Tour Code
JHWI

ADVENTURESABROAD

WALES & THE ISLE OF MAN: Castles to Cottages

with Jonathan Hodgson

14 days

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Day 1 Arrival in Cardiff

Cardiff didn't become the capital of Wales until 1955, and didn't quite feel like one for some time after that. It grew not from ancient royal prerogative but from coal — by 1905 it was the busiest coal-exporting port in the world, its dock wealth funding the civic parks, ornate arcades, and confident Edwardian architecture that still define the city centre today.

Arrivals are throughout the day, giving travellers time to settle into the Welsh capital before we gather this evening for our welcome dinner.

Overnight in Cardiff

Included Meal(s): Dinner

Day 2 Cardiff Castle, National Museum & Bute Park

Our exploration of Wales begins at Cardiff Castle, one of Britain's most remarkable historic buildings. The site has been occupied continuously since Roman times, and today's castle combines Roman foundations, a Norman keep, and perhaps the most extravagant Victorian interiors in the country.

Commissioned by the immensely wealthy 3rd Marquess of Bute and designed by architect William Burges, the lavish apartments include the spectacular Arab Room, Banqueting Hall, Library, and Roof Garden. Together they form one of the great achievements of the Victorian Gothic Revival.

We also visit the wartime shelters built within the castle walls during the 1930s and 1940s, offering a glimpse into Cardiff's experience during the Second World War.

Later we visit the National Museum Cardiff, home to important natural history collections and one of Europe's finest collections of Impressionist and Post-Impressionist art outside London. Works by Monet, Renoir, Van Gogh, and others sit alongside exhibitions that help explain the history and geology of Wales itself.

The afternoon is free to enjoy Cardiff at leisure. Bute Park, stretching north from the castle along the River Taff, offers pleasant walking paths through one of the largest urban parks in Britain.

Overnight in Cardiff.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 3 From Cardiff: Big Pit, Waterfall Country & Brecon Cathedral

Today we explore the industrial and natural landscapes of South Wales.

Our first stop is Big Pit National Coal Museum at Blaenavon, part of a UNESCO World Heritage Site that preserves one of the most important coal-mining regions in Britain. Former miners lead visitors underground into the original workings, providing a firsthand understanding of the industry that shaped modern Wales and fuelled Britain's industrial revolution.

From the coalfields we continue into Bannau Brycheiniog National Park, better known internationally as the Brecon Beacons. Here the landscape changes dramatically as forested valleys and upland ridges replace the former industrial heartland.

A walk through the celebrated Waterfall Country brings us to Sgwd yr Eira, the "Spout of Snow," one of Wales' most famous waterfalls. The path passes through ancient woodland before reaching the falls themselves, where a trail allows visitors to walk behind the curtain of cascading water.

Our day concludes at Brecon Cathedral, originally founded as a Norman priory and elevated to cathedral status in 1923. Its peaceful riverside setting provides a fitting contrast to the dramatic landscapes and industrial heritage encountered earlier in the day.

Overnight in Cardiff.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 4 Through the Heart of Wales to Pembrokeshire

Today we travel westward across the heart of Wales toward Pembrokeshire.

Our first stop is Swansea's National Waterfront Museum, which explores more than three centuries of Welsh industry, innovation, and social change. Interactive exhibits trace the development of coal mining, metalworking, transport, and manufacturing, helping place yesterday's visit to Big Pit within its wider historical context.

Continuing into the beautiful Tywi Valley, we visit two of Wales' most dramatic castles. Carreg Cennen Castle occupies a spectacular limestone outcrop overlooking the surrounding countryside and is widely regarded as one of the most dramatically situated castles in Britain. Its commanding position and panoramic views remain every bit as impressive today as they were in medieval times.

Nearby Castell Dinefwr was once the principal stronghold of the medieval Welsh kingdom of Deheubarth. Standing above the River Tywi amid ancient parkland and woodland, it offers insight into a period when Wales was divided among competing native kingdoms long before English conquest.

This afternoon we continue into Pembrokeshire, passing through some of Wales' most storied landscapes before arriving in St Davids, Britain's smallest city. Our base for the next three nights is the award-winning Twr y Felin Hotel, allowing us time to explore this remarkable corner of Wales at a more relaxed pace.

Overnight in St Davids.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 5 The Pembrokeshire Coast

Today we explore one of Britain's most beautiful coastal regions.

The Pembrokeshire Coast National Park is unique among Britain's national parks in being designated primarily for its coastline. Here towering limestone cliffs, hidden coves, offshore islands, and sweeping ocean views create some of the country's most memorable scenery.

