



# THE NEXT BIG THING



THIS PAGE:  
Drinks from The  
Dead Canary  
in Cardiff;  
OPPOSITE: Hiking  
near Cadir Idris.

Do not go gentle into  
that good night.  
Rage, rage against  
the dying of the light.  
- Dylan Thomas

WITH SOARING CLIFFS, QUAIN VILLAGES  
AND A HIP URBAN SCENE, **WALES** SHOULD  
BE ON YOUR 2019 TRAVEL RADAR. BY STEPHANIE MARCH

# REMEMBER BACK IN THE MID-1990S, WHEN THE HOTTEST PLACE TO BE WAS PRAGUE?

Everyone wanted to ditch their lives and head to the Czech Republic's freshly democratic capital. The dark and mysterious city held foggy bridges, Gothic architecture and the dream of Kafka-fueled discussions in cafés tucked down cobblestone alleyways. Then it shifted, and everyone had to go to Estonia. Tallinn, with its affordable medieval charms and the cold and deep Baltic Sea, beckoned. Belize was the hot spot at some point, too. Is it Iceland now? It seems as if every other person I know is booking a trip to experience the country's crystal blue lagoons and hike black-rock crags where a bended-knee engagement might happen once every five minutes, according to Instagram.

What is it about these destinations that draws travelers in droves? They're not like Paris, which will always hold our collective hearts, or Rome with its ancient travelers' trade. Those cities are international beacons that shine brightly—bucket list check boxes for millions. The initial allure of places such as Prague and Iceland is actually the fact that they are *not* Paris or Rome. In this increasingly shared global space, these hot spots seem like places where there is still something left to be discovered. It always has helped if the new "hot spot" is affordable, accessible and welcoming to incoming explorers—and these days, there clearly has to be some picturesque moments or startling landscapes for the required social postings that will assure the location's ascension to "hotness." As we ready for the inevitable shift ("No one goes to Iceland anymore, it's too crowded!"), where will the trend jet-setters land next? Here's a thought: Why not Wales?

On a recent trip through the country, I kept asking myself that very question. The small but fiercely independent member of the United Kingdom that sits on the western edge of England seems to me to have all the tickets. It's very old, but to the modern traveler it's still a bit unknown (ask the person next to you if Wales is a city or a country). It's accessible, but still rugged, and driving is an adventure. They speak English, but Welsh is more fun. It has one semilitzy city where you can spend a bit of cash, but the rest of the country is mostly made up of small towns. Its landscape is remarkably varied, from white sandy beaches to thickly wooded gorges, and it has more castles per mile than any other country on earth. And good lord, there are sheep everywhere! More prodigious than the Aussies' iconic kangaroos, the sheep are certainly more docile and photo ready than the cats of Bangkok. As I traveled from city to rocky wilderness,

from cocktail bar to the world's first mountainside surf lagoon, I wondered if this could be the right time for Wales.

## CARDIFF

First off, you probably know that Wales isn't England, but to mistake that fact will earn you a healthy dose of side-eye. These citizens of the United Kingdom happily call themselves Brits, but not English. While the country did end up voting for BREXIT, the Welsh votes were split between the rural areas and the capital city of Cardiff, which wanted to stay part of the European Union. This is the main university town, after all, with the most diverse population I saw while I was there.

Cardiff, or Caerdydd in Welsh (which hardly anyone speaks in the capital), is cosmopolitan and busy. But for all the shiny tall buildings and boutique hotels, the thing you simply can't escape is the ancient castle smack dab in the center. Make no mistake, this sets the tone for Wales. During my days there, I would turn a corner and happen upon a massive Gothic cathedral, come out from a hedge row and suddenly be dwarfed by a castle that had been lurking behind trees. In fact, there are 641 castles in this small country, but Cardiff Castle is king.

Originally a Roman fort, it has survived all the eras and all the rich men who thought they should add a tower here and a buttress there. The third Marquess of Bute, one of the world's richest men of his time, was responsible for creating the faux-Gothic persona it displays today. To see how far the ruling class has come, head down to the bay and witness what I think is one of the city's best buildings. The national assembly building, known as the Senedd, is a soaring modern construction that sits on the former docks and was opened by the queen in 2006. Glass and steel wrap the structure that looks to be reaching out to the water—and the world. The building itself is made with renewable technologies and is a monument to efficiency and sustainability, but the surrounding steps are made from black slate, an important part of the mining economies of North Wales. Dualities seem to coexist quite comfortably here.

