

North Wales



North Wales is a magical mix of medieval heritage and outstanding natural beauty, where you're never far from golden beaches or soaring summits. Hikers, climbers, cyclists and all manner of adrenaline junkies flock here from miles around. Snowdonia National Park is the crowning glory. Here, the highest peaks in Wales and England jut magnificently to the heavens – all too often set against moody, overcast skies. The Rivers Treweryn and Dee provide invigorating rafting and canoeing, while the less energetic can ride some of Britain's most scenic railways, of which the Ffestiniog and Cambrian Coast lines are the finest.

History hounds will love the otherworldly charms of the formidable castles at Caernarfon, Conwy, Harlech and Beaumaris, and the wonderfully over-elaborate Portmeirion, an Italianate village in a romantic seaside setting.

The northern coast is best known for the Victorian splendour of Llandudno, a classical British resort town. To the east, the impeccable Erddig country house and bustling town of Llangollen, with its International Eisteddfod, vie for attention with the spectacular mountains of the west.

To the northwest lies the most ardent Welsh-speaking area of the country. The mountains that hypnotise today's walkers and rock climbers also defied the marauding English invaders of the 15th century, and the spirit remains even among the modern-day youth. The Llŷn Peninsula, wild, rocky and less frequented, remains particularly proud.

The Isle of Anglesey has a greater concentration of prehistoric sites than anywhere else in

HIGHLIGHTS

- Beachcombing on the exposed **Llŷn Peninsula** (p743)
- Topping out on one of **Snowdonia's untamed peaks** (p721)
- Embracing the world at Llangollen's **International Eisteddfod** (see boxed text, p717)
- Storming the ramparts at **Caernarfon Castle** (p740), Edward I's most impressive stronghold
- Getting steamy on the vintage **Welsh Highland Railway** and **Ffestiniog Railway**(p730)
- Shooting the rapids on the frothy **River Dee** (p719)



■ POPULATION: 663,397

■ AREA: 2382 SQ MILES

Orientation & Information

The breathtaking Snowdonia mountains dominate this part of Wales. Containing the highest British peaks outside Scotland, they are the focus of the large Snowdonia National Park, which extends virtually from the north coast almost as far south as Machynlleth. Anglesey lies offshore to the northwest and the Llŷn Peninsula points west out to sea.

All major towns have tourist offices, with those in Snowdonia and the main coastal resorts being particularly well informed.

Gwynedd, the most northwesterly county, is a heartland of Welsh nationalism where around 70% of people use the mother tongue.

Activities

North Wales is crammed with adrenaline-pumping activities. The biggest attraction is **Snowdonia National Park**, where jagged peaks meet green wooded valleys, rolling hills and swaths of golden sand.

This is prime territory for walking, climbing, pony trekking, mountain biking and road cycling. The park is also home to two national activity centres. **Canolfan Tryweryn**, near Bala (the national white-water centre), and **Plas y Brenin**, at Capel Curig (the national mountain centre).

Heading west, the exposed **Llŷn Peninsula** has great water sports, while the **Isle of Anglesey** has gentle, rolling countryside that contrasts sharply with the harsh mountains of the park and provides less-strenuous walking with stunning coastal scenery.

East of Snowdonia, Llangollen is another white-water hot spot, thanks to the dependable rapids of the River Dee.

For full information, see the detailed entries in the Northeastern Wales and Snowdonia National Park sections in this chapter.

Getting There & Around

All tourist offices stock detailed bus timetables, and you can check details with **Traveline Cymru** (☎ 0870 608 2 608; www.traveline-cymru.org.uk). An extensive network of routes is in operation, but Sunday services are usually limited (especially in more-remote areas).

North Wales' rail links are good. Contact **National Rail Enquiries** (☎ 08457 48 49 50; www.nationalrail.co.uk) for times and fares. Major routes include the North Wales Coast Line from Chester to the ferry terminal at Holyhead, the Cambrian Coaster Line from Machynl-

leth to Pwllheli and the Conwy Valley Line from Llandudno to Blaenau Ffestiniog. One-way fares to Llandudno/Machynlleth start at £63/60 from London, £25/10.50 from Birmingham and £20/25 from Manchester.

The good-value multiday North & Mid Wales Rover (£30) offers three days' bus and train travel (including the Ffestiniog Railway) in seven days. Buy it from **Arriva Trains** (☎ 0870 9000 777), online at www.walesflexipass.co.uk, or at most railway stations. The Gwynedd Red Rover (£4.95) is valid on buses within south, central and northwest Snowdonia, the Llŷn Peninsula and some services in north-east Snowdonia (to Betws-y-Coed and Llandudno); buy it from the driver.

NORTHEASTERN WALES

The north Wales coast has its charms, but there are some kiss-me-quick, candyfloss resorts that you would be better off avoiding. No problem, because most visitors are heading for Snowdonia National Park and its giddy array of spectacular outdoor adventures.

En route you might fancy stopping at the stately home of Erddig, near Wrexham, or taking time out for a white-water jaunt at Llangollen, worth a visit in its own right for the International Eisteddfod each July.

For travel details see Getting There & Away under Wrexham and Llangollen in this section.

WREXHAM (WRECSAM)

☎ 01978 / pop 63,084

Wrexham is an uninspiring town – the only real attraction is nearby Erddig, a magnificent, stately 18th-century country home and estate.

The **tourist office** (☎ 292015; www.borderlands.co.uk; Lambpit St; ☹ 10am–5pm Mon–Sat Apr–Oct, 10am–4pm Mon–Sat Nov–Mar) is open year-round, but closed on Sunday.

Sights

As recently as 1973 the Yorke family lived at **Erddig** (NT; ☎ 355314; adult/child £7/4; ☹ house noon–5pm Sat–Wed Easter–Jun & Sep, noon–5pm Sat–Thu Jul & Aug, noon–4pm Oct, garden 11am–6pm Sat–Wed Easter–Jun & Sep, 10am–6pm Sat–Thu Jul & Aug, 11am–4pm Sat & Sun Nov–mid-Dec), and the house sheds rare light into the 'upstairs–downstairs' relationship between Britain's nobility and their servants.

The Yorkes lived here for more than 200 years, being known for the respect with which they treated their staff. Upstairs is a fine collection of furniture, including an impressive state bed, and original Chinese wallpaper. Downstairs are interesting photographs of servants and various household devices such as a box-mangle. The 800-hectare country park provides pleasant walking. Erddig has a licensed restaurant and a more low-key café that serves drinks and snacks.

Due to Erddig's popularity, timed admission tickets may be issued. The house lies 2 miles south of Wrexham, off the A525 road to Whitchurch.

Sleeping

Grove Guest House (☎ 354288; 36 Chester Rd; s/d from £27/52) is a 10-minute walk from the railway station and is convenient for visiting Erddig.

Getting There & Away

National Express (☎ 08705 808080) has good services. Coach 420 runs to London daily (£21, five hours) via Birmingham, the 381 to Manchester (£5.70, 1¼ hours) and the 550 to Liverpool (£6.20, one hour).

Local bus services link Wrexham with Chester, such as bus 1 (40 minutes, every 10 minutes, hourly on Sunday) and the 555, X5 and X94 with Llangollen (30 minutes, every 15 minutes, fewer on Sunday).

Wrexham is on the Chester–Birmingham train line, with services from Chester (15 minutes, about hourly) and Birmingham (£17, 1½ hours, hourly).

LLANGOLLEN

☎ 01978 / pop 2930

Lively Llangollen boasts archetypal British scenery, huddled in the fertile Vale of Llangollen around the banks of the tumbling River Dee. The town is famous for the annual International Eisteddfod, held every July to promote world peace through music, song and dance.

The river makes a good focal point, a pleasant place to sit and slurp an ice cream before mooching the backstreets for antiques and local crafts. Kids love the horse-drawn canal-boat trips, while train buffs drool over the handsome steam railway. Ruined Valle Crucis Abbey is close by and spectacular views over the town can be gained from Castell Dinas Brân. Thrill-seekers enjoy water sports on the Dee's rapids, and outdoor pursuits in the surrounding hills.

Engineer Thomas Telford, the Scottish 'Colossus of Roads', propelled the town into the 19th century by routing both the London–Holyhead (A5) road and the Llangollen Canal through it. Two miles up the canal is the scenic weir at Horseshoe Falls, while down the canal is a Telford masterpiece, the towering Pontcysyllte Aqueduct.

EISTEDDFODAU FOR ALL

The **National Eisteddfod** (www.eisteddfod.org.uk), pronounced *ey-steth-vot*, is a celebration of Welsh culture and is Europe's largest festival of competitive music-making and poetry. Descended from ancient bardic tournaments, it attracts more than 150,000 visitors and 6000 competitors annually.

Conducted in Welsh, the festival welcomes all. Foreigners come in search of Welsh ancestry, while musical fringe events featuring local bands lend a slight Glastonbury atmosphere. It's held in early August, and the venue swings annually between north and south Wales: in 2007 it heads north to Wrexham; in 2008 Cardiff represents the south.

Urdd Eisteddfod (www.urdd.org) is a separate young people's festival – urdd (*irth*) is Welsh for 'youth' – held every May at changing venues (2007 Carmarthenshire, 2008 Conwy County). The format resembles its bigger brother, although any self-respecting teenager prefers to hang out on the fringe at the main event.

Most famous is the **International Eisteddfod** (www.international-eisteddfod.co.uk), established after WWII to promote international harmony. Held every July in Llangollen, the event pulls up to 5000 participants from more than 40 countries as diverse as Kurdistan and Nigeria, transforming the town into a global village. In addition to daily folk music and dancing competitions, gala concerts feature international stars. In 2006, with the event celebrating its 60th birthday, Katherine Jenkins topped the bill. Demonstrating the influence of the festival, it was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004.

Orientation & Information

You can walk around Llangollen in 15 minutes. The **tourist office** (☎ 860828; www.nwt.co.uk; Castle St; ☎ 9.30am-5.30pm Apr-Oct, 9.30am-5pm Nov-Mar) is in the old chapel. Free internet access is available upstairs at the **library** (☎ 869600).

Sights

Ornate **Plas Newydd** (☎ 861314; adult £3; ☎ 10am-5pm Easter-Oct) was home to the Ladies of Llangollen, Lady Eleanor Butler and the Honourable Sarah Ponsonby (see boxed text, p720). A bizarre mix of Gothic and Tudor styles, the house has pleasant formal gardens that are home to the font from Valle Crucis Abbey. The house lies 400m uphill southeast of the town centre, but don't confuse it with the

National Trust stately home of the same name on Anglesey. Last entry is at 4.15pm.

Llangollen Steam Railway (☎ 860979; www.llangollen-railway.co.uk; return trip £8; ☎ daily Easter-Oct, most Sat & Sun year-round) chugs through another era on its 8-mile route to Carrog, passing through picturesque Berwyn and the Horseshoe Falls. The tourist office has timetables.

Horse-drawn canal trips depart from **Llangollen Wharf** (☎ 860702; www.horsedrawnboats.co.uk) opposite the railway station. Choose from a 45-minute trip (£4.50) or the motorised two-hour, one-way cruise to Telford's astounding 38m-high Pontcysyllte Aqueduct (£9).

The 6th-century **St Collen's Parish Church** (Church St; ☎ 2-6pm Mon-Fri mid-May-Sep) has an exquisite carved-oak roof as well as a mem-

orial to the Ladies of Llangollen, who lie in the graveyard.

Llangollen's small **Museum of Local History** (☎ 862862; www.llangollenmuseum.co.uk; Parade St; admission free; ☎ 10am-4pm) has interesting local heritage archives, including photographs and Bronze Age artefacts.

Atop the conical hill above the town sits the ruins of 16th-century **Castell Dinas Brân**. The walk up is exhilarating, and the views are fantastic.

Atmospheric and peaceful, the well-tended 13th- and 14th-century ruins of **Valle Crucis Abbey** (Cadw; ☎ 860326; adult/child £2.50/2, admission free Oct-Mar; ☎ 10am-5pm Apr-Sep, 10am-4pm Oct-Mar) occupy a picturesque setting, 1.5 miles north-west of town on the A542 to Ruthin.

Activities

Walk along the canal towpath to the weir at Horseshoe Falls or climb to Castell Dinas Brân (the tourist office stocks walking literature). Bryn Hughes of **Ceirïog Country Holidays** (☎ 01691-718398; www.ceirïog.com/country.html) leads guided walks and can arrange accommodation.

There's ample opportunity for adventure sports. Rafting, canoeing, gorge-walking, rock climbing, and more, can be found at the following places:

Adventure Activity Solutions (☎ 845009; Berwyn Rd) AAS can take you sailing, windsurfing and even hot-air ballooning.

JJ Canoeing & Rafting (☎ 860763; www.jjraftcanoe.com; Berwyn Rd; 2hr rafting Sun-Fri £40, Sat £45) A mile west of town, specialising in water sports but also abseiling, paintballing and archery, and with a decent café on site.

Pro Adventure (☎ 861912; www.proadventure.co.uk; 23 Castle St; 2hr rafting beginners/advanced £50/65) After a river trip, take a survival course or an introduction to mountaineering at Lockwood's Chimney.

Festivals & Events

Llangollen is the permanent venue of the **International Eisteddfod** (see the boxed text, p717), an annual knees-up of international folk music, song and dance.

Sleeping

The best accommodation is in B&Bs and guesthouses. Book in advance for the Eisteddfod.

Llangollen YHA hostel (☎ 0870 770 5932; llangollen@yha.org.uk; dm £12) This large Victorian mansion, 1.5 miles east of town, targets groups on activity breaks – book ahead for casual visits.

HEY, HEY MISTER BLUE SKY

In 2006 travel company Expedia published a list of the world's top 20 blue-sky views, and the vista from **Castell Dinas Brân** in Llangollen made the top 10. Only narrowly pipped by the cosmopolitan likes of Rio de Janeiro, Denarau Island in Fiji and Antananarivo in Madagascar, the north Wales panorama was commended for its total colour, clarity, brightness and cloud density. Locals have never felt more like singing the blues...

Cornerstones (☎ 861569; www.cornerstones-guesthouse.co.uk; 15 Bridge St; s/d from £35/60; ☎ wi-fi) Got your laptop? Good, because you can surf away here in a house boasting original 16th-century features (exposed beams and open fireplaces) but lacking no 21st-century luxuries.

Oakmere (☎ 861126; www.oakmere.llangollen.co.uk; Regent St; s/d £45/60; ☎) Set back from the road, this imposing Victorian mansion speaks quality from the moment you enter the door. The beautiful presentation incorporates restored features and striking oak furniture. Located at the east end of town.

Gales of Llangollen (☎ 860089; www.galesofllangollen.co.uk; 18 Bridge St; s/d £50/60, ste £5 extra; ☎) Belonging to the wine bar of the same name, rooms at Gales are a mix of 18th-century charm, modern conveniences and old-school swirly carpets. The larger suites are good value.

