

Is Pembrokeshire the new Cornwall?

The Telegraph - 20/06/08 - Fred Mawer

Pembrokeshire's best family accommodation

With its stunning coastline, the Welsh county of Pembrokeshire has the charm of Cornwall - minus the cost and crowds. Fred Mawer suggests where to stay.



Pembrokeshire has beaches as fine as anything in Cornwall

If you are looking for a location for a family seaside holiday, Pembrokeshire should be on your radar. Its magnificent coastline – nearly 200 miles, under national park protection and fringed by a coastal path – has everything from surf-pounded beaches to dramatic, craggy cliffs and offshore island nature reserves.

In this regard, Pembrokeshire's appeal is much the same as that of Cornwall. But it is less expensive and far less gentrified than the West Country; fancy hotels and gastro pubs, for example, are very thin on the ground in this south-west corner of Wales. It also feels significantly less crowded: at the last count, Pembrokeshire's resident population was a mere 114,000 and it receives only a quarter the number of holidaymakers that pile down to Cornwall.

Here is my selection of some of the best places for families to stay. I have visited all the accommodation in the past few weeks, and have stayed at each of the recommended hotels.

The lie of the land

Pembrokeshire's coast can be divided into three distinct parts. By far the busiest is the south, where the focal point is Tenby. With excellent beaches, pastel-coloured Georgian houses surrounding its harbour and an old town within medieval walls, it is one of Britain's most picturesque seaside resorts, though it can get a bit raucous on weekend nights.

There are plenty of family-orientated attractions nearby if the weather cuts up rough and some superb, rural beaches west of Tenby – notably at Manorbier (with the backdrop of a ruined Norman castle) and in the National Trust's Stackpole Estate (see right).

The western extremity of Pembrokeshire is much wilder and less populated. St David's – Britain's smallest city, with a stunning cathedral and a good selection of cafés and delis – is a first-rate base, particularly with vast Whitesands beach just down the road and wildlife-spotting boat trips to and around RSPB Ramsey Island (though the sea can often be too choppy for young children).

The wide sweep of St Brides Bay has several village-sized resorts: Newgale, best for surfers; bucket-and-spade Broad Haven; and Little Haven, one of the county's most attractive harbours. The highlight of the backwater peninsula to the south is Marloes Sands, a stunning sand and rock-studded strand accessible only on foot.

North Pembrokeshire is the most tranquil and least discovered, with more cliffs than beaches. Fishguard is nothing special, but up-and-coming Newport has several good restaurants and cafés and a civilised let's-escape-the-rat-race feel to it. Newport Sands is a great big, breezy beach that you can drive your car on to; farther up the coast, at the mouth of Cardigan's estuary, lies massive, dune-backed Poppit Sands.

Self-catering

The following recommendations are all cottage complexes, chosen for their superb location or excellent facilities (such as a shared indoor pool), sometimes both. Prices are per week for the cheapest cottage sleeping four in high (August) and low (November) seasons. Most are booked up for the school summer holiday weeks; many accept long-weekend bookings out of season.

1. Clydey Country Cottages

Boncath, near Cardigan (01239 698619, www.clydeycottages.co.uk, £900/£600).

This is the most appealing, family-orientated self-catering complex I visited. The setting – deeply rural, with far-reaching views over rolling hills – is idyllic. The 10

www.holidaycottagepems.co.uk

This PDF is printer-friendly.

creeper-covered cottages, within an 18th-century farmhouse (which has its own big private garden) and outbuildings, are full of character and style, with original features, smart kitchens and bathrooms and tasteful furnishings.

Guests have the run of 20 acres, a lovely big lawn with an excellent children's play area perfectly set under a big, old oak tree, a recently built, top-quality, indoor pool and a well-stocked games room. There are chicken, sheep and ponies to feed each morning. The only drawback is Clydey's distance from the coast; it is about 10 miles to Poppit Sands, the nearest good beach. The owners have recently bought a second property, Fron Fawr (details on Clydey's website): though closer to the coast, and with high-spec accommodation, it is not nearly as special as Clydey.