The country's most exciting nightlife is here in Cardiff, so it's smart to take advantage of it. We happened to be in the city while the new university freshmen were sowing their oats, and with about 40,000 students around, there were plenty of clubs leaking bright lights onto those who were queued up down cobblestone alleyways. We opted for something a little more high-end and found ourselves knocking on the back door of a dark building—the somewhat secret entrance to The Dead Canary.

As we walked down the stairs into the bar, the sounds of busy shaker tins and loud music filled the air. Scattered among the stylishly clad patrons were bearded servers in waistcoats working their way through the room. Drinks here are named for the heroes of Wales, and the menu comprises faux business cards in Rolodexes. Order a Christian Bale and you get a gin drink boosted with blood orange liqueur and swish of absinthe. Choose the Dylan Thomas and you will not go gentle into the good night—it's made of Glenmorangie whisky laced

**OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:** Surf lessons with Surf Snowdonia adventure park; The Cardiff Market; Canal boats and passengers along the Pontcysyllte Aqueduct in northeast Wales; Old College in Aberystwyth, Ceredigion, at sunset; Looking at sculptures at the Mostyn gallery in Llandudno; Coasteering near St. David's; Mixing cocktails at The Dead Canary; A family visiting the Anglesey Sea Zoo in Brynisiencyn.



PAGE 56: MATTHEW WILLIAMS/ELLIS (HKEED); PAGE 59: SURF SNOWDONIA (ADVENTURE PARK); CHRISTIAN VIEL/UEX (DEAD CANARY); © VISIT WALES (IMAGE CENTRE (INDOOR MARKET); CANAL BOATS; MOSTYN GALLERY; COASTEERING; ANGLESEY SEA ZOO)



with coffee and chicory, with a side of poetry.

After a round or two of crafted drinks, and a thrilling discussion in which one of our Welsh compatriots admitted to being a royalist, we drilled down as far as we could on the brilliance of the Duchess of Sussex, Meghan Markle, and then decided it was time for a snack. Off we tumbled to Caroline Street—known locally as Chip Alley or Chippy Lane—where you'll find the tipsy and hungry gathering in front of shops like Dorothy's Fish Bar for chicken curry and chips. Is there anything that beats a meat pie atop a hot and steaming cone of vinegar-doused chips at midnight? This all might seem like the trappings of modern life, but while there may be more taco shops now than in past years, the first chipper started selling here nearly 150 years ago. It was thought to be right around 1872, roughly the same time that the nearby Kings Cross pub opened, believed to be the oldest gay pub in Wales before it closed in 2011. See? Everything old is new again.

Of course, before you leave Cardiff, you should see the world-class National Museum Cardiff, take in a Premier League Cardiff City FC game and attend a show at the beautiful Wales Millennium Centre on Mermaid Quay. Strolling through one of the Edwardian glass-roofed shopping arcades, which dip and turn inexplicably between buildings, is a special joy when you

find the high-end fashion store next to a gin bar near an exit. But whatever the cost, don't leave before walking through the Cardiff Market, which has been trading in one form or another since the 1700s. Wend your way through food stalls, FC gear, cheesemongers and fish sellers and find your way to the Cardiff Bakestones shop. There, they sell some 1,000 Welshcakes a day—and for good reason. This national pastry is like a cross between a cookie and a biscuit, griddled and warm, but not thick, almost flaky yet flat with a scalloped edge. Eat one of these Welshcakes straight from the shopkeeper's hands, dusted with sugar and snug in a papery sleeve, and prepare yourself to be ruined for all the others you will invariably consume, chasing that first perfect bite. At least you had Cardiff.

#### PEMBROKESHIRE

You must leave the city. There's too much more. The sea and the cliffs have been here longest, and in fact, you *could* walk right out of Cardiff and hike the entire length of the country's edge. In 2012, the 870-mile Wales Coast Path was completed, connecting Chepstow in the south to the city of Chester in the north. The walking path darts in and out of villages, over cliff tops and sandy beaches, past ruins and hidden coves that you

might never see if you choose to travel by car or train—although the bike paths are another solid option. Like most, instead of committing to the full trek, we opted to hike parts of the path as we headed into Great Britain's only coastal national park, the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park.

