

A weekend on...

THE ISLE OF WIGHT



Take in the beautiful island views on foot

Fabulous local food, historic hideaways and bucket loads of outdoor pursuits makes this favoured destination of royals, writers and rock stars well worth the short hop from the mainland writes Viv Micklefield

Hot hikes

550 miles of footpaths, bridleways and cycle routes means it's possible to take-in the island's most famous landmarks, such as The Needles and Carisbrooke Castle, virtually crowd free. However, get off the beaten track and the real fun begins. The Isle of Wight Long Distance Walking Association organises guided walks across different terrain throughout the year. Summer months offer a chance to discover Freshwater Bay's caves from its rocky shoreline or to race the tide on the one-mile hike to St Helen's Fort, and back. "It's just an amazing

experience," says the LDWA's David Yates. "Watching the tide go really low, and then walking out with hundreds of people to a Solent fort, that is normally surrounded by water. There's a real party atmosphere." (It's happening on Monday 3 August, leaving from Bembridge Point if you're tempted.) With next spring's Walking Festival some distance away, the autumn sequel encourages everyone to stride-out between 23 and 26 October although the aptly named, 'beaches, bars and blisters' three-day coastal path walk is not one for the faint-hearted (www.ldwa.org.uk/IsleOfWight). ▶



Whitecliff Bay

Getting around

Getting to the Isle of Wight means riding the waves for just 10 minutes aboard Europe's last remaining commercial hovercraft from Southsea to Ryde (www.hovertravel.co.uk). Alternatively scoot across by catamaran from Portsmouth Harbour or as a foot passenger on Wightlink's more leisurely Portsmouth to Fishbourne, and Lymington to Yarmouth ferry services (www.wightlink.co.uk). There's also the Red Funnel ferry linking Southampton with East Cowes and its Red Jet service to West Cowes (www.redfunnel.co.uk). Once on dry land, a round-the-island ticket (www.islandbuses.info) provides the freedom to roam across this 13 by 23-mile atoll. Island Coaster buses can take up to six bicycles, however if more pedal power is needed, then go electric in Lake near Sandown (www.electricbikecentre.co.uk). You could let the Island Line trains take the strain between Ryde and Shanklin, while the five-mile long Isle of Wight Steam Railway brings out the romantic in everyone.



Find tranquility at Quarr Abbey

HIDDEN HISTORY

Finding tranquility in the height of the summer sounds a tall order, yet that's exactly what the quite extraordinary Quarr Abbey, near Ryde delivers. This community of Benedictine monks has hospitality as its mantra with visitors welcome to take time-out in the well stocked gardens and teasop, where Quarr Abbey ale, eggs, honey and preserves are all for sale, to explore the allotments and temporary art exhibitions, to join a woodland bug hunt, or to embark on their own spiritual journey by staying in the guesthouse.

Likewise, opening the doors into Dimbola Museum and Galleries, Freshwater puts things into focus. This former home and workplace of pioneering Victorian photographer, Julia Margaret Cameron has ever-changing displays, photography courses, and some of the island's best homemade cakes. Known for her pictures of 'famous men and fair women' this contemporary and good friend of Alfred Lord Tennyson is respected by art critics from New York to London (Hampshire Life will be taking a closer look at Julia's legacy in a future issue during this, her bicentenary.)



Bembridge lifeboat station at dusk. Credit Island Visions Photography

Feast

With its warm microclimate, fertile fields and shellfish rich waters, the abundance of 'home grown' food here is astonishing. If you've an appetite for new discoveries, the Taste Trail introduces super-sweet tomatoes, freshly baked bread and artisan cheese for starters. Then again, if time is short, a stop-over at Bridlesford Lodge Farm near Wootton Bridge finds a former milking shed piled high with mouthwatering goodies from over 50 local producers, with the Wight Marque a sure sign of provenance. There's also the Griffin family's acclaimed rose veal, as well as fresh milk from the Guernsey herd which reappears in Minghella's famous ice cream. Such collaboration is not unusual: a tour of Adgestone Vineyard proves not only why England's

oldest trading vineyard, currently run by Russ and Sarah Broughton, is playing its part in popularising our nation's wines, they've recently added a country wine to their range produced using Godshill cherries.



The Beach Cafe

Among those championing the island's bounty are its chefs, and none more so than Ben Cooke at The Little Gloster in Gurnard, the outright winner of Hampshire Life's Restaurant of the Year 2014. Alongside its stunning Solent views, there's an ever-changing menu from which to savour highlights like the sharing platter of crab and crayfish cakes with house cured gravadlax, followed by Isle of Wight Cheverton steak or Bembridge lobster. Be sure to steer a course towards this Scandi-style eatery with rooms (www.thelittlegloster.com) outside Cowes.



MY WEEKEND ON THE ISLAND...

GERRY PRICE

Local Gerry Price, aka The Coastal Gardener, lives near Forelands Beach, Bembridge having made the life-changing decision to swap Nottinghamshire for a seaside home nine years ago. Embracing her surroundings, she currently runs a popular plant nursery, workshops and garden design business.