Our day begins at St Govan's Chapel, a tiny medieval chapel built directly into a fissure in the coastal cliffs. Reached by a flight of stone steps, it occupies one of the most atmospheric locations in Wales and is closely associated with the traditions surrounding the 6th-century saint from whom it takes its name.
Nearby, we visit the Green Bridge of Wales, a magnificent natural limestone arch sculpted by Atlantic waves over thousands of years.

A guided walk introduces us to part of the Pembrokeshire Coast Path before we continue to the Stackpole Estate and Bosherston Lily Ponds, a tranquil network of lakes and flooded valleys rich in birdlife and coastal scenery.

Time permitting, we also visit Barafundle Bay, a secluded sandy beach regularly ranked among the finest in Britain.

Overnight in St Davids.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 6 St Davids & Ramsey Island

Today we remain in St Davids, exploring the city and its remarkable religious heritage. At its heart stands St David's Cathedral, built on the site associated with Wales' patron saint, Dewi Sant (St David), who died here in the 6th century. For centuries the cathedral attracted pilgrims from across Britain and Europe, and remains one of the country's most significant religious monuments. Adjacent to the cathedral are the impressive ruins of the medieval Bishop's Palace, a striking reminder of the wealth and influence once enjoyed by the church in this remote corner of Wales.

Later we board a boat for a cruise around nearby Ramsey Island, a nature reserve renowned for its dramatic sea cliffs, seabird colonies, and marine wildlife. Depending on conditions, sightings may include grey seals, gannets, guillemots, razorbills, and other species that thrive along this rugged stretch of coastline.

From both sea and mainland, the views across St Bride's Bay and the open Atlantic reinforce the sense that we have reached the western edge of Wales.

Time permitting, we also enjoy a walk at Whitesands Bay.

Overnight in St Davids.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 7 Aberystwyth, Portmeirion & Conwy

Today is one of the longer travel days of the tour as we journey from southwest Wales to the north coast, following much of the country's western shoreline.

Our first major stop is Aberystwyth, an attractive university town overlooking Cardigan Bay. Here we ride the historic Aberystwyth Cliff Railway, Britain's longest electric funicular railway, to Constitution Hill for panoramic views of the coast, the Irish Sea, and the mountains of inland Wales.

Continuing north, we visit Portmeirion, one of the most unusual destinations in Britain. Designed by architect Sir Clough Williams-Ellis and built over five decades, this colourful Italianate village combines Mediterranean-inspired architecture with a stunning estuary setting. Its whimsical design has made it famous worldwide and a favourite location for film and television productions.

By evening we reach Conwy on the north coast, where medieval walls, castles, and mountain scenery announce our arrival in a very different Wales from the one we left this morning.

Overnight in Llandudno.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 8 Eryri (Snowdonia) National Park & Beddgelert

Today we explore Eryri National Park (Snowdonia), home to some of the most dramatic mountain scenery in Britain.

Our principal destination is Yr Wyddfa (Snowdon), the highest mountain in Wales at 1,085 metres. We ascend by the historic Snowdon Mountain Railway, Britain's only public rack-and-pinion railway, climbing through forests, mountain pastures, and rugged alpine terrain to the summit area. Weather permitting, the views extend across Wales, Anglesey, the Irish Sea, and beyond.

Following our excursion through Eryri (Snowdonia) National Park, we'll pause in the storybook village of Beddgelert for a leisurely included lunch. Nestled among the mountains and associated with the famous Welsh legend of Gelert, this is one of North Wales' most charming communities and an ideal place to relax before our afternoon sightseeing.

On our return to Conwy we stop at Swallow Falls, one of Wales' most celebrated waterfalls, and enjoy views of the Fairy Glen near Betws-y-Coed, where the River Conwy has carved a dramatic gorge through moss-covered rock.

Overnight in Llandudno.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Lunch

Day 9 Conwy Castle - Chester - Liverpool

This morning we visit Conwy Castle, one of the finest medieval fortifications in Europe and a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Built by Edward I during his conquest of Wales in the late 13th century, its massive towers and remarkably complete curtain walls dominate the estuary below. From the battlements we enjoy sweeping views of the harbour, surrounding countryside, and mountains of Eryri.

We then say "Siwrnai dda" to Wales and cross into England, continuing to Chester, one of Britain's most historic cities. Founded as a Roman fortress nearly two thousand years ago, Chester retains the most complete circuit of Roman and medieval town walls in the country.

A guided walking tour introduces the city's unique Rows, the cathedral precinct, and the remains of Britain's largest Roman amphitheatre.

