

FROM STEAM TRAINS TO COUNTRY LANES

our escape to Mid Wales

When you think of Wales, Cardiff and Mount Snowdon may come to mind. But what does the vast stretch of land and sea in between have to offer? **Stuart Anderson** headed to Mid Wales to find out.

Crumbling castles, the Celtic language and rolling green hills that make the heart sing. My wife Becca and I discovered the charms of Wales on our honeymoon three years ago and had always wanted to return.

It was curiosity that led us to the central coastal region. It's not the most beaten of tracks as far as Welsh travel is concerned, so why go? Our host at the Centre for Alternative Technology (CAT) in Corris told us that while "north Wales focuses on the adventure tourism market, Mid Wales is about escapes, and it's about experiences".

The CAT itself is nothing if not an experience - you get there via one of the steepest vernacular railways in the world, powered by water. People have flocked to this site to advance 'green' approaches to life long before sustainability became a buzzword - it was founded in 1973. There are more than seven acres of interactive displays to explore including a house made from straw and a theatre built of rammed earth. You can also see unusual ways of harvesting wind, water and solar power and get involved in organic gardening. This is a place to learn, discover and reflect on our place in the world, and how we can improve it.

Mountains of fun

The CAT site was once a slate quarry, and the legacy of mining the rock used primarily in roofing provides some of the area's visitor highlights.

You can even go into the old Braich Goch mine at Corris to see the conditions the miners worked in - from the time it was hand-dug in 1836 to when the doors finally shut in the 1970s. Family groups worked in near total darkness in their own 'franchised' areas and

deaths from falling rocks and other mishaps were once common.

It's now called Corris Mine Explorers. We donned wellies and lighted helmets and were guided by a man called 'Moley' who knows the miles-long network of tunnels, caverns and underground waterways inside out. He's a fount of knowledge on the mine's history and geology and gives visitors as much adventure as they want - from scaling underground rock faces to even staying overnight. A bit of climbing was enough for us and though this tour was a highlight of the trip I'll admit I was happy to see the light of day at the end.

Around Corris

The mine is just next to the Corris Craft Centre, a beehive of studios where you can see everything from chocolates to dragon statues and award-winning craft gin from the Dyfi Distillery being made.

We also hiked to Cader Idris, a crater-shaped mountain with a lake in its lap in southern Snowdonia National Park. They say the trek turns you into either a poet or a madman, but since we took a wrong turn somewhere on the way up I was, luckily, spared both fates. Beautiful scenery though, and we barely saw another soul.

Machynlleth is nearby - a small town which has Owain Glyndwr's original Welsh parliament. That ancient building never seemed to be opened whenever we passed by, but we did find a lively cafe on the high street called Tŷ Medi where I had a brilliant vegetarian lasagne and door-stopper chocolate cake - highly recommended.

Mid Wales by rails

The next day took us to the Talylyn Railway, the oldest

preserved railway in the world and the inspiration for Thomas the Tank.

Steam locos on the 2ft 3 inch track used to shuttle both slate and passengers between coast and hinterland, but today it's just for people. Becca particularly enjoyed the trip as she got to ride in the loco itself with the driver and fireman, blowing the whistle at the right stops and even willing a flock of wayward sheep off the tracks.

We're no enthusiasts but this part of Wales is full of heritage lines so we went on another one at Aberystwyth - the Vale of Rheidol Railway.

This route, founded in 1902, winds its way along a cliff-side track with a vertigo-inducing drop to the valley below.

From the terminus, you can walk to the Devil's Bridge - actually three bridges built over each other in different centuries - and the waterfalls in the gorge they span. We did the waterfall walk with 675 steps down to the bottom including a steep stretch called Jacob's Ladder and a range of spectacular viewpoints of the falls around the route.

Kicking the bar

Aberystwyth itself is the region's main hub and is well worth a visit. It's the home of Wales' oldest university - founded in 1872 - and its streets, cafes and pubs are alive with that youthful buzz a big student population brings.

The original college building resembles Hogwarts and sits on the seafront right opposite the town's pleasure pier. There's a quirky tradition of kicking the white railing at the top of the prom. Several different stories explain how this got started - was it male students trying to get the attention of the young women at the college next door, or a way of encouraging laps of the seafront to stop the spread of TB? Who knows, just as long as you give it a kick.

Above it looms Constitution Hill, which you get to via another funicular railway - possibly the slowest in the world at 4mph - for views over the town and out into Cardigan Bay.

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STUART ANDERSON

RIGHT: The view over the Dyfl river valley from our farmstay at Gogarth Hall Farm, Mid Wales.

