

Time to stand and stare

Would adopting the principles of Slow Travel enhance a self-confessed urbanite's enjoyment of the coast? We sent writer RUFUS PURDY to Pembrokeshire, without his mobile, to find out

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At first I think the flashes must be coming from the lighthouse over the hill. But then I hear the thunder; a faraway rumble that sounds like the growl of a cornered Rottweiler. Over to the east, the horizon strobes again, illuminating angry, dark-purple clouds, and I feel the first cold spritzing of rain on my face.

I'd come outside this Saturday evening to enjoy the stars – glowing pips against a blackboard-dark sky – with a glass of Cwrw Cwm Gwaun bitter. But the sudden arrival of a raging tempest over this part of the Pembrokeshire coast makes for an even more thrilling spectacle. Were I not sticking to the principles of Slow Travel,

I'd have missed all this. I would no doubt be indoors watching reality TV.

ENJOY THE JOURNEY

In case you're unfamiliar with the term, Slow Travel is all about engaging properly with a destination. Its adherents take time to get to know a place properly, and eschew modern distractions such as television, mobile phones and the internet in order to focus fully on their surroundings. 'Every person sees Slow Travel in a different way,' says Hilary Bradt, Slow Travel pioneer and founder of the Bradt Travel Guides. 'To me, it's getting under the skin of a region by using all your

senses to enjoy the present moment rather than pushing forward with a sightseeing itinerary. It's about stopping to talk to shopkeepers or fellow walkers, gazing at the view, listening to birdsong, examining wild flowers or learning about village history through a small church.'

The movement shares many of its values with eco-tourism, and low-impact transport is encouraged. This is why it's taken me nine hours to get here. To reach my cottage, Trehilyn Isaf on the Strumble Head peninsula, I've travelled by train from London to Haverfordwest, via Cardiff, and then taken local buses as far as Fishguard. Travel, I've found, gets slower as population

density thins out. And this is why, at four o'clock on a Friday afternoon, I'm standing alongside three old men at a bus stop in Fishguard. I think about attempting to further my knowledge of the local area by engaging them in conversation, but they're all on tiptoes, watching a rugby match on a TV screen in the pub across the road.

When the bus – the ecologically sound Strumble Shuttle, which is powered by recycled vegetable oil – does arrive, it can only take me as far as the crossroads at Trefasser Cross. The driver tells me it isn't too far to my cottage from here. But, as I watch the bus lights disappear into the darkness, I must confess to feeling somewhat abandoned. There is no one about, and the only sounds as I walk along a narrow, hedge-flanked road are those of wind, distant sea and the rumble of my wheelee suitcase.

Arriving at my cottage, then, feels like planting hands on Dover Beach after a cross-Channel swim. It may be down to tiredness, but at this moment it's probably the most beautiful holiday home I've ever seen. The russet-red exterior glows invitingly behind a thoughtfully left-on

outdoor light; and through the window I can see a woodburning stove and marshmallow-soft sofa. Inside, the décor is a blend of traditional limewashed walls and dark-wood furnishings, with contemporary touches such as tongue-and-groove panelling and spotlight ceilings. Thanks to carbon-neutral underfloor heating, the stylish slate tiles are as warm as a just-used oven glove. I take a bottle of milk from the Bethesda Farm Shop hamper waiting for me in the house, and make myself a pre-bed cup of tea.

EAT LOCAL

When I open the blinds in my wooden-floored eaves bedroom the following morning, I am surprised to find several ginger cows staring up at me from across the yard. As I arrived in the dark, I was only dimly aware of a farm opposite the cottage. Thank goodness they weren't pigs. If they were, I might not have enjoyed my breakfast of Pembrokeshire bacon and sausages quite so much.

What a beautiful day. The air is clear, clean and floral-scented, and creamy-yellow shafts of sunlight spear down

HOW TO GO SLOW BY THE SEA

Hilary Bradt, founder of the Bradt Travel Guides, shares her tips on how to follow the Slow Travel ethos when visiting the British coast

- Walk from A to B, then take a bus back.
- So long as you're not alone, don't be afraid to hitchhike. It's an excellent way of meeting people.
- Look beneath your feet for special beach pebbles, shells and interesting driftwood.
- Bring some binoculars so you can identify seabirds and look for seals.
- Don't forget to pack a picnic and a swimsuit.

