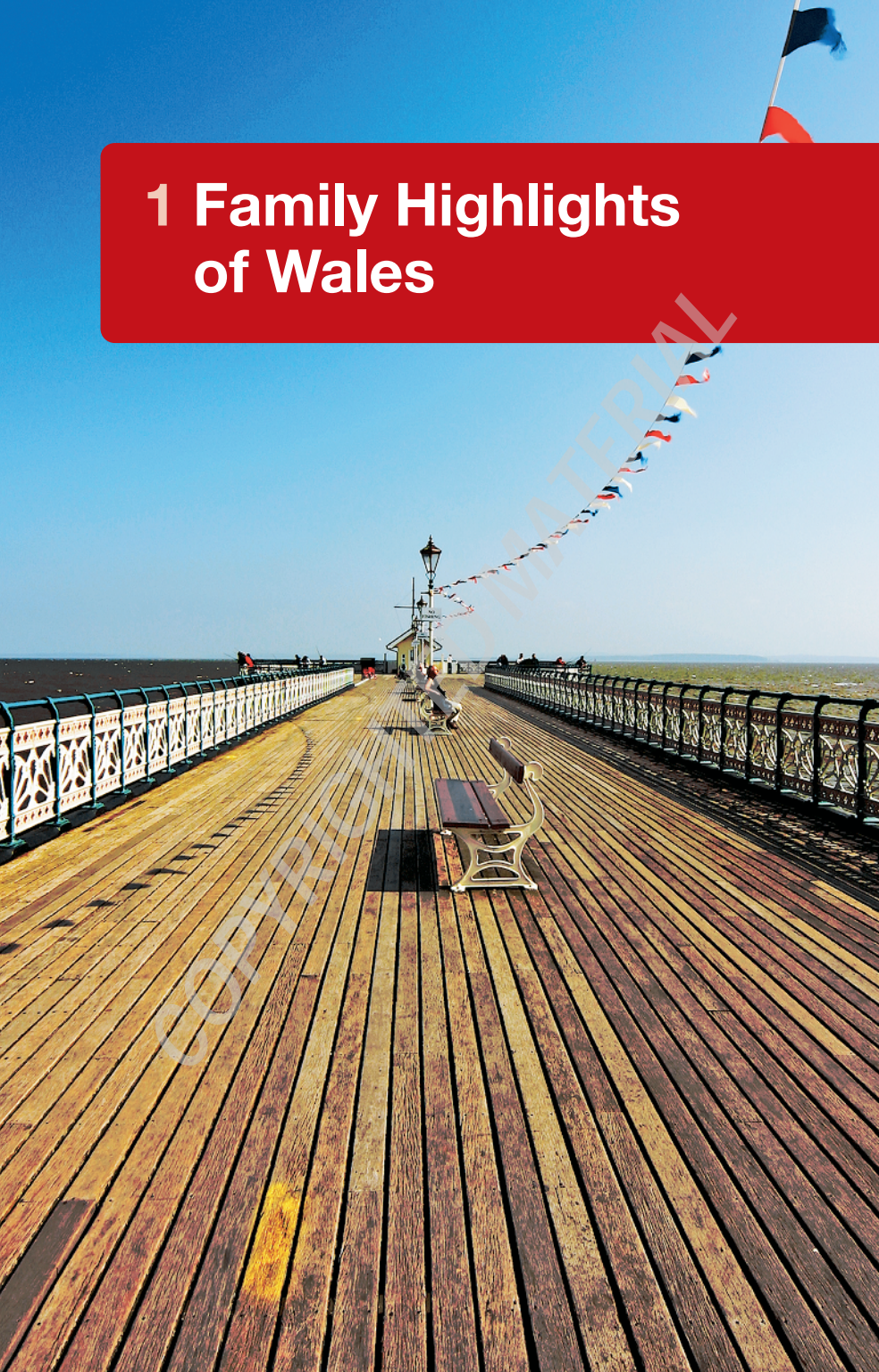


1 Family Highlights of Wales



Since our childhoods Wales has been the place for classic family holidays, offering windswept beaches and sandy sandwiches, castles and green hillsides. It still offers all those things, but now it's also the home of television's regenerated *Doctor Who*, with youngsters clamouring to see the Daleks in the exhibition at Cardiff's hip new Cardiff Bay development. It is also a place parents will recognise from the dark and decidedly adult alien-fighting TV hit *Torchwood* – a *Doctor Who* spin-off. There are major new attractions, a host of historic rail journeys, and the biggest natural attraction in England or Wales – Mount Snowdon. It's a place we love to take our own children.