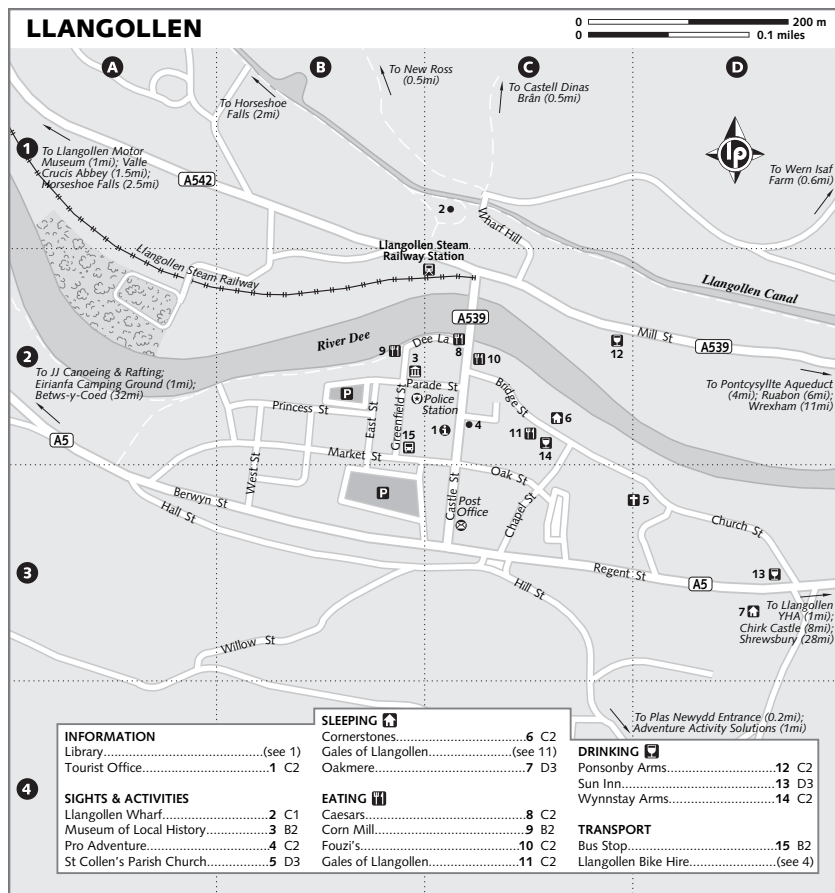
Pitch a tent at **Eirianfa Camping Ground** (☎ 860919; Berwyn Rd; 2-person tent sites £10), 1 mile west of Llangollen, or go across the river and trek eastwards (uphill) to reach friendly **Wern Isaf Farm** (☎ 860632; 2-person tent sites £8).

Eating

Fouzi's (☎ 861340; lunches £3.45-5.50) Amid Llangollen's swathe of blue-rinse, geriatric tearooms, try this slice of urban chic for a coffee or lunchtime snack.

Corn Mill (☎ 869555; Dee Lane; mains £6-12.50; ☎ noon-9pm) If the sun's shining, laze on the stylish wooden deck while chowing down at this renovated riverside eatery. Tuck in to fresh swordfish or local lamb, and should the heavens open, make a quick dash for the elegant indoor bar.

Caesars (☎ 860133; Dee Lane; mains £9-15; ☎ lunch & dinner) By the bridge, Caesars uses fresh ingredients to tickle the taste buds with wonders



LADIES OF LLANGOLLEN

Lady Eleanor Butler and the Honourable Sarah Ponsonby, the Ladies of Llangollen, lived in Plas Newydd from 1780 to 1829 with their maid Mary Carryl. Their love affair blossomed in Ireland and, after their Anglo-Irish families discouraged the relationship, they eloped to Wales disguised as men in an attempt to start a new life. They settled in Llangollen, devoting themselves to 'friendship, celibacy and the knitting of stockings'.

Their relationship became well known, so much so that national and literary figures of the day, including the Duke of Wellington and William Wordsworth, paid them visits. Wordsworth penned the charming words 'sisters in love, a love allowed to climb, even on this earth above the reach of time', although he was less enamoured with Plas Newydd, calling it a 'low browed cot'.

The ladies were very close to Mary who, having managed to buy the freehold to Plas Newydd, bequeathed it to them after her death. Lady Eleanor died in 1829, Sarah Ponsonby two years later. They are buried at St Collen's Parish Church in the centre of Llangollen.

such as crispy duck in port and orange. Set lunch and evening menus offer value – bag a window table for a hairy seat overhanging the river.

Gales of Llangollen (☎ 860089; www.galesofllangollen.co.uk; 18 Bridge St; mains £10-15; ☺ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) Wine bars might seem like a 1980s phenomena, and, yes, prawn cocktail is on the menu, but Gales is still going strong after 30 years of serving up traditional contemporary grub to locals and visiting punters alike. Good wine list as well.

Drinking & Entertainment

The **Wynnstay Arms** (☎ 860710; Bridge St) is probably the best boozier in town, although there's also decent beer and live music at the **Sun Inn** (☎ 860233; Regent St). For a younger feel try the **Ponsonby Arms** (☎ 861119; Mill St), named after one of the Ladies of Llangollen.

Getting There & Away

National Express coach 420 runs daily to Wrexham (30 minutes). For London (£25, 5½ hours), the service passes through Birmingham and Shrewsbury.

Buses 555 and X5 run to Wrexham from Monday to Saturday (30 minutes, every 15 minutes). Snowdonia services are less frequent; from Monday to Saturday the X19 runs four times per day to Betws-y-Coed (one hour) and Llandudno (two hours), with two services on Sunday. From Monday to Friday the X94 runs 10 times daily to Bala and Dolgellau, with nine services on Saturday and four on Sunday.

The nearest main-line train station (steam doesn't count) is Ruabon on the Shrewsbury–Chester line; Shrewsbury to Ruabon (30

minutes, at least every two hours). A taxi from Ruabon costs about £8 – call **Premier Cars** (☎ 861999). To reach Llanberis, take the bus to Wrexham and hop on the train there.

AROUND LLANGOLLEN

Chirk Castle

If you want a superb example of a 14th-century Marcher castle (NT; ☎ 01691-777701; adult/child £7/3.50; ☺ noon-5pm Wed-Sun Easter-Jun & Sep, noon-5pm Tue-Sun Jul & Aug, noon-4pm Wed-Sun Oct), then this is the place to come. Surprisingly, it's still inhabited – in 1595 the Myddelton family moved in and began the slow transformation of the castle from stout defender to elegant residence. Chirk Castle lies 8 miles southeast of Llangollen, 2 miles west of Chirk village, and has fine views over the English borderlands.

SNOWDONIA NATIONAL PARK (PARC CENEDLAETHOL ERYRI)

In a country overflowing with uplands, Snowdonia National Park reigns supreme, with the highest mountains and steepest valleys of any Welsh region. Dive into the rocky clefts and scramble up the slopes, armed with walking boots, crampons, or just a widening pair of eyes, for guaranteed excitement. The sea is so close that visitors can easily shift in pace between challenging terrain and relaxing sandy beaches.

Mt Snowdon (1085m) is the highest piece of rock in Wales and England. No world-beater in elevation, it nonetheless strikes a noble pose

atop a precipitous horseshoe of jagged peaks. Scaling the summit, on foot or by mountain railway, is the goal of many visitors – the park was created in 1951 as much to prevent the peak from being over-loved as from being neglected or built upon. Plenty of other mountain-hiking options are scattered across this extensive region, from the neighbouring ranges of the Carneddau and Glyders to Cader Idris above Dolgellau in the south. Rock climbing, white-water rafting, mountain biking and pony trekking are also excellent.

The surrounding coastline features the World Heritage-listed chain of wonderful medieval castles at Caernarfon, Harlech, Conwy and Beaumaris, each attached to a town of some charm.

Hard-won mineral treasures – copper, gold and slate – buried deep in the mountains permitted the inhabitants a tough living through the ages. Several mines now operate as visitor attractions, along with vintage railways such as the Ffestiniog and Welsh Highland lines, which once hauled the booty down to the sea. The area's high rainfall is cannily exploited by hydroelectric power stations; the Electric Mountain at Llanberis is one massive underground scheme you can see for yourself.

Orientation & Information

Snowdonia is the fourth-largest of Britain's 14 national parks, after the Cairngorms in Scotland and the South Downs and Lake District areas of England. While Mt Snowdon is the focus, the park covers 840 sq miles (2200 sq km). The boundaries extend fully 35 miles east–west and 50 miles north–south towards Mid Wales.

Major tourist towns have informative tourist offices that provide bed-booking services and weather information. Snowdonia National Park information centres can be found at Betws-y-Coed and Dolgellau (both open year-round), and from Easter to October at Blaenau Ffestiniog, Harlech and Beddgelert. Excellent online information is available at www.eryri-npa.gov.uk and www.visitsnowdonia.info.

The park's 24-hour weather number is ☎ 09068 500449 (premium rate).

Activities

ACTIVITY CENTRES

North Wales has two national activity centres: **Canolfan Tryweryn – the National Whitewater Centre** (☎ 01678-521083; www.ukrafting.co.uk) A trusty 1.5-mile stretch of the River Tryweryn, near Bala, provides

top rafting, canoeing and kayaking. For aquaphobes, try activities such as clay-pigeon shooting or bushcraft skills.

Plas y Brenin – the National Mountain Centre

(☎ 01690-720214; www.pyb.co.uk) Based at Capel Curig, this is the place to learn climbing, mountain biking and summit leadership. If you're confident enough to go it alone, the centre has a great equipment-rental service.

CYCLING

Dedicated mountain-bike venues with signposted, graded routes include top spot Coed-y-Brenin Forest Park (p733), Gwydyr Forest Park (p727) and Beddgelert Forest Park (p726). See www.mbwales.com and www.cycling.visitwales.com for more information. Permits are required.

Following two alternative routes through the park, the Lôn Las Cymru (see the boxed text, p651) route offers stunning, if hilly, road cycling.

For safety and environmental reasons, a voluntary daytime ban operates on Mt Snowdon on three (otherwise legal) bridleways, from 10am to 5pm daily May to September.

SnowBikers (☎ 01341-430628; www.snowbikers.com) and **Bicycle Beano** (☎ 01982-560471; www.bicycle-beano.co.uk) lead guided tours in and around Snowdonia National Park. Trips are irregular, so book well in advance.

To escape the roads and leave the traffic behind, scenic former railway lines can be found in the sea-level **Mawddach Trail**, near Dolgellau, and at **Caernarfon** in the north.

PONY TREKKING & HORSE RIDING

Tranquilly located at Waunfawr, south of Caernarfon, **Snowdonia Riding Stables** (☎ 01286-650342; www.snowdonia2000.fsnet.co.uk; per hr £15, half-day £33) can take you deep into the mountains. See also the Dolbadarn Pony Trekking Centre (p724) at Llanberis.

VINTAGE RAILWAYS

Several vintage, narrow-gauge steam railways ply routes through Snowdonia's breathtaking former mining heartlands (see the boxed text, p729).

WALKING

Mt Snowdon is the main destination for walkers, many basing themselves at Llanberis to tackle one of the numerous routes to the top (see the boxed text, p725).

But other hikes around the region are just as exhilarating, and less crowded. In the

north (just northeast of Snowdon itself), try the rugged Glyders and the famous ridge of Tryfan, or the domed summits of the Carneddau range (northeast of the Glyders). To the south the Moelwyns and Moel Hebog, or the Nantlle Ridge, are good options. For gentler forest trails and river walks head for Betws-y-Coed.

Further south, the well-used ascent of Cader Idris (near Dolgellau) makes a fine day's walk. Here are also the Arans (northeast of Dolgellau, southwest of Bala), the lesser-known Arenigs (west of Bala) and the challenging Rhinog Ridge (east of Harlech).

Local tourist offices stock brochures on the main mountain routes, as well as maps and detailed local guidebooks.

Before setting out, consider the following. Some walks graded 'easy' may still go near steep slopes or tricky terrain. Accidents can happen, usually on the way down. On average there are 70 serious incidents (and 10 deaths) annually in the park. Be prepared to deal with hostile weather at any time of year, even on days that seem clear and sunny. On anything more than a stroll, you should carry warm waterproof clothing, food and drink, map and compass. It's also worth checking the weather at a tourist office or on ☎ 09068 500449.

If in doubt about your abilities, consider a national park guided walk; ask at tourist offices or see the *Eryri/Snowdonia* newspaper.

Prestatyn, on the north coast, is the end of **Offa's Dyke Path**, a long-distance national trail

along the Wales–England border. The route's final three days, from Chirk Castle via Llandegla and Bodfari, showcase the varied scenery of this northwestern corner of the region.

If the weather is bad in Snowdonia, try heading for the coast. The **Llyn Peninsula** and **Isle of Anglesey** may have sunshine while the high peaks brood under cloud or rain.

Sleeping

There are some smart options in Snowdonia, but friendly hostels, B&Bs and midrange guesthouses are the norm.

Betws-y-Coed, Llanberis and Dolgellau have the greatest options, but some of the best are more isolated. There's a strong hostel network (both YHA and independent): see town entries for Bala, Bangor, Beddgelert, Betws-y-Coed, Capel Curig, Caernarfon, Dolgellau, Harlech, Llanberis and Porthmadog.

Five YHA hostels serve Mt Snowdon:

Bryn Gwynant (p726; ☎ 0870 770 5732;

bryngwynant@yha.org.uk)

Idwal Cottage (☎ 0870 770 5874; idwal@yha.org.uk)

Llanberis (p724; ☎ 0870 770 5928; llanberis@yha.org.uk)

Pen-y-Pass (☎ 0870 770 5990; penypass@yha.org.uk)

Snowdon Ranger (p726; ☎ 0870 770 6038; snowdon@yha.org.uk)

Getting There & Around

For information on Snowdonia buses, trains and multiday tickets, see p716.

Bus services between regional towns are adequate (but limited on Sunday). Colourful **Snowdon Sherpa** (☎ 01286-870880) buses serve the mountain areas and Mt Snowdon trailheads, with a network that includes Beddgelert, Betws-y-Coed, Capel Curig, Llanberis, Pen-y-Pass and the surrounding towns of Bethesda, Caernarfon, Llandudno, Llanrwst and Porthmadog. Buses run every hour or two (fewer on Sunday), typically from about April to September, including an open-top bike-carrying service.

For more information, contact **Traveline Cymru** (☎ 0870 608 2 608; www.traveline-cymru.org.uk) or visit a tourist office.

LLANBERIS

☎ 01286 / pop 1842

Llanberis has evolved to become Mt Snowdon's base town, but remove the outdoor pursuits and this is a fairly dull place. Built to house workers for the nearby Dinorwig slate

TOP FIVE VIEWS

- Across Tremadog Bay from Criccieth Castle (p743)
- Walking Mt Snowdon's Devil's Punchbowl (p725)
- Riding the Ffestiniog Railway (p730)
- The Snowdonia range from Beaumaris (p742)
- Craggy sections of the A5 from Bethesda to Capel Curig (p726)

quarry, its industrial heritage makes it far from the prettiest town in the national park.

Despite this, a steady flow of rugged fleecwearers maintains a jovial mood throughout the year, tossed together with an assortment of day-trippers eager to ride the Snowdon Mountain Railway. In summer Llanberis heaves, and a gentle walk around the town's lakes, Llyn Padarn and Llyn Peris, will be blessed relief from the crowds.

Nearby are two worthwhile sights: the Welsh Slate Museum and Electric Mountain, where you can take a guided tour to the bowels of an underground hydroelectric power station.

