

GREAT ESCAPES

If you want to get away from it all, our colleagues on *Holiday Which?* recommend three UK destinations for a perfect break

Scenic walks, fresh air, and leisurely pub lunches are a great antidote to a hectic city life. Snowdonia, the Perthshire Highlands and the Isles of Scilly offer all these things and, for those in search of a bit of culture, a handful of tourist attractions too.

Even though the Isles of Scilly are a frost-free zone, in spring the sea is likely to be too bracing and rough for swimming. And you'll probably need a woolly jumper and a waterproof coat, as well as sturdy walking boots, for the Perthshire Highlands and Snowdonia in March or April. But if crashing waves, empty beaches or mountain vistas appeal, these destinations are hard to beat. Always check weather forecasts and advice from local tourist information centres before setting out on the more adventurous walks in Snowdonia and the Perthshire Highlands.

For each area, we've given a range of places to stay. Book early, especially if you're planning a visit over the long Easter weekend, when some places will accept only two- or three-night bookings, and may not offer any reductions for single travellers.

We've also listed some great places to eat and drink, ranging from top-notch restaurants to atmospheric pubs. All our recommendations for accommodation, attractions and eating have been inspected for our guidebooks or *Holiday Which?*.

FURTHER INFORMATION

You can read the full *Holiday Which?* reports (and miniguides) on these three areas on the leisure and travel section of www.which.co.uk/whichextra.

For more information on where to stay, eat and drink, see our latest 2005 guides: *The Which? Guide to Good Hotels* (code WHG05), *The Good Food Guide* (code GFG05), *The Which? Pub Guide* (code WPG05) and *The Good Bed & Breakfast Guide* (published in April; code BED05). All cost £15.99 and can be bought from www.which.co.uk/bookshop, by calling 0800 252 100 and quoting the relevant code in brackets, or from any good bookshop.

For a free trial of *Holiday Which?* (published four times a year) and a free travel alarm clock, call 0800 252 100 and quote H2EW05, or visit www.holidaywhichfreetrial.co.uk.

PERTSHIRE HIGHLANDS

Loch Tay

Rannoch Moor

Portmeirion

NORTH WALES

Conwy

If crashing waves, empty beaches or mountain

vistas appeal, these destinations are hard to beat

Aerial view of the isles

ISLES OF SCILLY

Tresco

NORTH WALES

North Wales offers a magical mix of scenery and history. A wealth of first-class historical attractions is sandwiched between Snowdonia's bleak mountains and a coastline of sandy beaches overlooked by craggy headlands. It's a winning combination, with plenty to do even if the weather's bad.

For enthusiastic walkers, the North Wales Path provides some stunning coastal and mountain views as it winds its way along 60 miles of coastline from Bangor to Prestatyn. Llandudno is a genteel Victorian resort while Conwy is a picture-perfect town in a chocolate-box kind of way. The pretty streets beneath the medieval town walls and castle are home to several historic houses, including Aberconwy House (the oldest in Wales), Britain's smallest house (it has two storeys and is 10ft 2in high but its last resident was a 6ft 3in fisherman) and Plas Mawr, an outstanding Tudor house.

Much of North Wales lies within Snowdonia National Park, with Mount Snowdon (the highest peak in Wales) at its heart. At the small village of Llanberis you can board the Victorian steam railway. Weather permitting, the train runs daily from mid-March to early November as far as Clogwyn (three quarters of the way up) or Rocky Valley (halfway up). From mid-May to the end of October the train will take you to the starkly beautiful summit.

There are plenty of walking trails and routes in Snowdonia National Park, ranging from energetic mountain ascents to gentle woodland walks. Some routes are only for experienced climbers, but other areas, such as Betws-y-Coed on the eastern side of Snowdonia, have many paths, tracks and forest roads which can easily be explored.



Harlech Castle overlooking Snowdonia is part of a Unesco World Heritage Site

Sights worth a visit include Caernarfon Castle. England's King Edward I ordered work on the castle to begin in 1283, and today it's one of Europe's best-preserved medieval fortifications. Along with three other castles in the area (Harlech, Conwy and Beaumaris on Anglesey) it's part of a Unesco World Heritage Site.

North Wales used to be the world slate-mining centre, and its industrial heritage is on display at Blaenau Ffestiniog. The Llechwedd slate mines here closed in 1972 but have been reopened as a fascinating museum. The 140-year-old mine-to-port steam railway used to carry slate, but now ferries tourists from Blaenau to Porthmadog, from where most head to nearby Portmeirion (the setting for cult TV programme *The Prisoner*). This Italianate village of pastel-painted houses, steep cobbled streets and a skyline of spires and domes certainly doesn't feel very Welsh until it starts to rain – Snowdonia is one of the wettest parts of Britain. (There is a £5.70 admission charge per adult to the village if you're not staying in it.)

