



The Pilgrims' Way

THE COMPLETE GUIDE



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Overview

The Pilgrims' Way: Winchester to Canterbury on Foot

The Pilgrims' Way is a 214 km point-to-point walk across southern **England**, from Winchester Cathedral in Hampshire to Canterbury Cathedral in Kent. Allow 15 days on the standard stage breakdown, or less if you are a fast, experienced walker. The walking is moderate: rolling chalk downland, woodland, farmland, lanes and village sections rather than high mountains. It suits hikers who want a historic pilgrimage line but are comfortable navigating a route that is not waymarked as one continuous National Trail.

Route Overview

Start at Winchester Cathedral and the shrine of St Swithun, then head east through New Alresford, Chawton, Alton and Farnham on St Swithun's Way. From Farnham the route broadly follows the North Downs Way National Trail via Guildford, Box Hill and the Mole Gap, Reigate Hill, Otford, Wrotham, the Medway crossing near Cuxton/Aylesford, the Kent Downs, Wye, Chilham and Canterbury. It is a linear west-to-east walk, so plan separate transport back from Canterbury. For a different UK objective, compare the hillier **Beacons Way** or coastal routes such as the **Anglesey Coastal Path** and **Arran Coastal Way**.

A Pilgrimage Route with Prehistoric Roots

The Pilgrims' Way follows an ancient corridor along the North Downs, associated with prehistoric trackways and later medieval pilgrimage. Its fame grew after Thomas Becket was murdered in Canterbury Cathedral in 1170 and canonised in 1173, making his shrine a major pilgrimage destination until its destruction under Henry VIII in 1538. The idea of one neat continuous "Pilgrims' Way" is partly modern: Hilaire Belloc helped romanticise it in *The Old Road*, and Chaucer's pilgrims travelled from London, not Winchester.

Notable highlights

- **Winchester Cathedral and the Hospital of St Cross:** The traditional start, linked with the shrine of St Swithun. Nearby, the medieval Hospital of St Cross is associated with the Wayfarer's Dole of bread and ale.
- **St Martha's-on-the-Hill:** A hilltop church above Guildford, reached only on foot and standing on the old Pilgrims' Way. It gives a clear sense of the route's position above the Surrey Hills and Weald.
- **Watts Chapel, Compton:** A distinctive terracotta mortuary chapel near Guildford, designed by Mary Seton Watts and built by the local community in 1896–98. It is a worthwhile short detour near St Martha's Hill.
- **Box Hill and the Mole Gap:** The route crosses the River Mole below Box Hill, where the chalk ridge is cut by the valley. Expect one of the more memorable Surrey Hills sections.
- **Kit's Coty House:** A Neolithic chambered long barrow near Aylesford, marked by large sarsen stones and a capstone. It is one of the strongest reminders that this corridor long predates medieval pilgrimage.

- **Canterbury Cathedral:** The finish and the historic destination of Becket pilgrims. The cathedral is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and the mother church of the Church of England.

Challenges to expect

The main challenge is not altitude but continuity and navigation. The Pilgrims' Way is not signed as one single trail: use St Swithun's Way waymarks, North Downs Way acorns, OS maps and a guidebook. Expect muddy chalk and clay in winter, some lane walking, and short steeper climbs where river valleys cut the downs, including the Mole, Darent, Medway and Stour gaps. Book accommodation ahead in smaller villages.

Key Data

Country	United Kingdom, England
Distance	214 km
Duration	15 days
Difficulty	Moderate
Trail type	Point to point
Elevation gain/loss	3658 m
Highest point	240 m
Terrain & landscape	Forest, Hills, Farmland
Trail surface	Dirt, Gravel, Paved
Accommodation	Hotels, Guesthouses, Hostels, Campsites
Average daytime temp.	16°C
Chance of rainfall	Medium
Estimated cost	\$\$
Optimal season	Spring, Summer, Autumn
Accessibility	Family Friendly, Pet Friendly
Facilities	Restrooms, Water Sources, Campsites
Permits & fees	No permits or fees

Introduction

The Pilgrims' Way is a long, historic line across southern England, running west to east from Winchester to Canterbury through Hampshire, Surrey and Kent. It suits walkers who want churches, chalk downs, old trackways and frequent villages rather than wilderness or high mountains.

From Winchester Cathedral or the Hospital of St Cross, the route climbs out past St Catherine's Hill and follows St Swithun's Way towards Farnham. Beyond there it shares much of its corridor with the North Downs Way, but it is not simply the same trail: the older Pilgrims' Way often keeps lower on the spring line while the modern National Trail favours the chalk crest.

The walk is rich in stops that make sense of its history: St Martha's-on-the-Hill above Guildford, Box Hill and the Mole Gap, Otford in the Darent valley, Kit's Coty House near Aylesford, Chilham in the Stour valley and Harbledown before the final approach to Canterbury Cathedral. Later stages add Kent orchards, hop gardens and vineyards to the downland and village walking.

The challenge is not technical difficulty or altitude, but continuity. Because this is not waymarked end to end as one trail, you need to be comfortable linking St Swithun's Way, North Downs Way acorns, OS mapping, guidebook notes and occasional connecting paths, with muddy chalk and clay after rain.

This guide covers stages, daily planning, accommodation, food, transport, terrain and the common mistakes to avoid.

Stage-by-Stage Guide

The stage notes below follow the standard 15-stage Winchester-to-Canterbury breakdown. Distances are approximate: because the Pilgrims' Way is a historic line rather than one continuously waymarked trail, the exact mileage will vary with the guidebook, GPX, accommodation detours and whether you follow spring-line variants or North Downs Way sections.

Stage 1: Winchester to New Alresford — 14 km

This is a gentle but meaningful opening stage, leaving Winchester from the traditional cathedral area or the Hospital of St Cross before climbing out of the Itchen valley. St Catherine's Hill is the main early landmark: a short, steep chalk hill with an Iron Age fort, buried Norman chapel remains and a fine view back towards Winchester.

Underfoot, expect river-valley paths and chalk downland tracks, with the usual risk of slippery chalk after rain. This first part is followed using St Swithun's Way waymarks rather than Pilgrims' Way signs, so check the exit from Winchester carefully and do not rely on the route being branded consistently.

Winchester is the place to start fully supplied, with food, water and accommodation available in the city. New Alresford is a proper overnight stop, but accommodation should still be booked ahead, especially if walking in summer or at weekends.

Winchester has rail access, making this an easy stage for section walkers. Public transport onward from New Alresford should be checked before travelling, particularly if planning to return to Winchester the same day.

Stage 2: New Alresford to Alton — 19 km

This stage continues east through the Hampshire countryside on the St Swithun's Way corridor. It is a longer day than Stage 1 but still moderate, with rolling country rather than any sustained hill climb.

The notable cultural detour is Chawton, close to the route between New Alresford and Alton, where Jane Austen lived and wrote. If visiting Jane Austen's House, allow extra time and do not underestimate how quickly detours add distance on a multi-day walk.

Expect a mix of field paths, farm tracks, lanes and village approaches. In wet weather, chalk and clay sections can become greasy, and lane verges may be awkward where traffic is present; take care on minor-road sections and use high-visibility clothing in poor light.

Food and water are more reliable at the stage ends than between them. Carry lunch unless opening hours and village services have been checked before travelling.

Alton is a practical overnight stop and has rail access. It is one of the stronger logistical points in the Hampshire section, useful for ending a weekend section or joining the route without starting in Winchester.

Stage 3: Alton to Farnham — 18 km

This is the final stage of the St Swithun's Way section before the route reaches Farnham and the North Downs Way corridor. The walking is still low-level by hillwalking standards, but the day is long enough to feel like a full stage when carrying overnight kit.

The route passes near Chawton if not visited the previous day, then continues east through Hampshire towards Bentley and Farnham. Expect mixed rural walking: tracks, field edges, wooded sections and some lane or village walking.

Navigation matters here because Farnham is the transition point between the Winchester approach and the better-waymarked North Downs Way corridor. Keep OS mapping or a guidebook handy so that the correct line into Farnham is followed, rather than simply drifting onto local paths.

Food and water should be topped up in Alton before setting out. Bentley and the smaller settlements may have limited or changeable services, so do not rely on them without checking opening times.

Farnham is a strong resupply and overnight stop, with rail access. It is also an obvious place to start the eastern half for walkers who want to use the North Downs Way waymarking towards Canterbury.

Stage 4: Farnham to Guildford (St Catherine's) — 17 km

From Farnham, the route begins to follow the North Downs Way corridor more closely, with National Trail acorn waymarks becoming useful. This is still not the same as saying the historic Pilgrims' Way and the North Downs Way are identical: the Pilgrims' Way line often favours the spring line below the downs, while the modern trail may take the crest.

The stage runs through the Surrey Hills via Puttenham and Compton, with St Martha's-on-the-Hill forming the key high-level landmark before the descent towards Guildford. The hilltop church is reached only on foot and gives one of the most memorable early Surrey views across the downs and the Weald.

Near Compton, Watts Chapel is a worthwhile short detour if time and energy allow. Build this into the day rather than treating it as incidental, especially if accommodation or onward trains are time-sensitive.

Terrain is a mixture of sandy tracks, chalk paths, woodland, downland and village lanes. After rain, expect mud in wooded and clay sections, with chalky descents becoming polished and slippery.

Farnham and Guildford are both useful food, accommodation and rail hubs. Between them, services are more scattered, so carry enough water and food for the whole day unless current village options have been checked.

Stage 5: Guildford to Westhumble (Box Hill) — 22 km

This is one of the longest standard stages and should be treated as a full walking day. It links Guildford with the Mole Gap and Box Hill area, using the Surrey Hills as the main thread.

The walking includes downland, woodland, tracks and village approaches, with the route building towards Box Hill and the River Mole. The Mole Gap is one of the defining physical breaks in the North Downs: the river cuts through the chalk ridge, creating a more dramatic end to the stage than the modest altitude suggests.

Box Hill is the main highlight, with open chalk slopes, woodland and broad views over the surrounding Surrey countryside. The stepping-stones across the River Mole are a known feature of the area, but conditions and practical access should be checked before relying on them as part of a walking line.

Food and water should be planned carefully because the stage is long. Guildford is the best place to start supplied; any intermediate pub, café or shop arrangements should be checked before travelling.

Westhumble and the Box Hill area are close to Dorking, which has rail access and a wider range of services nearby. Accommodation in or near the end of the stage should be booked ahead, as this is a popular walking area.

Navigation is generally helped by North Downs Way waymarks, but this is also a place where many local paths, visitor routes and popular circuits intersect. Keep checking the onward eastbound line, especially around Box Hill and the Mole Gap.

Stage 6: Westhumble (Box Hill) to Merstham — 16 km

This stage continues east along the Surrey chalk scarp, moving from the Box Hill area towards Reigate Hill and Merstham. It is shorter than the previous day but includes enough ascent and descent to feel more demanding than the distance suggests.

Reigate Hill and the open chalk scarp provide the main views, with long southward prospects over the Weald in clear weather. The route is typical North Downs walking: woodland, chalk tracks, grassland, short climbs and descents where the land is cut by valleys.

After rain, chalk paths can be slippery and woodland sections muddy. Walking poles can be useful on greasy descents, particularly if carrying a multi-day pack.

Start with food and water from the Box Hill/Dorking area or from wherever the previous night is based. Merstham has rail access and is a practical end point, but check accommodation availability early, as many walkers may choose to stay slightly off-route where beds are easier to find.

Navigation remains based on the North Downs Way corridor, with the usual caveat that the historic Pilgrims' Way and the crest route are not always the same. Follow the chosen guide or GPX consistently rather than switching between variants mid-stage.

Stage 7: Merstham to Oxted — 13 km

This is a shorter Surrey stage and can work well as a lighter day after the longer Box Hill and Reigate sections. It continues through rolling downland country, with woodland and field paths broken by village or lane sections.

The walking is moderate rather than strenuous, but the same surface issues apply: chalk is slick after rain, clay holds mud, and shaded woodland can stay wet long after open ground has dried. In winter or after prolonged rain, gaiters are useful.

Food and water are best organised at Merstham before setting out. Oxted is near the route and has rail access, making the stage useful for section walkers and for anyone needing a shorter day.

Accommodation may be easier in or near Oxted than in smaller settlements along the line, but availability should be checked before travelling. If staying off-route, account for the extra distance at

both the end of this stage and the start of the next.

Navigation is generally straightforward if staying with the National Trail corridor, but there are enough local paths and road crossings to make map-checking necessary. Do not assume every waymarked track in this area is the onward Pilgrims' Way line.

Stage 8: Oxted to Otford — 19 km

This stage carries the walk towards Kent and the Darent valley. It is a longer day again, with the feel of a cross-country link between rail-accessible settlements rather than a remote upland traverse.

The terrain remains a mix of chalk downland, woodland, farm tracks and lanes. Expect short climbs and descents where the downs are cut by valleys, and take care on wet chalk or muddy clay.

Otford is the key place at the end of the day, a historic Kentish village in the Darent valley with the ruins of an Archbishop's Palace. The River Darent crossing marks one of the important valley gaps on the route.

Food and water should be planned before leaving Oxted. Services between Oxted and Otford are not something to rely on without checking current opening times, so carry enough for the whole stage.

Both Oxted and Otford have rail access, making this one of the more convenient stages for public-transport-based walking. Accommodation in Otford or nearby should be booked ahead, with alternatives checked if local beds are full.

Navigation around valley approaches and village edges can be more fiddly than the open downland sections. Keep an eye on the chosen line into Otford and through the Darent valley rather than simply following the most obvious path.

Stage 9: Otford to Wrotham — 9 km

This is the shortest standard stage and can be used as a rest-leaning day, a late-start day, or a way to manage accommodation spacing. It continues east from Otford through the Kent Downs corridor towards Kemsing and Wrotham.

The walking is modest in distance but still includes the typical pattern of downland tracks, field paths, lanes and village edges. The area sits close to the scarp and spring-line country, so route variants and local paths can make navigation more intricate than the mileage implies.

Otford is the best place to begin supplied. Kemsing has rail access nearby, and Wrotham is the overnight target for this stage, but food, pub and shop availability should be checked before travelling.

Accommodation around Wrotham should be arranged in advance. If staying away from the line, check how to rejoin the route the following morning without adding an awkward road walk.

Because the stage is short, it is tempting to combine it with the next one. That can work for fit walkers, but only if accommodation, daylight and onward transport are already planned.

Stage 10: Wrotham to Halling — 12 km

This stage heads from Wrotham towards the Medway corridor, passing through or near Trottscliffe before finishing at Halling. It is a relatively short day, but it leads into one of the important river-gap

sections of the route.

The terrain is a mix of rural tracks, field paths, lanes and downland edge walking. In wet conditions, expect mud in lower and wooded sections and slippery chalk where the route rises or falls from the downs.

The Medway is the major geographical feature ahead, with Cuxton and Rochester lying in the wider river area. Cuxton has rail access nearby, which can be useful if using public transport rather than overnighing exactly at Halling.

Food and water should not be left to chance between Wrotham and Halling. Carry enough for the day unless current options in villages on or near the route have been checked.

Accommodation at the end of the stage may involve staying in Halling, Cuxton or another nearby settlement. This should be checked before travelling, as smaller places on the Pilgrims' Way do not always have convenient beds exactly on the walking line.