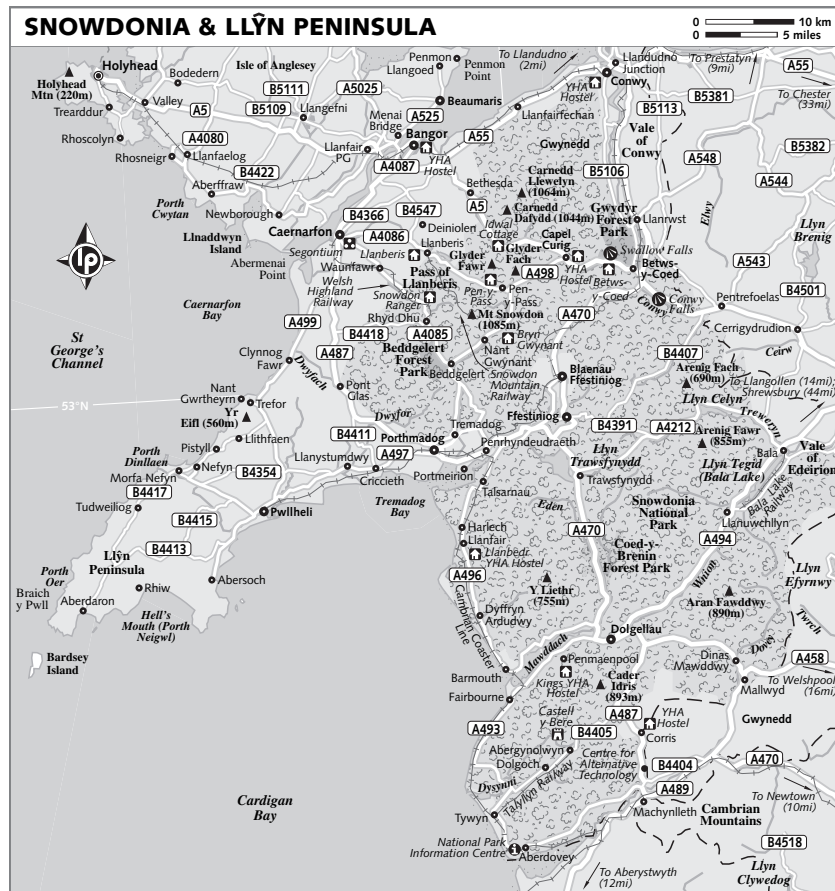
Orientation & Information

Llanberis is bypassed by the busy A4086, separating the village from the lakes. Nearly all the midrange accommodation and eateries are on High St. The **tourist office** (☎ 870765; llanberis.touristoffice@gwynedd.gov.uk; High St; ☎ 9.30am–5.30pm Easter–Oct, 11am–4pm Wed & Fri–Sun Nov–Easter) is opposite the post office.

Sights

The old, young, infirm and plain lazy have been riding Britain's only public rack-and-pinion railway, **Snowdon Mountain Railway** (☎ 0870 458 0033; www.snowdonrailway.co.uk; one way/return adult £14/21, child £11/14; ☎ departures up to half-hourly 9am–5pm Easter–Oct) to the summit of Mt Snowdon since 1896. The 5-mile journey climbs 900m and takes an hour. Schedules are weather-dependent and summertime queues can be long, but 9am departures can be booked half-price (by telephone, one day in advance).

Deep inside Elidir Mountain lurks an ingenious secret that helps Britain fire on all cylinders. **Electric Mountain** (☎ 870636; www.fhc.co.uk/electric_mountain.htm; tour £7; ☎ 10.30am–4.30pm



Wed-Sun Feb-Mar & Nov-Dec, daily Apr-May & Sep-Oct, 9.30am-4.30pm Jun-Aug) is the sparky name for this extraordinary rapid-response, pumped-storage Dinorwig power station. In times of surplus energy, water is pumped 600m up from Llyn Peris to the Marchlyn reservoir, where it sits until enough people switch on the kettle and – whoosh, instant electricity. Essential – after all, where would the Brits be without a cuppa? The good-value tour reveals all.

Good slate is a treasured commodity, both for roofing and ornamental decoration, and over the years tons of it came from around Llanberis. At the **Welsh Slate Museum** (☎ 870630; www.museumwales.ac.uk/en/slate; admission free; ☹ 10am-5pm Easter-Oct, 10am-4pm Sun-Fri Nov-Easter) in the huge Dinorwig quarry, you can visit old workshops where craftsmen split and dress the slate – it's harder than it looks.

The **Llanberis Lake Steam Railway** (☎ 870549; www.lake-railway.co.uk; return trip £6; ☹ 11am-4pm Jul-Aug, most days Mar-Jun & Sep-Oct) chuffs calmly along Llyn Padarn to Llanberis and back. The 5-mile return trip takes one hour.

Activities

The Llanberis area has numerous adventure possibilities. **High Trek Snowdonia** (☎ 871232; www.hightrek.co.uk), **Boulder Adventures** (☎ 870556; www.boulderadventures.com; Bryn Du Mountain Centre), **Padarn Watersports Centre** (☎ 870556; Llyn Padarn) and **Surf-Lines** (☎ 879001; www.surf-lines.co.uk) all offer a mixture of high-adrenaline pursuits such as mountaineering, kayaking, scrambling and coasteering.

Dolbadarn Pony Trekking Centre (☎ 870277; www.dolbadarnhotel.co.uk), operating from Dolbadarn Hotel, offers sedate excursions on horseback (half-hour taster £7.50, one hour £15, two hours £25, half-day £35, full day £55).

Sleeping

BUDGET

Cae Gwyn Farm (☎ 870718; Nant Peris; camp site per person £5) Opposite the Vaynol Arms in Nant Peris, 2 miles southeast of Llanberis, this site has basic facilities and the owner never turns anyone away.

Snowdon House (☎ 870284; 3 Gwastadnant, Nant Peris; tent sites per person £5, dm £10) Enjoy the luxury of heated bunk rooms a mere stone's throw from great routes to the Glyders and Tryfan.

Boulder Adventures (☎ 870556; www.boulderadventures.com; Ty Du Rd; dm £12, incl breakfast £14; ☹)

At the Bryn Du Mountain Centre, off High St. Dorms here have good facilities to complement the comprehensive programme of outdoor pursuits.

Pete's Eats (☎ 870117; www.petes-eats.co.uk; 40 High St; dm/2-bed r/flat £12/30/140) Above the superb café of the same name (see below), Pete's has plain but comfy dorms and two private rooms. The recently opened top-floor flat sleeps 12 and can be booked by the night for self-catering groups.

Llanberis YHA hostel (☎ 0870 770 5928; llanberis@yha.org.uk; dm £13.95; ☹ Easter-Oct with 48hr notice, Nov-Mar by arrangement) Behind the Spar supermarket on High St, this favourite has a top location for a quick ascent of Mt Snowdon. Four en suite doubles (from £32) are available.

Heights Hotel (☎ 871179; www.heightshotel.co.uk; 74 High St; s/d/tr/q £30/45/60/80) More hostel than hotel; the beer flows at the Heights while you shoot pool, scoff hearty meals or listen to live music. All rooms have en suite and are great value for larger groups.

MIDRANGE

Plas Coch Guest House (☎ 871212; www.plas-coch.co.uk; High St; d incl breakfast from £50) Opposite the Heights Hotel, Plas Coch has well-presented en suite rooms and a friendly welcome, with a hearty breakfast including Manx kippers and vegan options. No credit cards.

Dol Peris Hotel (☎ 870350; www.dolperis.com; High St; s/d from £28/50) Spacious and airy rooms with big mountain views in this Grade II-listed building that has a contemporary lounge and a burgeoning restaurant (see opposite).

Pen-y-Gwryd (☎ 870211; www.pyg.co.uk; s/d £34/68, without bathroom £28/56) Seven miles southeast of Llanberis, this cosy hotel is a little eccentric (breakfast and dinner are announced with a large gong) but full of atmosphere (look for the signatures of Britain's 1953 Everest climbers on the bar ceiling), although service can be abrupt at times.

Eating

Pete's Eats (☎ 870117; www.petes-eats.co.uk; 40 High St; mains £2.30-10; ☹ 9am-8pm Mon-Fri, 8am-8pm Sat & Sun Easter-Jun, Sep & Oct, 9am-9pm Mon-Fri, 8am-9pm Sat & Sun Jul & Aug, 9am-6.30pm Mon-Fri, 8am-8pm Sat & Sun Nov-Easter; ☹) You can't miss Pete's garish exterior. It's still the hiker's fave, often full to the brim at the end of a long day in the mountains. Its gut-busting Big Jim is an institution, as are the legendary pints of tea, but there are good

SUMMIT SPECIAL

No Snowdonia experience is complete without tackling one of the region's awe-inspiring mountains. At 1085m, Mt Snowdon is the biggest and also the busiest, thanks in no small part to the Snowdon Mountain Railway (p723). But that would be cheating, so leave the train to grandma and let's get those boots on.

Six paths of varying length and difficulty lead to the summit. Simplest (and dulllest) is the **Llanberis Path** (8 miles, six hours), running beside the railway track. The **Snowdon Ranger Path** (7 miles, five hours) starts at the Snowdon Ranger YHA hostel near Beddgelert; this is the shortest and also the safest in winter.

Two options start at Pen-y-Pass (and involve the least amount of ascent): the **Miners Track** (8 miles, six hours) starts gently and ends with a steep section; the **Pyg Track** (8 miles, six hours) is more interesting, and meets the Miners Track where it steepens. The classic **Snowdon Horseshoe** route (7.5 miles, 5½ hours) combines the Pyg Track to the summit (or via the precipitous ridge of Crib Goch if you're very experienced) with a descent route over the peak of Llewedd and a final section down on the Miners Track.

The straightforward **Rhyd Ddu Path** (8 miles, six hours) approaches from the west. Most challenging is the **Watkin Path** (8 miles, six hours), involving an ascent of more than 1000m on its southerly approach from Nantgwynant.

At the summit you should find work under way on a shiny new visitor centre, replacing the old bunker-like café that prompted Prince Charles to label the summit 'the highest slum in Europe'. Building of the centre has been dogged by setbacks; scandal erupted with the announcement that the roof would be made from Portuguese granite instead of local materials.

Variations on these walks are in Lonely Planet's *Walking in Britain*. Snowdon Sherpa buses (see p723) stop at the trailheads, and there are also options for accommodation near them all. If you want a little more solitude, get an early start for the **Glyders**, starting from Idwal Cottage YHA, or head further south for **Cader Idris**.

healthy options as well. Peter's also offers accommodation (see opposite).

Vaynol Arms (☎ 870284; Nant Peris; mains £6.40-12) Opposite Cae Gwyn Farm camp site in Nant Peris, the Vaynol is the best pub in the area, serving traditional pub meals (steak, gammon, scampi) and real ale to wash it all down.

Dol Peris Hotel (☎ 870350; High St; mains £9-11; ☹ 6-9pm Wed-Sun) Reasonably priced meals in a cosy atmosphere make Dol Peris a good midrange option. Try homemade steak-and-Guinness pie or join in a bargain-priced, themed Mexican night.

Y Bistrô (☎ 871278; 45 High St; mains £14-17.50; ☹ dinner Tue-Sat) Twenty years of fine cuisine mean reservations are recommended at this, the finest restaurant for miles. Creative Gallic flair meets local Welsh ingredients – how about a lone pigeon or lamb's liver served with abundant garlic and a potato rosti?

For self-caterers, there's a large, modern Spar supermarket on High St.

Getting There & Away

Llanberis is 13 miles from Bangor; catch bus 85 (45 minutes, 19 services daily Monday

to Saturday, seven services on Sunday). Bus 88 runs to Caernarfon (25 minutes, hourly); some services continue to Nant Peris. Service 96A goes to Nant Peris (10 minutes) and Pen-y-Pass (20 minutes) from Monday to Friday (hourly). The Snowdon Sherpa bus S1 to the Snowdon trailhead at Pen-y-Pass departs mostly hourly, including Sunday.

BEDDGELERT

☎ 01766

At the heart of the mountains, but with less bare rock and more greenery than neighbouring villages, Beddgelert makes a pleasant base from which to explore. Verdant hills above the River Gwynant are reminiscent of a Scottish glen, especially during summer when purple heather blazes all around. In the tiny streets below, a mainly elderly crowd enjoys a clutch of tearooms and craft shops. Visitors here are often perched on the wall outside the ice cream shop – join them for one (or more) of 23 lip-smacking homemade flavours.

The town's name, meaning 'Gelert's Grave', refers to the well-known Welsh legend of Prince Llywelyn's faithful dog. Believing

the dog had savaged his baby son, Llywelyn slaughtered the dog, only later to discover that Gelert fought off a wolf that had attacked the baby. More likely, the true name is derived from a 5th-century Irish preacher, Celert, who is believed to have founded a church here. Gelert's Grave can be found by following the river downstream.

The **National Park Information Centre & Tourist Office** (☎ 890615; 🕒 9.30am-5.30pm Easter-Oct) is on the road heading south.

Sights & Activities

First mined in Roman times, **Sygun Copper Mine** (☎ 510100; www.sygun-coppermine.co.uk; adult/child £9.75/5.95; 🕒 9.30am-5pm Easter-Oct, 10am-4pm 26 Dec-1 Jan) is 1 mile east of the village and is recommended for families; pan for gold and see the mine's impressive stalactites and stalagmites.

A popular **walk** follows the old Welsh Highland Railway down the Pass of Aberglaslyn – exercise caution when the river is high. The railway is under restoration (p730), but controversy has raged over the potential impact on the fragile environment and disruption to village life. Mountain-bike trails for all levels are at **Beddgelert Forest**, 2 miles north on the A4085. **Beics Beddgelert** (☎ 890434; bikes per half-/full day £14/18) rents mountain bikes and supplies route information.

Sleeping & Eating

Cwellyn Arms (Rhyd Dhu; ☎ 890321; www.snowdoninn.co.uk; sites per tent £5-7, dm £10-15, s/d from £50/60) Ideally placed for an assault on Snowdon, this pub offers standard en suite rooms, decent dorms and camp sites. Hearty grub fuels the climbers and splendid ales quench the thirst.

Plas Colwyn (☎ 890458; s/d from £20/40; 🍷) Rooms at Plas Colwyn are comfortable if somewhat drab, with patterned wallpaper and carpets. Meals can be arranged, including vegetarian options.

Beddgelert Tearooms & Bistro (☎ 890543; mains £11.50-20; 🍷 lunch & dinner) Cosy and cluttered with antiques, this is the place for afternoon tea or sophisticated dinner (shark steaks or fresh Anglesey lobster). Upstairs, bedrooms offer comfortable, although chintzy, accommodation (singles/doubles £25/42); some have exposed stone walls.

Two YHA hostels and one great camp site serve Snowdon summiteers:

Beddgelert Forest Campsite (☎ 890288; 2-person tent sites £7.50-12.70) Calm and leafy, this award-winning

Forestry Commission site lies a mile north of town on the Caernarfon road and has good facilities and a shop.

Bryn Gwynant YHA hostel (☎ 0870 770 5732; bryngwynant@yha.org.uk; dm £12) Stunning location overlooking Llyn Gwynant, near the steep Watkin Path, 4 miles east on the A498.

Snowdon Ranger YHA hostel (☎ 0870 770 6038; snowdon@yha.org.uk; dm £12) Well positioned for the Snowdon Ranger Path, 5 miles north on the A4085.

Although both hostels are open year-round, check in advance if you're travelling out of peak season, and make reservations in summer.

Getting There & Away

Snowdon Sherpa bus S4 runs to Caernarfon (30 minutes) and Pen-y-Pass (20 minutes), every two hours Monday to Saturday (fewer on Sunday). Bus S97 runs to Porthmadog (20 minutes), Capel Curig and Betws-y-Coed, every two hours (three on Sunday).

CAPEL CURIG

☎ 01690

Blink and you'll miss cute Capel Curig, one of the park's oldest resorts and ringed by dramatic scenery. Battered boots and rugged looks are *de rigueur* thanks to **Plas y Brenin – the National Mountain Centre** (☎ 720214; www.pyb.co.uk; B&B per person £20), a great facility for learning skills from alpine climbing to leadership courses – including introductory sessions. There's also a bar, climbing wall and dry ski slope, although not for use in that order. Last-minute accommodation can be booked (up to two days in advance), but only if the centre hasn't filled all the beds with activity groups.

Dolgarn Campsite (☎ 720228; sites per person £4) is a large farm site with a pleasant riverside location but basic facilities. With imposing Snowdon views, **Capel Curig YHA hostel** (☎ 0870 770 5746; capelcurig@yha.org.uk; dm £16; 🍷 Easter-Oct, Nov-Mar by advance booking) is the archetypal hiker's base.

our pick St Curig's Church (☎ 720469; www.stcurigs.church.com; dm £15, dm incl breakfast £20, s/d £37.50/65), a beautiful converted church, is Capel Curig's most stunning residence. Shoot pool under the ornate dome of the apse, chill on the comfy sofas or soak in the outdoor hot-tub. The contemporary mezzanine kitchen is wonderful, and en suite rooms with hand-carved four-poster beds promise a luxurious night for weary walkers.