Good places to stay and eat

ACCOMMODATION

Prices are per night over Easter weekend, for the cheapest en-suite double room (single in brackets), with breakfast, unless otherwise stated.

- **CAPEL GARMON Llannerch Goch:** Stylish B&B in sheep-farming country. £60.
- Tan-y-Foel:** Luxury hideaway with top-notch food. £136.
- **NANTGWYNANT Pen-y-Gwryd:** No-nonsense country inn popular with climbers. Half-board £116 (£52, shared bathroom).
- **PENMACHNO Penmachno Hall:**

B&B in idyllic rural setting. £70.

- **PORTMEIRION Hotel Portmeirion and Castell Deudraeth:** Chintzy hotel rooms £184 (£147), modern rooms in the folly castle £204 (£167).
- **TYN-Y-GROES Groes Inn:** Historic pub with spacious bedrooms. Good food and ales. £95 (£79).

FOOD AND DRINK
Prices are typical for a main course.

- **BEAUMARIS Ye Olde Bull's Head:** Historic pub with modern food. £8. (Also good to stay.)

- **CAPEL CURIG Bryn Tyrch Hotel:** Views of Snowdonia and a vegetarian-friendly menu. £9.
- **COLWYN BAY Café Niçoise:** Cheerful atmosphere with dishes using local ingredients. £14.
- **GLANWYDDEN Queen's Head:** Pub well known for its seafood. £8.
- **LLANBERIS Y Bistro:** Traditional with unfussy daily menu. £15.
- **TALSARNAU Maes-y-Neuadd:** Cosy bar with modern Welsh food. £31 for a three-course meal.

Good places

ACCOMMODATION

Prices are per night for the cheapest double room (single in brackets) with en-suite or private bathroom, half-board, over the Easter weekend.

● BRYHER

Bank Cottage:

Seafront B&B, with attractive bedrooms. £122 (£50).

Hell Bay Hotel:

Sophisticated hotel with New England beach-house feel. £260 (£163).

● ST AGNES

Coastguards: Cosy B&B with sea views. Booking ahead vital. £80 (£54).

Covean Cottage:

Popular guesthouse with tea-gardens. £99 (£43, shared bathroom).

● ST MARTIN'S

St Martin's on the Isle: Luxurious hotel with exemplary rooms, service and food. £260 (£143).

● ST MARY'S

Atlantic Hotel: Comfy, waterfront hotel. £144 (£82).

● TRESCO

Island Hotel:

Friendly place with views of white sand beaches. £242 (£121).

FOOD AND DRINK

Prices are typical for a main course.

● ST AGNES

Turk's Head: Pub by the harbour – hot chocolate with brandy is popular in winter. £9.

● TRESCO

New Inn: Snug alcoves, maritime-themed decor and a young, lively crowd. £11. (Also a good place to stay.)

ISLES OF SCILLY

Gin-clear waters gently lapping white sand beaches, bright sunshine and sub-tropical plants, plus a sprinkling of sophisticated hotels with award-winning food... If this sounds like the kind of mini-break only Michael Winner could have contemplated before the demise of Concorde and the short hop to Barbados, think again. All this can be found much nearer to home – a mere 28 miles off Land's End on the Isles of Scilly, in fact.

Scilly is made up of a string of more than 100 islands, only five of which offer places to stay (ranging from campsites to smart hotels), although in peak season accommodation is expensive.

With tales of shipwrecks and smugglers' caves and more rock pools for exploring than you can wave a net at, it's serious Famous Five territory. It's ideal for families, and many of the hotels and guesthouses are as child friendly as their surroundings. There's still plenty to enjoy if you're not travelling with children, as long as you're not in search of riotous nightlife or a long list of tourist attractions.

In the winter, you can fly by plane to St Mary's from Land's End or Newquay or by helicopter from Penzance to St Mary's or Tresco. From Easter to October there is also a regular boat service from Penzance to St Mary's, and boats between the islands operate a frequent service in these months too.

ST MARY'S

St Mary's is the biggest of the islands, and is likely to be your arrival point. It's a handy base, although it doesn't have the best beaches and is less memorable than some of the smaller, more unspoilt islands. Organised walks are popular with visitors – archaeologist and historian Katherine Sawyer of Scilly Walks offers various itineraries.

TRESCO

Tresco has the islands' one unmissable sight: Abbey Gardens, famous for its rare plants from around the world. Bikes can be hired from the estate office to explore, but a brisk walk will take you from Abbey Gardens to Old Grimsby and its glorious beaches.

BRYHER

Neighbouring Bryher has a child-friendly beach on the east shore, but if you head to the west on a windy day you'll see how Hell Bay got its name, as huge waves crash over the rocky shoreline. The smart, but pricey, recently refurbished hotel of the same name can also be found on the western side of the island, along with a few self-catering houses.