Navigation around the Medway approaches deserves attention. Roads, settlements, river crossings and local paths can make the route feel less continuous than the open downs, so follow the chosen map or GPX carefully.

Stage 11: Halling to Aylesford — 8 km

This is another short stage, crossing the Medway corridor towards Aylesford. The low mileage makes it useful for managing accommodation, but it should not be treated as a navigation-free stroll.

The walking is more valley-and-settlement influenced than the higher chalk stages. Expect lanes, village approaches and connecting paths as well as rural tracks, with the River Medway shaping the day.

Aylesford is the key overnight stop and has rail access. It is also the springboard for the next stage towards Kit's Coty House and the Kent Downs beyond.

Food and water are easiest to organise at the start and finish rather than assuming much en route. If combining this with Stage 10 or Stage 12, plan resupply and daylight carefully because the combined day changes character from a short link to a proper long-distance stage.

Accommodation in Aylesford or nearby should be booked ahead. If local options are limited, use the rail access to widen the search, but build the extra transfer into the next morning's walking plan.

Stage 12: Aylesford to Harrietsham — 18 km

This is one of the most historically rewarding Kent stages. Soon after Aylesford, Kit's Coty House lies off the Pilgrims' Way itself: a Neolithic chambered long barrow of large sarsen stones and one of the Medway Megaliths.

The route then continues east through the Kent Downs corridor towards Detling, Hollingbourne and Harrietsham. The landscape begins to show more of the Kent character that defines the later route, with farmland, orchards, hop gardens and vineyards appearing in the broader countryside.

Terrain includes tracks, lanes, field paths and downland sections. The walking is not technical, but the 18 km distance and the stop-start nature of historic and village sections can make the day slower than expected.

Carry food and water from Aylesford unless specific stops have been checked. Detling, Hollingbourne and Harrietsham are useful names for planning, with Bearsted or Hollingbourne near the route for rail access and Harrietsham also on the rail-access list.

Accommodation at Harrietsham or nearby should be arranged in advance. If staying in Hollingbourne or another nearby village instead, make sure the stage distances on either side still work.

Navigation can be fiddly where the historic spring-line route, village roads and North Downs Way-style crest options diverge. Follow one planned route consistently, especially around detours to Kit's Coty House and through the villages east of Aylesford.

Stage 13: Harrietsham to Boughton Lees — 18 km

This stage continues through the Kent Downs towards Lenham, Charing and Boughton Lees. It is a full-length day with a strongly rural feel, moving through the mixture of farmland, village edges, orchards, hop gardens and downland that characterises the eastern half of the route.

Lenham and Charing are the main planning points and both have rail access. They also provide useful options for shortening, joining or leaving the stage if the full Harrietsham-to-Boughton Lees day does not fit accommodation plans.

Underfoot, expect field paths, tracks, minor lanes and chalk or clay sections that become muddy after rain. The route is low in altitude but rolling, and the repeated small rises, descents and village transitions can add up over the day.

Food and water should be managed deliberately. Harrietsham is the place to start supplied, while any reliance on Lenham, Charing or smaller village services should be checked before travelling.

Boughton Lees is the stage end, but accommodation may not be as straightforward as in larger towns. Book ahead and be prepared to use nearby settlements if necessary; this should be checked before travelling.

Navigation through this part of Kent requires attention because the ancient pilgrimage line, modern rights of way and North Downs Way-related options do not always feel like one continuous trail. Keep OS mapping or a guidebook available rather than relying only on waymarks.

Stage 14: Boughton Lees to Chilham — 10 km

This is a shorter stage through the eastern Kent countryside, passing via or near Wye before reaching the Stour valley at Chilham. The shorter distance leaves time to enjoy the villages, but it also means accommodation and transport spacing may determine how the day is used.

The Stour is the key river system in this final part of the walk, with Wye and Chilham both associated with the valley. Expect a mix of lanes, tracks, field paths and valley approaches rather than continuous high-level ridge walking.

Chilham is one of the most attractive overnight stops on the route, known for its timber-framed houses around the square, castle and church. It is also close enough to Canterbury for the final day to feel like a closing approach rather than a major endurance stage.

Wye and Chilham both have rail access, giving this stage strong public-transport options. Food and water should still be carried unless specific cafés, pubs or shops have been checked before travelling.

Accommodation in Chilham should be booked in advance, particularly in popular walking seasons. If staying elsewhere, check the rail or road transfer carefully so the final stage to Canterbury starts cleanly.

Navigation is generally less physically demanding than on longer days, but the route still needs active checking through villages and valley paths. Do not assume every signposted path towards Canterbury is the specific Pilgrims' Way line being followed.

Stage 15: Chilham to Canterbury — 11 km

The final stage follows the Stour valley and the historic approach to Canterbury, entering the city from the west through Harbledown. This is a short day, but it carries the main symbolic finish of the route.

Harbledown is the last village before Canterbury and is associated with the traditional first sight of the cathedral. St Nicholas Hospital is the key medieval landmark here, before the route continues into the city.

The terrain is low-level and settled compared with the open chalk scarp stages: expect paths, lanes, village edges and the urban approach into Canterbury. After rain, muddy sections can still slow progress, but the main challenge is staying on the intended line through the increasingly built-up final miles.

Carry water from Chilham, and check food options if planning a leisurely finish rather than going straight into Canterbury. Canterbury has extensive services, accommodation and two railway stations, Canterbury West and Canterbury East, with frequent trains to London.

The historic destination is Canterbury Cathedral, the shrine city of St Thomas Becket and the natural end point for the walk. Cathedral access, visiting hours and any ticketing arrangements should be checked before travelling, especially if the finish day has been planned around entering the cathedral grounds.

Navigation into Canterbury needs more care than the distance suggests. Urban paths, roads and local signs can distract from the pilgrimage line, so keep the final approach via Harbledown clear on the map and plan the onward journey home as a separate one-way transport leg.

Recommended Itinerary

The most straightforward way to plan The Pilgrims' Way is the standard 15-day Winchester-to-Canterbury schedule. It keeps most days moderate, uses recognised stage towns, and takes advantage of the route's unusually good rail access for joining, leaving or section-walking.

Distances below are approximate trail-stage figures, not door-to-door distances from accommodation. If staying off-route, add the approach distance and check official mapping before booking.

Standard 15-day itinerary

Day	From	To	Approx. distance	Why this stage makes sense	Services/accommodation notes
1	Winchester	New Alresford	14 km	A manageable first day from the traditional Winchester start, leaving the Itchen valley and settling into the Hampshire countryside without overloading the opening stage.	Winchester has rail access and a wide choice of places to stay. New Alresford is a logical first overnight stop, but book ahead rather than assuming late availability.
2	New Alresford	Alton	19 km	A fuller but still moderate day across Hampshire, with Chawton near the route before Alton.	Alton has rail access, making this a useful section break. Accommodation should be arranged in advance, especially if planning to stay close to the route.
3	Alton	Farnham	18 km	This completes the western St Swithun's Way section into Farnham, where the route changes character and begins to align more with the North Downs corridor.	Alton and Farnham both have rail access. Farnham is one of the more practical overnight stops before the Surrey stages.
4	Farnham	Guildford (St Catherine's)	17 km	A good transition stage into the Surrey Hills, passing the Puttenham and Compton area, with Watts Chapel and St Martha's-on-the-Hill as important nearby highlights.	Farnham and Guildford both have rail access. Guildford gives the best range of services in this part of the walk and is a sensible place to resupply.
5	Guildford	Westhumble (Box Hill)	22 km	One of the longer standard days, taking the route through classic Surrey downland towards Box Hill and the Mole Gap.	Guildford is well served by rail. Dorking is near Westhumble and is useful for rail access and accommodation; book early if aiming to stay close to Box Hill.

Day	From	To	Approx. distance	Why this stage makes sense	Services/accommodation notes
6	Westhumble (Box Hill)	Merstham	16 km	A shorter follow-up after the long Guildford-to-Westhumble day, continuing along the chalk scarp via the Reigate Hill section.	Dorking is near the start for rail access, and Merstham has rail access at the end. Accommodation options may not sit directly on the line of the route, so check locations carefully.
7	Merstham	Oxted	13 km	A deliberately lighter day, useful for recovery after the main Surrey ridge walking and before the longer approach to Otford.	Merstham and Oxted both have rail access. This is a practical stage for section walkers from London.
8	Oxted	Otford	19 km	A solid eastward stage into Kent, finishing in the Darent valley at Otford.	Oxted and Otford both have rail access. Otford is a useful overnight and section endpoint, but accommodation should still be booked ahead.
9	Otford	Wrotham	9 km	A short day after the longer Oxted-to-Otford stage, allowing time around Otford and the Darent valley before continuing along the North Downs line.	Otford has rail access; Kemsing is another nearby rail point on this part of the route. Wrotham is a smaller overnight stop, so availability should be checked before travelling.
10	Wrotham	Halling	12 km	Another short-to-moderate Kent stage, moving towards the Medway gap and the Halling/Cuxton area.	Accommodation can be thinner in smaller villages. Cuxton is a nearby rail access point for this Medway section; check onward transport and lodging before committing to the overnight stop.
11	Halling	Aylesford	8 km	A short Medway-stage day, useful if taking time around the river crossing area or keeping the Kent section unhurried.	Aylesford has rail access and is a practical halt before the route continues towards the prehistoric landscape around Kit's Coty House.
12	Aylesford	Harrietsham	18 km	A stronger day east from Aylesford, passing the Kit's Coty House area and continuing towards the Detling and Hollingbourne side of the Kent Downs.	Aylesford has rail access. Bearsted and Hollingbourne are useful rail points near Detling; accommodation around smaller villages may require a short off-route transfer.

Day	From	To	Approx. distance	Why this stage makes sense	Services/accommodation notes
13	Harrietsham	Boughton Lees	18 km	A second full Kent day through the Lenham and Charing corridor, with orchards, hop-growing country and downs-edge walking becoming more prominent.	Lenham and Charing have rail access along this part of the route. Boughton Lees is a smaller finish point, so check accommodation and any off-route walking before booking.
14	Boughton Lees	Chilham	10 km	A shorter stage through the Wye and Stour valley area, finishing at Chilham, one of the strongest village stops near the end of the walk.	Wye and Chilham both have rail access. Chilham is a good final overnight before Canterbury, but book ahead in busy periods.
15	Chilham	Canterbury	11 km	A short final day via Harbledown into Canterbury, leaving enough time for the historic finish at Canterbury Cathedral.	Chilham has rail access, and Canterbury has two stations, Canterbury West and Canterbury East, for onward travel. Plan the one-way return before setting off.

Slower variant

A slower schedule suits walkers who want shorter days, more time for churches and historic sites, or less pressure on accommodation logistics. Allowing 16–18 days is sensible if splitting one or more of the longer stages or adding a rest day in a larger service town.

The stages most worth shortening are the 22 km Guildford to Westhumble day, the 19 km New Alresford to Alton and Oxted to Otford days, and the two 18 km Kent stages from Aylesford to Harrietsham and Harrietsham to Boughton Lees. Extra nights are easiest to manage where rail-accessible towns or nearby rail points are available, such as Alton, Farnham, Guildford, Dorking, Merstham, Oxted, Otford, Aylesford, Lenham, Charing, Wye, Chilham and Canterbury.

Do not assume every village has suitable beds on the route line. If creating shorter custom stages, confirm accommodation location, approach mileage and public transport before booking.

Faster variant

A faster schedule suits fit, experienced walkers who are comfortable with longer back-to-back days and independent navigation. The easiest compression is in Kent, where several standard stages are short: Otford to Wrotham is 9 km, Wrotham to Halling is 12 km, Halling to Aylesford is 8 km, Boughton Lees to Chilham is 10 km, and Chilham to Canterbury is 11 km.

Common faster approaches include combining two short adjacent stages, such as Otford to Halling at roughly 21 km, Wrotham to Aylesford at roughly 20 km, or Boughton Lees to Canterbury at roughly 21 km. Strong walkers can also reduce the overall schedule by avoiding short recovery days, but the longer custom stages should be planned from maps rather than assumed from village names.

The faster option is less forgiving of poor weather, muddy chalk and clay, or missed navigation where the Pilgrims' Way and North Downs Way diverge. Accommodation becomes more critical because a failed long day can leave few convenient alternatives in the smaller spring-line villages.

Planning the Route

Choose a route line before booking

The first planning decision is which version of the Pilgrims' Way to follow. This is not a single waymarked National Trail from Winchester to Canterbury: the practical route uses St Swithun's Way waymarks from Winchester to Farnham, then largely follows the North Downs Way corridor towards Canterbury, with OS maps, GPX and a guidebook to keep the line coherent.

This matters because the historic Pilgrims' Way and the modern North Downs Way are related but not identical. The historic line often keeps to the spring line below the downs, while the North Downs Way more often uses the chalk crest. Decide on one guidebook or GPX line before booking accommodation, otherwise a night booked in the wrong valley or village can add awkward extra walking at the end of a stage.

How many days to allow

The standard Winchester-to-Canterbury itinerary is 15 walking days, with stages ranging from short Kent days to longer downland crossings. This is the most sensible plan for most walkers because it fits the chain of towns and villages reasonably well and leaves time for navigation, church visits, food stops and public transport connections.

Fit, experienced walkers can compress the route, especially where several shorter stages fall close together in Kent. The obvious candidates are the short sections around Otford, Wrotham, Halling and Aylesford, but combining them depends on accommodation availability and how much road, valley and village walking is included in the chosen line.

A slower itinerary is often better than a fast one if the pilgrimage and historic sites are part of the appeal. Winchester, the Hospital of St Cross, Chawton, Watts Chapel, St Martha's-on-the-Hill, Box Hill, Otford, Kit's Coty House, Chilham, Harbledown and Canterbury Cathedral all reward time off the direct walking line.

Daily stages and accommodation

The route passes through populated countryside, but accommodation is not evenly spaced. Winchester, Alton, Farnham, Guildford, Dorking/Westhumble, Merstham, Oxted, Aylesford, Lenham, Charing, Chilham and Canterbury are more straightforward planning points than some of the smaller villages on or near the spring line.

Book each night ahead rather than expecting to improvise. In smaller villages, beds may be sparse, off-route or booked up in summer, and a short taxi or rail link may be needed to make a stage work. This should be checked before travelling.

When planning stages, look beyond the distance alone. A 13 km day with awkward accommodation can be more complicated than an 18 km day finishing in a town with rail access and food options.

Shortening, extending and rest days

The route is easy to adapt because it is so rail-accessible. Winchester, Alton, Farnham, Guildford, Dorking, Merstham, Oxted, Otford, Kemsing, Cuxton, Aylesford, Bearsted/Hollingbourne, Lenham, Charing, Wye, Chilham and Canterbury all have or are near railway stations, so many stages can be shortened, skipped, joined or split without committing to the whole trail in one journey.

Rest days are most useful in Winchester, Guildford or Canterbury, where there is more to do and better onward transport. A rest or half-day can also be practical after the longer Guildford to Westhumble stage, or before the final approach through Chilham and Harbledown into Canterbury.

Do not assume every station is directly on the walking line. Some are near the route rather than on it, and the link from path to platform should be included in the day's total walking time.

