

INSPIRATION Anglesey and North Wales

The ancient church
of St Hywyn
at Aberdaron,
Gwynedd



Magical Island

Iain Duff and family explore amazing Anglesey and the sublime north Wales coast

There's something romantic and quite magical about escaping to an island. Crossing the water to get there makes it feel quite exotic – even if it's just a quick trip across a bridge. And once you've arrived it's so much easier to switch off, thanks to fact that you're literally separated from the mainland.

It's a bit like taking a holiday abroad, without all the irksome inconvenience of learning a foreign language, changing money and worrying about passports.

Another plus of island camping is that you're never too far from the coast, but islands can also have a surprising amount of diversity of scenery.

The one thing they all have in common is a pace of life that is a several notches lower than on the mainland. Time seems to slow down, which is perfect for campers who want to recharge their batteries.

For me, the affinity with islands stretches back four decades to when I read my first ever Famous Five book. The carefree →

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adventures of Julian, Dick, Anne, George (and of course Timmy the dog) nearly always seemed to involve them going offshore – with the best known island destination being Kirrin Island.

Anglesey, off the northwest coast of Wales within sight of the awesome summits of the Snowdonia National Park, is probably my favourite UK island and it's a regular destination for our family camping trips.

It's a fair bit bigger than the fictional Kirrin Island but is an absolute charm – winding back lanes combined with modern fast roads, hidden coves and sandy bays and great coastal hiking combined with a bit of easy hill walking.

Anglesey's many attractions include castles like Beaumaris, boat trips to Puffin Island, an abundance of stately homes and National Trust properties such as Plas Newydd near the southeast coast and a wealth of Bronze



Beaumaris Castle (Crown Copyright)

WHERE TO VISIT

SOUTH STACK NATURE RESERVE

RSPB Visitor Centre, Holyhead, Anglesey
LL65 1YH
01407 762100
rspb.org.uk

LLANDDWYN BEACH

Llanfairpwll, Anglesey LL61 6SG

Beaumaris Castle

Castle St, Beaumaris, Anglesey LL58 8AP
01248 810361
beaumaris.com

ABERSOCH SAILING SCHOOL

Abersoch, Pwllheli, Gwynedd LL53 7DP
07917 525540
abersochsailingschool.com

PLAS YN RHIW

Rhiw, Pwllheli, Gwynedd LL53 8AB
01758 780219
nationaltrust.org.uk/plas-yn-rhiw

PLAS MAWR

cadw.gov.wales/daysout/plasmawr

ZIP WORLD FFOREST

Betws-y-Coed, Gwynedd LL24 OHX
01248 601 444
zipworld.co.uk



Exploring Beaumaris Castle ruins



Horses at Newborough

Age and Neolithic remains. A coastal path of around 125 miles circles the shoreline so there are plenty of walking opportunities, too. Add in Anglesey Sea Zoo, South Stack Lighthouse and RSPB reserve, Newborough Beach and the delightful Ynys Llanddwyn island and it all comes together to make visiting the island a delight.

On the mainland, Snowdonia is a haven for outdoor enthusiasts and especially those who enjoy the more active pursuits. But there's another side to this part of north Wales that is often overlooked. From Conwy in the north to Barmouth in the south, the area boasts 200 miles of glorious coastline. You'll find secluded bays, sheltered harbours and vast open beaches. Both on the coast

and inland there are pretty villages and lively resorts. Places to enjoy peace and quiet and places for action-packed days.

Anglesey is connected to the Welsh mainland by two bridges, the Menai Suspension Bridge, designed by Thomas Telford in 1826, and the Britannia Bridge, both of which bring you in to the village of Menai Bridge.

On our most recent trip we based ourselves for a long weekend at a campsite in the south of the island, around 20 minutes from Menai Bridge. White Lodge at Newborough is well-maintained, friendly and enjoys stunning views over the Strait towards Snowdonia. Owners, Christine and Kevin Barrie, have created a real continental



The dramatic cliff tops at South Stack



Conwy Castle

atmosphere to the place, and during our stay there was live music in a pop-up bar serving cocktails, local beers and a small selection of delicious-looking (and tasting) food. As darkness falls, there's a lovely atmosphere as campers get together to shoot the breeze and enjoy the entertainment.

It's also a perfect location to explore the island and the mainland.