Picture: STUART ANDERSON



INSET: Stuart Anderson.

Picture: STUART ANDERSON

LEFT: A view of Aberystwyth from the town's castle

Picture: ROGER RICHARDS

Views on the Welsh

Up here we also found the world's biggest Camera Obscura, a modern take on a very Victorian amusement that projects a zoomed-in shot of the town onto a table in a darkened room. You use a joystick to scroll the view around - great fun.

We then paid a visit to the National Library of Wales which gets a copy of every single book published in the UK. Parts of the building were closed for renovations but we did see a interesting exhibit on Welsh music, and another which told, bizarrely, of a lost tribe of Native Americans that spoke Welsh.

Even more fascinating was the Ceredigion Museum. Another free attraction, this has displays on everything from the Welsh Space Campaign - more of an art than a science project - to high-topped Welsh hats, all crammed into the gulleys of an Edwardian theatre.





WHERE WE STAYED

Our trip was organised by MWT Cymru (Mid Wales Tourism), and we were guests of a couple of farmstays, Gogarth Farm Holidays and Blue Grass Cottage. Both offered cosy, self-catering cottages in converted farm outbuildings and enough charm to feel like second homes rather than temporary travel digs. Gogarth Farm Holidays, near Machynlleth, boasts sweeping views over the river Dyfi and is the perfect place to explore the river's valley and Snowdonia's southern reaches. Blue Grass, run by the supremely welcoming Lisa Bumford and family, is five minutes' drive south of Aberystwyth and near a quiet stretch of the Wales Coast Path.

More information:

- Visit Mid Wales: www.visitmidwales.co.uk
- Centre for Alternative Technology, Corris, entry £4.00 - £8.50, www.cat.org.uk.
- Corris Mine Explorers, £29 for a two-hour tour, www.corrismineexplorers.co.uk
- Talyllyn Railway, Talyllyn, £17.70 for a standard day ticket, www.talyllyn.co.uk
- Vale of Rheidol Railway, Aberystwyth, adult return £21.50, www.rheidolrailway.co.uk
- Aberystwyth Cliff Railway/Camera Obscura, £3.50/£1, www.aberystwythcliff railway.co.uk
- National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth, free entry, www.library.wales
- Ceredigion Museum, Aberystwyth, free entry, www.ceredigionmuseum.wales.



LATEST LOCAL OFFERS

Telephone Travel Norwich Airport on 01603 428700, email enquiries@travelnorwichairport.co.uk or visit www.travelnorwich.com

Tenerife - 5 December, 7 Nights, 4* Adult Only in Los Gigantes, Half Board from £695pp - Saving £100 per couple

New Year in Edinburgh - 30 December, 4 Nights, 4* Named Hotel, Bed & Breakfast from £599pp

Amsterdam & Dutch Bulfields - 6, 9 & 27 April, 3 Nights, 3* Named Hotel, Bed & Breakfast from £629pp

Jersey - May Various Dates, 4 Nights, 5* Named Hotel in St. Helier, Bed & Breakfast from £485pp

Corfu - 1 May, 7 Nights, 5* Platinum, Adult Only Hotel in Aghios Gordios, Half Board from £555pp - Saving £136 per couple

Crete - 5 May, 7 Nights, 5* Platinum Hotel in Rethymnon, Half Board from £529pp - Saving £124 per couple

Majorca - 5 May, 7 Nights, 5* Platinum Hotel in Porto Cristo, All Inclusive from £665pp - Saving £368 per couple

Bulgaria - 28 May, 14 Nights, 5* Named Hotel in St. Vlas, All Inclusive from £719pp - Saving £121 per couple

Prices are correct at time of going to print, all subject to availability and based on maximum occupancy. Prices excludes £10/adult Norwich Airport Development Fee payable at the Airport.



The Dyfi Distillery is one of several fascinating artisan's workshops at the Corris Craft Centre in Mid Wales.

Picture: STUART ANDERSON

Summing up

Aberystwyth and surrounds can get overlooked in favour of the north and south, but that only adds to its charm. Wales isn't merely a hillier version of East Anglia, it is literally another country with its own language, traditions and culture. There's lots to discover and we've already vowed to make another trip back - check it out once and I'm betting you will too.



ABOVE: Looking through the Camera Obscura on Constitution Hill into Aberystwyth

Picture: STUART ANDERSON

LEFT: The water-balanced Cliff Railway at the Centre for Alternative Technology (CAT), Mid Wales

Picture: CAT