2. Celtic Haven

Lydstep, near Tenby (01834 870000, www.celtichaven.com, £895/£495).

Celtic Haven used to be a turkey farm, but don't let that put you off. It has been transformed into a good-quality and efficiently run large, cottage complex with excellent leisure facilities. These include an indoor pool (as warm as bath water), restaurant, swanky little spa, scenic nine-hole golf course, putting green, tennis courts and superior children's play area with a big trampoline. Children of all ages are welcome to try the golf and there is no extra charge for any of the sports; all equipment is free, even golf balls.

There are 26 well-equipped cottages, furnished typically with boarded floors, leather sofas and up-to-date kitchens. The more charming are in old, whitewashed former farm buildings set around a neat gravel courtyard; others are in modern buildings, but have their own little gardens. Lydstep's beach, 15 minutes' walk or two minutes' drive down a lane, is shingle – and marred by the caravan park behind it – but there are plenty of good beaches a short drive away.

3. Stackpole Estate holiday cottages

Stackpole Quay, near Pembroke (0844 800 2070, www.nationaltrustcottages.co.uk, £803/£304).

Encompassing cliffs, dunes and woodland, the lily-covered Bosherton Lakes and some stunning beaches, the National Trust's 2,000-acre Stackpole Estate is a jewel in the Pembrokeshire crown. Eight of the 10 cottages to rent are in converted outbuildings clustered around the gravel courtyard of a former farm – or in the farmhouse itself – and the complex backs on to a grassy area running down to a rocky shore and the

www.holidaycottagepembs.co.uk

This PDF is printer-friendly.

coastal path. The cottages I saw were neat and pretty, with Shaker-style kitchens and well-chosen furniture. The two lets in the whitewashed farmhouse (Stackpole and Farm) each have their own enclosed garden; the other cottages do not have their own outdoor space.

The Boathouse Tearoom (great salads, pasties and cakes) at Stackpole Quay is a couple of hundred yards away. Barafundle – a wide tranche of pristine sand backed by woods and a vast dune system – is 10 minutes' walk from the quay over cliff-top fields. Skip the two other Stackpole cottages, Quay Cottages 1 and 2: they are close to the Trust's car park, which gets very busy in summer.

4. Aberfforest

Near Newport. Book through Coastal Cottages of Pembrokeshire (01437 767600, www.coastalcottages.co.uk, £675/£311).

These five fairly simply furnished rentals – four in outbuildings around a courtyard, plus a farmhouse – stand in a really magical setting. Two minutes' walk down a track brings you to a beautiful horseshoe-shaped cove (often visited by seals) with a sand and shingle beach. The only public access is on the coastal footpath, so those staying at Aberfforest usually have the cove pretty much to themselves. The property also includes woodland, a little river and a rather impressive waterfall, all of which guests are encouraged to explore.

5. Orlandon Cottages

St Brides. Book through Coastal Cottages of Pembrokeshire (contacts as above, £727/£321).

A sleepy, well-placed spot, a mile inland from St Brides cove (ancient church, good rock-pooling), a short drive from Marloes Sands and Little Haven. Orlandon's four pastel-coloured cottages flank two sides of a green (passed by a quiet back lane) and back on to a communal field and children's play area; each also has its own garden. The cottages are as pretty inside as out: Hooper's, which has a lovely big kitchen with conservatory extension, snazzy wet room and large garden, is the pick.

Also worth considering

6. Scolton Country Cottages

Near Haverfordwest (01437 731599, www.scolton.com, £575/£285).

www.holidaycottagepemps.co.uk

This PDF is printer-friendly.

They are a fair drive from the nearest beach (Broad Haven on St Brides Bay is about 25 minutes away). By way of compensation, the complex has direct access to the 60 acres of meadows and woodland of adjacent Scolton Country Park. The 10 cottages are set around a courtyard of former farm buildings and are mostly on the compact side. There is a good indoor pool on site.

7. Ivy Court

Sited nearby Scolton Country Cottages (01437 532473, www.ivycourt.co.uk, £615/£285).