Standing on the edge of grassy, windswept cliffs dotted with clumps of thistles and brambles of wild raspberries, it struck me suddenly how sheltered Cardiff had seemed. Wild and cold waves lashed the rocks below, and there was a feeling that we had been in an entirely different country that morning. I was not expecting the expanse of white sandy beaches nor the pastel-hued beach town of Tenby, perched between the two of them. Were we in Italy? Commonly voted a top vacation spot, this little town buzzes during the high season with travelers from Cardiff and England who come for the sand, the water sports and the fresh fish sold directly from the boats in the harbor. Why do I feel like I've never heard of a beach town in the U.K.?

As we made our way to St. David's, at the westernmost tip of the park where it juts into St. George's Channel, we didn't know then how much we were about to deepen our relationship with the sea. You've heard of mountaineering and canyoneering? In Pembrokeshire, it's all about coasteering, which local surfers

invented in the early 1980s. This recreational sporting activity requires you to navigate an intertidal area of a rocky shoreline with just your body. No boat, no surfboard, no floaties or tech other than your wetsuit, a helmet and a life vest. To break it down, you and your pals are rock-hopping, wave-riding, swell-battling, cave exploring, perhaps cliff-jumping, while definitely testing all your muscles and limits. It's a rush. In St. David's, the crew from TYF Adventure got us geared up, taught us all

the ropes and took us to an old slate quarry where we could play. We scrambled and slid, dunked and bobbed until we were exhausted. Some of us were heartier than others, but the guides were ever patient and were clearly set on us having the most fun we could achieve. Did I jump from a ledge 10 stories up? It sure felt like it.

And if you're going to let the sea beat you up, your best form of self-care would be a night at Twr y Felin. Originally a windmill built in 1806,

OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: A winding lane in a Cardiff shopping arcade; The pub and beach of The Swan Inn in Little Haven at dusk; A selection of beers from Urban Tap House in Cardiff; An abandoned castle in Pembrokeshire; Sheep grazing in Brecon Beacons National Park. THIS PAGE: Three hikers on the Wales Coast Path near Ceibwr Bay in Pembrokeshire.

STEPHANIE MARCH (SHOPPING ARCADE); VISIT WALES IMAGE CENTRE (LITTLE HAVEN SWAN INN); LAND+TRKRS (© JUSTIN FOLKES) / SHUTTERSTOCK (PHOTO BEERS); JOSHILL (CASTLE)



this beautiful hotel has been restored and expanded by Griffiths Roch Foundation into one of the country's first contemporary art hotels, displaying more than 100 unique pieces from leading modern U.K. artists. Luxurious without being opulent, it's all about service and small details like plush bedding and deep bathtubs. We ate one of our best meals of the trip at the hotel's restaurant, which artfully plates modern seasonal cuisine, heavily focused on locally caught seafood.

I managed to sneak down into the small city of St. David's for a quick walk, charmed by narrow streets and window boxes overflowing with flowers. After slipping down an alley and following the turns, I rounded a corner and was surprised by the city's namesake cathedral, literally hidden in a hollow. Apparently this was intentional, as it was thought to protect the cathedral from the sights of the Viking hordes. Didn't work. The cathedral was sacked roughly seven times. Our Welsh friend said he always thought the inside looked a little drunk, what with the sloping floors resulting from that pesky earthquake of 1248. Nevertheless, walking around this massive and protected stone building that at once commands its space and then quietly fades among the rooftops was one of my favorite moments.

Leaving the south coast, we pointed ourselves north toward Snowdonia. We popped off the road here and there to see villages, buy kelp-infused rum, take pictures of sheep, slip into a castle or two and see ancient Celtic cairns that were created at the same time—and with the same rocks—as Stonehenge. All along the way, we ran into plenty of others who were doing the same thing. And every few stops, we'd pass fields where travelers had pitched tents or parked camper vans. The hedge game is strong in Wales, so there's not a lot of leeway on the roads, and when the lane narrows, it's straight hedge on both sides and nowhere to go. Our passenger van would come head to head with other drivers in a lane where passing at that point was not an option. Time and time again, both drivers would wave, one would back up to a shoulder space, and then both cars would wave again as they passed. No honking, no cursing, no blame. Just hedges.

## SNOWDONIA

It sounds like a place the Winter Warlock would live. And that makes sense, because I think I was spellbound by Snowdonia. After staying overnight in the shadow of the castle in Harlech, and possibly drinking more than our share of the cottage's gin when the Wi-Fi pooped out, we turned away from the sea and into the hills. This was rougher land, full of giant boulders and slate, though the sheep didn't seem to care. We found out that there are rogue sheep that have broken loose and spend their time at the very top of those mountains, where no one cares to grab them. Of course, you should yell "Freedom!" every time you see one.