ST MARTIN'S

If you're a city slicker hankering after bracing sea air and coastal walks but you still want to retire to the comfort of a luxury hotel at night, consider St Martin's. Here you'll find the best hotel on the islands and, at Great Bay, one of the finest beaches. And, as only residents can take cars on to any of the islands, you won't need to argue about who has to drive after a visit to St Martin's Vineyard.

ST AGNES

Little St Agnes has no hotel but does have a smattering of guesthouses, an idyllically situated campsite, the most south-westerly pub in Britain and a very photogenic lighthouse. The result is an island which has all the charm of a small village.



Main pic: No, it's not the Caribbean, but the clear waters and white sandy beaches of St Martin's, Isles of Scilly. Inset: Bird watching news on the isles



Breathtaking mountain views like this make the Perthshire Highlands ideal mini-break territory

PERTSHIRE HIGHLANDS

In the heart of Scotland, the Perthshire Highlands are easily reached from both Perth and Stirling (and you could happily spend a day exploring either), but the nearby lochs and mountains allow you to escape the urban sprawl and take a plunge into wild country.

This is an area that's best toured by car, so we have suggested two routes, each of which can be covered in a day from Perth. Hill-walkers should head for the beautiful countryside around Loch Tay and Ben Lawers, while the areas around Pitlochry and Dunkeld are also popular for walking.

PITLOCHRY AND LOCH TUMMEL

From Perth, follow the A9 north to Dunkeld. The village itself is largely 18th century, and the National Trust for Scotland has restored many of the houses here. Further north, Pitlochry scarcely existed before Queen Victoria visited in 1845 on medical advice, to take in the fresh air. It's not the prettiest town in the area, but the natural landscape around it makes up for that. There are way-marked paths all around Pitlochry – an uphill walk to Moulin and lunch at the pub there is a popular option. Just outside the town to the east is the Edradour whisky distillery, Scotland's smallest, producing just 12 casks a week.

Drive westwards on the B8019 north of Pitlochry for some of the best scenery in the region. The Queen's View Visitor Centre offers a superb vista down the loch with the mountain of Schiehallion in the distance.

Further west, along the shores of Loch Rannoch, views are similarly impressive. On the southern side of the loch is the Black Wood of Rannoch, which is all that's now left of the great Caledonian forest which once covered the hills. Paths wind their way across rough, heathery ground and you may see red squirrels, pine martens or even a wildcat here.

KILLIN, LOCH TAY AND ABERFELDY

If you enjoy the great outdoors, Loch Tay and the surroundings are ideal. There are superb walks suitable for a variety of fitness levels, watersports on the loch (most of which operate from March or April to October) and salmon-fishing opportunities. But if you prefer to view the great outdoors from the comfort of your car, stick to the minor road on the south-eastern bank for the best views. Killin, at the southern end of the loch, is a popular stopping point.

Just south of Kenmore at the northern end of the loch is the Scottish Crannog Centre. Crannogs were dwellings built on stilts in the shallow parts of many lochs – 18 are known in Loch Tay alone.

Aberfeldy is a solid, small town, with a pleasant central square. It is also home to Dewar's World of Whisky, which is less about whisky and more about the remarkable family which created and marketed Dewar's. The spooky-looking, 16th-century Castle Menzies close to Weem is another good wet-weather option. ■

Good places

ACCOMMODATION

Prices are per night for the cheapest en-suite double room (single in brackets where different), including breakfast, over Easter weekend, unless otherwise stated.

● ABERFELDY Tigh 'n Eilean:

Welcoming B&B on quiet road. £58 (£35).

● DUNKELD

Kinnaird: Gracious country-house hotel with log fires and memorable food, set in 9,000 acres. Half-board £350 (£300).

The Pend: Smashing B&B with imaginative food and comfortable rooms. £70 (£35)

with shared bathrooms.

● KILLIN

Invertay House:

Cottagey B&B rooms in a Georgian manse. Half-board £90 (£45).

● PITLOCHRY

Easter Dunfallandy House:

Pretty B&B rooms in house on a hill just outside the town. £60.

● ST FILLANS

Four Seasons Hotel:

Charming rooms and spectacular setting by Loch Earn. £106 (£78).

FOOD AND DRINK

Prices are typical for a main course.

● BLAIRGOWRIE

Kinloch House:

Quality ingredients expertly prepared. £39 (four-course set dinner). This country-house hotel is also a good place to stay.

● KILLIECRANKIE

Killiecrankie House:

The mahogany-panelled bar has an informal ambience. £9. (Its formal restaurant is also recommended.)

● KIRKTON OF GLENISLA

Glenisla Hotel:

Impressive line-up of real ales and malt whiskies in an updated, 17th-century inn. £9.