THIS PICTURE **Rufus Purdy** strides out on the Pembrokeshire Coast Path, with Strumble Head Lighthouse behind him



'The path winds along the top of green-headed rocky cliffs, which plummet down into simmering dark-turquoise water. And the breeze that blows in is fresh, briny and coats my lips with salt'

through the few cloud-wisps in a pale-blue sky. It's perfect weather, then, for a long walk along the Pembrokeshire Coast Path. So, after breakfast, I put on my coat and hat, and follow signposts to Strumble Head Lighthouse.

I can hear the sea long before I see it. The churn and crash of water sends gulls wheeling skywards, and invites me to pick up my pace. And soon I'm standing on a gorse-swathed clifftop, my feet planted on mattress-soft grass, looking across at the lighthouse. Situated on top of a cliff staring out at the Irish Sea, it resembles a castle – a brilliant-white keep guarding the shoreline from pirates and invaders. I decide against climbing up to it, and opt instead to head south along the coastline in the direction of St David's.

It's a stunning walk. The path winds along the top of green-headed rocky cliffs, which plummet down into simmering dark-turquoise water. And the breeze that blows in is fresh, briny and coats my lips with salt. There are steep climbs and gentle downhill sections, and I pass woodland, reed-filled hollows

and secluded beaches upon which basking seals make the most of the unseasonal sunlight. The views out to sea never dip below spectacular.

FREE YOUR MIND

I'm exhausted by the time I've walked the six miles or so to Abermawr beach and seriously in need of some food. As I'm a Slow Traveller, I haven't been able to check out dining options on the internet via my mobile phone. So I'm forced to rely on the knowledge of the lone dog-walker I meet as I descend the path down to the shingle. 'Try The Sloop Inn at Porthgain,' she says. 'They do a great fish pie.'

To get to Porthgain, though, I must semi-jog for the next mile or so to the village of Abercastle in order to catch the one bus that stops there that morning. I make it with just a couple of minutes to spare, and board the empty Strumble Shuttle to sweep down lanes in which branches hang like streamers and grass grows in the middle of the road. The bus stops right outside The Sloop Inn, and within ten minutes I'm sitting at an outside table, looking out to sea, with a

pint of Felinfoel Double Dragon and a homemade fish pie in front of me.

The brightness of the morning has faded by the time I eat my final morsel, and the sun now hides behind some lead-coloured clouds. To kill time before the bus returns to Porthgain on its journey back up the peninsula, I wander down to the harbour and rest on the small beach. The sea has turned grey and the shadows cast by the old slate mine shroud the jetties and cove. It will be dark in an hour or two.

I decide to end my walk and take the bus back into Fishguard to pick up provisions from the butchers and greengrocers there. I've got friends driving up from Cardiff tomorrow and, this evening, I'm planning to make them a Welsh lamb stew. Slow Food and Slow Travel seem a good fit, I think, as I head back to the bus stop – suddenly aware of how easily I've let my fast-paced urban outlook go and adjusted to the gentle rhythm of my break. And there's always star-gazing and those bottles of bitter in the farm-shop hamper to keep me entertained while I'm cooking.

 For more UK coastal features, see allaboutyou.com/country

WHERE RUFUS STAYED

Owned by TV personality Griff Rhys Jones, and the subject of his BBC4 documentary *A Pembrokeshire Farm*, the two-bedroom holiday cottage Trehilyn Isaf began life as a simple 19th-century farmhouse. Painstakingly restored by Rhys Jones and a team of local craftsmen, it is now a stylish dwelling that blends original features with modern facilities. And, as befits a property let by ethical self-catering agency Under The Thatch, it is every bit as green as its 70 acres of verdant grounds. The wood for the stove comes from sustainable forests, the walls are lined with sheep's wool insulation and underfloor heating comes from ground-source heat pumps.



FOR MORE INFO Under The Thatch (01239 851410, underthethatch.co.uk). One week from £349. Arrange a local-food delivery from Bethseda Farm Shop (fresh-welsh-meat.co.uk). **GETTING THERE** After arriving by train at Haverfordwest, take the 412 bus to Fishguard, then the 404 Strumble Shuttle to Trefasser Cross. The cottage is a 10-15 minute walk. For bus details, visit richardbros.co.uk. For info on Pembrokeshire, see visitwales.co.uk.