As we moved deeper into the north, things clearly changed again. Houses and buildings were more commonly crafted from giant hunks of dark gray stone and looked bigger and sturdier. Towns seemed more sparsely set apart. While the people were as friendly as ever, we suddenly heard more Welsh being spoken than English. In Cardiff, we were told that children were again being taught Welsh in schools—after generations had attended school without Welsh

**OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:** The Fairbourne Steam Railway in Gwynedd; Hanging out at the BrewDog bar in Cardiff; The Wales Millennium Centre in Cardiff; A castle overlooking one of Wales' beaches; Coasteering in Pembrokeshire; Cheeses at Madame Fromage delicatessen in Cardiff; A wakeboarder in Wakesock, Pwllheli, on the Llyn Peninsula; Shops in Cardiff Market.

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instruction. In Snowdonia, it seems to have never left.

As wild as the landscape was, it did seem to be somewhat more conservative in the towns we stopped in. Which may be why it felt altogether strange to find Surf Snowdonia in the middle of it all. Opened in 2015, it was the world's first inland surf lagoon (way more than a wave pool) and it drew surfers from all over the world to come practice and teach surfing in North Wales. It's a bit surreal: Skyrocketing evergreens climb the slopes in front of you as you madly paddle and try to catch the wave behind you. It's all mechanical, timed and measured to your skill level, but it is so very far from easy. Olympians train here.

The only way to balance a day of surfing in the mountains is to spend an evening in a nearby ancient walled city, right? A UNESCO World Heritage site, the town of Conwy is a medieval walled city, and the entire town exists within the castle walls that run nearly



Tenby Harbour in Pembrokeshire

a mile long with 21 towers and three gateways inside. Here we grabbed our first fish 'n' chips of the trip—sort of a victory dinner for cramming into a wetsuit for a second time—but then turned our heads for a mere second. That was all the gulls needed to abscond with our fish. Wandering these streets, populated with modern shops and devious gulls who don't care where you're from or where you're going, I may have decided: If Wales isn't the next hot spot, it is a patient place. There will still be castles waiting for when it is. ▀

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|----|---|---|---|---|
| 7+ | 3 | 4 | 2 | 1 |
|    | 3 | 4 | 2 | 1 |
| 3- | 1 | 3 | 4 | 2 |
|    | 4 | 2 | 1 | 3 |
| 2÷ | 2 | 1 | 3 | 4 |

Hard KENKEN

|     |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|-----|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2÷  | 2 | 4 | 6 | 3 | 1 | 5 |
| 1-  | 6 | 1 | 4 | 5 | 2 | 3 |
| 12÷ | 4 | 3 | 5 | 2 | 6 | 1 |
| 5-  | 3 | 5 | 1 | 6 | 4 | 2 |
| 10× | 5 | 6 | 2 | 1 | 3 | 4 |
| 2÷  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |

Easy Sudoku

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| 8 | 7 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 2 | 1 | 9 | 6 |
| 1 | 4 | 9 | 7 | 6 | 3 | 8 | 5 | 2 |
| 6 | 2 | 5 | 8 | 9 | 1 | 3 | 4 | 7 |
| 7 | 1 | 6 | 5 | 8 | 9 | 4 | 2 | 3 |
| 5 | 8 | 4 | 2 | 3 | 7 | 6 | 1 | 9 |
| 9 | 3 | 2 | 6 | 1 | 4 | 7 | 8 | 5 |
| 2 | 5 | 1 | 3 | 4 | 6 | 9 | 7 | 8 |
| 4 | 6 | 7 | 9 | 2 | 8 | 5 | 3 | 1 |
| 3 | 9 | 8 | 1 | 7 | 5 | 2 | 6 | 4 |

Hard Sudoku

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| 3 | 7 | 5 | 6 | 4 | 9 | 8 | 1 | 2 |
| 4 | 1 | 9 | 3 | 8 | 2 | 5 | 7 | 6 |
| 2 | 5 | 7 | 9 | 6 | 8 | 1 | 4 | 3 |
| 8 | 6 | 1 | 7 | 3 | 4 | 2 | 5 | 9 |
| 9 | 3 | 4 | 2 | 5 | 1 | 6 | 8 | 7 |

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| I | N | O | U | Y | E | O | H | O | K | T | O | T |   |
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| B | A | S | S | I | A | D | E | I | N | S | T | I | R |
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| P | R | E | S | S | E | S | S | X | S | W | E | R | S |

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