Family holidays in Wales have a retro joyfulness, open spaces, mountains, rivers and coastal walks, Thermos flasks and ginger biscuits. But, should you choose to do so, you can stop for a cappuccino, shop for hip surfing gear and visit hi-tech hands-on attractions.

Hopefully, there will always be parts of Wales that are far enough from the crowds to provide a natural antidote to the rigours of a stressful modern life. There's still a delightful *Famous Five* feel to exploring distant bays, climbing sand dunes and poking around in rock pools. Holiday resorts still look like they've been lifted straight from the 1950s. Yet peek behind the lace curtains and discerning parents will find smart and trendy hotels that welcome children with more than a hastily-scrawled sign.

It's not hard to find restaurants that revel in local produce, and take pride in providing youngsters with more than chicken nuggets and ketchup. There are also family pubs that really are family places – smoke-free and cheery without having the feel of a playbarn.

Don't, though, think that Wales is simply a quiet backwater. The holiday resorts of north Wales – Rhyl and Llandudno – are awash with people in high season, and the masses of smart holiday cottages in Pembrokeshire down south generally get booked up months in advance. Lanes leading to picturesque beaches (or at least to the cliff paths to picturesque beaches) reach gridlock – and far too much of the coast is covered in a sea of past-their-sell-by-date caravan parks.

But forget any thoughts that a family holiday here is a poor relation to a week on the Costas. Our children, Georgia and Henry, at the time of writing 10 and 7, have been here more times than they can count and loved every minute – whether staying in the luxury of the Italianate resort Portmeirion or sleeping in the roof of a camper van; in a cosy B&B or in a tent at one of the green and pleasant new breed of camping and caravan sites.

Every day is an adventure, filled with splashing in the surf on a balmy summer's day, eating creamy Welsh-made ice creams, and playing beach cricket, barbecuing juicy local lamb burgers, creeping through the dark tunnels of abandoned mines, climbing mountains and generally enjoying the great outdoors.

It can still be a place for a cheap holiday, and you can have a great time on even the tightest budget if you take a tent (or brave the bleak regimentation of a caravan park). But it is also a place to splash out on smart accommodation and fun

Wales has all the attractions of Europe's lakes and mountains destinations, places that families cheerfully get on a plane to visit at great expense – so why not stay in Wales?

WALES FAMILY HIGHLIGHTS

Best Experiences We love the variety of experiences that Wales has to offer, from the city life of Cardiff (p 21), to the wonderful beaches of the west coast (p 120), to the awesome splendour of Snowdon and the Brecon Beacons (p 219 and p 91).

Best Man-made Attractions

Dr Who Up Close (p 31) in Cardiff's Bay is a favourite of children and adults alike, with an ever-updated, changing collection of memorabilia, from outfits to full-size talking Daleks and Cybermen. The Big Pit (p 66), in the valleys north of Cardiff, is the

essence of Wales, coal-mining-turned-tourism, man-made in the very biggest sense, with the chance to go underground wearing helmet lamps.

Best Natural Attractions

Snowdon, obviously, but the Brecon Beacons and the Black Mountains are also a treat. On a more focused level, Henrhyd Falls (p 98) and other waterfalls in the Beacons are stunning, and the National Showcaves (p 97) are eerily beautiful.

Best Beaches Where do you start? Almost any beach on the Gower Peninsula – especially Three Cliffs Bay – although Pembrokeshire is our family's favourite part of Wales with the

View over Cardiff Bay



wildly beautiful Marloes Sands (p 137), the desert island feel of Barafundle Bay (p 132), or the miles of wide open sand at Newgale (p 138), and the seaside resort sands of Tenby (p 128). Neighbouring Cardiganshire (Ceredigion) is also a delight, especially Mwnt, near Cardigan (p 161) or the sands and dunes at Ynyslas north of Borth, just across the river from Aberdyfi, which itself has an unusually lovely estuary beach. Then there's the crescent beach at Abersoch (p 00) on the Llyn Peninsula, and uncrowded sandy coves further west.

