

Croseo i Cymru: Welcome to Wales

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Gower was the first place in Britain to be nominated as an “Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty”.

RHOSSILI (Wales), July 28 — I rarely rise to comments like: “Who’d want to go to Wales”, a glib remark made by a friend’s daughter on hearing our summer travel plans. She’s not the first snifty Brit to be boorish about Wales and certain not to be the last.

I’d give them a good “Croseo i Cymru” if they were minded to visit: the land of green valleys, sheep, rugby, castles and characterful Welsh folk full of mystifying quips. Its infectious charm keeps drawing us back from whatever corner of the globe our nomadic existence takes us.

The first glimpse over the hilltop leading into our village in the Gower, South Wales, and we know we’re home: rolling farmland, foxglove speckled hills and grazing wild Welsh ponies. This couldn’t be more different from the grey skyline of our Manhattan apartment.



Rhossili Bay... stunning scenery everywhere you look.

Beyond the sheep filled marshes, curly sand dunes topped with glossy beach grass frame neat rows of foamy waves that unfurl across the three-mile stretch of Rhossili Bay, known locally as Llangennith beach. The tranquillity is divine; as one local joked, “It’s so quiet here you can hear a bird sneeze!”

The British government declared the Gower peninsula, or Gwyr in Welsh, Britain’s first Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty back in 1956. The elevated views from our cottage “Stormy Castle” perched on the north-west tip of the Gower have changed little since this accolade was bestowed: strict planning laws curtail the building of new houses in a village whose heart pulses around the beach, King’s Head pub, the 11th century church of St Cenydd, village hall, PJ’s surfshop and a couple of farm shops; what more do you need?

There is plenty of adventurous pursuits and historical intrigue on offer too: from wild coastal walks, surfing, kite-surfing, paragliding off Rhossili Down, horse trekking along sandy beaches, to exploring ancient burial chambers and prehistoric caves.

But you’ll have to prod the locals to talk about their good fortune, for the Welsh, renowned for their modesty, rarely brag. News of the oldest cave paintings in Britain discovered in the South Gower last summer barely reached the headlines.

Our visit this year coincided with the annual “Mapsant” held in early July at St Cenydd’s Church. This celebration of Saint Cenydd’s unusual upbringing by seagulls on the nearby island of Burry Holms back in the 6th century may have lost its raw edge over the years — flute playing and chilled rosé served in the church graveyard having replaced cockfighting and beer-fuelled wrestling behind the King’s Head a century earlier— but this ancient Celtic tradition, peculiar to the Gower, still appears to be going strong.

And a carefully executed low tide crossing over Worm’s Head, marking the southerly end of Rhossili Bay, was held to be “the most adventurous day” my 10-year-old daughter has ever had.



Iconic Worm's Head: one of the most photographed areas of Wales

The iconic promontory resembles more the body of a mythical sleeping dragon than that of a worm; in keeping with its old Viking name “Wurm”, meaning dragon. We weaved our way across the two causeways carpeted in mussels, limpets and lively rock pools, stopping to admire the bulbous spider crabs a fisherman had caught (with his own hands) as bait for sea bass fishing at high tide.

An early start and tricky climb down a steep grassy ledge on the inner headland was rewarded by a Grey seal colony lolling around on the rocks below. We tucked into our sandwich lunch as we studied them, and they us, from their thick beds of maroon-coloured seaweed.

A trip to Goat's Hole is also planned where the famous Red Lady of Paviland Cave was found. The 33,000-year-old red ochre stained body — subsequently discovered to be that of a man — is the oldest human remains ever to be found in Britain (some claim the world) at a time when sabre tooth tigers and woolly mammoths ruled.

Unfortunately, the hike to the now bat and spider infested cave plays second fiddle to our children's preference of popping a boogie board over their backs and following the winding sheep track that runs to the beach.

This is hotly followed by nagging requests for lemonade and crisps in the King's Head beer garden. They serve a fiery "Dragon's Breath" curry, a tender Welsh salt marsh lamb, or for the more daring, a flavoursome laverbread (seaweed) and cockle quiche.

All ingredients are locally sourced, as is the interesting selection of microbrewery beers with memorable names like Gower Gold and Gower Power. Take caution with the latter; many under its influence have been heard singing to the sheep through the hedgerows on the way home.

No article on the Gower would be complete without mentioning at least one famous inhabitant: Rhossili's Edgar Evans, the oxen-built Welshman accompanied Sir Scott in his doomed Antarctica expedition back in 1912.



While it's not exactly balmy weather, it is the beach and children love it.

His flamboyant character undoubtedly fuelled a few doorstep exchanges years ago. Nowadays, the village gossip is more likely to be centred on avid debates as to the next television crew expected to pitch up.

Popular British television drama series "Doctor Who" and "Torchwood" have been filmed in Rhossili Bay; the latter was also snapped up by a US TV network. With any luck, our relations across the pond will become better acquainted with the region; many New Yorkers I've met have never heard of Wales...

For their benefit, and those left hankering for a little geography on that land the English are so rude about, it's that small friendly country just to the west of London. And you'll most definitely want to visit.



The three mile stretch of Rhossili Bay is enjoyed by sand buggies to para gliders