Although looking a little tired, **Bryn Tyrch Hotel** (☎ 720223; lunches £3.80-7, dinner mains £9-10.50)

remains Capel's best dinner option, and has decent rooms (singles/doubles £45/65, without bathroom £40/56). The contemporary menu features treats such as salmon fillet with fennel marmalade.

Bryn Tyrch is also a favourite boozier for hikers and climbers, along with the Plas y Brenin centre and the Mountain Bar at **Cobdens Hotel** (☎ 720243; B&B per person Mon-Thu £29.50, Fri-Sun £35.50), which is built into the rock face.

Snowdon Sherpa S2 and S97 services stop here en route between Llandudno (1½ hours, half-hourly, fewer on Sunday) and Llanberis (25 minutes), also calling at Betws-y-Coed and Pen-y-Pass. Snowdon Sherpa S6 to Bangor (40 minutes) runs three times a day (one on Sunday).

If you have a car, drive the A5 to Bethesda for raking, rocky views.

BETWS-Y-COED

☎ 01690 / pop 2034

Betws-y-Coed (*betoos-y-koyd*), self-styled eastern gateway to Snowdonia National Park, is a pretty village beside the babbling Rivers Conwy and Llugwy that gets awkwardly crowded during summer. Meaning 'chapel in the wood', the name is usually shortened to Betws.

Lying 12 miles northeast of Mt Snowdon, this is the first major walking hub that you reach if you're travelling from northern England. With transport you can easily strike out for the big peaks; otherwise, enjoy the tranquil riverside paths and mountain-bike trails in the surrounding woodland, or just chill in a café.

Orientation & Information

The village stretches along narrow Holyhead Rd, with all amenities on or just off it. The **National Park Information Centre & Tourist Office** (☎ 710426; 🕒 9.30am-5.30pm Easter-Oct, 9.30am-4.30pm Nov-Easter) is in the Royal Oak Stables near the train station.

Activities

There are numerous forest **walks** close to Betws. Northwest is **Gwydyr Forest**, 28 sq miles of oak, beech, larch and fir crisscrossed with paths, and a great venue for walking, **mountain biking** or **pony trekking**. The *Gwydyr Forest Guide* costs £2 and *Walks around Betws-y-Coed* £4.95 – both from the tourist office.

Beics Betws (☎ 710766; www.beicsbetws.co.uk; bikes per half-/full day £14/18) provides bikes and route

information – bookings are advised. Find it up the steep lane behind the post office.

At **Ty Coch Farm** (☎ 760248; www.horse-riding-wales.co.uk; Penmachno; per hr £17, full day £48), in the village of Penmachno, 6 miles south of Betws, you can ride by the hour or for a full day. There's also a popular to-the-pub-and-back route (around four hours, £36).

Pretty **Swallow Falls** (adult/child £1/50p) is 2 miles west, by the A5, and is reachable by a scenic riverside path starting at Pont-y-Pair bridge. **Conwy Falls** (adult £1) is 2 miles south off the A5, with a quaint café.

Of course, you could just join day-trippers for a **picnic** on the boulders of the gushing River Llugwy at the midtown Pont-y-Pair bridge.

Sleeping

Seemingly every other house in Betws is a B&B or hotel, but it still gets hectic around holiday times. Try to get away from the main street, the busy A5.

Riverside Camping & Caravan Site (☎ 710310; Old Church Rd; tent sites per person £5.50; no pitching after 9.30pm) Scenic, peaceful riverside site with great facilities that fills up in summer, but only accepts singles and couples. Cross the train track at the station or follow the road to the golf club from Holyhead Rd.

Betws-y-Coed YHA hostel (☎ 710796; betwsycoed@yha.co.uk; dm £14) Unspectacular but functional hostel, 2 miles west of Betws on the A5. You'll be isolated here, so self-cater or eat moderately at the adjacent Swallow Falls Hotel bar.

Church Hill House (☎ 710447; www.church-hill-house.co.uk; Vicarage Rd; s/d £27.50/55) Overlooking St Mary's Church, this peaceful place is reminiscent of a trip to grandpa's – all floral carpets and Anaglypta wallpaper. Rooms are basic but spotless and the family cat welcomes all-comers. Budding pianists can plonk away in the lounge to the unusual audience of a stuffed salmon and a Scottish buck's head.

Dolgethin Guesthouse (☎ 710241; s/d from £28/40; 🍷) An Israeli hostess is the last thing you expect in rural Wales, but that's what you get at this friendly place, the last house on the left as you head west from the village. Furnishings are old but comfortable.

Bryn Afon (☎ 710403; www.bryn-afon.co.uk; s/d £40/54; 🍷) Cross the Pont-y-Pair bridge and go right for this breezy place, where walkers and cyclists are welcome to share the soft, smartly designed rooms and superb river views.

Henllys – The Old Courthouse (☎ 710534; www.guesthouse-snowdonia.co.uk; Old Church Rd; d £60-80) Ever spent a night behind bars? Actually, don't answer that. Instead, take the details of this converted 1867 courthouse and police station with original features such as a solid door with a little sliding window, as well as a collection of international police helmets. Bedrooms have themed names such as 'Fingerprint' and 'Swag', but please, no jokes about the 'Handcuff' room.

Acorns (☎ 710395; www.betws-y-coed-breaks.co.uk; d £60-90; ☒) Near the centre of the village, this stylish, open-plan suite has modern décor and luxuries such as DVD player and huge power shower. More elegant than most around here – don't get muddy boots on the carpet!

Eating

Betws is heavily weighted to accommodation, but eating options have improved.

Alpine Coffee Shop (☎ 710747; Old Station Bldgs; mains £5-7.50; ☞ Mon-Fri 9am-5.30pm, Sat & Sun 8am-5.30pm) Longtime institution with great all-day breakfasts, snacks and vegan meals. There's also a comprehensive tea menu featuring Jun Shan Silver Needles, the most expensive tea in the world, at £8.50 per pot!

Ty Gwyn Hotel (☎ 710383; Holyhead Rd; mains £6.50-15; ☞ lunch & dinner) Tuck into extra-tasty morsels such as marinated Thai steak in this atmospheric coaching inn overlooking Waterloo Bridge.

Cross Keys (☎ 710334; Holyhead Rd; mains £6.75-12; ☞ lunch & dinner) Tasty pub-style food (gammon, steak, curry) and desserts, served in a cosy bar at the west end of the village.

Royal Oak Hotel (☎ 710219; Holyhead Rd; mains £8-18.50; ☞ lunch & dinner) This place takes strange pride in the fact that Sir Cliff Richard once ate here. Bar meals include slow-grilled Welsh lake trout, while the restaurant serves the most expensive dishes in town – try pumpkin-and-cumin risotto.

Bistro Betws-y-Coed (☎ 710328; Holyhead Rd; mains £13-16; ☞ lunch & dinner) Locally sourced fish and meat, and veggie options, are dished up in a cottagey dining room with chunky wooden tables.

Self-caterers should head to the small **Spar supermarket** (☎ 710324, Holyhead Rd; ☞ 8am-10pm).

Getting There & Away

Betws lies halfway along the scenic Conwy Valley railway line between Llandudno (40

minutes) and Blaenau Ffestiniog (30 minutes), with eight services daily (three on Sunday).

Buses 19 and X19 run to Llandudno (one hour, nine daily, one on Sunday), the 97A serves Porthmadog (65 minutes, four daily, two on Sunday) via Beddgelert and 84 connects Betws to Blaenau Ffestiniog (20 minutes, two daily, none on Sunday).

Snowdon Sherpa bus S2 shuttles regularly between Betws and Capel Curig, Pen-y-Pass and Llanberis.

BLAENAU FFESTINIOG

☎ 01766 / pop 3961

Dwarfed by immense peaks of slate-mine slag waste, Blaenau (blay-nye) Ffestiniog is the town Snowdonia forgot – when the national park was established an exclusion zone was created around Blaenau and its pariah status was assured.

The mountains of slag exist because for every ton of usable slate that was mined, nine tons of rubble were produced. While much of Britain benefited with shiny new roofs, Blaenau still carries the burden of its industrial past and today the town feels trapped and forlorn.

But despite the scars, it could be worse – the surroundings are magnificent and the air is clean. Most visitors come for the Ffestiniog Railway (p730), which once carried the slate to the seaport at Porthmadog, and Llechwedd Slate Caverns, where the immense scale of the mining history is revealed.

The **National Park Information Centre & Tourist Office** (☎ 830360; ☞ 9.30am-5.30pm Easter-Oct) is a friendly place with a range of books and maps.

Sights

Llechwedd Slate Caverns (☎ 830306; www.llechwedd-slate-caverns.co.uk; 1 ride/both rides adult £8.95/£13.50, child £6.75/9.50; ☞ 10am-5.15pm Mar-Sep, 10am-4.15pm Oct-Feb) offers two tours inside the 1846 mine tunnels: the 25-minute Deep Mine tour, including a descent on the UK's steepest passenger railway (1:1.8, or 1.8m across for every metre up or down), and the Miner's Tramway tour, which better suits claustrophobics. The mine is 1 mile north of Blaenau on the A470.

Sleeping & Eating

Ourpick Bryn Elltid Guest House (☎ 831356; www.accommodation-snowdonia.com; Tanygrisiau; s/d £27/44.50) Just outside Blaenau, on the shores of Llyn

Ystradau, this place is a Snowdonia gem – a wonder of ecofriendly self-sustainability with solar collectors, wood-burning stoves and imaginative wooden extensions added to the original stone cottage. The ace in the pack is the 'Hobbit House', a wool-insulated, turf-roofed outbuilding-cum-guest-bedroom. Top it off with a wonderful organic meal (four-course dinners £18) using garden-fresh ingredients.

Cae Du (☎ 830847; www.cae-du.co.uk; s/d £35/50) Another hiker's favourite due to its close proximity to first-rate paths, Cae Du stands in beautiful gardens. The isolation and views are immense, and the welcome is friendly. Three-course dinners cost £14. Cae Du is 1.5 miles south, signed off the A470 Ffestiniog road.

Queens Hotel (☎ 830055; www.queens-snowdonia.co.uk; Church St; mains £7-14) Bar and restaurant meals and 12 tidy, old-style bedrooms (singles/doubles from £45/60), named after steam trains from the Ffestiniog Railway.

Opposite the train station, the **Co-op supermarket** (☞ 8am-10pm Mon-Sat, Sun 10am-4pm) is best for self-caterers.

Getting There & Away

Bus 1 to Bangor (1½ hours, hourly Monday to Saturday, five on Sunday) runs via Porthmadog, Criccieth and Caernarfon. Bus 35 serves Dolgellau (50 minutes, seven daily Monday to Saturday) and the T4 serves Llandudno (75 minutes, two daily Monday to Saturday, three on Sunday), via Betws-y-Coed.

The narrow-gauge Ffestiniog Railway from Porthmadog terminates at Blaenau, although the bus takes half the time. Regular trains to Llandudno (£5.50, 65 minutes, at least six

daily, three on Sunday in summer, fill-in bus in winter) go via Betws-y-Coed.

PORTHMADOG

☎ 01766 / pop 3008

Porthmadog is the type of place where it's better to travel than arrive. It's located at the mouth of the Glaslyn Estuary, where the Llŷn Peninsula juts westward, and most visitors approach through mountainous splendour. Whether by road or the scenic Ffestiniog Railway, the journey enthralls and 'Port' itself is a disappointment. For many its major attraction is either as a transport hub or place to stock up on provisions.

The town grew around the 19th-century harbour built by William Alexander Madocks to handle slate from the mountain mines, much from Blaenau Ffestiniog. The link with Blaenau is still the main draw today, as people flock to ride the vintage steam train along its 13.5-mile route. The track crosses the estuary via the **Cob**, a mile-long causeway that affords fine views to the Moelwyn mountain range.

At the end of the Cob is the **tourist office** (☎ 512981; porthmadog.touristoffice@gwynedd.gov.uk; High St; ☞ 9.30am-5.30pm), which backs onto the harbour – a pleasant place to stroll or take coffee and cake. Free internet access is available at the **library** (☎ 514091; Chapel St; ☞ 10am-noon & 2-6pm Mon, Tue & Fri, 10am-noon & 2-4pm Wed, 10am-noon Thu & Sat).

The main **High Street** houses most shops and facilities, leading to Porthmadog's full-sized train station (Cambrian Coaster line) at the western end of town. Beach-bums love **Blackrock Sands**, 2 miles west and one of the region's most beautiful coastal stretches, while

STEAM RIDES AGAIN

Wales' narrow-gauge railways are testament to an industrial heyday of mining and quarrying. Using steam and diesel engines, they often crossed terrain that defied standard-gauge trains. The wonderful scenery they rattle through makes riding them truly worthwhile.

The advent of steam and the rapid spread of the railway transformed 19th-century Britain, but 20th-century industrial decline and road-building left many lines defunct. The infamous Beeching report of 1963 closed dozens of rural branch lines and five years later British Rail fired up its last steam engine.

Passionate steam enthusiasts formed a preservation group, buying and restoring old locomotives, rolling stock, disused lines and stations – a labour of love financed by offering rides, often with old railway workers helping out.

Nine restored lines around Wales form a group called **Great Little Trains of Wales** (☎ 01286-870549; www.greatlittletrainsofwales.co.uk). The narrow-gauge Wanderer pass (£55) is valid for nine consecutive days on all lines.

to the east is the Italianate fantasy village of Portmeirion.

Ropewalks (☎ 515316; www.ropewalks.co.uk; per 2hr session £15) is a high-flying activity centre where you trapeze, swing or zip yourself in to an airborne frenzy. Find it at Greenacres Holiday Park, 2.5 miles along the road from High St, signposted Borth-y-Gest.

Ffestiniog Railway & Welsh Highland Railway

Built between 1832 and 1836, the narrow-gauge **Ffestiniog Railway** (☎ 516024; www.festrail.co.uk; half/day/full return trip £10/16.50) used to haul slate from the mines of Blaenau Ffestiniog to the sea at Porthmadog. Today, vintage 1860s engines and carriages puff tourists along the picturesque 13.5-mile line.

Trains run two to eight times daily from Easter to October, with limited off-season services. For a cheaper ticket (£12.50), depart on the first or last trains (booking is advisable).

At the western end of town (near the main-line station) is another piece of railway history. The **Welsh Highland Railway** (☎ 513402; www.whr.co.uk; return trip £4.95) used to run 22 miles northward through the mountains via the Pass of Aberglaslyn and Beddgelert to Caernarfon and is now under restoration. You can ride a short 1.75-mile section of the former track at this southern end of the line. More substantial is the northern section between Caernarfon and Rhyd Dhu (p740). Good-value discount tickets allowing return travel on all three lines cost £30.

Sleeping & Eating

Tyddyn Llwyn Hotel (☎ camping 512205; hotel 513903; www.hotel.tyddynllwyn.com; Morfa Bychan Rd; 2-person tent sites £10-13, s/d £35/60) Camp in scenic grounds a half-mile along Borth Rd in open countryside. Rooms are available, but were under refurbishment at the time of research. Call for latest details.

Snowdon Lodge (☎ 515354; www.snowdonlodge.co.uk; Church St; dm/d incl breakfast £14/35; ☎) This Tremadog house was the birthplace of Lawrence of Arabia in 1888, and is now a friendly independent hostel specialising in activity breaks. Dorms can be cramped but breakfast is good and there's a sociable bar. Find it 1 mile north of Porthmadog.

Tudor Lodge (☎ 515530; www.tudor-lodge.co.uk; Penamser Rd; s/d £35/55) Comfortable, friendly and

good value en suite accommodation in the heart of town, near the roundabout on the A497 towards the west end of High St.