Section hiking

The Pilgrims' Way is particularly well suited to section hiking from London and the south-east. The railway network makes it realistic to complete the walk over weekends or single days, especially from Farnham eastwards where the route corridor passes a frequent chain of towns and stations.

For section walkers, the main challenge is continuity. Because the Pilgrims' Way is a historic line rather than one continuous waymarked trail, it is easy to walk a mixture of St Swithun's Way, North Downs Way and local paths without noticing a divergence. Keep the same map, guidebook or GPX line for every section so the completed route joins up cleanly.

A point-to-point end-to-end walk also needs separate transport planning at the finish. Canterbury has two stations, Canterbury West and Canterbury East, with trains to London, but the walk does not return to Winchester.

Planning priorities

Priority	What to plan
Navigation	Carry OS mapping, GPX and/or a guidebook. Waymarking changes from St Swithun's Way to North Downs Way, and the Pilgrims' Way is not signed end to end as one trail.
Accommodation	Book ahead, especially in summer and in smaller villages. Check whether the bed is on the route, in the nearest village, or requires an extra link by rail, taxi or foot.
Food	Resupply is generally manageable through towns and villages, but do not rely on every small settlement having open shops or pubs. Opening hours should be checked before travelling.
Water	Carry enough water for the full day between reliable stops. Chalk downland sections can feel exposed, and services are not guaranteed in every village.
Transport	Use the strong rail access to shorten, split or escape stages. Check current train times before relying on them, especially for first and last services.
Ground conditions	Chalk and clay become slippery after rain and muddy in winter. Waterproof footwear and poles can be useful in wet conditions, even though the route is low-level.
Weather	Spring, summer and autumn are the best seasons. In poor weather, the navigation burden increases because field paths, sunken lanes and downland junctions are less obvious.

Priority	What to plan
Permits and access	There is no route-wide permit to arrange for the walk itself. Entry arrangements, opening times and any charges for cathedrals, churches, museums or historic sites should be checked individually.

Practical stage-building advice

Start by booking the end points that are least flexible, then fill the easier town stages around them. The smaller Kent and Surrey villages can be the pinch points, particularly where the chosen line keeps to the foot of the downs rather than dropping into larger service towns.

Avoid planning solely from one named place to the next without checking the exact path line. For example, the route may pass near Dorking, Rochester or Detling without necessarily finishing in the centre of those places, depending on the version followed.

Allow extra time on days with well-known detours or historic stops. Chawton, Watts Chapel, St Martha's-on-the-Hill, Box Hill, Kit's Coty House and Harbledown can all add time even when the walking distance looks modest.

The safest planning approach is to treat each day as a complete logistics unit: start access, route line, food, water, end accommodation and escape station. That is more important on the Pilgrims' Way than shaving kilometres, because the main difficulty is continuity rather than altitude.

Towns, Villages and Overnight Stops

Accommodation on the Pilgrims' Way is easiest in the larger towns and more variable in the villages below the North Downs. The standard 15-day itinerary deliberately uses rail-served towns where possible, but several nights in Kent fall in smaller settlements where beds, food and evening meals can be limited.

Book accommodation ahead rather than relying on turning up, especially in summer, at weekends and on the shorter village stages. Opening days for pubs, cafés and village shops change, so evening meals and next-day provisions should be checked before travelling.

Winchester

Winchester is the practical starting base, with the traditional start at Winchester Cathedral and many walkers also beginning at the Hospital of St Cross just south of the city. It is the best place to arrive the night before the walk if travelling from outside Hampshire.

Accommodation, food and shops are much easier here than on the first few rural stages. Winchester has its own railway station with direct trains from London Waterloo, making it straightforward for both end-to-end walkers and section walkers.

Use Winchester to buy any missing maps, food or wet-weather kit before committing to the route. Once beyond the city and St Catherine's Hill, services become more village-based.

St Catherine's Hill

St Catherine's Hill is not an overnight stop, but it matters logistically because it marks the climb out of the Itchen valley at the start of the walk. There are no town services on the hill itself, so water and food should be sorted in Winchester.

The hill is a useful early check on navigation and footwear conditions. Chalk paths can be slippery after rain, and this becomes a recurring theme across the route.

New Alresford

New Alresford is the first standard overnight stop after Winchester. It works well as a short first day, particularly for walkers who start at the cathedral or Hospital of St Cross and want time for the Winchester sites before leaving.

Expect village/town-scale accommodation and food options rather than the breadth found in Winchester. Beds should be booked ahead, as the next day to Alton is longer and it is not a stage where a late start helps.

New Alresford is a good place to reset after the opening day and check onward arrangements. If relying on a particular pub, café or shop for food, opening times should be checked before travelling.

Alton

Alton is a strong overnight stop at the end of the second standard stage and has a railway station, making it useful for joining, leaving or breaking the walk. It is also one of the more practical Hampshire stops for accommodation and resupply.

The route passes near Chawton between New Alresford and Alton, so Alton is the natural place to overnight if making time for the Jane Austen-related detour. Food options are more reliable here than in the smaller villages, though specific opening days still need checking.

For section walkers, Alton is one of the key access points before the route continues east towards Farnham and the transition from St Swithun's Way to the North Downs Way corridor.

Chawton

Chawton sits close to the route between New Alresford and Alton and is primarily a short detour rather than a standard overnight stop. Walkers interested in Jane Austen's House may want to allow extra time on this stage.

Do not plan around Chawton as a full-service resupply point unless current facilities have been checked. Alton is the more dependable overnight and transport base nearby.

Bentley

Bentley lies on the approach towards Farnham and is useful mainly as a route place and possible transport reference rather than a core overnight base. It has or is near rail access according to the route's transport pattern, which can help section walkers.

Accommodation and food should not be assumed without checking in advance. For most end-to-end itineraries, Alton and Farnham are the more practical overnight pair for this part of the route.

Farnham

Farnham is one of the most important logistics points on the whole walk. It is the end of the Winchester-to-Farnham St Swithun's Way section and the point from which walkers generally begin using the North Downs Way National Trail waymarking eastwards, while still remembering that the Pilgrims' Way and North Downs Way are not identical.

As a larger town with a railway station, Farnham is a good overnight stop, resupply point and section-walking access point. Accommodation, food and shops are more likely here than in the villages immediately to the east.

It is worth checking maps and the guidebook carefully here before continuing. From Farnham onwards the route follows the North Downs corridor, but historic Pilgrims' Way lines, spring-line options and North Downs Way crest routes can diverge.

Puttenham

Puttenham is a village stage point between Farnham and Guildford. It is useful for route pacing and local breaks, but it should not be treated as a guaranteed overnight or resupply stop unless accommodation and food have been booked or checked.

This part of the route is close enough to larger Surrey towns that many walkers continue to Guildford for the night. Carry enough food and water from Farnham if not certain of village services.

Compton

Compton is useful because of its proximity to Watts Chapel, one of the worthwhile short detours on this section. It sits before the route rises towards St Martha's-on-the-Hill and then drops towards Guildford.

Accommodation and food are likely to be more limited than in Guildford. If visiting Watts Chapel, allow time in the day rather than assuming it can be fitted in after reaching accommodation.

St Martha's-on-the-Hill

St Martha's-on-the-Hill is a major route landmark but not an overnight stop. The church stands on a sandy ridge above Guildford and is reached on foot, so it is best treated as part of the walking day between Farnham and Guildford.

There are no town services on the hill itself. Guildford is the practical place for accommodation, food, rail access and any resupply after this section.

Guildford

Guildford is one of the best-equipped stops on the route and a sensible overnight after the Farnham stage. The standard itinerary reaches the St Catherine's area of Guildford, with the city providing the practical services nearby.

Accommodation, food, shops and rail access are stronger here than in the preceding villages. Guildford is also a very useful section-walking hub because it has or is near a railway station and sits roughly where the walk enters the heart of the Surrey Hills.

Use Guildford for resupply before the longer stage to Westhumble and Box Hill. The next day crosses a more rural stretch of downs and woods, so do not rely on finding everything en route.

Box Hill and Westhumble

Westhumble is the standard overnight point for the Box Hill stage, with Dorking nearby as the larger practical base. This is one of the most memorable Surrey sections, but accommodation should be arranged carefully because the immediate route area is not a large town centre.

Dorking is near the route and has rail access, making it useful for accommodation, food and transport if Westhumble options are limited. If staying off the exact line, check the walking route or taxi arrangements between the trail and accommodation.

Box Hill itself is a walking highlight rather than a place to assume evening services. The Mole Gap and stepping-stones area can be busy, but that does not remove the need to plan food and overnight logistics in advance.

Dorking

Dorking is not the standard named stage end in the itinerary, but it is an important nearby service town for the Box Hill/Westhumble stop. It is especially useful if accommodation directly on the route is scarce.

The town has or is near railway access and is a sensible place for section walkers to start or finish the Box Hill stage. Factor in the extra distance or transfer needed if staying in Dorking rather than immediately at Westhumble.

Reigate Hill

Reigate Hill is a route landmark on the chalk scarp rather than a normal overnight stop. It comes between the Box Hill/Westhumble area and Merstham, with open downland and views over the Weald.

Plan this as part of the walking day, not as a service centre. Food and accommodation are better planned at Westhumble/Dorking before it and Merstham after it.

Merstham

Merstham is the standard overnight stop after the Box Hill to Merstham stage and has rail access. It is a practical place to break the route before the shorter stage to Oxted.

Accommodation should still be booked ahead, as not every rail-served place on the route has abundant walking-friendly beds. Merstham is useful for section walkers because it sits on the rail-accessible Surrey/Kent approach to the North Downs.

Food and resupply should be checked against current opening times. If arriving late, do not assume that village or small-town services will still be available.

Oxted

Oxted is the standard overnight after Merstham and is near rail access, making it another useful section point. The stage into Oxted is one of the shorter standard days, which can help if weather, mud or navigation has slowed progress.

Accommodation and food planning still need care, especially if staying outside the town centre or close to the route rather than near services. The following stage to Otford is longer, so Oxted is a sensible place to restock and start early.

Otford

Otford is a key Kent stop at the Darent valley crossing and the standard overnight after the Oxted stage. It has rail access and is also a practical point for London-based section walkers.

The village has historic interest, including the ruins of an Archbishop's Palace, but for walkers its main value is as a manageable stage end with transport. Accommodation can be more limited than in larger towns, so book ahead.

Otford is followed by a short standard stage to Wrotham. This gives some flexibility: walkers moving faster may combine stages, while those keeping to the 15-day schedule can use Otford for a lighter recovery day afterwards.

Kemsing

Kemsing lies close to the route east of Otford and has rail access. It is useful for section walking and can provide an alternative access point in this part of Kent.

Do not assume it will solve accommodation shortages unless specific beds have been booked. For most standard itineraries, Otford and Wrotham remain the planned overnight points.

Wrotham

Wrotham is the standard overnight after the short Otford stage. Because that walking day is only about 9 km in the standard schedule, Wrotham can also be used to absorb delays from the previous day or to allow a slower morning in Otford.

Accommodation and food should be arranged in advance. This is one of the village-based parts of the route where a full range of services cannot be assumed.

The next stage to Halling is also relatively short, but it crosses towards the Medway area. Check the following night as well, rather than planning only one day at a time.

Trottscliffe

Trottscliffe is a village on the Wrotham to Halling section. It is best treated as an intermediate route place rather than a dependable overnight base.

Carry food and water for the day unless current services have been checked. If considering an overnight here, confirm accommodation and meal options before committing to the itinerary.

Halling

Halling is the standard overnight before the short stage to Aylesford and sits near the Medway section of the walk. It has or is near rail access, with Cuxton also listed as a rail-accessible place in this area.

This is a practical but potentially limited overnight stop, so book beds ahead and check food options. The following day is short, which can be useful if accommodation availability forces a slightly off-route arrangement.

Cuxton

Cuxton is near the route around the Medway crossing area and has rail access. It can be useful for section walkers or as a practical alternative if Halling accommodation is not suitable.

If using Cuxton, check exactly how it connects with the walking line before booking. The Pilgrims' Way through this area is not a single continuous waymarked trail, so careful map work matters.

Rochester

Rochester lies near the route across the Medway rather than on the standard stage line. It may be useful as a larger nearby service centre if accommodation or transport around Halling, Cuxton or Aylesford does not work.

Any plan to use Rochester should account for the extra transfer or walking needed to rejoin the route. This should be checked before travelling.

Aylesford

Aylesford is the standard overnight after Halling and has rail access. It is an important practical stop before the longer stage towards Harrietsham.

Accommodation and food should be booked or checked ahead. The route east of Aylesford includes Kit's Coty House as a notable nearby prehistoric site, so allow time if taking that detour.

Aylesford is also a good point to reassess the Kent section. From here eastwards, the route increasingly passes through smaller settlements, with accommodation sometimes on or near the spring-line rather than in large towns.

Kit's Coty House

Kit's Coty House is a significant stop near Aylesford, reached off the Pilgrims' Way itself. It is not an overnight or service point, but it is one of the clearest reasons to allow extra time on the Aylesford to Harrietsham stage.

Do not rely on facilities at the monument. Food, water and accommodation should be planned around Aylesford, Detling, Hollingbourne or Harrietsham instead.

Detling

Detling lies on the Aylesford to Harrietsham section and is a useful village reference on the way through the Kent Downs. It is near the rail-served Bearsted/Hollingbourne area rather than being the main standard overnight in the 15-day schedule.

Accommodation and food may be sparse, so Detling works best if a specific booking has been made. Otherwise, continue with the planned stage structure or use nearby rail-linked settlements as needed.

Hollingbourne

Hollingbourne is near the route and has rail access, making it a useful alternative or support point around the Detling/Harrietsham section. It can help if accommodation in the exact stage village is unavailable.

Check the route connection before booking off the line. This part of Kent is well suited to rail-based section walking, but end-to-end walkers still need a clear plan for where each day actually finishes.

Harrietsham

Harrietsham is the standard overnight after Aylesford and has rail access. It is one of the most useful Kent stops for keeping the 15-day itinerary intact.

Book accommodation ahead and check evening food. The next stage to Boughton Lees is a longer rural day by the standard schedule, so Harrietsham is a sensible place to stock up and start with a full day's food if needed.

Lenham

Lenham lies between Harrietsham and Charing and has rail access. It is a useful intermediate place for section walkers and may provide flexibility if splitting or adjusting the standard stage to Boughton Lees.

Do not assume accommodation availability without booking. If using Lenham as a stop, check how it affects the next day's distance to Charing, Boughton Lees or Wye.

Charing

Charing is another rail-accessible Kent village on the approach to Boughton Lees. It can be useful as an access point or alternative overnight if the standard stage end does not suit.

Food and accommodation should be checked in advance. In this part of the route, small changes to overnight location can make the following day either very short or unexpectedly long.

Boughton Lees

Boughton Lees is the standard overnight before the short stage to Chilham. It is a village stop rather than a large service centre, so accommodation and meals need arranging ahead.

The preceding day from Harrietsham is one of the longer Kent stages in the standard plan. Arriving with food sorted reduces the risk of being caught out by limited evening services.

Boughton Lees also gives a manageable next day towards Wye and Chilham, allowing time for the Stour valley section rather than rushing straight through.

Wye

Wye lies on the Stour valley approach near the end of the walk and has rail access. It is useful for section walkers and as a possible adjustment point between Boughton Lees and Chilham.