Best Resorts Tenby (p 128) is the main resort town in the south, which along with its village-harbour neighbour Saundersfoot offers a near-perfect blend of beaches and town life. New Quay (p 164) on the west coast is smaller, combining seaside fun with sea-faring adventures. And Barmouth (p 228), on the edge of

Seaside spades, New Quay



the Snowdonia National Park, has quietly become a favourite of ours. The small but lively town has a long beach and a backdrop of mountains.

Best Outdoor Activities

Walking stretches of the Pembrokeshire Coastal Path (p 123) can be fun for parents with teenagers or energetic youngsters – try heading up on to the cliffs at Stackpole (calling at Barafundle Bay), or walking around Dinas Head, near Fishguard. In fact, just about any seaside spot you visit will have the path meandering through. The National Mountain Centre at Capel Curig (p 00), offers mountain fun of the organised variety, including children's and family taster days – one of dozens of activity centres around the country.

Best Watery Activities

Cardigan Bay Active (p 145) is a loose collective of enthusiastic types who organise everything from delightfully peaceful trips through Cilgerran Gorge, just south of Cardigan, to sea kayaking and coasteering (climbing and splashing your way along the coast).

Best Boat Ride The Dolphin Survey Ship from New Quay (p 164), Cardiganshire, takes you to look for dolphins and other creatures. VentureJet (p 147) operates from outside St David's, Pembrokeshire, with hair-raising jaunts to look for sealife, darting into caves in jet-propelled dinghies.



Pembrokeshire Coastal Path

Best Castles Caerphilly (p 46) is one of Europe's biggest, and is just what every youngster thinks a castle should be – battlements, towers, arrow slits – all that stuff. However, perhaps more fascinating to both young and old are the magical faux castles built on old foundations for coal baron Lord Bute. Cardiff Castle (p 27) in the city centre and Castell Coch (p 41) in the hills outside, are magical fantasy lands of ornately painted rooms, exquisite craftsmanship and extravagant style, like a cross between *Harry Potter* and *The Lord of the Rings*, while Castle Coch – with its circular, roofed towers – has a touch of *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* thrown in.

Best Museums The National Museum of Wales (p 30) in Cardiff is of international quality with art, dinosaurs and much more. The National Slate Museum (p 221) in old slate quarry buildings in Llanberis was a surprising hit with us, and St Fagans: National History

Museum (p 42) near Cardiff, is superb, too.

Best Family Events Cardiff has regular events in Roald Dahl Plass, outside the Millennium Centre on the Bay, such as Cardiff Harbour Festival in August. Food festivals also abound, with Abergavenny one of the biggest (p 95). All – including Cardigan (p 158) with its riverside setting – include family entertainment.

THE BEST ACCOMMODATION

Most Family-friendly Option The Porth Tocy Country Hotel on the cliffs above Abersoch (p 211) on the Llyn Peninsula does it with style. Family-run, you feel like you're part of a big country house party, children running around the meadows outside then sitting down to their own dinner, with adults dining later (along with outsiders in the

know) in a restaurant that's been in the Good Food Guide for years.

Best City Hotel We stayed at the cool, modern Hilton (p 47) opposite Cardiff Castle and now the children whoop the name and want to stay whenever we pass a Hilton sign. The stylish rooms, stainless steel swimming pool and Razzi restaurant (with activity sets and free quality meals for youngsters eating with hotel guests) went down a storm. It has a perfect position, too.

Best Grand Hotel Portmeirion is an Italianate folly (star of TV's *The Prisoner*) just outside Porthmadog. There's the hotel itself and a number of rooms and apartments in fantastical buildings around the 'village', which is enclosed, safe, and somewhere our children adored for simply being a brilliant place to stay.

Best Self-catering These are the places that companies such as English Country Cottages offer –

not just cottages but historic farmhouses and country piles, sleeping anything from parents with a baby to a multi-generation family get-together.

Best Setting It has to be Portmeirion again.

Best Camp Site It's difficult to choose the best camp site because much depends on how full it is – particularly at weekends. But, during the week, Hillend Camp Site on the Gower Peninsula (p 89) is as close to the beach at Rhossili Bay as you can get – yet sheltered by huge sand dunes and with family-only fields, play area and café.

Best Boutique Hotel Escape in Llandudno looks as trad as its surroundings, yet beyond the gardens and white façade is a deliciously-modern B&B. There are PlayStations in rooms along with posh TVs (and sea and mountain views) They take children from age 10.