The area around the village of Newborough is one of the most beautiful parts of Anglesey, with countless walking opportunities, including a network of sand dunes and Newborough Forest.

In fact, much of Anglesey's coastline, and around 220 square miles of countryside overall, has been designated an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) and the opportunities for breathtaking sightseeing are amazing.

South Stack is a fantastic RSPB nature reserve, made up of heathland and farmland



Birdwatching at Ellin's Tower

on sea cliffs on the dramatic northwestern edge of Anglesey, near Holyhead. We took the clifftop path towards the castellated Ellin's Tower – originally used as a summer house, today it serves as an RSPB information centre with a shop and café. On a clear sunny day you can see right across the sea to Ireland, and it's also a superb spot to watch puffins, fulmars, guillemots, razorbills and peregrine falcons swoop around the cliffs. Further along the coast, sitting on a small island, is the 19th century lighthouse. We reached it by descending 400 steps down the steep mainland cliffs then crossing a short suspension bridge over turbulent sea water. After touring the engine room and exhibition we climbed the spiral staircase to the top of the tower and took in the spectacular views.

North Wales gets more than its fair share of rain so when the sun does show you need to make the most of it – especially when there are so many great beaches to enjoy.

Renowned as one of the finest in Britain, Llanddwyn Beach is large enough that it never feels crowded even in the middle of summer and the gentle slope of the sand makes it perfect for children to play in the sea. From here you can access Ynys Llanddwyn, a mile-long rocky island featuring the remains of a 16th century church, said to have been home to Santes Dwynwen, the Welsh patron saint of lovers.

After a few hours on the sands, we took some time to explore the 2,000-acre woodland next to the beach. It is home to a thriving community of red squirrels as well as being packed full of other wildlife, including wild ponies.

Tempting as it would be to spend all your stay exploring Anglesey's natural wonders, no visit to the island should ignore its rich history. Four Welsh castles have been designated as UNESCO World Heritage Sites, including Beaumaris on Anglesey. The 13th century stronghold, in the



Llanddwyn Beach



Kayaking on the Menai Strait

“Crossing the water to get to an island makes it feel quite exotic – even if it’s just a quick trip across a bridge”



The Menai Suspension Bridge

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Llyn Cwellyn

pretty town of the same name, was built by Edward I and consists of symmetrical concentric “walls within walls” that were state of the art for its time and are still pretty impressive today. Described as the most technically perfect castle in the UK, it is partially surrounded by a water-filled moat but sadly the castle was never completed – work stopped before it could reach its full height. After a lovely couple of hours touring the ruins, we had a cone from the Red Boat ice cream parlour then took a gentle wander around the town. An unexpected treat was seeing dolphins swimming in the Menai Strait as we walked along the seafront.

ON THE MAINLAND

Rich in Welsh culture, the Llyn Peninsula's coastline has been a protected Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty for almost 60 years and its quiet roads are a joy to drive on. Abersoch has great beaches and has become a fashionable spot for all kinds of visitors.

The sailing school in the village is based on the main beach and offers a range of activities, including sailing, powerboating, paddleboarding, kayaking and yachting. For the complete sailing novice, dip your toe in the water with a one or two-and-a-half hour introductory lesson. Further along the peninsula is the coastal village of Aberdaron, where we arrived just in time for Sunday lunch!

A sunny day at Llandwyn Bay



It is actually three separate outdoor adventure centres, all relatively close to each other in the Snowdonia area.

We visited Zip World Fforest at Betws-y-Coed, where the two junior campers whizzed along on a roller coaster-style course through the trees and negotiated a treetop adventure course with high wires. At this location there is also a ‘plummet from the summit’ drop, a toboggan run, a Zip Safari and Europe's highest five-seater swing – Skyride.

Zip World Blaenau Ffestiniog has Titan, the largest zip wire zone in the world, in which you fly over disused slate miles at a terrifying rate of knots. The views over the village and the valley beyond are amazing, if you are brave enough to open your eyes! There are also subterranean caverns with an underground zip line and an adventure

The carvery at Gwesty Tŷ Newydd comes with a sea view and like all the best eateries in this part of the world, the food is home-cooked, locally sourced and plentiful. After a brisk stroll on the sandy beach to walk off the effects of the roast beef, we popped into the National Trust's new interpretation centre, Porth y Swnt, which uses poetry and art installations to provide an insight into Llŷn's special landscapes, seascapes and rich cultural heritage.