The route around Wye is part of the final Kent section before Canterbury, with the Stour crossing area close by. If using Wye for accommodation, check availability and the exact route connection before booking.

Chilham

Chilham is the final standard overnight before Canterbury and has rail access. It is a very useful last stop because the final day to Canterbury is short by the standard schedule, leaving time to reach the cathedral without rushing.

Accommodation should still be booked ahead, as Chilham is a small village rather than a large town. Food options and opening days should be checked before relying on them for dinner or breakfast.

For walkers completing the route, Chilham is a good place to organise the final day's timing, cathedral visit and onward transport from Canterbury.

Harbledown

Harbledown is the last village before Canterbury, entered from the west. It is an important historic approach point, with St Nicholas Hospital associated with the old pilgrim route.

It is not usually the main overnight stop because Canterbury is close ahead and far better supplied. Treat Harbledown as a final route landmark rather than a place to solve accommodation or resupply.

Canterbury

Canterbury is the finish and the best-served place at the eastern end of the route. The historic destination is Canterbury Cathedral, and the city has the widest choice of accommodation, food and onward travel on the final section.

Canterbury has two railway stations, Canterbury West and Canterbury East, with frequent trains to London. Because the Pilgrims' Way is a one-way west-to-east walk, return transport should be planned separately rather than assumed on arrival.

Staying overnight in Canterbury is often the simplest option after finishing, especially if arriving late in the day or wanting time at the cathedral. Book ahead during busy periods and confirm current cathedral visiting arrangements before building the final day around them.

Getting to the Start

By train

Winchester is the practical railhead for the start of The Pilgrims' Way. The city has its own railway station, with direct trains from London Waterloo, making it one of the easier long-distance walks in England to begin without a car.

From Winchester station, continue to the traditional start at Winchester Cathedral, or to the Hospital of St Cross just south of the city if beginning there. The Hospital of St Cross start adds a strong historic opening to the walk before the route climbs past St Catherine's Hill out of the Itchen valley.

Train times, engineering works and ticket restrictions should be checked before travelling, especially for an early start or a weekend departure.

By bus

Bus is mainly useful for local access within Winchester rather than for the main approach to the walk. If starting at the Hospital of St Cross rather than Winchester Cathedral, local bus or taxi options may reduce the amount of city walking before the trail properly begins.

Specific bus routes, stops and Sunday or evening services change over time. This should be checked before travelling.

By car

Driving to the start is possible, but it is not the cleanest option for the full route because The Pilgrims' Way is a one-way walk ending in Canterbury. Anyone leaving a vehicle in Winchester needs a legal long-stay parking plan for the full duration of the walk, and this should be checked before travelling.

For most end-to-end walkers, public transport is simpler: start by train into Winchester, then return separately from Canterbury, which has two railway stations, Canterbury West and Canterbury East. If travelling by car is unavoidable, consider whether it is better to park at the finish area and travel to Winchester by train before starting, rather than having to retrieve a car from Hampshire after reaching Kent.

From the nearest airport

For overseas arrivals, the simplest approach is usually to reach the London rail network and take a train from London Waterloo to Winchester. Airport-to-London connections, onward train times and any required cross-London transfers should be planned before booking onward travel.

Do not plan a tight same-day connection from a flight straight onto the first walking stage. Winchester is a good place to stay the night before starting, which also gives time to buy food, sort maps or GPX files, and begin from the Cathedral or Hospital of St Cross without rushing.

Where to stay before starting

Winchester is the best overnight base before Day 1. Staying in the city keeps the start simple, gives easy access to the Cathedral, and avoids relying on morning transport before the first stage to New Alresford.

Accommodation should be booked ahead in busy periods. If choosing to begin at the Hospital of St Cross, check its location against the booked accommodation and allow time to reach it before joining the route out towards St Catherine's Hill.

Getting Home from the Finish

By train

Canterbury is one of the easier long-distance-walk finishes in England to leave by public transport. The city has two railway stations, Canterbury West and Canterbury East, both within the city rather than at an outlying trailhead.

Trains from Canterbury run frequently to London, making rail the default option for most walkers finishing the Pilgrims' Way. Choose the station according to the next available service and your onward destination rather than assuming one is always better; current times, engineering works and ticket restrictions should be checked before travelling.

If returning to Winchester after completing the full west-to-east walk, plan this as a separate rail journey. In practice, many walkers will connect via London, as Winchester has direct trains from London Waterloo and Canterbury has regular London services, but the best route depends on the day and time of travel.

If finishing late, do not rely on being able to walk into Canterbury, visit the Cathedral area, eat, and still make an onward train without checking times first. A pre-booked night in Canterbury is the safer plan if the final stage from Chilham is being walked at a relaxed pace or in poor weather.

By bus

Local buses serve Canterbury and nearby villages, but buses are usually more useful for short local movements than for the main journey home. They can help if accommodation is outside the centre or if a walker needs to reposition from Harbledown or another western approach into the city.

Bus timetables, evening services and Sunday frequencies are timetable-dependent and should be checked before travelling. For most end-to-end walkers, the train will be simpler and more reliable for leaving Canterbury.

By car/taxi

Because the Pilgrims' Way is a point-to-point route from Winchester to Canterbury, leaving a car at the finish is only convenient if a lift or separate vehicle arrangement has been made. Otherwise, expect to return to the start by public transport rather than by taxi; a full Canterbury-to-Winchester taxi would be an expensive long-distance transfer.

Taxis are most useful for short local journeys at the finish: from Canterbury Cathedral or accommodation to either station, or from the western edge of the city if the final approach leaves you tired or short of time. If arriving late, pre-book a taxi rather than assuming immediate availability.

From the nearest airport

Air travel is not normally part of the logistics for this route, as both ends are well connected by rail and the walk sits within reach of London. For international departures, the practical approach is to take a train from Canterbury towards London and connect onwards to the relevant airport by rail, Underground, coach or airport service.

Airport connections vary significantly by airport, day and time, so this should be checked before travelling. Allow extra time if finishing the walk and flying the same day; staying in Canterbury or London first is usually less risky.

Where to stay at the finish

Canterbury is the best place to stay at the end of the route. Finishing at Canterbury Cathedral gives a clear end point, and staying overnight avoids having to rush the final stage from Chilham or leave immediately after reaching the historic destination of the walk.

The city has hotels, guesthouses, B&Bs and inns, but accommodation should still be booked ahead, especially in summer and at weekends. If trains home are the priority, choose somewhere with straightforward access to Canterbury West or Canterbury East rather than focusing only on the Cathedral precinct.

Which Direction Should You Walk?

The Pilgrims' Way is best walked **west to east, from Winchester to Canterbury**. This is the traditional and most practical direction: it begins at Winchester Cathedral or the Hospital of St Cross, follows the historic pilgrimage line through Hampshire, Surrey and Kent, and finishes at Canterbury Cathedral, the route's natural destination.

Walking eastbound also matches the standard 15-stage breakdown from Winchester to Canterbury. That makes accommodation planning, daily distances and navigation notes simpler to line up, especially because this is not one continuously waymarked trail.

West to east: Winchester to Canterbury

This is the direction most walkers should choose. The journey has a clear pilgrimage logic: St Swithun's shrine at Winchester, the Wayfarer's Dole at the Hospital of St Cross, the climb past St Catherine's Hill, then the long progression across the North Downs towards Canterbury and Becket's shrine.

Navigation is also more straightforward in this direction because the route naturally moves from **St Swithun's Way waymarks between Winchester and Farnham** to the **North Downs Way acorn waymarks from Farnham towards Canterbury**, with OS maps, GPX and a guidebook filling the gaps. The Pilgrims' Way and North Downs Way are not identical, so direction will not remove the need for careful map-reading, but the usual west-to-east structure reduces avoidable confusion.

The scenery builds well eastbound. The walk starts with the Itchen valley and Hampshire downland, then moves through the Surrey Hills around St Martha's-on-the-Hill, Guildford, Box Hill and Reigate Hill before entering the Kent Downs, orchards, hop gardens, vineyards and the Stour valley near Wye and Chilham. The final approach through Harbledown gives the route a strong ending before Canterbury.

Transport works well in this direction. Winchester has its own station with direct trains from London Waterloo, and Canterbury has two stations, Canterbury West and Canterbury East, with frequent trains to London. As this is a point-to-point walk, onward or return travel still needs to be planned separately.

East to west: Canterbury to Winchester

Walking from Canterbury to Winchester is entirely possible, especially for section walkers using the many railway stations along or near the route. Canterbury's two stations make it an easy place to start, and Winchester is a simple rail finish.

The main drawback is that the route loses much of its historic momentum. Leaving Canterbury rather than arriving there changes the psychological shape of the walk, and the traditional pilgrimage finish comes at the start rather than the end.

Reverse navigation also needs more care. The route is already a historic line rather than a single signed trail, and walking westbound means using the same St Swithun's Way, North Downs Way, OS mapping and guidebook material in reverse. Particular attention is needed where the historic Pilgrims' Way follows the spring line while the modern North Downs Way takes the chalk crest.

Are the climbs easier one way?

There is no strong climbing advantage in either direction. The route is low in altitude, with a high point of about 240 m, and the effort comes from repeated rolling downland rather than a single major ascent.

The sharper changes of height come where river valleys cut through the downs, including the Wey, Mole, Darent, Medway and Stour gaps. Walked eastbound or westbound, these still involve short climbs and descents, so daily distance, mud and navigation matter more than direction.

Accommodation and stage flow

The standard west-to-east stages give the cleanest accommodation flow, using places such as New Alresford, Alton, Farnham, Guildford, Westhumble, Merstham, Oxted, Otford, Wrotham, Halling, Aylesford, Harrietsham, Boughton Lees, Chilham and Canterbury. Beds can still be sparse in smaller villages and may sit off the exact line, so each night should be booked ahead.

A reverse itinerary can use the same places, but it is more likely to require adapting stage notes and checking how each day links to rail stations, accommodation and the chosen variant of the route. This should be checked before travelling.

Recommendation

Walk **Winchester to Canterbury** unless there is a specific transport, accommodation or section-walking reason to do otherwise. It is the traditional direction, fits the standard stages, works well with the available rail links and gives the strongest finish: entering Canterbury from the west through Harbledown and ending at Canterbury Cathedral.

Accommodation Along the Route

Accommodation on The Pilgrims' Way is workable for an inn-to-inn walk, but it needs more planning than a fully waymarked National Trail with an established chain of trail lodgings. The route passes through populated countryside and several substantial towns, so beds are available overall, but they are unevenly spread.

The easiest nights to organise are in Winchester, Alton, Farnham, Guildford, Dorking/Westhumble and Canterbury. The awkward sections are the smaller spring-line villages and some Kent stages, where accommodation may be limited, off the exact line of the route, or booked up at weekends.

Book every night ahead rather than relying on turning up. This is especially important in summer, on Friday and Saturday nights, and around the smaller stage stops such as Wrotham, Halling, Aylesford, Harrietsham, Boughton Lees and Chilham.

Accommodation levels by place

Place	Accommodation level	Best for	Notes
Winchester	Good	Start night, late arrival by train, visiting the Cathedral or Hospital of St Cross	One of the strongest places to start with a comfortable buffer night before walking.
New Alresford	Limited	End of the first stage from Winchester	A smaller stop than Winchester or Alton; book ahead rather than assuming same-day availability.
Alton	Good	Reliable overnight stop and rail access	A practical early-route base, especially for section walkers using the station.
Farnham	Good	End of St Swithun's Way section; start of the North Downs Way overlap	A useful reset point before the Surrey Hills stages.
Guildford	Good	Strong choice, restocking, rest day, transport links	One of the best places on the route for a wider range of hotels, guesthouses and services.
Westhumble / Box Hill	Limited	Natural stage end after Guildford	Accommodation close to the path can be limited; Dorking nearby is often the practical alternative.
Merstham	Limited	Shorter overnight stop between Reigate Hill and Oxted	Works as a stage halt, but choice is not comparable with the larger towns. Rail access helps if using nearby accommodation.
Oxted	Limited	Stage end before the Darent valley	A practical stop, but book ahead and check how far the accommodation lies from the walking line.
Otford	Limited	Historic village stop after crossing the Darent valley	A useful overnight point, especially if breaking the Surrey-to-Kent transition into shorter days.

Place	Accommodation level	Best for	Notes
Wrotham	Limited	Short stage end and staging point towards the Medway	One of the places where advance booking matters; nearby alternatives may require taxi or rail planning.
Halling / Cuxton	Limited	Medway gap overnight logistics	Useful for breaking the route before Aylesford. Check exact location of any bed against the day's finish.
Aylesford	Limited	Medway valley stop and access to Kit's Coty House area	A sensible overnight point before the longer Kent Downs stage towards Harrietsham.
Harrietsham	Limited	Kent Downs staging point	Smaller-scale accommodation; rail access gives flexibility if beds on the route are full.
Lenham / Charing	Limited	Adjusting the Kent stages	Useful alternatives when splitting or reshaping the Harrietsham–Boughton Lees section. This should be checked before travelling.
Boughton Lees	Limited	Stage end before Wye and Chilham	Treat as an awkward booking point. If no suitable bed is available, plan a taxi or rail-supported transfer to a nearby stop. This should be checked before travelling.
Wye	Limited	Alternative Kent overnight or shorter-stage option	Can help rework the final approach to Canterbury, especially if Chilham is full.
Chilham	Limited	Final overnight before Canterbury	Attractive and useful, but small; book early for weekends and summer dates.
Canterbury	Good	Finish night, cathedral visit, onward rail travel	The strongest accommodation choice at the eastern end, with two stations for onward travel.

Booking strategy

For a 15-day itinerary, start by securing the limited village nights before booking the larger towns. Winchester, Guildford and Canterbury usually offer the broadest choice, while the smaller Kent and Surrey stops can dictate the shape of the whole walk.

If a standard stage endpoint has no suitable bed, it is often easier to keep the walking day intact and transfer off-route at the end. The route's strong rail access makes this realistic in many places, with stations at or near Winchester, Alton, Farnham, Guildford, Dorking, Merstham, Oxted, Otford, Kemsing, Cuxton, Aylesford, Bearsted/Hollingbourne, Lenham, Charing, Wye, Chilham and Canterbury.

Taxi transfers can also solve awkward gaps, particularly where accommodation lies away from the spring-line route or where a village has little choice. Book taxis ahead for rural pick-ups, and do not assume late-evening availability in smaller places.

Luggage transfer and camping

This route can suit inn-to-inn walkers carrying only a daypack if luggage transfer is arranged in advance, but do not assume a universal route-wide baggage system. Availability, coverage and prices should be checked before travelling.

Camping is possible only as part of a planned itinerary, not as a fallback every night. The route has some campsites and a few hostels in the wider towns, but the accommodation pattern is mixed rather than continuous, so each camping night needs to be located and booked or checked before setting off.

Practical tips for avoiding accommodation problems

- Book the smaller stops first: New Alresford, Wrotham, Halling, Aylesford, Harrietsham, Boughton Lees and Chilham are more likely to shape the itinerary.
- Use larger towns for flexibility: Winchester, Farnham, Guildford, Dorking/Westhumble and Canterbury are the easiest places to build in rest, laundry or resupply time.
- Check distance from the path, not just the town name. Some beds may be a useful taxi ride away rather than directly on the walking line.
- For section walking, use the rail-accessible stops to avoid weak accommodation points entirely.
- In summer and at weekends, book well ahead and avoid leaving the final Kent stages to last-minute availability.

