

Southeast Wales & Brecon Beacons



The southeast corner of Wales, where the River Wye meanders along the border with England, is the birthplace of British tourism. For more than 200 years people have come to explore this tranquil waterway and its winding, wooded vale where the majestic ruins of Tintern Abbey have inspired generations of poets and artists. But today there is more to the region than the pleasant market towns and rural by-ways of the Lower Wye.

To the west stretch the serried vales of the South Wales valleys, once the country's industrial heartland, where names such as Rhondda, Rhymney and Ebbw Vale speak of close-knit communities forged in the hard graft of coal mines and iron works. The mines may be closed and the iron works gone, but the communities survive and are carving out a new role for these scarred postindustrial landscapes with attractions such as the Rhondda Heritage Park, the Big Pit National Coal Museum and the Unesco World Heritage Site at Blaenavon.

Move north and the landscape changes yet again to the majestic upland scenery of the Brecon Beacons National Park, a magnet for hikers, hill walkers and mountain-bikers. Beneath the hills runs the River Usk, flowing through the lively towns of Brecon, Crickhowell and Abergavenny, whose lush surrounding farmland produces some of the finest food in Wales, and where you can enjoy one of the highest concentrations of quality restaurants in the country.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Strolling among the romantic ruins of **Tintern Abbey** (p115)
- Enjoying the tranquillity of the magical **Vale of Ewys** (p132)
- Descending into a real coal mine at **Big Pit National Coal Museum** (p122)
- Reaching the summit of **Pen-y-Fan** (p124), the highest peak in South Wales
- Exploring the underground delights of the **Dan-yr-Ogof Showcaves** (p138)



GETTING THERE & AROUND

Stagecoach is the southeast's main long-distance bus operator; call **Traveline** (☎ 0870 608 2608; www.traveline-cymru.org.uk) for information.

If you'll be using buses frequently, you may save money by getting a travel pass. The Network Rider pass (£6/20 for a day/week) can be used on all buses operated by Stagecoach South Wales, Chepstow Classic Buses, Welcome Travel, Glyn Williams Travel and H&H Coaches; it is not valid on the X43 Cardiff-Merthyr Tydfil-Brecon-Abergavenny service operated by Sixty-Sixty Coaches.

LOWER WYE VALLEY

The River Wye flows 154 miles from the mountains of Mid-Wales to the River Severn at Chepstow, much of it designated an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (www.wyevalleyaonb.org.uk) famous for its limestone gorges and dense broadleaved woodland. The most beautiful stretch lies between Monmouth and Chepstow, along the border between Monmouthshire and England. For a long time the county of Monmouthshire was considered to be in England, but it was finally recognised as part of Wales in 1974.

The **Wye Valley Walk** (www.wyevalleywalk.org) is a 136-mile waymarked riverside trail running from Chepstow to the river's source on the slopes of Plynlimon Fawr. From Monmouth downstream the trail runs mainly along the river's western side, past the splendid ruins of Tintern Abbey. The tourist offices in Chepstow and Monmouth have maps and information on walking short sections of the trail.

MONMOUTH (TREFYNWY)

☎ 01600 / pop 10,000

Against a background of pastel-painted Georgian prosperity, the compact market town of Monmouth bustles and thrives. It sits at the confluence of the Rivers Wye and Monnow, and has hopped in and out of Wales over the centuries as the border shifted back and forth. Today, it feels more English than Welsh.

The town is famous as the birthplace of King Henry V, victor at the Battle of Agincourt in 1415, and immortalised by Shakespeare. Other locals who have passed into history include Geoffrey of Monmouth (p78), the 12th-century historian, and Charles Stewart Rolls, co-founder of Rolls-Royce.

In modern times Monmouth's main claim to fame is the nearby Rockfield recording studio, a few miles to the northwest. Established in the 1960s, the studio has produced a string of hit albums including Queen's *Bohemian Rhapsody*, Iggy Pop's *Soldiers* and *(What's the Story) Morning Glory?* by Oasis, and has been used by bands from Mott the Hoople to Coldplay. It's not unknown for rock stars to be spotted in Monmouth's pubs and restaurants.

Orientation

The centre of town is Agincourt Sq, with the Shire Hall on its east side and Monnow St, the main shopping street, running southwest from here to the pedestrianised Monnow Bridge. Regional buses stop just off Monnow St near the Somerfield supermarket.

Information

IT Centre (☎ 714344; 2-4 Monnow St; 𠄎 9am-5.30pm Mon-Sat; per 30 min £1)

Monmouth Hospital (☎ 713522; Hereford Rd) For emergency services go to Abergavenny.

Monmouth Library (☎ 775215; Whitecross St; 𠄎 9.30am-5.30pm Mon, Tue & Fri, 9.30am-8pm Thu, 9.30am-4pm Sat) Free internet access.