Yr Hen Fecws (☎ 514625; www.henfecws.com; 16 Lombard St; s/d from £42/55; ☎) Stylishly restored, this stone cottage remains one of the finest places to stay in town. The restaurant serves excellent bistro dishes (mains from £8) such as hot smoked salmon with fresh asparagus.

Passage to India (☎ 512144; www.tudor-lodge.co.uk; 26 Lombard St; mains £4.25-14; ☎ 6-11pm) Recommended and oft-busy place with deep red and yellow décor, serving an array of tasty subcontinental treats.

Try the Golden Fleece, 1 mile north in Tremadog, for local beer and stout pub grub.

Getting There & Away

Porthmadog is a hub for north Wales.

BUS

National Express (☎ 08705 808080) coach 545 runs daily to London (£27.50, 10 hours) via Bangor, Caernarfon, Llandudno, Chester and Birmingham. It stops near the police station on High St.

Bus 97 serves Betws-y-Coed (65 minutes, four daily, two on Sunday) via Beddgelert, Pen-y-Pass and Capel Curig. Bus 1 travels to Blaenau Ffestiniog (30 minutes) and Caernarfon (45 minutes) hourly, fewer on Sunday. Bus 3 runs to Pwllheli (35 minutes, every half-hour, six on Sunday). Bus X32 runs to Dolgellau (50 minutes, six daily, four on Sunday), Machynlleth (1½ hours) and Aberystwyth (£5, 2¼ hours), or Bangor (one hour).

TRAIN

Lying on the scenic Cambrian Coaster line, Porthmadog connects to Machynlleth (£8.60, 1¼ hours) and Pwllheli (20 minutes) every two or three hours (fewer on Sunday). For vintage trains to Blaenau Ffestiniog, see left.

AROUND PORTHMADOG Portmeirion

Contrasting starkly with Snowdonia's natural beauty, **Portmeirion** (☎ 01766-770000; www.portmeirion-village.com; adult/child £6.50/3.50; ☎ 9.30am-5.30pm) is a seaside fairy tale that testifies to the power of imagination. Welsh architect Sir Clough Williams-Ellis spent the years 1925 to 1927 designing his Utopian masterpiece, resulting in a charming group of disparate Italianate buildings. Despite his quick work at the draw-

ing board, it was 1975 before Williams-Ellis' vision was finally completed.

Williams-Ellis assembled remnants from ramshackle stately mansions and reassembled them in a hotchpotch of pastel shades and ornate flourishes on an isolated peninsula near his ancestral home. Gathered around a central plaza, with a backdrop of a beautiful, broad tidal estuary, the quirky architecture conjures an irresistible Mediterranean atmosphere.

Over the years Portmeirion has influenced novelists, film writers and the Beatles. Noel Coward wrote *Blithe Spirit* here, an episode of the BBC's *Dr Who* was based in the village and George Harrison chose it to host his 50th-birthday party. Most famously, Portmeirion was the set for the cult 1960s TV series *The Prisoner*, and the 'Prisoner Information Centre' remains.

Nobody lives here – it's purely a magical tourist draw that attracts huge summer crowds. Wonderful accommodation is available, but you'll need pockets as deep as Llechwedd Slate Caverns to experience it. **Hotel Portmeirion** (☎ 01766-770000; s £153-242, d £188-277) has classic, elegant rooms and a contemporary dining room designed by Sir Terence Conran. **Castell Deudraeth** (☎ 01766-772400; s £174-242, d £209-277) is a Victorian mansion with an informal grill and more modern rooms.

Portmeirion lies 1.75 miles east of Porthmadog across the Cob, then a mile south off the main road. Bus 99B runs directly to the village twice daily at 9.55am and 1.05pm (not Sunday). More buses, and Ffestiniog and Cambrian Railway trains, run to the village of Minffordd, from where it's a 1-mile walk.

HARLECH

☎ 01766

Of all north Wales' medieval fortifications, the sheer might and awe-inspiring position of Harlech Castle make it one of the most memorable, with sweeping views across Tremadog Bay and the brooding bulk of Mt Snowdon to the rear. Finished in 1289 by Edward I, Harlech is now a Unesco World Heritage Site.

Resolutely clinging to the hillside, Harlech itself is tiny but provides sophisticated accommodation, stylish dining and pleasant mooching around antique shops. Up and down the coast gorgeous beaches hug the shoreline, none better than Shell Island, accessible by causeway and a good place for kids to explore the rock pools.

There's a **National Park Information Centre & Tourist Office** (☎ 780658; Gwyddfor House, High St; ☎ 9.30am-5.30pm Easter-Oct) behind the castle. The train station lies below the town, meaning a steep 15-minute climb to the castle.

Harlech Castle

Despite its strategic location and hefty construction, the **castle** (Cadw; ☎ 780552; admission £3; ☎ 9.30am-5pm Apr-May & Oct, 9.30am-6pm Jun-Sep, 9.30am-4pm Mon-Sat & 11am-4pm Sun Nov-Mar) has been called the 'Castle of Lost Causes' because it fell so often during battle. It was captured by Owain Glyndŵr in 1404, but the future Henry V usurped him just four years later. During the Wars of the Roses the castle fell to the Yorkists (after an astonishing seven-year siege) in 1468, and fell again in 1647 when Cromwell's men took control during the Civil War.

The fortress's great natural defence is the seaward cliff face. When it was built, ships could sail supplies right to the base. The landward side is defended by the twin-towered **Great Gatehouse**, with three portcullises, arrow slits and murder-holes (portals for boiling fluids).

Early 15th-century events inspired one of Wales' most famous military marches, Men of Harlech. Regiments linked to Wales, such as the Royal Welsh (UK) and the Royal Canadian Hussars, have adopted the rousing anthem as their regimental march.

Sleeping & Eating

Llanbedr YHA hostel (Harlech YHA; ☎ 0870 770 5926; reservations@yha.org.uk; dm £12; ☎ Easter-Oct) Close to the coast on the A496, 3 miles south of Harlech.

Gemlyn Restaurant & Tearoom (☎ 780425; High St; 2-/3-course dinners £21.50/23.50; ☎) Long-standing institution with classy dishes such as brochette of monkfish with pesto crust, or tasty afternoon tea with a view on the sunny deck. Upstairs, two bright rooms (singles/doubles from £45/60) offer simple accommodation. Room 1 has great castle views.

Castle Cottage (☎ 780479; www.castlecottageharlech.co.uk; s £65-95, d £90-120; ☎) Fine dining and five-star accommodation by the castle. Elegant rooms exude quality, with solid furniture, exposed beams and wonderful en suite bathrooms. Room 7 is a monster. Downstairs, the restaurant (three-course dinners £29) has wonders such as roast suckling pig and baked Conwy salmon – recommended for a splurge.

Getting There & Away

Bus 38 serves Barmouth (30 minutes, hourly, three on Sunday) and Blaenau Ffestiniog (30 minutes, 11 times daily, two on Sunday). Cambrian Coaster trains serve Machynlleth (£7.50, 1½ hours) and Porthmadog (20 minutes) about every two to three hours (three on Sunday).

BARMOUTH (ABERMAW)

☎ 01341 / pop 2251

Spectacular scenery blesses this part of Wales. Miles of golden beaches and the stunning Mawddach Estuary mean you're seldom far from mountain or sea. Unfortunately, Barmouth is something of a blot, a seaside resort in the worst British traditions – sunburnt beer-bellies, white socks and sandals, and bucket (and spade) loads of inflatable tat.

The **tourist office** (☎ 280787; barmouth.touristoffice@gwynedd.gov.uk; Station Rd; ☹ Mar–Nov) is inside the train station.

Sights & Activities

Cross the mouth of the estuary on a wooden railway viaduct (with footpath) and walk or cycle the atmospheric Mawddach Trail (see opposite). Alternatively, climb the steep alleys to **Dinas Oleu** (265m) for outstanding cliff-top views.

Board a ferry to the sandy spit, Penrhyn Point, then ride the narrow-gauge **Fairbourne & Barmouth Steam Railway** (☎ 250362; www.fairbourne.railway.com; ferry return trip £2.50, train £6.90; ☹ Jun–Oct), which rattles 2 miles along the seafront to Fairbourne.

Sleeping & Eating

Sandpiper Guest House (☎ 280318; www.thesandpiper.guesthouse.co.uk; 7 Marine Pde; s/d from £23/45; ☹) Flouncy rooms but homely enough, and offering rare wheelchair access.

Dros-y-Dwr (☎ 280284; www.barmouthbandb.co.uk; 6 Porkington Tce; s/d from £35/50; ☹) Spacious en suite rooms with pristine décor and big sea views mean this remains one of the better options in town.

Bistro (☎ 281009; Church St; mains £10–14.50). For top tucker, try Bistro's international menu of meat and fish, such as roast duck breast on walnut mash with plum and honey sauce.

Getting There & Away

Bus 38 serves Blaenau Ffestiniog (65 minutes, at least four daily Monday to Saturday,

two on Sunday) via Harlech. Bus T5 runs to Porthmadog (50 minutes, seven daily, none on Sunday) or Machynlleth (55 minutes, eight daily, none on Sunday).

Cambrian Coaster trains run to Machynlleth (£5.80, 55 minutes) and Porthmadog (45 minutes) every two or three hours (three on Sunday).

TYWYN & AROUND

☎ 01654

Famous as the inspiration behind Reverend W Awdry's children's stories *Thomas the Tank Engine*, the cute steam-driven **Talyllyn Railway** (☎ 710472; return trip £11; ☹ Easter–Oct) pootles 7 miles up the Fathew Valley to Abergynolwyn, where it once served slate quarries. The train passes five stations en route, where you can disembark for pleasant guided walks. Ticket stubs to full locos are exhibited at the **railway museum**, and there's a **tourist office** (☎ 710070; High St).

Three miles off the B4405 road from Tywyn, in the Dysynni Valley, the ramshackle remains of 13th-century **Castell y Bere** (Cadw; open site) are worth visiting. Built in 1222 by Llywelyn the Great, the castle was seized by the Normans but abandoned soon after. A short walk from here is the quaint 12th-century **St Michael's Church**. Note the leper's window, through which, in less salubrious times, sufferers could witness the sacraments.

DOLGELLAU

☎ 01341 / pop 2407

No-nonsense market towns are a Welsh speciality, and Dolgellau (doll-geth-lye) does the job better than most. Stout stone buildings topped with tons of prime slate are the setting for gruff local businesses to serve the outlying communities.

The town is a major outdoor-pursuits base. One of Snowdonia's premier peaks, bulky Cader Idris (893m), lies to the south, while nearby Coed-y-Brenin Forest Park provides glorious mountain biking. For a gentler stroll or bike ride, try the heralded Mawddach Estuary path to Barmouth.

Dolgellau's wealth came from the 19th-century wool trade, which provided most of the impressive buildings. More than 200 are listed for preservation, the highest concentration in Wales. Despite the town's industrial roots, recent years have seen a welcome twist of modern zest, with contemporary restaura-

rants and stylish shops tempting locals and visitors alike.

The **National Park Information Centre & Tourist Office** (☎ 422888; ☹ 9.30am–5.30pm Easter–Sep, 10am–5pm Thu–Mon Oct–Easter) is in the central square. Upstairs is a permanent exhibition (admission free) on the area's Quaker heritage, dating back to the 17th century.

Meaning 'mighty session', **Sesiwn Fawr Dolgellau** (☎ 0871-2301314; www.sesiwnfawr.com; per day/weekend £18/30), held in July, combines great music with top-notch ale. Although the festival is traditionally folk based, 2006 saw a set from Newport's comedy-rappers Goldie Lookin' Chain.

Activities

CYCLING

Eight miles north of Dolgellau, on the A470, is **Coed-y-Brenin Forest Park** (☎ 440666; www.mb.wales.com), a premier mountain-biking destination. Signposted trails weave for 70 miles, with something for all abilities. There are bike rentals, a café and bike wash. Dolgellau lies on the Lôn Las Cymru (see the boxed text, p651) route, or for picturesque pedalling try the **Mawddach Trail**, a converted railway line meandering 7.5 miles along the south of the Mawddach Estuary to Barmouth. The trail starts in the car park beside the town bridge.

Hire mountain bikes at **MRX** (☎ 423008; Smithfield St; per day £15–20) and **Dolgellau Cycles** (☎ 423332; half-/full day £13/20).

WALKING

As well as the **Mawddach Trail**, the 2-mile **Torrent Walk** along a shaded ravine (once a private path for 'ladies and guests' of the Caerywch Estate) is worthwhile; head east along the A470 – the walk is signposted off the B4416 road to Brithdir.

The proximity of **Cader Idris** is a big draw, and the tourist office stocks route leaflets. The standard route is a six-mile, five-hour return hike up the 'Dolgellau' or Ty Nant Path (southeast from Ty Nant Farm on the A493). Longest and easiest is the Tywyn or Llanfihangel y Pennant Path (10 miles, six hours), northeast from the Talyllyn Railway terminus at Abergynolwyn; while the shortest and steepest is the Minfordd Path (six miles, five hours), northwest from near the Minfordd Hotel on the A487 road to Machynlleth. Whichever route you choose, always carry clothing for cold and wet weather.

OTHER ACTIVITIES

Abergwynant Farm & Pony Trekking Centre (☎ 422377; www.abergwynantfarm.com; pony treks per hr from £10) leads daily treks through the foothills of Cader Idris. The farm is 3.5 miles southwest of town on the A493.

Sleeping

Local legend says anyone who sleeps atop Cader Idris will awake mad or a poet. We prefer more conventional accommodation.

Dolgun Uchaf (☎ 422269; www.guesthousesnowdonia.com; tent site per person £5, bunk £10, d from £44; ☹) Try a 500-year-old former Quaker meeting house with an olde-worlde atmosphere but flowery rooms. You can camp here as well, or grab a decent bunk.

Kings YHA hostel (☎ 0870 770 5900; kings@yha.org.uk; dm £12; ☹ with 48hr advance booking) Self-catering country-house hostel ideally located for Cader Idris. Take the A493 or bus 28 to Abergwynant and walk the final mile.

Clifton House Hotel (☎ 422554; www.clifton-house-hotel.co.uk; Smithfield Sq; s/d £50/66, without bath-room £30/58; ☹) Formerly the town jail and a surgery, this hotel now has tidy bedrooms, some with DVD players. Downstairs is a restaurant (mains around £11).

Aber Cottage (☎ 422460; www.abercottagegallery.com; Smithfield St; d £60; ☹ wifi) Centrally located chunky stone cottage that exudes friendly warmth, with tasteful décor and modern luxuries – this is a longtime fave. The tearoom and restaurant are recommended too.

Tyddyn Mawr (☎ 422331; Islawrdref, Cader Rd; d £60) Luxury accommodation at the foot of Cader Idris makes this a superb choice, 3 miles southwest of town. Rooms in the farmhouse are enormous and beautifully appointed, but it's the haunting views and unerring peace that lend a unique atmosphere.

Eating

Aber Cottage Tearoom & Restaurant (☎ 422460; www.abercottagegallery.com; Smithfield St; dishes £5, 5-course evening meals £30; ☹) For anyone who's missing home cooking, enjoy this cosy atmosphere and freshly prepared grub. The huge choice of soups always hits the spot.

Dylanwad Da (☎ 422870; 2 Smithfield St; mains £11.50–15.50; ☹ 10am–3pm & 7–9pm Thu–Sat) Coffee shop by day, contemporary restaurant by night, this is still the classiest place in town. Flavour-some treats include chicken with spinach and coconut.

Self-caterers can indulge at delicatessen **Popty'r Dref** (☎ 422507; Upper Smithfield St) or grab the basics at **Spar supermarket** (☎ 422200; Plas-y-n-Dre St).

Getting There & Away

Buses 32 and X32 serve Aberystwyth (75 minutes, eight daily, twice on Sunday) via Machynlleth, and Bangor (1½ hours) via Caernarfon – use these services for the Centre for Alternative Technology. Bus 35 serves Blaenau Ffestiniog (50 minutes, seven daily, none on Sunday). Bus 94/X94 travels to Barmouth (25 minutes, at least hourly, four on Sunday), as well as Bala, Llangollen and Wrexham.