Camping and Wild Camping

Camping is possible on The Pilgrims' Way, but it is not the simplest way to walk the route. This is a lowland, populated route through towns, villages, farmland, chalk downland, woodland edges and lanes rather than a remote trail with regular walker-focused camping infrastructure.

There are some campsites and a few hostels in the wider corridor, but they should not be assumed at the end of every stage. In smaller villages and on spring-line sections, overnight options can be sparse and may sit off the walking line, so camping itineraries need more planning than a B&B or rail-supported section walk.

Campsites and booking

No single chain of official Pilgrims' Way campsites runs from Winchester to Canterbury. Plan each night individually, checking whether a campsite is actually close enough to the route or whether it requires a road walk, taxi, bus or rail link.

The practical approach is to build the camping plan around the larger stage towns and transport points: Winchester, New Alresford, Alton, Farnham, Guildford, Westhumble / Dorking, Merstham, Oxted, Otford, Wrotham, Halling, Aylesford, Harrietsham, Charing, Wye, Chilham and Canterbury. Availability, opening seasons and booking rules change, so this should be checked before travelling.

Summer weekends can be busy, particularly in the Surrey Hills and near popular walking areas such as Box Hill. Book ahead rather than turning up late in the day with a tent.

Wild camping

Do not plan this route around informal wild camping. The Pilgrims' Way crosses private farmland, villages, church land, woodland, chalk grassland and managed countryside, and there is no general expectation that walkers can camp wherever they stop.

In England, wild camping normally requires the landowner's permission. If permission has not been arranged, use a campsite, booked accommodation, or public transport to reach a suitable overnight stop.

Discreet late arrival and early departure camping is sometimes discussed by long-distance walkers, but it should not be treated as a right on this route. It is especially inappropriate near churches, historic sites, village greens, nature-rich chalk grassland, crop fields, livestock areas, woodland edges, car parks and viewpoints.

Does the route suit a camping itinerary?

The route suits **occasional camping** better than a pure tent-only thru-hike. The excellent rail access makes it easy to combine campsites, B&Bs, inns and section walking, which is often more practical than carrying full camping gear for all 15 stages.

A tent-only plan can work, but it will likely involve some off-route walking and careful booking. It may also create uneven days if the nearest legal campsite does not match the standard stage end.

Carrying camping gear is less demanding here than on a high mountain route because the altitude is low and the terrain is non-technical. The trade-off is that much of the walking is on chalk, clay, lanes, farm tracks and village paths, where wet-weather mud and hard surfaces can make a heavier pack more tiring than expected.

Best sections for camping logistics

The most manageable camping sections are likely to be those with stronger transport and resupply options, especially around the larger towns and rail-linked villages. The Winchester to Farnham stretch has regular settlements, and the Farnham to Canterbury corridor benefits from the North Downs Way alignment and frequent rail access.

The Surrey section around Guildford, Box Hill / Westhumble, Dorking, Reigate Hill, Merstham and Oxted is popular walking country, but that does not mean camping is available directly on the path. Check campsite locations carefully before committing to a long day.

The Kent stages through Otford, Wrotham, Halling, Aylesford, Harrietsham, Lenham, Charing, Wye, Chilham and Harbledown pass through settled countryside, orchards, hop gardens, vineyards and villages. This is useful for food and transport, but not a licence to camp on agricultural land.

Water and supplies

Do not rely on rivers as camping water sources. The route crosses or approaches the Itchen, Wey, Mole, Darent, Medway and Stour, but these are lowland rivers in populated and farmed landscapes, not dependable drinking-water sources.

Carry enough water between settlements and refill in towns, villages, booked accommodation, cafés, pubs or campsites where available. Any tap access at churches, public buildings or village facilities should be treated as uncertain unless checked locally.

Food resupply is generally easier than on remote trails because the route passes through populated southern England. Even so, smaller villages may have limited opening hours, so carry at least one emergency meal if camping.

Leave No Trace and fire safety

Use established campsites wherever possible. If camping with permission on private land, keep the pitch small, arrive late, leave early, and remove all litter, food waste and sanitary waste.

Open fires are not appropriate on this route. The Pilgrims' Way crosses chalk grassland, woodland, farm margins and dry downland where fire damage can be severe; use a stove only where the landowner or campsite permits it.

Avoid damaging chalk turf, field edges, hedgerows, crops and woodland floors. Camp well away from livestock, gates, paths, churches, historic monuments and residential areas, and keep noise and lights to a minimum.

Seasonal considerations

Spring, summer and autumn are the main walking seasons. Campsites may not all operate across the full period, so opening dates should be checked before travelling.

After rain, chalk and clay become slippery and muddy, which matters more with a heavy camping pack. In winter or prolonged wet weather, camping is less attractive: short daylight, mud, saturated pitches and limited campsite availability can make booked indoor accommodation or day-sectioning by rail a better plan.

Food, Water and Resupply

The Pilgrims' Way is not a wilderness route, but it should not be treated as a continuous village-to-village café walk either. Food and water are easiest at the larger stage towns and rail-linked settlements; between them, the line often uses chalk downland, farm tracks, sunken lanes and quieter spring-line paths where there may be long stretches with no reliable shop or tap.

Plan each day around the overnight stops rather than assuming that every village on the map has open services. Rural opening hours, Sunday trading and seasonal café hours can be restrictive, especially on the smaller Hampshire, Surrey and Kent sections.

Food planning

For most walkers, the safest routine is to buy breakfast provisions and a packed lunch before leaving the stage town, then treat any pub, café or village shop en route as a bonus. Carry at least a full day's lunch and snacks on every stage unless accommodation has specifically arranged food for the next day.

Winchester, Alton, Farnham, Guildford, Canterbury and the larger rail-linked towns are the easiest places to resupply. Smaller places such as Puttenham, Compton, Trottiscliffe, Detling, Boughton Lees, Harbledown and other villages may be useful for food or drink, but should not be relied on without checking current opening times.

The Kent stages pass through more settled country with villages, orchards, hop gardens and vineyards, but that does not automatically mean easy trail-side food. The route can sit on lanes and tracks away from the main village centre, so a short detour may be needed.

Water planning

Start each stage with enough water for the whole day, especially in warm weather on open chalk sections. A practical minimum for many walkers is around 1.5–2 litres, rising to 2–3 litres in hot conditions or if walking fast stages without planned stops.

The most reliable refills are at accommodation, cafés, pubs and other staffed premises in towns and villages. Churches and public buildings may occasionally help, but availability varies and should not be assumed.

The route crosses or passes several rivers, including the Itchen, Wey, Mole, Darent, Medway and Stour, but these are not ideal primary drinking-water sources. Much of the walk is through lowland farmland, villages and road corridors, so any natural water should be treated or filtered, and even then used only when necessary.

Resupply by section

Section	Food availability	Water availability	Notes
Winchester to New Alresford	Good at Winchester; limited once out of the city and over the early chalk and Itchen-side country. New Alresford is the logical end-of-day resupply point.	Fill in Winchester before leaving. Refill opportunities between settlements should not be assumed.	Do not rely on the Hospital of St Cross Wayfarer's Dole as a meal plan; it is a historic tradition, not a resupply strategy.
New Alresford to Alton	Best planned from New Alresford and Alton. Chawton is near the route, but any food stop or detour should be checked before travelling.	Carry enough from New Alresford. Ask for tap refills where services are open.	This is typical Pilgrims' Way country: settled, but not continuously serviced on the path itself.
Alton to Farnham	Alton and Farnham are the main resupply points. Bentley is on the line of travel, but opening times and services should be checked before relying on it.	Start full from Alton. Farnham is the dependable end-of-stage refill.	This is the final St Swithun's Way part before joining the North Downs Way corridor.
Farnham to Guildford	Farnham and Guildford are the key food points. Puttenham and Compton may require checking for current services.	Fill at Farnham and plan to reach Guildford self-sufficient.	The route passes near Watts Chapel and St Martha's-on-the-Hill, but hilltop and historic-site sections should not be expected to provide water.
Guildford to Westhumble / Box Hill	Guildford is a strong resupply base. Westhumble, Box Hill and the Dorking area offer better prospects than the open downland sections, but check what is open on the day.	Carry enough from Guildford, particularly for the longer stage to Westhumble.	One of the longer standard stages, so pack lunch before leaving Guildford unless a stop is planned and checked.
Westhumble to Merstham	Food is more likely around the larger settlements than on the chalk scarp itself. Merstham is the main end-of-stage planning point.	Fill before setting off from Westhumble or the Dorking area. Do not depend on water on the ridge.	Chalk paths can feel exposed in warm weather, even though the route is low in altitude.
Merstham to Oxted	Merstham and Oxted are the main practical anchors. Any intermediate food stop should be treated as uncertain unless checked.	A shorter stage, but still start with a full bottle supply.	Sunday and rural-hours planning matters here; do shopping the evening before if necessary.
Oxted to Otford	Oxted and Otford are the main food and water points. The Darent valley around Otford marks the end of the stage.	Carry water from Oxted; refill at Otford.	Do not assume every village close to the downs has a shop open when you pass.
Otford to Wrotham	Shorter in distance, with food planning centred on Otford and Wrotham.	Water needs are lower than on the long stages, but still leave Otford with enough for the day.	A short stage can still be awkward if arriving after rural services have closed.

Section	Food availability	Water availability	Notes
Wrotham to Halling	Wrotham and Halling are the key points. Trottiscliffe is on the route corridor but should be checked before relying on services.	Fill at Wrotham. The Medway-side approach does not remove the need to carry drinking water.	Natural water near the Medway should be treated if used; tap refills are preferable.
Halling to Aylesford	A short stage with planning centred on Halling and Aylesford.	Carry enough from Halling; refill at Aylesford.	The crossing of the Medway corridor is not a reason to reduce carried water.
Aylesford to Harrietsham	Aylesford is the main start-point resupply. Services between Aylesford, Kit's Coty House, Detling, Hollingbourne and Harrietsham vary and should be checked.	Start full from Aylesford. Plan for limited reliable water until the end of the stage.	This is a longer Kent stage; carry lunch rather than depending on a mid-stage stop.
Harrietsham to Boughton Lees	Harrietsham, Lenham, Charing and Boughton Lees are the main named planning points along this section.	Fill before leaving and top up where staffed services are open.	The route passes through Kent countryside where detours into village centres may be needed for food.
Boughton Lees to Chilham	Food planning should be based on Boughton Lees, Wye and Chilham.	Carry enough from the start and refill in settlements.	The Stour valley section is short, but check opening times before assuming lunch in Wye or Chilham.
Chilham to Canterbury	Chilham and Canterbury are the main food points, with Harbledown before the city.	Fill at Chilham; Canterbury is the reliable finish-point refill.	This is a short final day, but carry water until Canterbury rather than assuming a refill in Harbledown.

Navigation and Waymarking

The Pilgrims' Way is not a single, continuously waymarked National Trail. Treat it as a historic west-to-east line that has to be stitched together from signed trails, rights of way, roads and guidebook directions.

Navigation is the main practical challenge of the walk. The ground is not technical, but the route can be ambiguous because the historic Pilgrims' Way often follows the spring line below the North Downs, while the modern North Downs Way frequently runs higher on the chalk crest.

What signs to follow

Section	Main waymarking to expect	Planning note
Winchester to Farnham	St Swithun's Way waymarks	This covers the western approach from Winchester through Hampshire to Farnham. Carry the route line as well as following signs.
Farnham towards Canterbury	North Downs Way National Trail acorn waymarks	The North Downs Way overlaps heavily with the Pilgrims' Way corridor, but it is not identical to the historic route and ultimately continues to Dover, with a Canterbury option.
Historic Pilgrims' Way alternatives	OS maps, guidebook directions and rights-of-way navigation	Where the Pilgrims' Way keeps closer to the foot of the downs, do not assume the North Downs Way acorns are always taking the same line.

At Farnham, pay particular attention to the change from St Swithun's Way to the North Downs Way corridor. This is the point where many walkers mentally switch from a Hampshire waymarked route to the longer chalk-downs section across Surrey and Kent.

GPX and maps

A GPX track is strongly recommended for the full Winchester-to-Canterbury walk. It is especially useful at village exits, road crossings, field-path junctions and where several rights of way run close together along the downs.

Use an offline mapping app that can display Ordnance Survey-style 1:25,000 mapping, and download the relevant map tiles before each stage. Do not rely on mobile data being available at every point, particularly in wooded sections, valleys and rural gaps between settlements.

Paper maps are sensible on this route because it is not signed as one trail end to end. The relevant Ordnance Survey Explorer sheets listed for the corridor are: 132, 144, 145, 146, 147, 148, 149 and 137. Check the exact sheet coverage against the version of the route being walked before buying or printing maps.

Where navigation needs most care

The most common navigational issue is not getting lost in wild country, but following the wrong long-distance line. Between Farnham and Canterbury, the North Downs Way and the Pilgrims' Way share a

broad corridor, but the historic spring-line route and the modern crest route can diverge.

Take extra care around the main river gaps where the route drops through more complex terrain and settlement: the Wey around Farnham and Guildford, the Mole near Box Hill and Westhumble, the Darent around Otford, the Medway near Halling, Cuxton and Aylesford, and the Stour near Wye and Chilham. These are natural places for path junctions, road walking, railway access and route variants to cluster.

Town and village exits also deserve attention. Winchester, Alton, Farnham, Guildford, Merstham, Oxted, Otford, Aylesford, Lenham, Charing, Chilham, Harbledown and Canterbury are all places where a quick map check before leaving the streets can prevent an avoidable detour.

Is it suitable for beginners?

The walking itself is moderate, but the route is not ideal for hikers who want a single obvious line with continuous branded waymarks. Confident beginners can manage individual stages with a guidebook, GPX and OS mapping, especially because public transport access is good along the corridor.

For a full end-to-end walk, basic navigation competence is important: reading rights-of-way on OS maps, matching signs to the intended route, checking junctions before committing, and recognising when the North Downs Way and the Pilgrims' Way are not following exactly the same line. Anyone uncomfortable with that should start with shorter rail-accessible sections before attempting the whole route.

Terrain, Conditions and Difficulty in Practice

The Pilgrims' Way is physically moderate rather than mountainous. The highest ground is only about 240 m, and there is no scrambling, rocky ground or technical walking. The real difficulty comes from doing repeated days on mixed lowland surfaces, keeping the route line together, and dealing with chalk and clay when they are wet.

Path surfaces

Underfoot, expect a varied mix rather than one consistent trail surface. The route uses chalk downland paths, open grassland, farm tracks, sunken lanes, woodland paths, minor roads and village lanes, with water-meadow walking around the Itchen at the Winchester end.

Between Farnham and Canterbury much of the practical walking is along the same corridor as the North Downs Way, so the ground often feels like classic North Downs walking: chalk ridge, scarp-edge paths, woodland and dips through river gaps. The historic Pilgrims' Way line often keeps lower on the spring line at the foot of the downs, while the North Downs Way more often takes the crest, so the exact character depends on the route variant being followed.