Also compensates for its inland position by having access to a park. A gate at the back of its large, mature garden leads into Llys-y-Fran Country Park, where the focus is a rather spectacular reservoir (fishing and extensive walks). The 10 characterful cottages (some with galleried bedrooms) are in former farm buildings dotted about the garden. There is a children's play area and heated, covered pool (open Easter to October; not nearly as smart as Scolton's).

Hotels

Prices quoted are for school summer holidays dates.

8. The Druidstone Hotel

Near Broad Haven (01437 781221, www.druidstone.co.uk, bedrooms accommodating a family of four from £105 b & b per room per night, cottages from £420 per week).

A rambling Victorian building on the cliffs above an awesome, mile-long sandy beach, and surrounded by 20 acres of "wild and natural" gardens, the Druidstone is, by a long chalk, the most alluring hotel for families in Pembrokeshire. It is also excellent value. Jane Bell, the hands-on owner, has over many decades nurtured a very informal home-from-home atmosphere; you are greeted by a pile of buckets and spades in the porch and children are served (healthy) suppers around a single table in the old farmhouse kitchen.

The homely, TV-free bedrooms have few frills (the fanciest are pine-panelled, en-suite set-ups in the attic); many share bathrooms and the flexible bed and room permutations offer parents and children varying degrees of privacy. In the grounds are half-a-dozen simple cottages equipped for self-catering, though guests often take some meals at the hotel. The food – served as candlelit dinners in the dining room and as bar meals on terraces with views of the sea and sunsets – is pretty good. Many

www.holidaycottagepemps.co.uk

This PDF is printer-friendly.

guests have been coming for years, which means you need to book way ahead for peak times and, I suspect, might result in a slightly cliquey atmosphere at times.

Also worth considering

9. Fourcroft Hotel

Tenby (01834 842886, www.fourcroft-hotel.co.uk, from £55 b & b per adult, children aged six–14 sharing parents' room are half price, under sixes are free).

Though not exactly stylish, the Fourcroft has much to commend it. The location – in a Georgian terrace above the resort's superb North Beach, with gardens descending in narrow terraces down to the sand – is the best in town. Staff are very switched on and patient with demanding children. There are plenty of decent-sized family bedrooms and facilities include a heated outdoor pool and old-fashioned games room. Baby monitors can be provided in the evenings for parents eating in the restaurant. With plenty of locally sourced produce and vast portions, the food is quite enjoyable.

10. Southcliff Hotel

Tenby (01834 842410, www.southcliffhotel.com, £38 b & b per adult, children sharing parents' room – aged two-13, half price; under two, £5).

Run by a practising children's nurse, this guesthouse goes to great lengths for families with young children. Every possible bit of kit is provided for babies; the lounge is full of children's books and videos, boxes of building bricks and board games; bedrooms (more than half can sleep a family of four) come with a teddy; children are given a snack on arrival and are well catered for with evening meals. Be prepared, though, for a rather intense lime-green colour scheme throughout.

Campsites

Prices are per night in a tent in the school summer holidays. Book well ahead to secure a pitch at peak season and note that both campsites are exposed, so can often be windy.

11. Caerfai Bay

(01437 720274, www.caerfaibay.co.uk, £13 per tent, plus £4.25 per person, children 3-12, £3).

Less than a mile from St David's, the campsite is at the end of a no-through lane above gorgeous little Caerfai Bay beach (sandy at low tide). There are spectacular www.holidaycottagepems.co.uk

This PDF is printer-friendly.

views across St Brides Bay from the camping fields, good-quality wash blocks with family facilities and, across the lane, a farm shop selling organic produce.

12. Pencarnan Farm

(01437 720580, www.pembrokeshire-camping.co.uk, adults £11, children 6-16 £4.50).

Also near St David's, the site occupies a superb location. Directly below its spacious camping fields lies a gorgeous strip of semi-private sand; Whitesands is a 10-minute stroll away. Pencarnan's facilities include a shop and shower block.

www.holidaycottagepembs.co.uk

This PDF is printer-friendly.