



SOUTHWEST

Broadchurch, starring Olivia Colman and David Tennant, was filmed in Bridport



■ They say the pace of life is slower in the West Country, and this year's choices certainly have a familiar look. There's something comforting about it, of course, like clotted cream on a hot scone. Nowhere can challenge the dominance of Bath, Bristol and Cheltenham, the three contrasting wealth magnets that have dominated the list every year. Exeter is probably closest, but until it sorts out its soulless, chain-store-dominated high street, the big three can sleep peacefully.

■ At least there's a rival for our favourite outdoor honeypot, Chagford, which has lorded it over the rest of Dartmoor on every one of our lists. (Superfast broadband means it's no disaster indoors, either.) Its near neighbour, timeless, bustling North Bovey, is a welcome and worthy challenger.

■ Elsewhere, it seems there's only one reason to want to live beside the seaside. Our coastal picks, Fowey, Falmouth, Mudeford and Topsham, all owe their place on the chart to their supersmart sailing scenes. The lesson for other seaside towns looking to up their game? Get a marina. Or, if they can't manage that, at least a branch of Jack Wills.

■ Much has been made of the new electric trains that will bring Bath within a big hour of London Paddington. Will this turn our glorious Romano-Georgian Unesco World Heritage Site into just another long-distance commuter town – like Reading, but with nicer windows – or perhaps inspire a sensible trend towards reverse commuting? (Who wouldn't rather spend days in Bath and nights in London?) And don't be surprised if the continued expansion of Newquay airport gives Cornwall a significant boost. Flybe's new services to Doncaster/Sheffield, Glasgow, Aberdeen and Liverpool will make the wilder corners of the west a lot more accessible from the rest of Britain.

■ Rather than Somerset, we think Kim, Kanye and co should be looking at Wiltshire (the new Gloucestershire). Bruton, Somerset's starriest little town, has been overrun with urban slurry-seekers for the past two years. Tisbury and Mere, Wiltshire's new entries (as well as returning star Marlborough), offer a chance to hang out in muddy pastures new. Kanye could feed his Ikea habit in Bristol. Or Southampton.



1 BATH

It's renowned for its Roman baths and 18th-century Georgian architecture, and from next year, Bath will have another claim to fame that's already getting the Regency bosoms of this cherished city heaving: rail electrification will speed commuters to London in just 65 minutes. Estate agents say 40% of buyers are from the capital – they flock not to take the waters in the restored spa, but to enjoy the superb shopping, five independent schools, two universities, characterful pubs and abundance of parks and open space. And they aren't just pushing up prices in the prestigious Royal Crescent and Circus, where the best-preserved houses already command more than £3m: the impact of their grand tour is being felt in townhouses and cottages at more reasonable (just) prices. Alternatively, Bath Riverside is a scheme of 2,281 homes, receiving mixed reviews, on a 44-acre site about 20 minutes' walk from the centre.

The downsides are predictable: many houses are heavily protected by the heritage police, so are more expensive to maintain or extend. Parking is difficult, it's hilly to walk around and tourists are absolutely everywhere. For now, though, that doesn't put us off.

What the locals say It's like west London – but with trickier parking.

Why we love it Bathed in glory.

2 BRIDPORT, DORSET

Quiet ordinariness in an extraordinarily beautiful location is the making of this understated market town. Bridport is easy to champion, thanks to its romantic

coastal path, a dramatic beach, artisan shops, twice-weekly markets, the art deco Electric Palace cinema and the Lyric Theatre. The place really comes alive during its festivals: food and beer, literature and, er, hats. It has several primary schools, but only one secondary – not an issue, perhaps, for the growing population of energetic retirees.

There are two housing markets in Bridport. Inland, prices range from less than £250,000 for an Edwardian starter home to £750,000 or more for a farmhouse with land. Flats and houses with sea views at West Bay – formerly Bridport Harbour, but now best known as ITV's Broadchurch – are among the most affordable on the south coast, going for between £250,000 and £600,000.

What the locals say Have you been an extra yet?

Why we love it Old-school seaside, with an outside chance of seeing David Tennant and Olivia Colman on set.

3 BRISTOL: REDLAND

With manicured Clifton increasingly too expensive for ordinary mortals, and the creative hang-outs of St Pauls and Stokes Croft still a bit too gritty for aspirational families, Redland, a 15-minute ride from Temple Meads station, is in high demand. The average property price is now £408,000, up 12% in a year, but on a like-for-like basis, it's cheaper than Clifton, where neat terraces typically sell for £625,000. In Redland, even the most sought-after family terraces, within a short walk of the bars and restaurants of Whiteladies Road, cost £600,000, while tall Victorian villas fetch £1m. For a more independent vibe, locals head to

Chandos Road, home to Wilks, a Michelin-starred restaurant, and No Man's Grace, a cool British-style tapas restaurant; the nearby Kensington Arms is the go-to gastropub.

The Redland Green Club has 10 tennis courts (six of them grass); there are allotments nearby. The 400-acre open space of the Downs is within walking distance, as is the Cube cinema, frequented by the students who reside in Redland's smaller homes. Families compete to buy homes near the independent Redland High School for girls, housed in an 18th-century mansion, and the popular, 1,400-pupil Redland Green comprehensive.