Chalk is usually firm and quick in dry weather, but it becomes slippery after rain, especially on descents, shaded woodland sections and worn lanes. Clay sections and farm tracks can become muddy in winter and after prolonged wet weather, so this is not a route where "low altitude" automatically means easy walking.

Climbs, descents and river gaps

The route is rolling rather than high, but it is not flat. The steeper moments usually come where rivers cut through the downs, notably around the Wey, Mole, Darent, Medway and Stour gaps.

The first clear climb comes out of the Itchen valley past St Catherine's Hill near Winchester. Later, the Surrey Hills bring more pronounced up-and-down walking around St Martha's-on-the-Hill, Guildford, Box Hill, Westhumble, Reigate Hill and Merstham.

Box Hill and the Mole Gap are among the more demanding sections in practice, not because of altitude, but because the route combines downland, valley crossing and ascent/descent in a concentrated area. In Kent, the line continues to rise and fall through the North Downs and then the Stour valley around Wye and Chilham.

Road, lane and village walking

This is not a continuous wild footpath. There are regular village sections, connecting lanes and minor-road stretches, particularly where the route drops through settlements or follows the gentler spring-line country below the downs.

That makes the walk logistically easier, with frequent access to towns and stations, but it also affects fatigue. Hard lanes can be tiring over consecutive days, especially with a full pack, and navigation through built-up edges can be less intuitive than following a clear ridge path.

Mud, chalk and wet-weather difficulty

Wet weather is the main condition that changes the route. Chalk paths can polish into a slick surface, while clay and farm tracks can hold mud and slow the pace considerably.

Waterproof footwear with reliable grip is more useful here than heavy mountain boots for technical ground. Walking poles can help on slippery chalk descents and on the short steeper climbs out of the river valleys.

After rain, allow extra time for the Surrey and Kent downland sections, especially where woodland, sunken lanes or field-edge tracks reduce drying. In winter conditions the walk becomes less about ascent and more about managing mud, short daylight and slower progress.

Exposure and weather

There is no mountain exposure on the Pilgrims' Way. The open chalk tops and scarp sections can, however, feel exposed to wind, sun and rain because there may be little shelter across stretches of downland.

In summer, open grassland and crest walking can be hot and dry underfoot, while shaded woodland remains cooler. In spring and autumn, conditions are usually more comfortable for distance walking, but rain can quickly make chalk and clay more awkward.

Navigation as part of the difficulty

Route-finding is a genuine part of the challenge. The Pilgrims' Way is a historic pilgrimage line, not a single waymarked National Trail from Winchester to Canterbury.

In practice, walkers use St Swithun's Way waymarks from Winchester to Farnham, then North Downs Way acorn waymarks from Farnham towards Canterbury, with OS maps, a guidebook or GPX to connect the correct line. This matters because the North Downs Way and the historic Pilgrims' Way overlap heavily but are not identical: the former often takes the chalk crest, while the latter frequently follows the lower spring line.

A missed turn is unlikely to create a dangerous situation in this populated part of southern England, but it can add road walking, extra climbing or a long correction at the end of a day. The navigation demand is one of the main reasons the route is better suited to walkers who are already comfortable with maps and mixed waymarking.

Stage difficulty in practice

The standard 15-stage breakdown keeps most days moderate, but effort is uneven. The longer days, especially Guildford to Westhumble at about 22 km, feel more serious when combined with the Surrey Hills terrain.

Shorter Kent stages such as Otford to Wrotham, Wrotham to Halling, Halling to Aylesford, Boughton Lees to Chilham and Chilham to Canterbury are physically easier on paper, but still require accurate route choice through a mix of downs, villages and valley approaches. Over the full walk, the cumulative effect of 214 km and about 3,658 m of ascent is more important than any single climb.

What makes it easier — and what makes it harder

The route is made easier by low altitude, frequent settlements, excellent rail access and the absence of technical terrain. It is a good long-distance walk for fit walkers who are happy covering steady daily distances on varied lowland paths.

It is made harder by wet chalk, muddy clay, hard lane walking, repeated short climbs through the North Downs and the need to stitch together several signed and unsigned route elements. Beginners expecting one continuous, clearly branded trail may find the navigation more demanding than the walking itself.

Weather and Best Time to Walk

Best months

The most practical walking window is **spring to early autumn**. The route is low-altitude throughout, with a high point of about 240 m, so the main seasonal issue is not mountain weather but **mud, slippery chalk, overgrown field edges, exposed downland, and daylight**.

Late spring and early autumn are usually the best choices for a full 15-day walk: enough daylight for the longer stages, generally better underfoot than winter, and less heat pressure than high summer. Summer is also very workable, but accommodation in smaller villages and along the spring-line sections should be booked ahead.

Season	Practical verdict	Main considerations
Spring	One of the best periods	Improving daylight, chalk grassland and woodland walking, but rain can still make chalk and clay slippery
Summer	Good, but book ahead	Long daylight, easier logistics, exposed chalk downs can feel hot, accommodation demand is higher
Autumn	Often excellent early on	Cooler walking conditions, but wetter spells bring mud back quickly on clay and shaded tracks
Winter	Possible, but not ideal	Short daylight, muddy chalk and clay, slippery descents, fewer daylight hours for navigation and 18–22 km stages

Rain, mud and slippery chalk

Rain has the biggest effect on this route. The Pilgrims' Way crosses chalk downland, clay, farm tracks, sunken lanes, woodland and river valleys, and the briefest wet spell can make chalky slopes and clay paths greasy.

This matters particularly where the route climbs or drops through the river gaps of the Wey, Mole, Darent, Medway and Stour, and on the steeper chalk sections around places such as St Catherine's Hill, St Martha's-on-the-Hill, Box Hill and the North Downs scarp. Footwear with reliable grip is more important than heavy mountain boots, but smooth-soled shoes are a poor choice after rain.

In prolonged wet weather, allow extra time for field edges, muddy woodland sections and minor-road walking where verges are soft or narrow. Walking poles can be useful on slippery chalk descents and in winter mud.

Heat, sun and water planning

In summer, the open chalk grassland and ridge sections can be exposed. The route passes through populated countryside, but not every stage has evenly spaced services directly on the line, and accommodation or refreshments may sit off-route in smaller villages.

Carry enough water to cover the full day rather than assuming frequent refills. This is especially important on longer stages such as Guildford to Westhumble, Oxted to Otford, and the 18 km Kent

stages from Aylesford to Harrietsham and Harrietsham to Boughton Lees.

A sunhat and sunscreen are worth packing in summer, particularly for the open North Downs sections and the Kent stages through orchards, vineyards, hop gardens and exposed farmland.

Wind, fog and storms

The Pilgrims' Way is not high, but parts of the North Downs are exposed enough for wind and poor visibility to affect navigation. Fog or low cloud on open downland can make path junctions, field edges and crest-line alternatives harder to follow, especially because this is not a single waymarked trail from end to end.

Bad visibility is a stronger issue here than the altitude suggests. Carry OS mapping, a guidebook or GPX, and do not rely only on occasional waymarks, particularly where the historic Pilgrims' Way, St Swithun's Way and the North Downs Way corridor diverge.

If thunderstorms are forecast, avoid lingering on exposed chalk tops, open ridges and isolated hilltop sections. There is usually lower ground or a village within reach, but stage plans should stay flexible in unsettled weather.

Daylight and winter practicality

A winter end-to-end walk is realistic for fit, well-equipped walkers, but it is a less forgiving version of the route. The ground is often muddier, chalk descents are more slippery, and short daylight makes the longer 18–22 km days harder to complete without walking in dusk or darkness.

Winter also increases the importance of route-finding. Missing a turning on a route that is not waymarked as one continuous trail can cost time, and that matters more when daylight is limited.

For winter section-walking, the route's rail access is a major advantage: many stages can be shortened, reached or left by train. For a continuous winter traverse, book accommodation carefully and check current opening arrangements for pubs, shops and any off-route overnight stops before travelling.

Accommodation and seasonal pressure

Summer is the busiest period for accommodation, particularly in smaller villages where beds may be limited or off the route. Book each night ahead for a continuous walk, rather than relying on finding rooms at the end of the day.

Spring and autumn can be easier for availability, but smaller inns, guesthouses and campsites may have variable opening patterns. This should be checked before travelling.

Seasonal closures and diversions

No special seasonal permit system is needed for the route itself, and there are no route-wide seasonal closures to plan around. However, public rights of way, farmland edges, woodland paths and National Trail sections can be affected by temporary diversions, maintenance, forestry work or local path issues.

Check current route information and train times before setting off, especially if walking long stages with fixed accommodation at the end of the day.

Safety Notes

The Pilgrims' Way is a low-altitude walk through populated countryside, not a mountain or wilderness route. The main safety issues are navigation, slippery chalk and clay after rain, road and village sections, exposed downland in poor weather or heat, and managing a long point-to-point itinerary without assuming the route will be continuously signed.

In an emergency in the UK, call **999** or **112** and ask for the relevant service. Give your location as clearly as possible using a grid reference, nearby road, village, church, station, landmark or the name of the path you are on.

Navigation and route continuity

This is **not a single waymarked National Trail from Winchester to Canterbury**. From Winchester to Farnham you follow St Swithun's Way waymarks; from Farnham towards Canterbury there is heavy overlap with the North Downs Way, but the historic Pilgrims' Way and the North Downs Way are not identical.

Carry OS mapping, a guidebook and/or a reliable offline GPX track, and expect to make choices where the historic spring-line route and the modern North Downs Way crest route diverge. Do not rely on waymarks alone, especially near villages, road crossings and connecting paths between the downs and accommodation.

Before setting off each morning, check the day's route, expected finish point, escape stations and any planned detours. This matters most on stages where accommodation or services may sit off the line of the walk.

Ground conditions

Chalk and clay can be very slippery after rain and muddy in winter. Short steep climbs and descents occur where river valleys cut through the downs, including around the Wey, Mole, Darent, Medway and Stour gaps.

Footwear with good grip is more useful than heavy mountain kit. Trekking poles can help on wet chalk descents, muddy field edges and the steeper approaches to downland viewpoints such as St Catherine's Hill, Box Hill and the scarp sections through Surrey and Kent.

Road walking and crossings

The route includes lane, village and minor-road walking. Wear visible clothing in dull weather, walk facing oncoming traffic where there is no pavement, and take extra care on bends, narrow lanes and at road crossings between villages.

Do not assume a quiet rural lane is safe because traffic is infrequent. Vehicles can appear quickly, and verges may be uneven or overgrown.

Weather exposure, heat and cold

The North Downs are not high, with a maximum elevation of about 240 m, but open chalk grassland and scarp-top sections can feel exposed in wind, rain or strong sun. Conditions can change quickly over a long day, particularly on stages of 18–22 km.

Carry waterproofs even in settled seasons, and add warm layers outside summer. In hot weather, start early, carry enough water, use sun protection and avoid underestimating the open sections where shade may be limited.

Water, rivers and wet ground

The walk crosses or passes river valleys including the Itchen, Wey, Mole, Darent, Medway and Stour. These are normal countryside crossings, but banks, bridges, wet grass and riverside paths can be slippery after rain.

At Box Hill and the Mole Gap, the well-known stepping-stones across the River Mole are a place to be cautious in wet conditions. Use a safer nearby crossing if the stones are wet, crowded or unsuitable; this should be checked before travelling.

Do not drink untreated water from rivers, streams or field troughs. Plan drinking water around towns, villages and booked accommodation, especially on warmer days or where services are sparse between stage ends.

Livestock, dogs and farmland

Expect farmland, field paths and enclosed tracks throughout the route. Keep gates as found, stay on the right of way, and give livestock plenty of space.

Dogs should be kept under close control, and on a lead where livestock, horses, roads or ground-nesting wildlife may be present. If cattle behave defensively, move calmly away and do not get between animals and their young.

Mobile signal and solo walking

The Pilgrims' Way is generally well served by nearby towns, villages and rail access, but mobile coverage should not be treated as guaranteed in woodland, valleys or below the scarp. Download maps and tickets before leaving accommodation, and keep a power bank available on longer stages.

Solo walkers should leave the day's plan with someone else, including the intended start, finish and any likely bailout station. This is particularly useful because the walk is point-to-point and some overnight stops may be off-route.

Daily pre-walk checks

Before starting each stage, check:

- the weather forecast, including heat, wind and heavy rain;
- the route line for the day, including whether following St Swithun's Way, the North Downs Way or a Pilgrims' Way variant;
- any path closures, diversions or local access notices;

- daylight hours and the realistic walking time for the stage;
- food and water availability before the next village or town;
- train options from nearby stations in case the day needs to be shortened;
- accommodation check-in arrangements and the route from the trail to the overnight stop;
- phone battery, offline maps and emergency contact details.

The safest approach is to treat each stage as a self-contained countryside walk rather than assuming the whole pilgrimage line will guide you from signpost to signpost.

Gear Recommendations

The Pilgrims' Way is a low-altitude walk, but it is not a casual waymarked stroll from end to end. Gear should prioritise reliable navigation, comfort over repeated long days, and grip on wet chalk, clay, lanes and farm tracks.

Footwear

Choose comfortable walking shoes or lightweight boots with good tread rather than heavy mountain footwear. There is no technical ground and the high point is only about 240 m, but wet chalk and clay can be very slippery, especially on descents, sunken lanes and short steeper climbs where the route crosses river gaps such as the Wey, Mole, Darent, Medway and Stour.

Waterproof footwear is useful in spring and autumn, and after sustained rain. In dry summer conditions, breathable trail shoes can work well for fit walkers carrying a light pack, provided they still have enough grip for chalk paths and muddy woodland sections.

Waterproofs and Layers

Carry a proper waterproof jacket on every stage, even for section walks from rail stations. The route is exposed in places on the North Downs and can also involve long village-to-village sections where there may be limited shelter between settlements.

A light insulating layer is sensible outside high summer, particularly for slower walkers, early starts, church visits, hilltop stops and waiting for trains at the end of a section. Waterproof trousers are worth packing in wet months or if walking the full route over consecutive days, when keeping clothing dry becomes more important.

Navigation

Navigation is the most important gear category on this route. The Pilgrims' Way is a historic line rather than a single continuously waymarked National Trail: from Winchester to Farnham it uses St Swithun's Way waymarks, then it overlaps heavily with the North Downs Way corridor towards Canterbury, but the historic spring-line route and the modern crest route are not always the same.

Carry at least one reliable offline navigation option, and preferably two:

- OS mapping for the full route or the relevant section.
- A guidebook or route description that makes clear which Pilgrims' Way variant is being followed.
- An offline GPX track on a phone or GPS device.
- A backup power bank for multi-day walkers and anyone navigating primarily by phone.

Relevant OS Explorer coverage includes 132, 144/145, 145/146, 147, 148, 149 and 137. Check current map coverage before buying or downloading, especially if walking only selected sections.

Water and Food Carry

The route passes through populated countryside, but do not assume that every village has open services at the time you arrive. Carry enough water for a full walking day between planned resupply stops, with extra capacity in warm weather on open downland sections.

Food carry can usually be light compared with remote mountain routes, but a packed lunch and emergency snacks are still sensible. This is especially true on the quieter spring-line stages, where accommodation and services can sit off the route and opening hours may not align with a walking day. This should be checked before travelling.

