

Pembrokeshire

As the Welsh county's coastal national park hits 70, Vicky Smith find plenty to celebrate, from wandering serene sandy shores to visiting resort towns filled with good food... and ideas



Even in Britain's earliest literature, Pembrokeshire attracted compliments. The *Mabinogi*, a collection of medieval folktales compiled in Middle Welsh, proclaimed it "a land of mystery and enchantment". Centuries on, this remote south-western corner of Wales continues to beguile with a coastline boasting more Blue Flag beaches than any other Welsh county and the UK's least populated (and perhaps most magical) city, St Davids.

It is also home to Pembrokeshire Coast National Park, which celebrates its 70th anniversary this year with an array of enticing days out. It's very much in keeping with a theme. While COVID-19 may have deterred visitors these past two years, it hasn't stopped Pembrokeshire gearing up to welcome them back. Along with the revamped waterfront at Milford Haven, there are newly expanded activity centres around Martletwy (Wild Lake Wales) and at Llys-y-Frân Lake, as well as a slew of innovative new restaurants, including Annwn (annwnrestaurant.co.uk), which serves up seasonal fine dining in a converted potting shed near Cleddau Woodlands.

Pembrokeshire is lapped by the sea on three sides. On my visit, I not only relished fine coastal vistas but picture-postcard resorts such as Tenby. I also made time to explore some lesser-known delights. In the small, hilly town of Narberth, where colourful buildings cluster around a war memorial, I stumbled on a hoard of independent shops ranging from antique bazaars to family jewellers. The town's abundance of cafés, restaurants, and delis crammed with curated goodies – check out Ultracomida – revealed an impressive gastronomic underbelly. It's little surprise it's twinned with Ludlow, the "Food Town" across the English border in Shropshire.

I also travelled to the Preseli Mountains, whose slopes are dotted with reminders of its past, from the Neolithic burial chamber of Pentre Ifan to Castell Henllys Iron Age village. And at Carew Millpond, where egrets waded in the castle's reflection and martins flitted around the Tidal Mill, I pondered how Pembrokeshire's history – of Christian pilgrims and Viking invasions, Celtic warriors and Tudor Kings – is as dramatic as its legendary landscapes. A place of mystery and enchantment indeed. ▶

51.6762° N, 4.9184° W

Ask a local

"Take the gentle, circular Abermawr Walk through ancient National Trust woodland to a wild and remote beach with extraordinary wildlife on its shores. Follow the trail back, then head up through the valley to Melin Tregwynt, a white-washed woollen mill with restored water wheel that has been weaving iconic patterned blankets from Welsh sheep's wool since the 17th century and has been run by the same family for over 100 years."

Sophie Hurst, director at Preseli Venture





DAY 1

Spend the morning in **St Davids**, the city with the smallest population in the UK, whose crowning glory is its **cathedral** (stdavidscathedral.org.uk). A site of worship since the 6th century, it nestles in a scenic hollow near the country's most westerly point; this was also where St David, patron saint of Wales, was buried. Next, visit **Oriely Parc Gallery**, where you'll find art displays from Wales' national collection alongside a helpful visitor centre (01437 720392) before pottering around some of the many independent treasures in this small, charming city. Have lunch at **The Really Wild Emporium** (thereallywildemporium.co.uk), which serves foraged meals in a restored Art Deco building; or if you're feeling adventurous, try innovative insect-based cuisine at **Grub Kitchen** (grubkitchen.co.uk). In the afternoon, take a trip to the **Preseli Mountains**, a medley of heath and moorland studded with quirky landmarks, such as the community-owned **Tafarn Sinc** pub and its old railway line (*pictured*), as well as prehistoric sites like the Iron Age roundhouses of **Castell Henllys** (visitpembrokeshire.com). Stop at **Newport** or **Fishguard**, both picturesque coastal towns with an indie vibe, then round off the day with hearty fare at **The Sloop Inn** (sloop.co.uk), a cosy pub between Fishguard and St Davids.

Getting there: Key train stations include Haverfordwest and Pembroke, with trains from outside Wales often connecting in Swansea or Cardiff. Various buses (often with names like *Puffin Shuttle* and *Poppit Rocket*) traverse the National Park coastline, though some may find exploring easier by car. See visitpembrokeshire.com.

Stay at: Twr y Felin (twryfelinhotel.com; *pictured*), a former windmill with a claim to be Wales' "first contemporary art hotel", offers an AA-award-winning stay in St Davids and is home to a well-regarded restaurant, Blas. Expanded last year, it features 41 rooms (B&B doubles from £195pn) and over 100 pieces of commissioned art. Alternatively, Solva-based Quality Cottages lists a wide range of stays across the county and has increased its portfolio to include more family- and dog-friendly options (qualitycottages.co.uk; from £448 per week). **W**



DAY 2

Now it's time to explore central and south Pembrokeshire. Start with popular seaside resort **Tenby**, whose lively harbour (*pictured*), cobbled streets, medieval town walls and brightly painted clifftop houses perched above sandy beaches make it, unsurprisingly, a tourist honeypot, so get there early, before the crowds. Just along the coast, **Saundersfoot** is another jewel worth checking out. Next, head inland to **Pembroke**, a walled town whose mighty **castle** (pembrokecastle.co.uk) dates to 1093 and was the birthplace of Henry VII. Grab lunch at the onsite cafe before enjoying the nearby waterside walk, or strolling into town and browsing the many local shops and galleries. Pop into the Grade II-listed Georgian **Town Hall**, which hosts an eclectic museum and a series of superb murals depicting Pembroke's eventful past (pembrokmuseum.wales). Afterwards, make a detour to **Daugleddau Estuary** (dubbed "Pembrokeshire's hidden waterway"), which is a haven for wading birds and includes sights such as **Carew Castle** and **Tidal Mill** (pembrokeshirecoast.wales). Finally, stop off in **Narberth**, celebrated for its diverse shopping scene and dining delights. A meal at **Madtom** (madtomseafood.com) or food hall **Hwb** (hwbnarberth.com) is a fitting end to any visit.



4 TOP THINGS TO DO

HIKE the Pembrokeshire Coast Path. This glorious 300km trail ranges from secluded coves and pastel ports to over 50 beaches and 40 Iron Age forts. You don't have to tackle it all at once; the official website (pembrokeshirecoast.wales) has a wealth of suggested itineraries, taking in relaxing strolls alongside more challenging stretches.

SAIL to an island. Another highlight of the county's coast is its islands, which promise the same fusion of ancient history and soul-stirring scenery as their mainland counterpart. Many are now nature reserves, with residents such as endearing puffins and grey seal pups.

ENCOUNTER more wildlife. Whether meandering down the River Teifi in a Canadian dug-out canoe with Top of the Woods (topofthewoods.co.uk), spotting red deer and peregrine falcons as you go, or looking out for kingfishers and otters at the Welsh Wildlife Centre (welshwildlife.org), don't miss the chance to meet critters inland, too.

DISCOVER why this is a sustainable gourmet hotspot. Experiences span from tours at Velfrey Vineyard (velfreyvineyard.com) to coastal foraging with Craig Evans (coastalforaging.co.uk). Producers Atlantic Edge Oysters even farm their own shellfish, while initiatives like the Peninsula Producers Food Hub (openfoodnetwork.org.uk) spotlight regional purveyors.