

Tiny Wales chock-full of castles and charm



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Humble, charming little Wales is a land of lusty men's choirs, salty harbors, slate-roofed villages, stunning mountains and stout castles.

In fact, Wales is slathered with castles. During the late 13th and early 14th centuries, English King Edward I started building these awe-inspiring fortresses, arguably the most breathtaking you'll find anywhere in Europe, to subdue the rebellious Welsh. These castles were masterpieces of medieval engineering, built with state-of-the-art castle technology, with sea access to restock from England.

In the Middle Ages, the standard castle was a simple stone building ("keep") on a hill ("motte"), surrounded by a wall that enclosed a yard (or "bailey") where the people lived. This mound-and-yard (or "motte-and-bailey") pattern was the basis of the typical medieval castle. Later castles were much bigger, with more rings of walls as much as 20 feet thick, once whitewashed and gleaming in the sun, flags flying high. Outside the wall was the moat, a ditch occasionally filled with water (they put alligators in them only in fairy tales).

Edward I's castles were English islands in the middle of angry Wales. Most were built with a fortified grid-plan town attached and then filled with English settlers.

If you want to visit Welsh castle towns but don't have time for the whole region, head for North Wales, where my preferred home base is the town of Conwy. Built in the 1280s to give Edward I a toehold in Wales, it also served as a



GRETCHEN STRAUCH/RICK STEVES' EUROPE

Caernarfon Castle in Wales, built in the late 13th century, is where Prince Charles had his investiture in 1969, a ceremony similar to a coronation.

busy port back when much of England was roofed with Welsh slate. Today it boasts the best medieval walls in Britain, a protective castle dramatically situated on a rock overlooking the sea, and an appealing harbor front that locals treat like a town square.

But Conwy isn't just walls and a castle. You'll also find Plas Mawr, a rare house from around 1580, built during the reign of Elizabeth I. It was the first Welsh home to be built within Conwy's English enclave. (Elizabeth's Tudor family had Welsh roots, and, therefore, relations between Wales and England warmed under her rule.) Billed as "the oldest house in Wales," it offers a delightful look at 16th-century domestic life among the wealthy. His-

torically accurate (if facsimile) household items bring the rooms to life, as does the refreshing lack of velvet ropes; you're free to wander as you imagine life in this house.

While Conwy oozes with Welsh charm, the most famous Welsh fortress is half an hour's drive away at Caernarfon Castle, where the last two Princes of Wales were invested. (It's a royal ceremony similar to a coronation; Prince Charles had his investiture in 1969.) Like Conwy, Caernarfon is an Edward I garrison town; the city still follows the original, medieval grid plan laid within its well-preserved ramparts. Modeled after the striped, angular walls of ancient Constantinople, the castle, though impressive, was never finished and never really

used. Despite its unfinished state, it's fun to climb around, especially its huge Eagle Tower.

While the castle is late 13th century, Caernarfon is mostly a 19th-century town. At that time, the most important place in town was the area that sprawls below the castle (now a parking lot). This was once a booming slate port, shipping tidy bundles of slate from North Wales mining towns to ports all over Europe. While the slate trade is gone, Caernarfon bustles with shops, cafes and people; the pleasant town is worth a wander.

For one of Britain's most beautiful castles, visit the romantic little village of Beaumaris on the Isle of Anglesey, about a 30-minute drive northeast from Caernarfon. Beaumaris

originated, like other castle towns, as an English "green zone" in the 13th century, surrounded by Welsh guerrillas. Today, it feels genuinely Welsh, with a fine harbor front, lots of colorful shops and eateries, a fascinating Victorian prison (now a museum) and the remains of an idyllic castle.

The site has no natural geological constraints like those that encumbered the castle designers at Caernarfon and Conwy, so its wall-within-a-wall design is almost perfectly concentric. While Beaumaris shows medieval castle engineering at its best — four rings of defense, a moat and a fortified dock — problems in Scotland changed the king's priorities. Construction stopped by 1330. It looks ruined (and rather squat), but it

was never ransacked or destroyed; it's simply unfinished. The site was overgrown until the last century, yet today it's like a park, with pristine lawns and a classic moat. Because it's harder to get here, it's less crowded, making your visit feel more authentic.

Wales has a fierce loyalty to tradition and a distinct and thriving local culture. And, even with literally hundreds of once-fierce castles glaring down on any visitor, it offers among the warmest welcomes you'll find anywhere.

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GAVIN HELLIER/AWL IMAGES

Zicasso offers a 10-day trip to Chile's Easter Island during the Christmas season.