Trekking Poles

Trekking poles are optional, not essential. They are useful if carrying a heavier pack, walking in wet conditions, or tackling the short sharper climbs and descents around the downs and river valleys.

They can also help on slippery chalk, muddy clay and uneven farm tracks. Fast section walkers in dry conditions may prefer to leave them behind.

Inn-to-Inn Hikers

For walkers using hotels, B&Bs, inns and guesthouses, keep the pack compact and comfortable enough for consecutive 15-day walking. A typical inn-to-inn load should focus on waterproofs, spare socks, a warm layer, navigation, phone charging, basic first aid and enough food and water for the day.

Because some accommodation in smaller villages can be sparse or off route, carry shoes or sandals only if the extra weight is justified by the booking pattern. Laundry opportunities and drying space will vary, so quick-drying walking clothing is more useful than carrying many changes.

Campers

Camping is possible in places, but the route is not designed as a continuous campsite-to-campsite trail. Campsites exist in the broader corridor, yet they are not guaranteed at every stage end, and some may require detours from the line of walk. Book or check each night before committing to a camping itinerary.

Campers should keep weight under control, as the challenge is cumulative distance rather than altitude. A lightweight shelter, compact sleep system, stove if needed, waterproof packing and reliable navigation are more important than mountain-specific equipment. Water planning matters more when camping, as evening and morning water availability should not be assumed; this should be checked before travelling.

Fast and Section Hikers

The Pilgrims' Way is very rail-accessible, so many walkers tackle it in single-day or weekend sections. For these trips, the key items are still navigation, waterproofs, water, snacks and a charged phone, not a large expedition pack.

A small daypack is usually enough, but do not rely solely on signs. The change from St Swithun's Way to North Downs Way waymarking, plus the distinction between the historic Pilgrims' Way and the North Downs Way crest route, makes a downloaded map or GPX particularly useful for short sections where losing the line can waste the day.

Sun, Insects and Seasonal Extras

In summer, take sun cream, a hat and enough water for exposed chalk grassland and open ridge sections. Sunglasses can be useful on bright chalk tracks.

In warm months, basic insect repellent is sensible for woodland edges, water meadows and evening stops, though insects are not a defining difficulty of the route. In spring and autumn, add warmer gloves or a hat if starting early or finishing late.

Winter walking is possible for experienced walkers, but mud becomes a bigger factor on chalk and clay. If walking outside the main spring-to-autumn season, prioritise grippy footwear, waterproof trousers, an earlier start, a head torch and careful train planning.

Budget and Costs

The Pilgrims' Way is not a wilderness route, but it is not a cheap walk if completed as a 15-day inn-to-inn journey across southern England. Accommodation is the main cost, followed by food, rail travel and any taxis needed to reach off-route beds in smaller villages.

All figures below are planning estimates in GBP. Prices vary heavily by season, day of week, room type and how early beds and rail tickets are booked, so current prices should be checked before booking.

Typical full-route budget

These estimates assume the full Winchester-to-Canterbury walk over about 15 days, with 14 overnight stops. They exclude major sightseeing admission fees and any specialist equipment purchases.

Style	Likely spend	What it usually means
Budget	£700– £1,200	Camping or occasional hostel where available, simple rooms when necessary, supermarket lunches, limited pub meals, carrying your own luggage, minimal taxis
Mid-range	£1,400– £2,400	B&Bs, inns and modest hotels most nights, pub/café meals mixed with shop food, some off-route taxi transfers if accommodation is sparse
Comfortable	£2,500– £4,000+	Better hotels or private rooms, eating out most days, more taxis, luggage help or packaged arrangements where available

Solo walkers should budget more per person than pairs sharing twin or double rooms. Single rooms can be limited in villages, and a solo hiker may have to pay close to the full room rate.

Accommodation costs

The route passes through well-populated country, with hotels, guesthouses, B&Bs, inns, some campsites and a few hostels in or near the towns. The cheaper end of the budget is easier around larger places such as Winchester, Alton, Farnham, Guildford, Dorking/Westhumble, Merstham, Oxted, Otford, Aylesford, Lenham, Wye, Chilham and Canterbury than in smaller spring-line villages.

As a rough planning guide:

Accommodation type	Planning allowance
Campsite pitch / basic camping night	£10–£30 per person, where available
Hostel or very simple bed	£25–£60 per person, where available
B&B, inn or modest hotel	£70–£130+ per room, often more for peak dates
Comfortable hotel room	£120–£220+ per room

A fully camping-based itinerary is possible only with careful planning, because campsites are not guaranteed at every natural stage end. Expect occasional detours, taxis or a paid room if camping places do not line up with the day's walk.

Book accommodation ahead in summer and at weekends. Several stages finish in smaller places where beds may be sparse or slightly off the route, and leaving bookings late can increase both room cost and taxi cost.

Food and drink

Food costs depend on how often pubs and cafés are used. The walk passes through towns and villages regularly, but not every stage should be treated as having reliable refreshments exactly where needed, so buying lunch supplies before leaving larger settlements is sensible.

Food style	Planning allowance
Supermarket breakfasts/lunches, occasional pub meal	£15–£30 per day
Mix of cafés, pub dinners and shop lunches	£30–£55 per day
Eating out most meals	£55–£80+ per day

Accommodation that includes breakfast can reduce the daily food spend, but it may also mean a higher room rate. Carry snacks and water each day, especially where the route runs along downs, farm tracks and minor lanes between villages.

Transport to and from the route

Public transport is one of the strengths of this walk. Winchester has a station with direct trains from London Waterloo, and Canterbury has two stations, Canterbury West and Canterbury East, with frequent trains to London. Because this is a point-to-point walk, plan the return journey separately rather than assuming a circular transfer.

Rail fares vary too much to give a fixed figure. Advance tickets, off-peak travel and railcards can make a major difference; walk-up peak fares can be much higher. Current train times and fares should be checked before travelling.

For section walkers, transport can become the largest repeated cost. The route is unusually rail-accessible, with useful stations at or near places including Alton, Farnham, Guildford, Dorking, Merstham, Oxted, Otford, Kemsing, Cuxton, Aylesford, Bearsted/Hollingbourne, Lenham, Charing, Wye, Chilham and Canterbury, but individual stage logistics still need checking.

Taxis and off-route transfers

Taxis are not normally required every day, but they are useful when the preferred accommodation is away from the walking line or when a stage needs shortening. This is particularly relevant on smaller village stages and where the historic spring-line route does not finish neatly beside a large choice of beds.

As a planning allowance, short local transfers can add £10–£40 at a time, and more if the pickup is awkward or late in the day. Agree the fare in advance where possible, and ask accommodation providers about local taxi availability before relying on a transfer.

Luggage transfer and packages

Do not assume that a standard end-to-end baggage-transfer system covers the exact Pilgrims' Way line. The route is a historic pilgrimage corridor rather than a single waymarked National Trail, and it overlaps with but is distinct from the North Downs Way.

Walkers who do not want to carry a full pack may need to use a walking-holiday company, arrange taxis between booked accommodation, or carry luggage on some days and transfer it on others. Prices and availability are highly itinerary-dependent and should be checked before booking.

Self-guided packages can be convenient because they usually bundle accommodation planning and route notes, and may include luggage movement. They are normally more expensive than arranging the same walk independently, especially for solo walkers, but can save time where accommodation is sparse.

Other costs to allow for

Navigation is not optional on this route. The Pilgrims' Way is followed using St Swithun's Way waymarks from Winchester to Farnham, then North Downs Way acorn waymarks towards Canterbury, plus maps, GPX or a guidebook. Allow for OS mapping, a guidebook or a reliable mapping subscription rather than trying to save money by relying only on sporadic signs.

Also allow a small contingency for:

- paid entry to historic sites, churches or museums along the route;
- replacement food or drink in more expensive village shops;
- laundry on a 15-day walk;
- extra train or taxi journeys if bad weather, injury or accommodation changes force a stage alteration;
- a rest or short day if the cumulative mileage starts to tell.

A sensible contingency is at least 10–15% above the planned trip budget. The walk is logistically straightforward by English long-distance standards, but late accommodation changes and one-off taxis can quickly erode an over-tight budget.

Luggage Transfer, Guided Tours and Support Services

The Pilgrims' Way is much easier to support than a remote upland trail, but it is less straightforward than a branded National Trail with a mature baggage network. It is a historic line rather than one continuously waymarked trail, so any luggage transfer, taxi plan or walking-holiday itinerary needs to match the actual Winchester-to-Canterbury route being walked.

Luggage transfer

Do not assume there is a single end-to-end baggage service covering every Pilgrims' Way overnight stop. The practical options are usually:

- arranging luggage transfer through a walking-holiday company as part of a self-guided package;
- booking local taxis to move bags between nearby towns and villages;
- asking accommodation providers whether they can help with onward baggage movement;
- carrying a light overnight pack and using the excellent rail access to keep logistics simple.

This is most important on stages where accommodation is sparse or slightly off-route, particularly through smaller spring-line villages and the Kent Downs. If luggage transfer is essential, book accommodation and bag movement together rather than assuming it can be added later.

When arranging baggage movement, give providers the full accommodation address, mobile number, expected collection time and any access details. Confirm maximum bag weight, labelling, delivery time and what happens if a property is unmanned during the day. Current prices and availability should be checked before booking.

Self-guided walking packages

Self-guided packages suit walkers who want the route, accommodation and baggage logistics organised, while still walking independently each day. A typical package may include booked accommodation, daily route notes or GPX files, luggage transfer and advice on getting to Winchester and home from Canterbury.

The key planning point is route definition. Some companies may package walking in the same corridor using the North Downs Way, while the Pilgrims' Way often follows the older spring-line line and finishes at Canterbury rather than continuing towards Dover. Check that the itinerary starts at Winchester, follows the intended Pilgrims' Way line, and uses stages that match the overnight stops you want.

Also check whether the first section from Winchester to Farnham is included. This part is followed using St Swithun's Way waymarks before the route joins the North Downs Way corridor, so it should not be treated as a standard North Downs Way-only holiday.

Guided walks and pilgrimage support

Fully guided end-to-end departures are likely to be less common than self-guided arrangements, but guided pilgrimage walks, church-linked events and shorter led sections may be available at certain times. These are most useful for walkers interested in the religious and historical context of Winchester, St Martha's-on-the-Hill, Otford, Aylesford, Harbledown and Canterbury.

For a complete end-to-end walk, guided support should be checked carefully: number of walking days, whether baggage is included, the exact line followed, group size, accommodation standard and how road or village sections are handled. Dates, prices and inclusions vary, so confirm current details before booking.

Taxi transfers and rail support

Taxis are useful on this route, but mainly as targeted support rather than the default way to complete it. They can help with off-route accommodation, shorter walking days, bad-weather bail-outs, or returning from a village finish to a rail station.

The railway is often the better support system. Winchester, Alton, Farnham, Guildford, Dorking, Merstham, Oxted, Otford, Kemsing, Cuxton, Aylesford, Bearsted or Hollingbourne, Lenham, Charing, Wye, Chilham and Canterbury all have or are near stations, making section walking and emergency exits unusually practical for a long-distance route.

Train and taxi times should still be checked before travelling, especially for weekend services, evening finishes and smaller stations. Because this is a one-way west-to-east walk, plan the return from Canterbury separately; the city has Canterbury West and Canterbury East stations.

When support is worth paying for

Paid support is most useful if you want to walk the full route in one continuous trip without carrying more than a day pack. It is also worth considering if accommodation availability forces overnight stays away from the line, or if the group includes walkers with different daily distance limits.

It is less necessary for experienced walkers who are comfortable carrying a light pack and using rail links. The route passes through populated countryside, and the standard stages are short to moderate by long-distance walking standards, but navigation and continuity still require proper maps, GPX or a guidebook.

Whatever level of support is chosen, book ahead in summer and in the smaller villages. The limiting factor is often not walking difficulty, but matching beds, baggage, transport and the exact Pilgrims' Way route into one workable plan.

Shorter Hikes and Best Sections

The Pilgrims' Way is unusually good for section walking because many stage ends are in towns or villages with rail access nearby. The main caution is navigation: outside the St Swithun's Way and North Downs Way sections it should not be treated as one continuously signed trail, so carry OS mapping, a guidebook or a reliable GPX even for a single day.

Distances below follow the standard 15-stage Winchester-to-Canterbury breakdown and do not include optional detours.

Best for	Section	Approx. distance	Why choose it	Transport notes
Best day walk	Farnham to Guildford	17 km	A strong one-day introduction to the Surrey section, with Puttenham, Compton, the option of Watts Chapel, St Martha's-on-the-Hill and the approach to Guildford. It gives a clear feel for the chalk-and-sand ridge country without committing to a remote finish.	Farnham and Guildford both have railway stations. Check current train times before travelling.
Best weekend section	Guildford to Merstham, usually split at Westhumble / Box Hill	38 km	Two satisfying days with some of the route's best-known downland: Guildford to Box Hill via the Surrey Hills, then onwards towards Reigate Hill and Merstham. Expect a tougher first day at about 22 km, followed by a shorter second day of about 16 km.	Guildford and Merstham have stations; Dorking is near the Box Hill / Westhumble stage area. Accommodation around the middle of the section should be booked ahead.
Best 3-5 day section	Farnham to Oxted	68 km over 4 days	A practical mini-traverse of the North Downs corridor: Farnham to Guildford, Guildford to Westhumble, Westhumble to Merstham, then Merstham to Oxted. It includes St Martha's-on-the-Hill, Box Hill, the Mole Gap, Reigate Hill and good rail fall-back points.	Rail access is available at Farnham, Guildford, Dorking, Merstham and Oxted, making it one of the easiest multi-day sections to plan from London and the South East.
Best for scenery	Farnham to Merstham	55 km over 3 days	This is the strongest compact scenery section: wooded ridges, open chalk, views over the Weald, the hilltop church at St Martha's-on-the-Hill, Box Hill and the Reigate Hill area. It has more sustained downland character than the gentler western approach.	Start at Farnham station and finish at Merstham station. Dorking gives a useful rail option near the Box Hill / Westhumble stage.

Best for	Section	Approx. distance	Why choose it	Transport notes
Best for beginners	Chilham to Canterbury	11 km	A short final-day taste of the pilgrimage, with Chilham, Harbledown and the arrival into Canterbury. It is a manageable distance for walkers who want the historic finish without taking on the full route.	Chilham has a station; Canterbury has Canterbury West and Canterbury East. This is still a point-to-point walk, so plan the rail journey in advance.
Best for public transport	Farnham to Oxted	68 km over 4 days	This section combines good walking with frequent escape and join points, so it suits long weekends, flexible schedules and weather-dependent planning. It is also easy to shorten by walking only Farnham–Guildford, Guildford–Dorking, Dorking–Merstham or Merstham–Oxted.	Use the stations at Farnham, Guildford, Dorking, Merstham and Oxted. Exact train times and engineering works should be checked before travelling.
Best for villages and services	Aylesford to Canterbury	57 km over 4 days	A good Kent section for walkers who want villages, historic sites and a less remote feel: Aylesford, Kit's Coty House, Detling, Hollingbourne, Lenham, Charing, Boughton Lees, Wye, Chilham, Harbledown and Canterbury all sit in or near this later part of the route. It also brings in the orchards, hop gardens and vineyards that mark the Kent stages.	Aylesford, Lenham, Charing, Wye, Chilham and Canterbury have rail access. Some overnight stops on the standard stages are smaller places, so accommodation and onward transport should be checked before travelling.