BALA (Y BALA)

☎ 01678 / pop 1980

Water sports are the main attraction in Bala, a small market town by Wales' largest natural lake, Llyn Tegid (Bala Lake). Nearby is the National Whitewater Centre, giving visitors a double whammy of aquatic adventure.

The **tourist office** (☎ 521021; bala.tic@gwynedd.gov.uk; Pensarn Rd; ☎ 10am–5.30pm Mon & Thu–Fri) is in the leisure centre 500m southwest of town.

Activities

Near the tourist office, **Bala Adventure & Water Sports Centre** (☎ 521059; www.balawatersports.com; Bala Lake Foreshore; half-day courses £25–40) offers courses in windsurfing, rafting and canoeing. You can also hire sailing boats (one hour £25 to £35, two hours £40 to £50, half-day £55 to £70), kayaks (one hour/two hours/half-day £10/16/25), canoes (one hour/two hours/half-day £20/30/40) and windsurfers (one hour/two hours/half-day £16/24/36) or try orienteering or climbing.

On a 1.5-mile stretch of the River Treweryn, the adrenaline-inducing **National White-water Centre – Canolfan Tryweryn** (☎ 521083; www.ukrafting.co.uk; rafting from £29) offers year-round class-IV white water, fed by a release from the Llyn Celyn reservoir. Book at least two days in advance and check the water levels with the centre before you travel. Find it 3.5 miles northwest of Bala on the A4212.

More serene is **Bala Lake Steam Railway** (☎ 540666; return trip £7; ☎ 4 trips daily Easter–Sep), where vintage locos chuff 4.5 miles (1½ hours return) along the southern bank to Llanuwchllyn. The charming station is off the B4391, half a mile south of town.

Cycling allows you to explore the lakeside, quiet lanes and forestry mountain-bike tracks.

Hire bikes and get route details at **Bala Bike Shop** (RH Roberts; ☎ 520252; High St; per half-/full day £7.50/12.50; ☎ 9am–5.30pm Jul & Aug, 9am–5.30pm Mon, Tue & Thu–Sat, 9am–12.30pm Wed Sep–Jun).

Sleeping & Eating

Pen-y-bont Touring & Camping Park (☎ 520549; Llangynog Rd; 2-person tent sites £11; ☎ Apr–Oct) A mile south on the B4391, this peaceful place is the closest camp site.

Bala Backpackers (☎ 521700; www.bala-backpackers.co.uk; 32 Tegid St; dm £10 Sun–Thu, £11 Fri, £12 Sat, breakfast £3 extra; ☎ May–Sep & weekends year-round; ☎) Bright, spacious, airy and boasting a piano, 'BB' comes up trumps.

Bryn Tegid (☎ 521645; www.balawales.com/bryntegid; d £80; ☎) Overlooking the lake, at the far end of town past the tourist office, this elegant pile has expansive gardens and superb views.

There's a couple of mid-price restaurants with main courses around £10. Try **Plas-y-n-Dre** (☎ 521256; High St) or **Express Pizzeria** (☎ 520591, Berwyn St).

Getting There & Away

Bus 94/X94 runs 12 times daily (four on Sunday) to Wrexham (1½ hours) via Llangollen (one hour), and to Dolgellau (40 minutes).

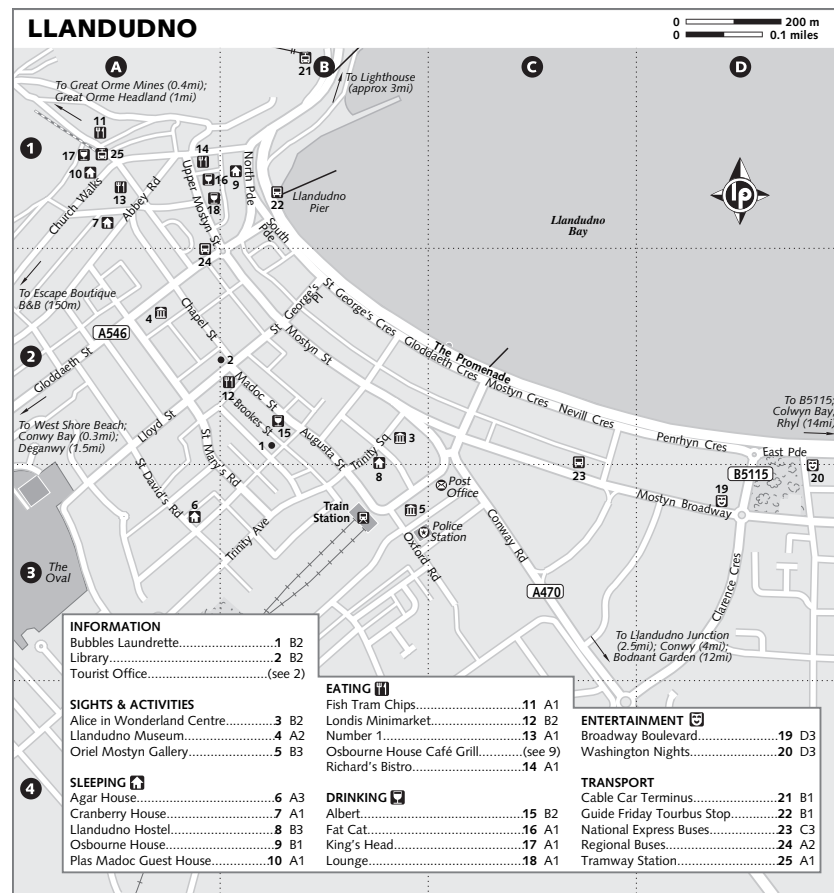
LLANDUDNO

☎ 01492 / pop 14,872

Handsome Llandudno is Wales' largest Victorian seaside resort, with a fantastic location and spectacular period architecture along a sweeping bay. In summer the town bursts at the seams under the weight of holidaying Brits.

The premier attraction is the **Great Orme** (207m), a spectacular 2-mile-long limestone headland jutting in to the Irish Sea. Old-school tramway and cable-car rides go to the summit, providing breathtaking views to the Snowdonia range. On the seafloor, traditional delights include an impressive pier and a range of penny-pinching amusement arcades. A more unusual claim to fame is Llandudno's influence on *Alice in Wonderland* – in 1863 the Liddell family, whose daughter was Lewis Carroll's model for Alice, summered at the house that is now the St Tudno Hotel.

Llandudno has often been called 'Costa Geriatrica' due to its year-round popularity with the oldies. Today, while silver-tops continue to migrate here, the scene's slowly changing and good times don't necessarily mean a floral B&B



and steaming mug of cocoa. A range of decent bars and restaurants lend a contemporary feel and plans are afoot to attract big-name music acts to the nightlife scene.

Orientation & Information

The grand promenade of North Shore Beach lies to the northeast, with Conwy Bay and West Shore Beach to the southwest. Major shops and banks are on Mostyn St, also the stop for regional buses. The train station lies 400m back from the promenade.

Sharing the same building are the **tourist office** (☎ 876413; Mostyn St; ☎ 9am–5.30pm Mon–Sat & 9.30am–4.30pm Sun Easter–Oct, 9am–5pm Mon–Sat Nov–Easter), and the **library** (☎ 574010; Mostyn St; ☎ 9am–6pm Mon, Tue & Fri, 10am–5pm Wed, 9am–7pm Thu, 9.30am–1pm

Sat), which offers free internet access. **Bubbles Laundrette** (25 Brookes St) opens daily.

Sights & Activities

From sea level it's difficult to gauge the scale of the Great Orme, designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). Several Neolithic sites nestle on this promontory, and the unbroken views of Snowdonia are supreme. The headland is a designated **country park** (☎ inquiries 874151), boasting a cornucopia of flowers, butterflies, moths and sea birds. The tourist office has information.

You can walk to the summit, take the **Great Orme Tramway** (☎ 876749; www.greatormetramway.co.uk; return trip £4.80; ☎ 10am–6pm Easter–Oct), which leaves every 20 minutes from Church Walks,

or ride Britain's longest **cabl car** (one-way/return trip £4.95/5.50) from Happy Valley above the pier – departures are weather dependent. The summit has a visitor centre which has picnic tables, a café and leaflets on the natural history.

Extending 670m into the sea, the elegant 1877 Victorian **pier** was once a major embarkation point for Isle of Man steamers.

Guide Friday (☎ 879133; full trip £6.50; ☞ May-Sep) does hop-on hop-off bus **sightseeing trips** combining Llandudno and Conwy, departing from the pier half-hourly.

North Wales' leading contemporary art venue is the cool **Oriel Mostyn** (☎ 879201; www.mostyn.org; 12 Vaughan St; admission free; ☞ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat), which has changing exhibitions, beautiful and puzzling alike. More-traditional artefacts are housed at **Llandudno Museum** (☎ 876517; 17-19 Gloddaeth St; adult/child £1.50/75p; ☞ 10.30am-1pm & 2-5pm Tue-Sat, 2.15-5pm Sun Easter-Oct, 1.30-4.30pm Tue-Sat Nov-Easter).

Kids like the **Alice in Wonderland Centre** (☎ 860082; 3 Trinity Sq; adult £2.95; ☞ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat, 10am-4pm Sun Easter-Oct, 10am-5pm Mon-Sat Nov-Easter), and if you just want to relax, take a stroll at the calming **West Shore**.

The trip to fabulous Bodnant Garden (p738) is a popular excursion.

Sleeping

You can't camp in Llandudno, but there is an astonishing array of accommodation for all budgets.

Llandudno Hostel (☎ 877430; 14 Charlton St; dm £15, s/d £22/35, s/d without bathroom £20/33) Rave reviews continue for this family-run Victorian pile. Super-clean and with private rooms, but no self-catering facilities.

Plas Madoc Guest House (☎ 876514; www.plasmadoc.guesthouse.co.uk; 60 Church Walks; s/d from £30/50; ☞) Clean, crisp rooms with original features, a friendly welcome and vegetarian or vegan breakfasts are the order of the day at tidy Plas Madoc.

Agar House (☎ 875572; www.agarhouse.co.uk; 17 St David's Rd; s/d from £36/52) Comfortable and reliable option on this leafy residential street.

Cranberry House (☎ 879760; 12 Abbey Rd; d from £50; ☞) Graceful décor on an upmarket street a short walk from town.

our pick **Escape Boutique B&B** (☎ 877776; www.escapebandb.co.uk; 48 Church Walks; d £75-105; ☞ wi-fi) Gorgeous Victorian villa overlooking the town, offering an escape in the truest sense.

The guest lounge, with its 42-inch plasma screen and honesty bar, is the epitome of cool, while the luxurious rooms are themed (urban cool, retro, New York loft style), and feature DVD players, superb en suites and mega-comfy beds. Breakfast is an experience *par excellence*, with quality local and organic fare.

Lighthouse (☎ 876819; www.lighthouse-llandudno.co.uk; Marine Dr; d £140) The lights went out in 1985 but the lighthouse saw a new dawn as a luxury hideaway. It's chock-full of original features, such as portholes and a slate fireplace, and the views are immense, but it gets battered in winter. Situated in the Great Orme country park.

Osborne House (☎ 860330; www.osbornehouse.com; 17 North Pde; ste £145-220; ☞) Canopied beds, down duvets, marble bathrooms and roll-top baths – this is *real* Victorian opulence, with sea views. The six suites are a bit fussy for some, but heaven for others. The café and grill come recommended.

Eating & Drinking

Fish Tram Chips (22-24 Old Rd; fish & chips £4.40; ☞ noon-2.30pm & 4.30-7.30pm Tue-Sat, noon-3pm Sun) The seaside ain't the seaside without fish and chips, and this place, next to the tram station, is the best in town.

Osborne House Café Grill (lunch £3.50-9, mains £8.50-15.50; ☞ 10.30am-10pm Mon-Sat, 10.30am-9pm Sun) Dine by candlelight on treats such as breast of Barbary duck in orange and ginger sauce. This is one of Llandudno's finest choices, offering a touch of opulence for all budgets.

Number 1 (☎ 875424; Old Rd; mains £12.50-16.25; ☞ 5.30-9.30pm Mon-Sat) This place might sound like a 1980s wine bar, but bookings are recommended if you want to savour the lip-smacking baked guinea fowl or venison sausages.

Richard's Bistro (☎ 875315; 7 Church Walks; 3-course dinner £25; ☞ dinner Tue-Sat) Has a bland name but strong reputation among local foodies.

Upper Mostyn St remains a trendy hang-out. Grab a pint and decent platter (£4.50 to £12.50) at these café-bars.

Fat Cat (☎ 871844; 149 Upper Mostyn St) Stylish Llandudno branch of this Welsh mini-chain.

Lounge (☎ 876120; 143 Upper Mostyn St) Skin-deep Art Deco-style wine bar, with no real substance.

There's a **Londis minimarket** (☞ 7am-11pm) on the junction near the tourist office.

Entertainment

Llandudno clubbers groove at **Broadway Boulevard** (☎ 879614; Mostyn Broadway; ☞ 10pm-3am), and **Washington Nights** (☎ 877974; East Pde; ☞ 9pm-2am Thu-Sat). For ale-sinking in a traditional pub, try the **Albert** (☎ 877188; Madoc St) or **King's Head** (☎ 877993; Old Rd).

Getting There & Away

National Express (☎ 08705 808080) bus 545 passes through Llandudno daily to London (£26, 8½ hours) via Birmingham and Chester, and to Pwllheli (£6.50, two hours) via Bangor.

Bus 5 runs every 15 minutes (hourly on Sunday) to Caernarfon (½ hours) and Bangor (65 minutes) via the railway interchange at Llandudno Junction (20 minutes) and Conwy (25 minutes). Bus 9 runs every half-hour (none on Sunday) to Llandudno Junction (12 minutes) and Bangor (55 minutes). Snowdon Sherpa bus S2 runs to Llanberis (two hours) via Betws-y-Coed, Capel Curig and Pen-y-Pass.

TRAIN

Conwy Valley line trains serve Blaenau Ffestiniog (£5.50, 65 minutes, four times daily Monday to Saturday, two on Sunday) via Betws-y-Coed.

Hourly direct services run to Manchester (£20.10, 2¼ hours) via Chester (£11.70, one hour). Most Sunday services require a change at Llandudno Junction, which also has connections to London Euston (£55.10, four to 6½ hours, at least hourly, fewer on Sunday) and other regional options.

CONWY

☎ 01492 / pop 3847

History buffs shouldn't miss this small but sturdy walled castle-town on the estuary of the River Conwy. The castle, one of Wales' finest, dominates the town and is a Unesco World Heritage Site. Inside the town walls, the colourful streets contain a mix of medieval and Victorian buildings, together with a couple of contemporary cafés.

The approach to the castle gate is theatrical, with three bridges spanning the river: Thomas Telford's 1826 suspension bridge (now pedestrianised), Robert Stephenson's 1848 steel railway span and the newer road crossing.

The **tourist office** (☎ 592248; ☞ 9.30am-6pm Easter-Oct, 9.30am-5pm Mon-Sat & 11am-4pm Sun Nov-Easter)

is at the castle gift shop. There's free internet access at the **library** (☎ 596242; Castle St).

Sights

CONWY CASTLE & TOWN WALL

Another great bastion in Edward I's Welsh defences, **Conwy Castle** (Cadw; ☎ 592358; admission £4.50; ☞ 9.30am-5pm Apr-May & Oct, 9.30am-6pm Jun-Sep, 9.30am-4pm Mon-Sat & 11am-4pm Sun Nov-Easter) was built in just five years (1282-87) following the conquest of Gwynedd. Today it is deservedly a World Heritage Site.

