

Wales offers more than tea shops and pubs 1

the 19th century waxed lyrical about the scenery, why Merlin hung out here and why Tom

With its spectacular history and scenery, there's a lot to discover

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Wales is often misunderstood as twee, full of tea shops and pubs where teary-eyed men recite Dylan Thomas. Wales is also home to Michelin-starred restaurants and award-winning wineries, Roman ruins and hundreds of castles. And it's not part of England.

Getting off the train at Newport from Paddington Station, I read a sign in two languages: Welsh and English. The Welsh are fiercely proud and rightly so. Exploring the country's green valleys, mountain peaks and rugged coastline, it's obvious why the great Romantic poets of



Exploring Wales, you may come across Dinas Bran Castle, a medieval castle standing high above the town of Llangollen.

Jones sings about the “Green, green grass of home.”

The Wye Valley, the source of inspiration for the painter Turner and the poet Wordsworth, is a microcosm of rural Wales. Spectacular scenery is filled with historical sites, like Druid stones, Norman castles, Roman settlements and sites linked to King Arthur. Known as the “birthplace of British tourism,” getting to places like Tintern Abbey, the jewel in Wye’s crown, would be challenging to the most intrepid Victorian traveller.

Not so these days. I started my Wye tour in medieval Chepstow, which recently claimed the title “Ancient Gateway to Wales,” just down the road from Tintern. The town is compact, easy to walk around and home to the first Norman stone castle built in Britain.

A terrific way to explore the valley is by canoe. The Mon-

mouth Canoe and Activity Centre has a fleet of “Canadian canoes” and Welsh blue badge guides. I opted for a day trip with a very informative and entertaining guide. We wandered down the Wye River, passed a man in hip waders fishing and smoking a fat cigar, with diving kingfishers and otters, and it was like a scene from the book Wind in the Willows.

I checked into the Bell at Skenfrith in the Monmouthshire countryside, a former 17th century coaching inn, and sampled Welsh cuisine at its superb restaurant (with an extensive wine list, including local vineyards).

Next day, after strolling the grounds, I met up with my cousin, Sue, at the market town of Abergavenny, known as the “Gateway to Wales.”

We travelled on to Blaenavon, a world heritage site. Plan on spending a day here, and glimpse

into the country’s industrial past, the coal miners and iron workers — it’s an eye-opener. Wearing miner hard hats with lights attached, we descended 300 feet and toured the underground with a former miner. By recreating even the sounds and smells of the mine, the tour gives you an impression of working life at the coal face, something neither of us will forget.

A working coal mine from 1880 right up until 1980, the site reopened as a museum in 1983 and won the Gulbenkian Prize for museum of the year in 2005.

We wound our way up the famous Black Mountain road (A4069) with its hairpin turns, past serious mountain bikers and roaming sheep to our final destination. Hay on Wye, with its 39 second-hand book shops, is so tiny you can circumnavigate the town in 20 minutes. The world-renowned Hay Festival in May attracts people worldwide, and

year-round it’s inundated with bibliophiles. Loaded down with books, I wonder briefly how to pack them into my suitcase. Sue offers to store them for me, and I have another reason to return.

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hirundine · 20 days
Oh wow, "The Ancient Gateway" Then the "Gateway"? ... Be still my