On the way back to Anglesey we visited Plas yn Rhiw, a delightful small 16th century manor house with an ornamental garden and wonderful views over Cardigan Bay.

Next day we headed to the mainland again, visiting historic Conwy in the morning and then into the heart of Snowdonia later. In the centre of Conwy stands Plas Mawr, perhaps the finest surviving town house of the Elizabethan era. This architectural gem is a symbol of a prosperous age, epitomised by the taste of Robert Wynn, a well-travelled trader and respected member of the Welsh gentry. An audio tour described the restoration of the house as well as the life of the people who lived and worked in it – not just Wynn but the staff who worked for him.

History and heritage are all very well, but if I'm honest, by now we needed something with a bit more oomph and there's nowhere in north Wales with more oomph than Zip World.



Plas Mawr, Conwy (stock.adobe.com)



Abersoch Beach



Porthmadog marina

course. And finally Zip World Penrhyn Quarry boasts Velocity 2 – the fastest zip line in the world at more than 100mph and the longest in Europe. You can also take an adrenalin-fuelled ride down the mountainside on a quarry cart or a slightly more sedate tour of the quarry in a truck.

Often described as the gateway to Snowdonia, Betws-y-Coed has something of an Alpine feel to it thanks to the surrounding Gwydyr Forest. It's a popular place for day-trippers, some of whom come to enjoy the numerous trails that start off from here and wind into the surrounding countryside, either on two feet or on two wheels.

But if that all sounds too active, don't panic. Most visitors simply spend a few hours browsing the craft and gift shops before enjoying a bite to eat at one of the numerous restaurants and cafés.

On the way back to Anglesey, we popped into the pretty village of Beddgelert and visited Gelert's Grave. It tells the sad story of

Gelert, the faithful hound of medieval prince, Llywelyn the Great. According to legend, the prince killed the dog in the mistaken belief that it had killed his one-year-old son – in reality Gelert had saved the boy from a wolf.

FINE DINING

In the evening we treated ourselves to a slap-up meal at the Marram Grass restaurant on the campsite. The restaurant is housed in an old breeze block shack with a tin roof but don't let the unassuming building put you off. A meal here means beautifully prepared, locally produced food in cosy and inviting surroundings, just a couple of minutes' walk from your tent. It's rustic but welcoming, all delivered with a quirky sense of humour; wild flowers poke out of vintage bottles on every table, alongside pots of the local Halen Môn salt. It began life as a greasy spoon café, dishing up frozen lasagnes and supermarket burgers but it was transformed by chef Ellis Barrie, and his brother, Liam, who got

WHERE TO STAY

WHITE LODGE

Penlon, Newborough, Anglesey, Gwynedd LL61 6RS
01248 440230
whitelodgecaravanpark.com

AWELFRYN CARAVAN PARK

Newborough, Anglesey, Gwynedd LL61 6SG
01248 440230
awelfryn.co.uk

BLACKTHORN FARM CARAVAN PARK

Penrhos Feilw, Trearddur Bay, Anglesey, Gwynedd LL65 2LT
01407 765262
blackthornleisure.co.uk

TYDDYN ISAF CAMPING AND CARAVAN PARK

Lligwy Bay, Dulas, Anglesey, Gwynedd LL70 9PQ
01248 410203
tyddynisaf.co.uk

SHORESIDE CARAVAN AND CAMPING PARK

Station Road, Rhosneigr, Anglesey, Gwynedd LL64 5QX
01407 810279

involved when their parents moved from their native Liverpool to Anglesey to run the caravan park in 2009. Since then it has won a string of culinary awards, made numerous TV appearances and has even been awarded a much sought-after place in the *Good Food Guide*. Not bad for a former cow shed! With his reputation burgeoning, Ellis was a finalist in the BBC's Great British Menu in 2018 and as you'd expect, a meal here is unforgettable.

Dinner at the Marram Grass set us up perfectly for our final day on Anglesey – a quick game of table tennis at the campsite in the morning followed by a round of golf (the crazy variety) and a squint at some exotic sea life at the Sea Zoo, just along the coast from the site. After a few hours of paddling on kayaks in the shadow of Snowdon on the Menai Strait it was time to pack up and head home – after another memory-packed trip to this magical island.



The Beddgelert memorial



Zip World