The shape of the castle was dictated by the rock on which it was built, with eight huge drum towers punctuating the soaring curtain walls. Inside it's quite dilapidated, but fun to explore nonetheless – it's especially easy to imagine important gatherings in the now-roofless great hall. From the battlements, views across the estuary and to the peaks of Snowdonia – when it's not veiled in cloud – are exhilarating.

The 1200m-long **town wall** was built simultaneously with the castle, guarding Conwy's residents at night. You can walk significant sections of the wall, complete with 22 towers, of which Upper Gate gives the best views.

OTHER SIGHTS

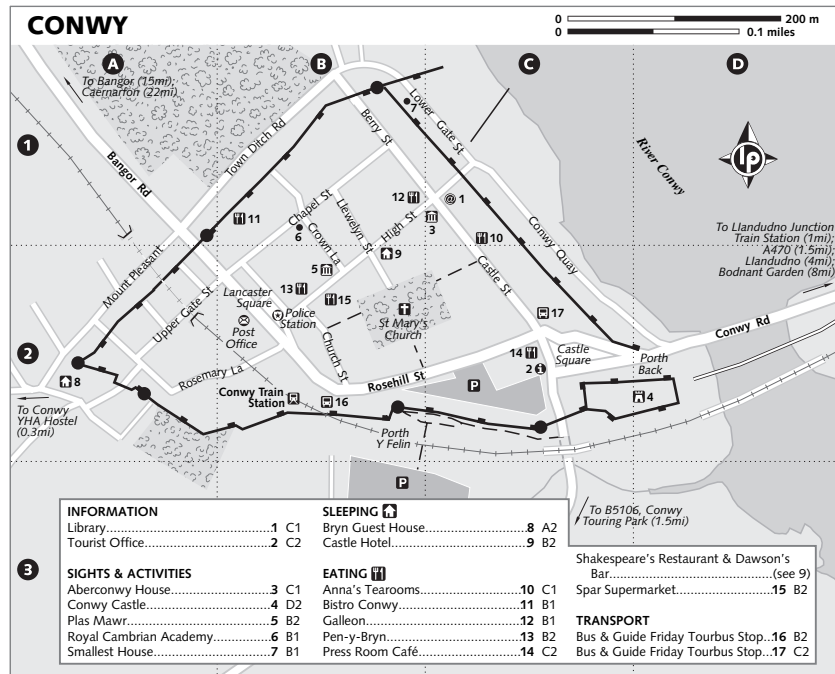
Two historic houses within the walls are worth visiting.

One of Britain's finest surviving Elizabethan town houses, **Plas Mawr** (Cadw; ☎ 580167; High St; adult/child £4.90/4.50; ☞ 9.30am-5pm Tue-Sun Apr-May & Sep, 9.30am-6pm Tue-Sun Jun-Aug, 9.30am-4pm Tue-Sun Oct) was built in 1585. The tall, whitewashed exterior is an indication of the owner's status, but gives no clue of the vivid friezes of the interior. The admission price includes a helpful audio tour. A combined ticket including entrance to the castle costs £7.

Nearby, intriguing timber-and-plaster **Aberconwy House** (NT; ☎ 592246; Castle St; adult/child £3/1.50; ☞ 11am-5pm Wed-Mon Easter-Oct) is a well-restored 14th-century merchant's dwelling that has served as coffee house, hotel, bakery and antique shop.

Behind Plas Mawr, the modern **Royal Cambrian Academy** (☎ 593413; Crown Lane; ☞ 11am-5pm Tue-Sat, 1-4.30pm Sun) is a premier Welsh arts institution. Admission to the interesting exhibitions is often free.

Down on the quay, a minuscule dwelling claims to be the UK's **smallest house** (adult 75p). At 3.05m high and 1.8m wide, it doesn't give you a lot for your money.



Guide Friday hop-on hop-off sightseeing bus trips, combining Conwy and Llandudno (p736), stop beside the train station and in Castle Sq.

Day-trippers love fantastic **Bodnant Garden** (NT; ☎ 650460; adult/child £6/3; ☽ 10am–5pm Easter–Oct), where global plants and flowers flourish over 80 colourful acres. Summer sees roses, water lilies, hydrangeas and clematis in full bloom. The garden lies 7 miles south off the A470 in the Vale of Conwy. Bus 25 from Llandudno passes by hourly. From Conwy, board at Llandudno Junction.

Sleeping

Conwy Touring Park (☎ 592856; 2-person tent sites £4–10.85) Pleasant, leafy site, but without a car it's a steep 1.5-mile trek south on the B5106.

Conwy YHA hostel (☎ 0870 770 5774; conwy@yha.org.uk; Sychnant Pass Rd; dm £15.50) Decent facilities but drab location, a 10-minute walk from the centre. Dorms have shower rooms and private beds are available.

Bryn Guest House (☎ 592449; www.bryn.org.uk; Sychnant Pass Rd; s/d £37/54; ☒) Under the highest point of the town walls, here's a solid, spacious

home with large rooms and excellent views of Conwy and Snowdonia.

Castle Hotel (☎ 582800; www.castlewales.co.uk; High St; s/d from £75/110) Mixing contemporary style with historic features (for example, a 1570s four-poster bed) proves a winning formula. The attached Shakespeare's Restaurant & Dawson's Bar is recommended.

Eating

Shakespeare's Restaurant & Dawson's Bar (☎ 582800; www.castlewales.co.uk; High St; bar dishes £4.50–8.50, restaurant mains £8–14) Attached to the Castle Hotel on High St. Here you can have anything from a simple bar snack to artistically presented bistro dishes such as smoked salmon or lobster.

Press Room Café (☎ 592242; 3 Rosehill St; mains £5–14; ☽ 10.30am–4.30pm Tue–Wed & Sun, 10.30am–4.30pm & 7–9pm Thu–Sat) With an outdoor courtyard, this cool place serves stylish, tasty dishes such as steamed sea bass with ginger and spring onions.

Bistro Conwy (☎ 596326; 26 Chapel St; mains £14) Blending modern and traditional Welsh dishes, this place, squashed against the town

wall, is a real favourite. Try the local Conwy mussels if you can.

Anna's Tearooms (Castle St) and **Pen-y-bryn** (28 High St) are two time-honoured places for sandwiches or afternoon tea. For filling fish and chips, try the **Galleon** (☎ 593391, 2 High St; fish & chips £4).

The Spar supermarket is on High St.

Getting There & Away

Bus 5 serves Caernarfon (70 minutes, every 15 minutes, hourly on Sunday) via Bangor, and Llandudno (20 minutes) via Llandudno Junction (five minutes).

Trains on the London–Holyhead line serve London Euston (£60.30, four hours, five daily Monday to Saturday, once Sunday) via Crewe.

BANGOR

☎ 01248 / pop 15,280

Scruffy Bangor is a small university city swollen with students who lend a cool edge to an otherwise uninspiring place. Positioned just outside Snowdonia National Park, Bangor is within striking distance of several major attractions and has good transport links, but is of little interest in its own right. The city is the last stop before the historic bridge to the Isle of Anglesey.

Bangor's **tourist office** (☎ 352786; Deiniol Rd; ☽ 9.30am–1pm & 2–4.30pm Mon–Fri) is near the police station and post office.

Most of **St Deiniol's Cathedral**, small, proud and lopsided, is the result of 19th-century restoration. Its treasure is the evocative 500-year-old, carved-oak Mostyn Christ. The pretty Victorian **pier** (adult 25p; ☽ 8.30am–9pm Mon–Fri, 10am–9pm Sat & Sun) stretches 450m out into the Menai Strait.

Sleeping & Eating

Bangor YHA hostel (☎ 0870 770 5686; bangor@yha.org.uk; Tan-y-bryn; dm £12.50; ☽ Apr–Sep, Tue–Sat Oct–Mar) Large Victorian mansion half a mile from town.

Tregarth Homestay (☎ 600532; www.tregarth-home-stay.com; Llain Y Grug, Dob, Tregarth; s/d £25/50; ☽) With craggy views and a sun terrace, this walker- and cyclist-friendly place is handily located for the mountains. It's 6 miles from town – take bus 6 or 7 to Tregarth.

Herbs Restaurant (☎ 351249; 162 High St; mains £2.50–12) A veggie delight. Enjoy a range of salads and healthy options as well as organic meat and fish dishes.

Java (☎ 361652; High St; mains £4–12) Hidden up an alley off High St, this remains a cool place to be. The international menu includes the saliva-inducing Malaysian beef randang.

Fat Cat Caf Bar (☎ 370445; 161 High St; mains £5–12; ☽ 11am–1pm Mon, 10am–11pm Tue–Thu, 10am–midnight Fri & Sat, 11am–10.30pm Sun) The original of this Welsh mini-chain. Grab a tasty burger or latte and chill in comfy basement sofas or on the summertime balcony.

Ristorante Pulcinella (☎ 362807; Pier Promenade; mains £5.50–14.50; ☽ dinner Tue–Sat) Tried-and-tested pizza place with a scenic pier-side location.

Entertainment

Bangor bursts with pubs. Decent ones include the nautically themed **Skerries Inn** (☎ 352277; 374 High St), **Tap & Spile** (☎ 370835; Garth Rd), by the pier, and student favourite **Belle View** (☎ 364439; Holyhead Rd) in Upper Bangor.

Getting There & Away

BUS

National Express coach 545 runs daily to London (£27.50, nine hours) via Birmingham.

Bus 1 runs hourly to Blaenau Ffestiniog (two hours), via Porthmadog and Caernarfon. Buses 5 and 5X run to Caernarfon (30 minutes) and Llandudno (one hour), at least half-hourly. Buses 85 and 86 serve Llanberis (45 minutes, hourly), while the X32 travels to Aberystwyth (£5, 3½ hours, five daily), via Caernarfon, Porthmadog, Dolgellau and Machynlleth. All services are less frequent on Sunday.

TRAIN

Trains operate to Chester (£13.50, 70 minutes, at least hourly) and London Euston (£62.90, four hours, three daily direct).

AROUND BANGOR

Penrhyn Castle

East of Bangor is **Penrhyn Castle** (NT; ☎ 353084; adult/child £8/4, garden only £5.40/2.70; ☽ noon–5pm Wed–Mon Easter–Jun, Sep & Oct, 11am–5pm Wed–Mon Jul & Aug), a magnificent 19th-century fantasy dwelling – constructed between 1820 and 1845 – overlooking the sea. Thomas Hopper used neo-Norman style for the Pennant family, the original owners who made their fortune in Welsh slate and Jamaican sugar. The interior features elaborate carvings, beautiful paintings and (the crowning glory) a one-ton slate bed made for Queen Victoria. The tourist office can explain the 2-mile walking route.

CAERNARFON

☎ 01286 / pop 9726

There's a wonderful romantic air about colossal Caernarfon Castle, guarding the River Seiont on the Menai Strait. The final link in Edward I's 'iron ring', the site is one of Wales' finest, and deservedly has World Heritage status, together with its neighbours at Conwy, Harlech and Beaumaris. Who could deny the buzz of exploring the labyrinth of spiral staircases and bulging battlements?

Conflict followed Caernarfon all the way to the 20th century, when in 1911 then prime minister (and Welshman) David Lloyd George declared Caernarfon Castle as the setting of the investiture ceremony for the heir to the British throne. It was an attempt to bring the royals closer to the Welsh constituency, but it backfired spectacularly. Caernarfon is a strong Welsh heartland, and the anti-Crown mentality reached an (almost) explosive climax in 1969. At the investiture of Charles, the current heir to the throne, there was an attempt to blow up his train.

The modern town sprawls east from the medieval walls (which you can't walk), with good amenities, but most places of interest remain close to the castle. Nocturnal Caernarfon has developed a gritty reputation recently, so exercise caution.

Orientation & Information

Caernarfon's focus is the castle, located beside an oversized car park by the river. The medieval walls enclose a compact area, four streets wide and two deep.

The **tourist office** (☎ 672232; caernarfon.touristoffice@gwynedd.gov.uk; Castle St; ☎ 9.30am-5.30pm) is by the castle.

Sights & Activities

Caernarfon Castle (Cadw; ☎ 677617; adult/child £4.75/4.50; ☎ 9.30am-5pm Easter-May & Oct, 9.30am-6pm Jun-Sep, 9.30am-4pm Mon-Sat, 11am-4pm Sun Nov-Mar) was built between 1283 and 1301, standing as Edward I's most impressive stronghold. Almost impregnable, the polygonal towers and colour-banded masonry were based on Constantinople's 5th-century walls, and set it apart from the other castles of north Wales. Twenty-eight bedraggled men withstood a 1404 siege from Owain Glyndŵr's army here, and during the 17th-century Civil War the castle was unsuccessfully attacked three times.

Caernarfon Castle was originally built as a seat of government rule and royal palace; the towers were decorated with ornate stained glass. The Eagle Tower is the finest remaining example. In the Queen's Tower is a museum celebrating Wales' oldest infantry regiment, the Royal Welsh Fusiliers. Other towers contain exhibits on Edward I's campaigns and the 1969 investiture.

Away from the castle, take a pleasure-boat trip with **Menai Strait Cruises** (☎ 672772; sightseeing cruises adult/child £4.50/2.50; ☎ noon-5pm late May-Jun, Sep & Oct, 11.30am-6pm Jul & Aug), which runs 40-minute tours from Slate Quay beside the castle, tide permitting.

By the quayside is the small **Maritime Museum** (☎ 675194; Victoria Dock; adult/child £1/50p; ☎ noon-4pm Sun-Fri), with the huge anchor of the wrecked HMS *Conwy*, which ran aground in 1956.

Between Caernarfon and Rhyd Ddu runs one of Wales' many restored narrow-gauge railways, the vintage **Welsh Highland Railway** (☎ 677018; www.whr.co.uk; 3hr return trip £16.50). The 12-mile ride provides wonderful, ghostly scenery. The station is on St Helen's Rd, 300m upriver from the castle. The line should eventually be reinstated all the way through the mountains to Porthmadog, where a shorter stretch is also operational (p730).

One mile southeast of the castle, on the A4085 to Beddgelert, are the excavated foundations of **Segontium** (Cadw; ☎ 675625; admission free; ☎ grounds 10.30am-4.30pm, museum 12.30-4.30pm Tue-Sun), a significant Roman fort dating from AD 77. The site was occupied for 300 years by around 1000 men. The small museum supplies the information needed to appreciate the site.

The tourist office has details of **walking and cycling** trails leaving Caernarfon in opposite directions; the scenic 4.5-mile **Lôn Las Menai** along the strait towards Bangor, and the 12-mile **Lôn Eifion** south to Bryncir. **Beics Menai** (☎ 676804; www.beicsmenai.co.uk; Slate Quay; bikes per 2/4/6/8hr £10/12/14/16) provides cycle hire.

Sleeping

Cadnant Valley Camping & Caravan Park (☎ 673196; www.cwmcadnantvalley.co.uk; Llanberis Rd; 2-person tent sites around £11; ☎ Easter-Oct) On the A4086 to Llanberis, this is a pleasant parkland site.

Totters (☎ 672963; www.totters.co.uk; 2 High St; dm incl breakfast £14) Nothing special from the outside, terrific Totters nestles inside the town walls. With clean, fresh dorms, a 14th-century

stone-walled basement-cum-breakfast room, comfy lounges and good self-catering facilities, it's a great independent hostel.

Black Boy Inn (☎ 673604; Northgate St; s/d £52.25/57, without bathroom & incl breakfast s/d £33.25/38) Dating from 1522, this traditional inn has original wooden beams and panelling, and walls 1.5m thick! In keeping with the style, rooms have 1969 furnishings.

Caer Menai (☎ 672612; 15 Church St; d £50-60) There's a slightly dated feel about the setup at this Georgian-era guesthouse, but all rooms have en suite and the location inside the walls can't be beaten.