Keen to preserve the island's natural beauty, Gerry organises the annual community beach clean-up. "It's a lovely beach here and then there's Bembridge Ledge which is brilliant for rock pooling. Even at low water, the area we call the 'lagoons' means you can always swim."

Add to this owning a beach hut just a stone's throw from the sea, and, she says there's plenty to keep the whole family occupied. "You'll usually find us on the beach, or, as we belong to Brading Haven Yacht Club, we like pottering around Priory Bay in dinghies. There's the coastal footpath here too, or you can walk up to Culver Down then drop into Sandown. As summer approaches and everything starts opening up again, you always get that burst of energy."

To stumble across this eastern corner, complete with its iconic windmill and lifeboat station stretching out towards Spithead, throws up more surprises. As Gerry points out: "We've still got a butcher, a baker and a fishmonger in Bembridge - our fruit and veg shop also sells lots of organic produce."

"Eating out there's a really nice café near us called The Beach Hut. Further afield, we recently went to The Pointer Inn at Newchurch and if you go straight through Ventnor's Botanic Garden, the crab shacks in Steephill Cove are lovely; The Garlic Farm is always worth a visit too."

Summing-up what makes the Isle of Wight so special for her, Gerry (www.thecoastalgardener.co.uk) says: "I think it has to be the sense of community and, of course, it's all about being by the sea - whatever your mood, to have such lovely surroundings right on the doorstep...I don't think I'll ever want to move away."



See The Needles up close from a Stand Up Paddleboard

CARRY-ON EXPLORING

A leisurely canter around Mottistone (the recent venue for Sherlock star Benedict Cumberbatch's nuptials) reveals the newly-opened Warrior Trail, a fitting tribute to the original warhorse and to his owner, local 'lad'

Jack Seely. Being cycle friendly, the whole landscape is a mecca both for families enjoying the gentler rides along disused railway lines, and for Lycra clad enthusiasts keen to master the hill climbs or the 66-mile round-the-island route.

Expect to find plenty to saddle-up for during this year's cycling festival

(5-27 September, www.sunseaand-cycling.com). While to really make the Isle of Wight your playground, Tackit-Isle Adventures run kayaking sessions from St Helens Duver combined with mountain biking on the return journey.

In fact, you can try everything from sand yachting and segway riding to

windsurfing, and stand-up paddle boarding which, owner Ben Smith says has become so popular, they've introduced a yoga version! And not to forget sea angling, rib and powerboat charter, paragliding and coasteering. Perhaps it's no coincidence that adventurer Bear Grylls once lived on the Isle of Wight too.

Leafy retreats

This green-fingered island boasts 30 participants in the National Garden Scheme, and one of the gems behind the hedgerows is Northcourt Manor.



A one-time haunt of the poet Algernon Swinburne, its 400th anniversary celebrations include a Jacobean Murder Mystery Weekend in November. But those already clued-up enjoy a secluded B&B and unique rental property for larger gatherings, with a billiard room and library letting you lord it up, if only for a weekend. Within the sub-tropical grounds there's a fruiting banana plant, and a walled kitchen garden. And 'lost gardens' abound even at the tourist spot of Osborne House where, according to head gardener Toby Beasley, there are plans to bring the lower terraces complete with dancing fountain and shell alcove back to life. The myrtle growing here still appears in royal wedding bouquets as a good luck and fertility charm, with the Duke and Duchess of Cornwall keeping this island tradition alive.

BOOK YOUR TRIP

Planning a weekend away on the Isle of Wight is made easy by going to www.visitisleofwight.co.uk. The island's official tourism guide has all the information you need on where to stay, things to do, attractions, events, and food and drink.



Seaside slumber



Looking to stay somewhere a bit different? Yes, there are yurts,

vintage campervans and shepherd huts. But who'd want

to miss being gently rocked by the incoming tide. And the beauty of staying aboard the permanently moored, and reassuringly named, houseboat 'Sturdy' in the heart of Bembridge Harbour is that you get to live the life of salty seadogs, in the lap of luxury. Stepping off the gangplank and on to the main deck, the view enjoyed from the open plan living/dining room complete with a fully-fitted kitchen is breathtaking. Throw back the bi-fold doors or better still climb up to the sundeck where faux fur rugs keep the sea breezes at bay, and you'll be mesmerised for hours. Owners James and Georgina are long-time houseboat residents, and their converted Thames river barge has sleeping accommodation on two floors, with space for six plus three children - and they've thought of all the extras, from WIFI to wellies, there's even a wine delivery service to keep the holiday vibe flowing. If you fancy a night off from cooking, the Pilot Boat Inn or The Old Village Inn both offer freshly cooked pub grub less than 15 minutes walk away - while local tapas restaurant Shed, and Dan's Kitchen in nearby St Helens, get excellent reviews. The clanking of neighbouring masts and the odd-sounding gurgles take a little getting used to, yet prepare to become hooked on enjoying the wildlife from your amazing vantage point. A three-night weekend stay is £850 dropping to £795 for four-night, off-peak midweek breaks (theharbourhouseboat.co.uk).