TRIPS, TIPS & DEALS

Christmas on Easter Island

BY PHIL MARTY | Chicago Tribune

You can combine two holidays into one by spending Christmas on Easter Island. Zicasso, which matches travelers with travel specialists, offers the customizable 10-day trip. The tour starts in Santiago, Chile, and includes a private tour of wineries in the Colchagua Valley, the country's prime wine region. It then moves on to northern Patagonia for some trekking, horseback riding and rafting. From Patagonia, it's back to Santiago before flying to Easter Island. The highlight of Christmas Eve day will be a snorkeling excursion, and on Christmas Day there will be outings to see Easter Island's most famous attraction, the moai statues. The package is priced from \$5,199 per person, double occupancy, and includes nine nights' lodging, most meals and various tours. A premium option, priced from \$7,865, upgrades the accommodations and adds other tours, including two helicopter rides. Info: tinyurl.com/zuuolp7

Cyber Monday deals

Post-Thanksgiving means sales, even in the travel arena. On Cyber Monday, Nov. 28, Friendly Planet Travel (www.friendlyplanet.com) will reduce prices on more than 50 international tour packages that include air, promising savings of up to \$1,400 per couple. The sale will last 48 hours. Also on Cyber Monday, Mahekal Beach Resort (www.mahekalbeachresort.com) in Playa del Carmen, Mexico, will knock money off stays from May 14 to Dec. 19, 2017. Naturally you won't find these deals on the websites until Cyber Monday.

Boat-based getaways

Road Scholar has expanded its horizons with 19 trips sure to float your boat. All are ship-based, including ocean liners, riverboats and small vessels that carry fewer than a hundred passengers. The destinations are as diverse as the ships, ranging from Iceland and Antarctica to Spain's Canary Islands and the American South along the Mississippi River. History buffs might enjoy the WWI Commemorative Voyage in Belgium and France, scheduled for Sept. 12-23, 2017. The itinerary includes one expert-led lecture onboard and 17 field trips to battlefields, cemeteries and other significant sites. The 12-day/11-night itinerary is priced from \$2,995 per person, double occupancy, with international air starting at \$1,000. See all of the ship-based trips at tinyurl.com/zlkrove.

Phil Marty is a freelance writer.



GEAR BOX

PILLOWPACKERS

Travel pillow works like a dream

BY JUDI DASH
Los Angeles Times

A new travel pillow may strike you as a big yawn, but Pillowpacker's latest is a different take. The company has inserted an inflatable inner pillow into an outer pillow filled with down feathers or downlike microfiber to create a soft, snugly hybrid that weighs less than a pound.

You get a choice of

three fillings: Hutterite Goose Down, Brome Duck Down or the Hypoallergenic Microfiber Down-Alternative. Each is encased in a 100 percent cotton shell with a side zipper for accessing the inner pillow's inflation valve (it requires only a few puffs) or removing the inner pillow. (The outer pillow can be machine-washed and dried.) Each pillow comes with one cotton percale pillow-

case in a choice of eight colors, as well as a nylon stuff sack.

At 19-by-14-by-3-inches, a Pillowpacker is smaller than a standard bed pillow, but it's nearly as fat when inflated. Deflated and stashed in its sack, a Pillowpacker is about the size of a rolled hand towel. Prices begin at \$90, depending on filling. Info: www.pillowpackers.com.

Judi Dash is a freelancer.

NEED TO KNOW

Cedar Point coaster to bear Cubs' moniker

BY LORI RACKL
Chicago Tribune

The Chicago Cubs' wild ride to a World Series win means another wild ride, Cedar Point's Top Thrill Dragster roller coaster, will be renamed in the team's honor.

The tallest, fastest coaster at the amusement park in Sandusky, Ohio, will go by the moniker Top Thrill Cubster during next season's opening weekend May 6 and 7.

The temporary renaming is the result of a lost bet this month between the park's staff and their counterparts at Six Flags

Great America in Gurnee, Ill. The losing park also had to sing the winning team's song. A video of dejected Cedar Pointers lip-syncing "Go, Cubs, Go" is posted on the park's Facebook page.

The 420-foot-tall Top Thrill Dragster reaches speeds of 120 mph.

Cedar Point isn't the only Ohio business forced to pay up for the Cleveland Indians' loss to Chicago.

The Schofield Hotel, a Kimpton property in Cleveland, is offering \$99 rooms to Illinois residents for the month of December thanks to the Cubs' World Series championship.



CEDAR POINT AMUSEMENT PARK

Thanks to the Cubs' World Series win, Cedar Point's Top Thrill Dragster roller coaster will go by the name Top Thrill Cubster during the Ohio's park's opening weekend in May.