Eating

Doc Cafè Bar (☎ 685200; www.galericaernarfon.com; Galer; mains £5.50-7.95; ☎ 9.30am-5.30pm) A short walk from the castle, contemporary Doc offers stylish snacks and light lunches in super-cool, arty surroundings – think deep red, clean white and natural wood. Catch a show or see a film here as well.

Stone's Bistro (☎ 671152; Hole in the Wall St; mains £10.25-14.50; ☎ dinner Tue-Sat) Renowned for Welsh lamb, Stone's has an open kitchen so you can see your food being prepared. With dark décor, the far corners can be gloomy, so try for a window seat.

Ogof-y-Ddraig (☎ 677322; Hole in the Wall St; mains £10-16; ☎ lunch & dinner) The name means 'The Dragon's Cave', and here there's a traditional Welsh theme and dishes created with locally sourced ingredients. Good vegetarian options.

Getting There & Away

Caernarfon has no train services, but buses abound.

National Express coach 545 passes through Caernarfon daily to London (£27.50, 9½ hours) via Chester and Birmingham, and the 380 goes to Pwllheli (£5.70, 65 minutes).

Snowdon Sherpa bus S4 runs about hourly (less frequently on Sunday) to Pen-y-Pas (65 minutes) via Snowdon Ranger YHA hostel and Beddgelert. Bus 1 runs hourly to Porthmadog (45 minutes), and Blaenau Ffestiniog (1½ hours); other services run less frequently on Sunday. Bus 5 serves Bangor (25 minutes) and Llandudno every half-hour (fewer on Sunday). The X32 serves Aberystwyth five times daily. Buses 9 and 88 run to Llanberis (twice-hourly, hourly on Sunday) and 12 serves Pwllheli (45 minutes, hourly, three on Sunday).

ISLE OF ANGLESEY

After the rugged majesty of Snowdonia, some find the low-lying planes of the Isle of Anglesey (Ynys Môn) disappointing. For others, travelling east from the ferry port of Holyhead, the mountainous vista sets pulses racing. But don't let Snowdon's looming presence distract you: there are unique charms here, and visitors who explore will find miles of inspiring coastline and Wales' greatest concentration of ancient sites.

Fertile Anglesey provides north Wales with much of its wheat and cattle, and has a long history of habitation. Good farming probably played a role in attracting a considerable early population, while the island was holy to the Celts. Often referred to as Mam Cymru – Mother of Wales – it was the last outpost to fall to the Romans.

In 1826 Thomas Telford established the first permanent link to the mainland. His 174m bridge across the Menai Strait has a 30m-high central span, allowing the passage of tall ships. By 1850 a second crossing was under construction – Robert Stephenson's **Britannia Bridge** carried the newly laid railway. Today, this bridge also carries the bulk of the road traffic, much of which hurtles directly to the Irish ferries at Holyhead.

Mostly in coastal locations, Anglesey's ancient remains number around 20, spanning the ages from prehistoric to Roman and early Christian times. Top billing goes to Neolithic burial mound **Bryn Celli Ddhu** (600m from the car park on the A4080 west of Plas Newydd, two miles west of Llanfair PG).

LLANFAIRPWLLGWYNGYLLGOGERYCHWYRNDROBWL LANTYSILIOGOGOGCH

Leave this tourist trap to the geriatric shutterbugs who roll in on the tour buses, and save your time for somewhere else. The name (meaning 'St Mary's Church in the hollow of the White Hazel near a rapid whirlpool and the Church of St Tysilio near the Red Cave') was an 1860s invention to propel the village to national stardom. Nowadays laziness has set in and the 58 letters are generally shortened to Llanfair PG or Llanfairpwll.

Nevertheless, this is still the village with the longest name in Britain, and some claim in Europe, and the tour buses continue to come

here. After all, how many other stations do you know where the platform ticket has to be 15cm long just to fit the name on?

AROUND LLANFAIR PG Plas Newydd

With magnificent views across the Menai Strait to Snowdonia, this **stately home** (NT); ☎ 01248-714795; adult £6; ☎ house noon-5pm Sat-Wed, gardens 11am-5.30pm Sat-Wed Easter-Oct) is an 18th-century Gothic masterpiece. Designed for the Marquis of Anglesey, the house contains the largest permanent collection of Rex Whistler works, including an enormous, fantastical dreamscape of Mt Snowdon – the single canvas is an unbelievable 18m wide. Plas Newydd is 1.5 miles south of Llanfair PG train station. Don't confuse it with the Ladies of Llangollen's Plas Newydd.

BEAUMARIS (BIWMARES)

☎ 01248 / pop 1513

Formerly Anglesey's principal town and foremost port, Beaumaris boasts abundant history. With a waterfront location, the romantic castle lords over a pretty collection of Georgian buildings, all set against the magical Snowdonia backdrop. Water sports are the main draw today – in early 2006 plans were approved to build a new 400-berth marina at Gallows Point.

Sights & Activities

Beaumaris Castle (Cadw; ☎ 810361; adult/child £3.50/3; ☎ 9.30am-5pm Apr, May & Oct, 9.30am-6pm Jun-Sep, 9.30am-4pm Mon-Sat & 11am-4pm Sun Nov-Mar) is the last of Edward I's great castles of North Wales, and the largest. It was built by the brilliant military architect James of St George, between 1295 and 1298, on a flat shoreline site that allowed a symmetrical design. Although money ran out before fortifications were completed – the result being a fortress of greater charm than menace – the castle is deservedly a World Heritage Site. Despite its squat appearance, its defences were strong, with multiple walls and murder-holes for dousing invaders with boiling oil.

Allow two hours to visit the historic museum of crime and punishment, **Beaumaris Courthouse & Gaol** (☎ 810921; adult/child courthouse £2.50/1.75, gaol £3/2.25; ☎ 10.30am-5pm Easter-Sep). The courthouse is nearly 400 years old and the creepy gaol contains the last-surviving tread-wheel in Britain (for hard-labour prisoners).

Puffin Island is a haven for seals and puffins, and **Starida Sea Services** (☎ 810251; www

.starida.co.uk) runs (weather-dependent) one-hour **cruises** (adult/child £5/4, six daily Easter to October), as well as fishing trips and Menai Strait cruises. Book at the kiosk on the pier.

Sleeping & Eating

Kingsbridge Caravan & Camping Park (☎ 490636; Llanfaes; 2-person tent sites £10.50-12.50) Scenic meadow site situated 1.5 miles north of Beaumaris on the B5109 towards Llangoed.

Cleifiog (☎ 811507; www.deifiog.co.uk; Townsend; s/d £40/75; ☎) There's a seafront location at the east end of the village for this above-average B&B that used to be a monks' hospice.

Ye Olde Bulls Head Inn (☎ 810329; Castle St; d from £98.50) Tasteful rooms at this 1472 inn are named after characters from Charles Dickens' novels. Dinner treats (three-course dinners £35, mains £5.50 to £14.60) include Anglesey beef or a contemporary charcuterie selection.

Getting There & Away

Buses 53, 56, 57 and 58 run to Bangor (30 minutes, half-hourly Monday to Saturday, hourly Sunday).

HOLYHEAD (CAERGYBI) & HOLY ISLAND (YNYYS CYBI)

☎ 01407 / pop 11,237

There's not much for tourists in the working town of Holyhead, the major departure point for ferries to Ireland. The surrounding coastline is splendid, but that may not be enough to provoke a lengthy stay.

The **tourist office** (☎ 762622; ☎ 9.30am-5.30pm Mon-Sat, 10am-5pm Sun, closed 1-2pm) is in Terminal 1 at the ferry port.

You might be surprised to find a progressive arts centre here, but the **Ucheldre Centre** (☎ 763361; Ucheldre Ave; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat, 2-5pm Sun) is just that. The converted church hosts film, drama and live music.

Holyhead is the starting point for the Lôn Las Cymru cycle route (p651), and the rugged coastline provides good walking. To the west is **Holyhead Mountain** (220m). At its western base, signposted from town, is **South Stack lighthouse**, open to all visitors who can tackle the 400-step descent to the offshore rock. Anglesey's main water-sports centre is **Trearddur Bay**, 2.5 miles south of Holyhead.

Sleeping & Eating

Anglesey Outdoors (☎ 769351; www.angleseyoutdoors.com; Porthdafarch Rd; tent sites per person £3, dm £10, tipi per

night from £60) Two miles south of town. Get your fill of outdoor sports such as canoeing and sea-kayaking, or curl up by the fire in a super-snug six-person Native American-Indian tipi.

B&Bs in Holyhead are accustomed to late arrivals off the ferry:

Min-y-Don (☎ 762718; www.holyheadhotel.com; 2 Newry Fawr; s/d from £20/45) Friendly welcome at this centrally located guesthouse.

Yr Hendre (☎ 762929; www.yr-hendre.co.uk; Porth-y-Felin Rd; d £55; ☎) A cut above average, Yr Hendre has smart rooms with pleasant outlooks.

At the Ucheldre Centre, **Ucheldre Kitchen** (☎ 763361; Ucheldre Ave; mains £5; ☎ 10am-4.30pm Mon-Sat, 2-4.30pm Sun) dishes out simple but well-priced staples such as jacket potatoes and afternoon tea.

Getting There & Away

Irish Ferries (☎ 08705 17 17; www.irishferries.com) and **Stena Line** (☎ 08705 70 70; www.stenaline.com) run ferries from Holyhead to Ireland (p968).

Bus 4 serves Bangor (1½ hours, half-hourly Monday to Saturday). On Sunday, bus 44 operates every two hours.

Trains to Chester (£12.50, 1¾ hours), via Bangor and Llandudno Junction (£8.90, 55 minutes), run hourly, as do services to London Euston (£65.50, four to five hours).

LLŶN PENINSULA

Isolated physically and culturally from the rest of Wales, this 24-mile long finger jutting into the sea is a stronghold of Welsh nationalism. Plaid Cymru, the nationalist party, was founded here in 1925, and Welsh remains the language of everyday life.

The Llŷn (khlee'en) also provides isolation in abundance, with more than 70 miles of largely unspoilt coastline, much under the stewardship of the National Trust (NT). Windswept sandy beaches are a feature, notably at sailing town **Abersoch**, surf-lover's **Hell's Mouth** (Porth Neigwl) and, on the north coast, water-sports centre **Porth Dinlaen**. Near the tip of the peninsula, whitewashed **Aberdaron** can feel like the end of the earth, but it's the place to catch a boat to the early Christian site of Bardsey Island (see the boxed text, p744).

For details of buses see Pwllheli (p744). Beyond Pwllheli, Abersoch has the only **tourist**

office (☎ 01758-712929; enquiries@abersochtouristinfo.co.uk; ☎ 10.30am-4.30pm Apr-Sep, 11am-3pm Mar & Oct, 11am-1pm Nov-Feb).

CRICCIETH (CRICIETH)

☎ 01766 / pop 1826

Criccieth is just 4 miles from Porthmadog and the journey is worthwhile. For the casual visitor, this genteel seaside village holds greater attractions than its more commercial neighbour. Most visitors take a day-trip to the cliff-top castle, with sweeping views over Tremadog Bay, but there are also decent accommodation and dining options. The nearest tourist office is at Pwllheli.

Little remains of **Criccieth Castle** (Cadw; ☎ 522227; adult/child £2.90/2.40; ☎ 10am-5pm Easter-Jun, 10am-6pm Jun-Sep, open site Nov-Easter), but its wonderfully romantic position atop the cliff gives panoramic views. Originally constructed by native Welsh prince Llywelyn the Great in 1239, the castle was overrun in 1283 by Edward I's forces, who probably added the distinctive twin-towered gatehouse. In 1404 Owain Glyndŵr recovered the fortress for the Welsh, destroying it beyond further military use.

Sleeping & Eating

Lion Hotel (☎ 522460; www.lionhotelcriccieth.co.uk; s/d from £38/66) Slightly dated in décor, this traditional hotel nevertheless has comfy-enough rooms, some with good castle views.

Moelwyn (☎ 522500; www.themoelwyn.co.uk; Mona Tce; s/d from £39/58) Rooms here have that fresh, seaside feel, while the restaurant (mains £8.50 to £16, open for dinner only) does delicious seafood, meat and veggie dishes.

Glan Y Mor (☎ 523012; Glan Y Mor; d from £50; ☎) Imposing Art Deco house in large gardens with open sea views. If you want to be set back from the centre of town, this option will suit you perfectly.

Poachers (☎ 522512; 66-68 High St; mains £9.50-18.50; ☎ lunch Wed-Sun, dinner Mon-Sat) Quite a mix here, from German meatballs to Caesar salad, Tex-Mex to Welsh rabbit, and butternut squash to pan-seared swordfish.

Getting There & Away

Bus 3 runs half-hourly to Porthmadog (15 minutes, six on Sunday) and Pwllheli (25 minutes).

Trains between Porthmadog (eight minutes, about every two hours, three on Sunday) and Pwllheli stop at Criccieth.

BOATING TO BARDSEY

Tiny Bardsey Island (Ynys Enlli), a 2-mile-long spit off the tip of the peninsula, was an early Christian site known as the Isle of 20,000 Saints. St Cadfan created a monastery here in the 6th century and, at a time when journeys to Italy were long and perilous, three pilgrimages to Bardsey equalled one to Rome.

In summer, the **Bardsey Island Trust** (☎ 08458-1136554; www.bardsey.org; return trip £25) operates daily ferries to the island from Porth Meudwy (1.5 miles west of Aberdaron) and Pwllheli. The trip takes 15 minutes but is dependent on weather and demand, so call a couple of days in advance. You have three to four hours on the island to see 6th-century carved stones, 13th-century abbey ruins and a significant colony of Manx shearwaters.

PWLLHELI

☎ 01758 / pop 3861

The administrative capital for the Llŷn, Pwllheli (poolth-heh-lee) is a staid town of staunch Welsh tradition and the birthplace of Plaid Cymru.

There's little for visitors other than pleasant walking up and down the South Beach promenade, together with a little clutch of cafés and gift shops. It's also the terminus of the Cambrian Coaster railway, and as far as most tourists get without the aid of a car.

The well-stocked **tourist office** (☎ 613000; pwllheli.touristoffice@gwynedd.gov.uk; ☎ 9am-5pm Apr-Oct, 10am-4pm Mon-Wed, Fri & Sat Nov-Mar) is opposite the train station.

Sleeping & Eating

Bayview Guest House (☎ 613808; www.bayview-guesthouse.co.uk; 1 Bay View Tce; s/d £22.50/40) Respectable budget choice overlooking the marina.

ESI Café Bar (☎ 701321; Station Sq; lunch £3.50-7, mains £12-16; ☎ 11am-11pm, food to 9pm) This café-bar tries to be super-hip (all moody black-and-white contrasts) but forgets it's neither in Cardiff nor London. Still, the contemporary food's pretty good.

Amigos (☎ 612248; Station Sq; mains £8.50-10.75; ☎ 6-9.30pm Mon-Thu) Cheery restaurant with standard Mexican fodder.

Plas Bodegros (☎ 612363; www.bodegros.com; 3-course dinners £40; ☎ dinner Tue-Sun, lunch Sun; ☎) This place is proud to be Wales' only five-star restaurant with rooms (singles/doubles from £50/110). The sumptuous furnishings and melt-in-the-mouth delights at Bodegros make the trip to Pwllheli worthwhile. It's 1 mile west of town on the A497.

Getting There & Away

Buses to the east include bus 3 to Porthmadog (35 minutes, every half-hour, six on Sunday) and 12 to Caernarfon (45 minutes, hourly, three on Sunday). Heading east along the Llŷn are bus 8 to Nefyn (15 minutes, about hourly, four on Sunday), 17 to Aberdaron (40 minutes, every two hours, none on Sunday) and 18 to Abersoch (25 minutes, about hourly, four on Sunday).

Pwllheli is the terminus of the Cambrian Coaster rail line. Trains run to Machynlleth (£10, two hours) via Porthmadog every two or three hours Monday to Friday (fewer on weekends).

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