Portmeirion



Best Budget Accommodation

We really are fans of Youth Hostels. They're often in spots that money couldn't buy and we (and the children) love the freedom they offer. Port Eynon YH, a former lifeboat station on the Gower Peninsula (p 89), is quite sensational.

Best Extended Family

Accommodation Feel like lords of the manor at Tros Yr Afon, a stone manor house near the rocky shoreline of the Menai Strait in Anglesey. The main building sleeps 16, plus two. Then converted cottages and stables in the courtyard take another nine. Beaches abound and the charms of the town of Beaumaris are just a stroll away.

THE BEST EATING

Most Child-friendly

Restaurant Castle Deudraeth at Portmeirion. The brasserie-style restaurant is big and airy, with lots of youngsters wandering about. The picture windows open on to a large lawn with views of the sea where they played happily. Children's food was both tasty and attractive – Georgia's grilled chicken with chips was something we'd have gladly eaten ourselves.

Best Seafood Hive on the Quay in Aberaeron serves crab, lobster, grilled mackerel and other delights from Cardigan Bay in an old wharf building in one of the coast's most delightful towns.

Best Budget Nosh Pete's Eats, a kind of hippy hikers cafe in Llanberis, where those who've walked Snowdon have tucked into huge meals for 30 years. It's where mixed grill eaters meet brown rice lovers – and children's meals cost less than £2.50. Open for dinner – and wine's £6.70 a bottle.

Best Ice Cream There are any number of swish ice cream makers in Wales, but we all love Cadwalader's, available at the maker's growing chain of cafes where you can also get sandwiches, coffee – and alcoholic ice cream cocktails. Ices come in everything from chocolate to dragon's breath (don't ask!) and, should you visit at the right time, Christmas pudding. The one at Cardiff Bay is great for grabbing a cornet, the one in Portmeirion fun for people-watching, and the brand new one at the original 1927 shop in Criccieth best for sea views, across Tremadog Bay.

CYCLING

This is the place. There are more than 1,000 miles of cycle trails in Wales that are part of the 10,000-mile National Cycle Network throughout the UK. Whether you want to cruise with tots along the Promenade at Rhyl or put in serious training on the slopes of Snowdon, there's something to suit every family. About a third of the trails are off-road – more generally meaning that

they're on paths or old railway tracks rather than being serious mountain biking for experts. And despite the mountains, many are flat and safe for even the youngest cyclist, deep in the country and returning softly to their starting point.

For the more fit and adventurous there's the 377-mile Celtic Trail from Chepstow on the English border to Fishguard on the Pembrokeshire coast. Well, perhaps more realistically you could try part of it, which is how it's designed. The Millennium Coastal Path near Llanelli, on the south coast, translates into a 12-mile seaview dream loop. To the west, the Camarthen–Fishguard loop is 146 miles of spectacular – but hilly – scenery.

Bike hire shops are surprisingly in evidence in most areas of Wales. For full details visit the National Cycle Network sites www.sustrans.org.uk, or www.cycling.visitwales.com.

GOLF

Wales has gone golf mad since winning the right to host the 2010 Ryder Cup, at the Celtic Manor Resort near Newport, Gwent. Its 200 courses are experiencing a boom, which might mean crowds but also means top facilities, as well as a

drive to encourage youngsters to take up the game. The Golf Foundation works towards improving standards in schools, and attitudes are more relaxed towards children at many clubs. The Celtic Manor, a luxury resort for all the family, offers junior golf tuition, including coaching weeks during school holidays. If it's just dad or mum who wants to play, there are courses across the country that are ideal for slipping off for a few hours while the rest of the family hits the beach or a range of other attractions. Visit www.golfasitshouldbe.com.

FISHING

Nowhere is better for a bit of father and son (or daughter) bonding than Wales, where you've got an unrivalled collection of rivers, reservoirs, lakes and sea. You can fish for huge pike in the ancient waters of Lake Bala in Snowdonia National Park, or huge sea bass at many locations around the coast. Charter boats take you off Pembrokeshire where you can bag a shark, or you can find trout in the River Usk in the Black Mountains. There are more than 500 lakes in Wales with dozens of rivers and charter boats in almost every port. See www.fishing.visitwales.com.