Camping and very low-cost section hikes

Camping is possible in places along the wider route, but this is not a trail where camping can be assumed at every stage end. The Pilgrims' Way passes through populated countryside, farmland, villages and downland, and the practical pattern for most walkers is B&Bs, inns, guesthouses and hotels rather than a continuous campsite chain.

For a camping-based section, choose a rail-accessible stretch such as **Farnham to Oxted** or **Aylesford to Canterbury** so that plans can be adjusted if a campsite is full, off-route or closed. Campsite locations, opening dates and permissions should be checked before travelling.

Highlights and Points of Interest

The Pilgrims' Way is strongest as a journey of linked places rather than a single dramatic landscape. Its interest builds through cathedral cities, hilltop churches, chalk escarpment viewpoints, river gaps, Kentish villages and very old sacred sites. If time is limited, the places below are the ones most worth allowing extra time for.

Winchester, the Hospital of St Cross and the Itchen valley

Winchester gives the walk its most meaningful start. The traditional beginning is Winchester Cathedral, associated with the shrine of St Swithun, while many walkers also begin or pause at the medieval Hospital of St Cross just south of the city.

The Hospital of St Cross is especially relevant to the route because the Wayfarer's Dole of bread and ale is still given to those who ask. Allow time here if the first day is not being rushed; opening arrangements and visitor access should be checked before travelling.

Leaving the city, the route climbs out of the Itchen water meadows towards St Catherine's Hill. This early section quickly shifts the walk from urban pilgrimage setting to chalk downland.

St Catherine's Hill, Winchester

St Catherine's Hill is one of the best early viewpoints on the route. It rises steeply from the Itchen valley south-east of Winchester and gives a first proper look back over the city.

The hill is crowned by an Iron Age fort and the buried ruins of a Norman chapel, making it more than just a scenic climb. It is also worth noting the name carefully: this is St Catherine's Hill at Winchester, not St Catherine's near Guildford or St Martha's-on-the-Hill in Surrey.

Chawton and Jane Austen country

Between New Alresford and Alton, Chawton is the main literary detour. The village is closely associated with Jane Austen, who lived and wrote there, and Jane Austen's House is close to the route.

This is one of the better places to build in a slower morning or afternoon if combining the walk with cultural stops. Opening times for Jane Austen's House should be checked before travelling.

Watts Chapel, Compton

Near Compton, Watts Chapel is one of the most distinctive architectural stops on the whole route. The Grade I-listed terracotta mortuary chapel was designed by Mary Seton Watts and built by Compton villagers between 1895 and 1904.

Its Celtic Revival relief decoration makes it a memorable short detour near St Martha's Hill. The nearby Watts memorial cross also ties the site explicitly to the Pilgrims' Way, so it is not just an unrelated attraction off to the side.

St Martha's-on-the-Hill

St Martha's-on-the-Hill is one of the defining Surrey landmarks of the walk. The Norman church stands on a sandy ridge above Guildford and is reached only on foot, which gives it a strong sense of arrival.

The church lies on the line of the old Pilgrims' Way and offers wide views over the Surrey Hills and the Weald. For many walkers, this is the clearest expression of the route's hilltop-church character.

Box Hill and the Mole Gap

Box Hill is the most famous natural landmark on the Surrey part of the route. The chalk summit stands above Dorking where the North Downs are cut by the River Mole, creating one of the key river gaps crossed by the walk.

The Mole crossing, with stepping-stones across the river, makes this section particularly memorable. Expect this area to feel busier than quieter spring-line villages, especially in good weather, but it is still worth lingering for the views and the contrast between river valley and chalk heights.

Reigate Hill and the Surrey chalk scarp

East of Box Hill, Reigate Hill gives another strong dose of open downland and chalk-scarp walking. The appeal here is less about a single monument and more about long southward views over the Weald as the route continues east through Surrey.

This is a good section for walkers who value landscape over built heritage. In poor weather, chalk and clay can be slippery, so the same viewpoints can require more careful footing than the modest altitude suggests.

Otford and the Darent valley

Otford is one of the key Kentish villages on the route, sitting below the downs where the walk crosses the River Darent. It is a natural place to slow down because it combines village character, a river-valley crossing and historic remains.

The ruins of an Archbishop's Palace give Otford particular significance on a route tied so strongly to Canterbury. It is also a useful point for walkers thinking in stages, as the Darent valley marks a clear landscape break.

The Medway, Aylesford and Kit's Coty House

The Medway crossing near Cuxton and Aylesford is another of the major valley moments on the route. After the Surrey and west Kent downs, the river gives a clear change in scale and setting.

Near Aylesford, Kit's Coty House is one of the most important prehistoric sites associated with the walk. This Neolithic chambered long barrow, built from large sarsen stones and dating from around 4000 BC, is one of the Medway Megaliths.

It is reached off the Pilgrims' Way itself, but it is worth the detour for anyone interested in how much older this travel corridor is than medieval pilgrimage. Build in time rather than trying to add it at the end of a long day.

Kent Downs, orchards, hop gardens and vineyards

The later Kent stages add a different texture from the Hampshire and Surrey sections. Alongside chalk downs and village lanes, the route passes through country associated with hop gardens, vineyards and orchards.

This is not a remote wilderness section, but it is one of the most characteristic parts of the walk. The interest comes from the mix of downland, cultivated Kent countryside and repeated small settlements such as Hollingbourne, Harrietsham, Lenham, Charing and Boughton Lees.

Wye, Chilham and the Stour valley

Near the end of the walk, the River Stour gives the route its final major valley setting. Wye and Chilham are the key places here, with Chilham standing out as one of the most attractive villages on the entire route.

Chilham has timber-framed houses around a village square, with a castle and church nearby. It is an excellent place to pause before the final approach to Canterbury, especially if the last stage is being kept short.

Harbledown and the approach to Canterbury

Harbledown is the last village before Canterbury and has strong pilgrimage associations. Traditionally, this was where pilgrims gained their first sight of the cathedral, making it an important psychological point near the end of the journey.

The medieval St Nicholas Hospital adds to the sense that the final approach is not just a suburban walk into a city. It is worth keeping enough time and energy for this section rather than treating it as a simple march to the finish.

Canterbury Cathedral

Canterbury Cathedral is the historic goal of the Pilgrims' Way and the site of the shrine of St Thomas Becket. It is also a UNESCO World Heritage Site and the mother church of the Church of England.

For walkers completing the full Winchester-to-Canterbury line, this is the natural place to finish properly rather than simply reaching the city centre. Cathedral access, services, visitor hours and any admission arrangements should be checked before travelling.

Best places to spend extra time

Place	Why linger
Winchester	Cathedral, Hospital of St Cross and the first climb to St Catherine's Hill
Chawton	Jane Austen associations close to the route between New Alresford and Alton
Compton and St Martha's Hill	Watts Chapel, the Watts memorial cross and one of the route's best hilltop churches
Box Hill and the Mole Gap	Classic chalk-summit scenery, the River Mole and stepping-stones
Otford	Darent valley setting and the ruins of an Archbishop's Palace

Place	Why linger
Aylesford and Kit's Coty House	Medway valley and a major prehistoric monument off the route
Chilham	One of the finest village stops near the end of the walk
Harbledown and Canterbury	Final pilgrimage approach and Canterbury Cathedral

Common Mistakes and Planning Tips

The Pilgrims' Way is logistically straightforward in some ways — rail access is excellent and the walk stays in populated countryside — but it catches out walkers who treat it like a single signed National Trail. The main risks are navigation drift, accommodation gaps, and underestimating how slow wet chalk, clay and repeated valley crossings can feel over 15 days.

Common mistake	Better plan
Assuming the Pilgrims' Way is waymarked end to end	Use St Swithun's Way waymarks from Winchester to Farnham, North Downs Way acorns from Farnham towards Canterbury, and carry OS mapping, GPX and a guidebook throughout.
Confusing it with the North Downs Way	Treat them as related but separate routes. The Pilgrims' Way often follows the spring line below the downs, while the North Downs Way uses more of the chalk crest and continues to Dover.
Booking beds too late in smaller villages	Reserve each night ahead, especially in summer. Accommodation is usually available somewhere nearby, but not always directly on the line of the route.
Assuming every settlement has reliable food supplies	Plan food around the larger stops and check current pub, café and shop opening before each stage. This should be checked before travelling, especially for evenings and Sundays.
Planning only by mileage	Allow for mud, lanes, field edges, route-finding and short steeper climbs where rivers cut through the downs, including the Wey, Mole, Darent, Medway and Stour gaps.
Forgetting the finish is one-way	Arrange transport back from Canterbury separately. Canterbury has Canterbury West and Canterbury East stations, but onward train times should be checked before travelling.
Relying on one old GPX track	Cross-check any GPX against current maps and a guidebook. This matters more here than on a single National Trail because several variants of the historic line exist.

Navigation: do not follow acorns blindly

The biggest planning error is to assume that North Downs Way acorns equal the Pilgrims' Way. From Farnham eastwards the routes overlap heavily, but they are not identical. The historic Pilgrims' Way line often sits lower on the spring line at the foot of the downs, while the National Trail frequently uses the crest.

Before starting, decide which version of the Winchester-to-Canterbury route is being walked and stick to it. The 214 km / 133 mile figure used here follows the LDWA-style full Winchester route and the standard 15-stage breakdown; other quoted distances vary because they include different mixes of road, spring-line and North Downs Way crest walking.

Carry OS mapping and a guidebook rather than relying only on waymarks. The first part uses St Swithun's Way between Winchester and Farnham, then the North Downs Way waymarking becomes useful, but there is no single continuous Pilgrims' Way waymarking system from Winchester Cathedral or the Hospital of St Cross to Canterbury Cathedral.

Accommodation: book the awkward nights first

The route passes through many towns and villages, but accommodation is unevenly spaced. Beds are easier around places such as Winchester, Alton, Farnham, Guildford, Dorking, Aylesford and Canterbury than in smaller spring-line villages and downland sections.

Book the whole chain before committing to travel dates, or at least secure the constrained nights first. If accommodation lies off-route, include the extra walk or local transport in the day's plan rather than treating the stage distance as the full day's effort.

Camping and hostels exist only in some areas, so they should not be assumed as a complete end-to-end strategy without checking each night. Wild camping is not a practical default for this route.

Food and water: do not mistake "populated" for "always serviced"

The Pilgrims' Way is not remote, but that does not mean every village has a shop, open pub or daytime café. Smaller places can be sparse for supplies, and opening hours can matter more than map symbols.

Carry enough food for the day, especially on stages that finish in smaller settlements such as Wrotham, Halling, Harrietsham, Boughton Lees or Chilham. Check current opening times for evening meals and breakfast before booking accommodation; this should be checked before travelling.

Water planning is generally easier than on upland trails because the walk passes settlements regularly, but do not depend on churches, pubs or cafés being open exactly when reached. Start each day with enough water for the full stage in warm weather.

Stage planning: leave margin for wet ground and route-finding

The standard schedule uses 15 stages ranging from short days to a 22 km day between Guildford and Westhumble. Fit, experienced walkers can compress the route, but long consecutive days are harder when the chalk and clay are wet.

Chalk can be slippery after rain, clay can become heavy and muddy in winter, and sunken lanes can slow progress. The route is low-altitude, with a high point around 240 m, but the repeated dips through river gaps add effort that is easy to underestimate on paper.

The short stages in Kent are not wasted time if they allow for accommodation availability, sightseeing or transport connections. Do not automatically merge them without checking where the next realistic bed and meal will be.

Transport: use the railway, but plan the gaps

One of the route's strengths is rail access. Winchester, Alton, Farnham, Guildford, Dorking, Merstham, Oxted, Otford, Kemsing, Cuxton, Aylesford, Lenham, Charing, Wye, Chilham and Canterbury are all on or near useful rail options, and Bearsted or Hollingbourne can help around Detling.

This makes section-walking very realistic, but it also creates a trap: station proximity is not the same as a guaranteed convenient train at the end of a wet or late day. Check current train times before relying on a station for escape, especially at weekends and on shorter winter days.

For an end-to-end walk, remember that Winchester to Canterbury is a point-to-point journey. Book the outward and return travel as separate legs rather than assuming a circular transport plan.

Weather and ground: take the downs seriously even though they are low

The Pilgrims' Way is not a mountain route, but exposed chalk downland can be hot, windy or slippery depending on season. Spring, summer and autumn are the best walking seasons, with winter bringing more mud on chalk and clay.

Footwear with reliable grip is more useful than heavy mountain kit. In wet weather, expect slower going on farm tracks, sunken lanes and field paths, particularly where the route climbs out of the Wey, Mole, Darent, Medway and Stour valleys.

Check the forecast before exposed sections over the downs and carry sun protection in summer. Shade and services are not always exactly where they look convenient on the map.

Historic detours: choose them deliberately

There are worthwhile places close to the route, including Chawton, Watts Chapel near Compton, Kit's Coty House near Aylesford, Harbledown and Canterbury Cathedral. The mistake is adding every detour without adjusting the day.

Decide in advance which historic stops matter most and build time into the relevant stage. A short detour can still affect arrival time if it falls on a longer day or before a booked evening meal.

Final Advice

The Pilgrims' Way is best suited to walkers who enjoy historic landscapes, churches, old trackways and steady day-after-day mileage more than remote mountain walking. The terrain is moderate and low-altitude, but the route asks for self-reliance: it is a pilgrimage line, not a single fully waymarked trail.

The main thing to plan carefully is navigation. Between Winchester and Farnham you will be using St Swithun's Way; from Farnham towards Canterbury much of the walking follows or overlaps the North Downs Way, but the historic Pilgrims' Way often sits lower on the spring line while the modern National Trail takes the chalk crest. Carry OS mapping, a reliable guidebook or GPX, and check for path diversions before setting out.

Accommodation also deserves advance planning. The route passes through well-served towns such as Winchester, Alton, Farnham, Guildford, Dorking, Otford, Aylesford, Lenham, Wye, Chilham and Canterbury, but smaller spring-line villages can have limited beds and some options may sit off-route. Booking each night ahead is the safest approach, especially in summer.

For many walkers the richest sections are the Surrey and Kent downland stretches: St Martha's-on-the-Hill, Box Hill, the Darent and Medway crossings, Kit's Coty House, the orchards and hop-garden country towards the Stour, and the final approach through Harbledown into Canterbury. These are the places where the route feels most clearly like a long historical corridor rather than just a sequence of paths.

The full Winchester-to-Canterbury walk works well as a 15-day journey, particularly for anyone drawn to the pilgrimage tradition and the sense of travelling west to east across southern England. It is also one of England's better long routes for section hiking, thanks to rail access at or near many stage points including Winchester, Alton, Farnham, Guildford, Dorking, Merstham, Oxted, Otford, Kemsing, Cuxton, Aylesford, Lenham, Charing, Wye, Chilham and Canterbury.

The final caution is simple: do not treat The Pilgrims' Way as the same thing as the North Downs Way. They overlap heavily, but they are different routes with different logic and different finishes. Plan the version you intend to walk, keep a close eye on junctions, and allow extra time in wet weather when chalk and clay become slippery and slow.