What the locals say There's more to life than Clifton.

Why we love it Period grace, green space and a youthful Bristol buzz.

4 CHAGFORD, DEVON

Devon is a county full of irresistible charms: bountiful countryside, glorious coastline, bustling towns and villages, buttery scones. Chagford, within the picturesque folds of Dartmoor, encapsulates its allure. It feels like a town, despite having just 1,500 residents – numbers are swelled by walkers and day trippers, some drawn by the nearby foodie favourite Gidleigh Park (where Michael Caines has given way to the Michelin-garlanded Michael Wignall). It hosts the occasional book, food or film festival, as well as an agricultural show, but for most, Chagford's crowning glories are the 750-year-old church and two renowned hardware and outdoor stores, one of which dates from 1898. Granite cottages in the centre (from about £200,000) give

way to Edwardian villas and converted farmhouses, then more recent semis and bungalows. More are planned, proof that this is an evolving place to live.

One of the first places in the country to have electricity – and one of our first regional Best Places winners – Chagford is blessed with high-speed internet, a priceless commodity in the sticks, and one that attracts small businesses and creative types. There's a strong sense of community, and its appeal is cemented by excellent sports facilities, an open-air solar-heated pool, a primary school and easy access to the secondaries of Exeter. For special occasions or life's essentials, depending on how you look at it, Waitrose and Lidl are just 13 miles away in Okehampton.

What the locals say We're still winning.

Why we love it It's a community-centred beauty spot.

5 CHELTENHAM, GLOUCESTERSHIRE

This has to be one of the most highly fancied spa towns in Britain. Horsey types and gamblers love the National Hunt races here. There are science, jazz and food and drink festivals to complement the Times and Sunday Times-sponsored literary bonanza. Cheltenham is also home to the doughnut-shaped GCHQ, four theatres and the University of Gloucestershire.

Let's just admit that this town is not short on aspiration. It has more trendy shops, restaurants and pavement cafes than you can wave your Amex card at. Sip a flat white at Moka Coffee House, order seared scallops and pig's head carpaccio at the two-Michelin-starred Le Champignon Sauvage (no mobiles



Harbour lights

Main picture, Falmouth harbour (7). From top, dining out in Montpellier, Cheltenham (5); the view from Golden Cap, near Bridport (2); and the Georgian curves of the Circus, in Bath (1)



in the dining room), or kick back at Jessop House, run by the Wild Beer Co.

There's an elbows-out scramble for Georgian townhouses in hotspots such as Montpellier, the Park and the Suffolks, where prices tip £2m, all because of their proximity to the even more highly fancied schools: Cheltenham Ladies' College has day pupils among its 850 students, then there's Pate's Grammar, Balcarras School and Cheltenham College. Modern family homes in the suburb of Charlton Kings are also popular. And if you want to escape at the weekend, you've got the Cotswolds on your York stone doorstep.

What the locals say Where did you buy your gilet?

Why we love it Upmarket shopping, elegant housing and well-kept parks.

6 EXETER: TOPSHAM

Everyone here lives near or overlooking the untroubled waters of the sparkling Exe estuary. They might be in one of the 18th-century Dutch-gabled villas (£2m-plus), a converted sail loft, a terraced cottage or even – to the shock of some – a new home on the fringe, all just 12 minutes by train from central Exeter. It makes Topsham the perfect combination of city, coast and country for an older population of deep-rooted Devonites, as well as a growing number of yummy-mummy (and daddy) types. That said, despite the popular local primary school, the demographic is still much more hip replacement than hipster.

Near the M5, and a short drive or train hop from Exmouth's prom and beach, Topsham has classy businesses that appeal to both crowds, among them Pebblebed (a vineyard), the Salutation (an inn with rooms that attracts Chelsea-tractor weekenders) and the Pig & Pallet (which sells locally sourced meat). The "big society" is out in force: residents manage an outdoor pool, a sailing club, a library and a museum, and raised £300,000 to prevent waterfront land being bought by developers.

What the locals say Can I help you?

Why we love it A perfectly preserved suburb: the best in the west.

7 FALMOUTH, CORNWALL

There's a salty buzz about Falmouth that shows no sign of abating, so it's on our Best Places list – again. The sea views, beaches, marinas and open countryside are a constant, but at the same time, thriving new industries – creative and digital, marine and renewable – are attracting younger families in search of a perfect work/life balance. And that life is the finest blend of rural and urban in the West Country.

There's a young, lively feel, thanks to the ever-growing university presence and the harbourside development of shops and restaurants, but the energy has become self-perpetuating, with quirky bookshops, cinemas, art galleries, bars, cafes and restaurants springing up. The basics, too, are in place: Falmouth has good schools and a hospital, while the private schools, mainline station and larger shops of Truro are within easy reach. Prices are still manageable: two-bedroom flats on the waterfront go for £250,000–£400,000. A family home within walking distance of the beach – or your boat – will set you back upwards of £500,000.

What the locals say I'm here to stay.

Why we love it There's always something happening.