Overnight in Liverpool.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 10 Liverpool - Ferry to Douglas, Isle of Man

The morning in Liverpool is unhurried — the city has been managing departures for centuries and sees no reason to rush them. Our ferry leaves in the late morning/early afternoon, the Mersey broadening into the Irish Sea as the Lancashire coast recedes astern.

This is the same sea that opened before us off Pembrokeshire — off the headland at St David's, off the rocks of Ramsey Island — seen now from the middle of it rather than the edge. The Isle of Man emerges as a mountain rising from the water, its outline sharpening over the crossing until Douglas resolves along the curve of its bay.

We check in to our hotel this evening with three days on the island still ahead.

Overnight in Douglas.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 11 Tynwald Hill & Peel

Tynwald Hill at St John's is not impressive in the conventional sense — a low artificial mound in a field, connected by a processional path to a small parish church. What it represents is another matter. This is where the Manx parliament has assembled continuously for over a thousand years, making it one of the oldest legislative bodies in the world.

Each midsummer, laws passed during the year are proclaimed here in both Manx and English — the ceremony conducted on a mound built from soil taken from each of the island's seventeen parishes, a physical expression of democratic principle older than most of the constitutions that followed it.

Peel occupies the island's western coast, its harbour sheltered by a tidal island whose red sandstone ruins are those of a medieval cathedral and castle. St Patrick's Isle has been occupied since the Iron Age; what stands today was built by bishops who understood the strategic value of ground the sea defended twice daily. The ruins are extensive and atmospheric, the sandstone warming in afternoon light to something close to amber.

The House of Manannan at the harbour uses the island's mythology and archaeology to tell the story of a culture that survived successive arrivals — Celtic, Viking, Christian — by absorbing rather than simply resisting them. The sea god Manannan, who cloaked the island in protective mist, is perhaps its most fitting founding figure.

Overnight in Douglas.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 12 Castletown, Cregneash & the Steam Railway

Castletown was the Isle of Man's capital for six hundred years, a distinction it owed entirely to Castle Rushen, which the Norse kings built above the harbour and successive rulers expanded. The castle is among the most complete medieval fortifications in the British Isles — its walls, towers, and Great Hall largely intact, a clock mechanism installed in the gatehouse in 1597 still keeping time. The town beneath it has reached a comfortable accommodation with its former importance: quiet streets, a working harbour, the castle dominating without overwhelming.

The Old House of Keys takes its name from “Kiare as Feed” — Manx for “four and twenty,” the traditional number of elected members who debated island legislation in this chamber before the parliament moved to Douglas. The room survives intact; the debates are now re-enacted rather than conducted, the arguments no less pointed for being scripted.

Cregneash, at the island's southern tip, preserves traditional Manx rural life through thatched farmhouses, working crofts, and the particular quietness of a place that did not change quickly. The Manx language, which came close to extinction in the 20th century, has been actively revived — spoken here through interpretation programs and, beyond the village, taught again in schools and in daily use.

The return to Douglas by heritage steam railway — the narrow-gauge line running since 1873 — closes a day that has moved through a considerable range of Manx time.

Overnight in Douglas.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 13 Snaefell & Laxey

The Snaefell Mountain Railway has been running since 1895, its electric tramcars little changed from the originals, a centre rail keeping them on track in wet weather by the same solution the Victorian engineers first devised. The line climbs six miles from Laxey through open moorland, the landscape emptying as the summit approaches.

At 621 m, Snaefell is the island's only mountain, and the view from the top makes good on what is claimed for it: on a clear day you can see England, Scotland, Ireland, and Wales — four kingdoms from a single point, the Isle of Man spread below as the fifth, and the sky, by long Manx tradition, as the sixth.

Wales is there on the southern horizon — the mountains of Snowdonia as a distant outline, seen now from the other side of the water.

The Great Laxey Wheel stands on the hillside above the village, 22 m in diameter — the largest working waterwheel in the world. Built in 1854 and named Lady Isabella after the lieutenant governor's wife, it was constructed to pump water from the lead mines beneath the valley, a problem of real engineering complexity solved with a confidence that the result entirely justifies. The mines closed long ago; the wheel still turns.

The Douglas horse-drawn trams have been running along the promenade since 1876, the route unchanged, the pace unhurried, the bay spread out alongside.

Overnight in Douglas.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 14 Departure from Douglas

After breakfast, we say our farewells and depart.

Several daily flights connect to London Gatwick, Heathrow, and City Airport.

Turrys mie! (good journey!)

Included Meal(s): Breakfast