue on Clare Street,**

then Corn Street. At the bend, continue ahead (still Corn Street).

10. **Go left on Broad Street for the Everards Printworks (tiled exterior). At the end go right on Nelson Street. Look up for murals from the 2011 See No Evil street art festival.**
11. **Go right (Broad St, then High St), passing St Nicholas Market (covered market, food stalls, independent traders).**
12. **Follow the river through Castle Park, passing the remains of St Peter's Church and an S shaped bridge**
13. **Keep following the river until you have to cross St Phillips bridge onto the opposite bank.**
14. **Continue following the river**
15. **Head inland by the next big bridge, inland, right on Temple Back, left on Temple Rose, to Temple Gardens for the ruined Knights Templar church.**
16. **Follow the river, passing another S shaped bridge.**
17. **Across the square is the Knights Templar pub, a Wetherspoons.**
18. **Continue ahead for the station.**

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