Police Station (☎ 712321; Chippenham Gate St)

Post Office (27 Monnow St; 𠄎 8.30am-5.30pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-4pm Sat)

Rub-a-dub-dub (Cinderhill St; 𠄎 7.30am-7.30pm Mon-Fri, 8am-8.30pm Sat) Self-service laundrette.

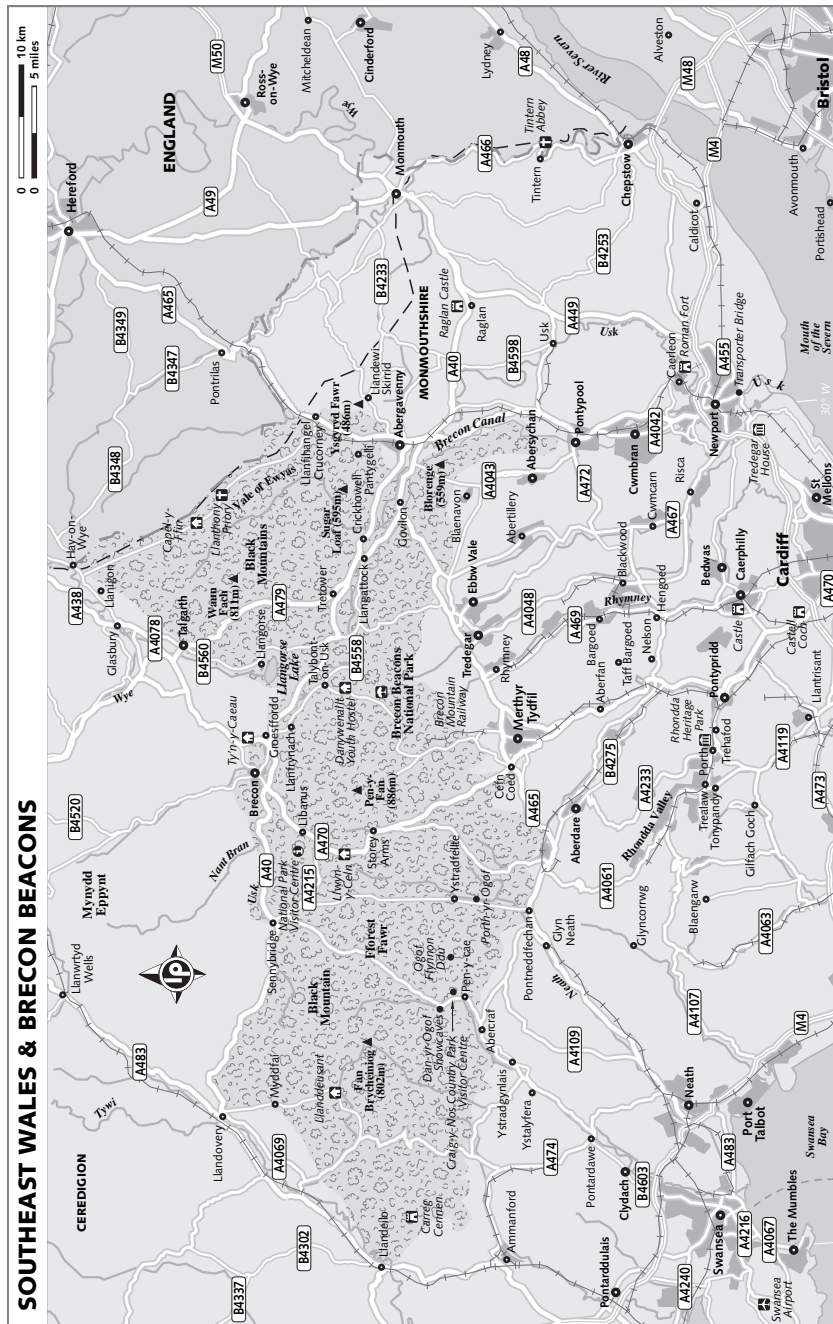
Stephen's Bookshop (3 Church St) A warren of floor-to-ceiling secondhand books.

Tourist Office (☎ 713899; Shire Hall, Agincourt Sq; 𠄎 9am-5.30pm Jul & Aug, 10am-5pm Sep-Jun)

Sights

Agincourt Sq is dominated by the arcade of the 1724 **Shire Hall**, and a statue of former Monmouth resident Charles Stewart Rolls (1877-1910), one half of the team that founded Rolls-Royce. Not only a pioneering motorist and aviator, he was the first British citizen to die in an air accident (his statue is clutching a model of the Wright biplane in which he died). The square hosts a market on Friday and Saturday.

Nearby on Castle Hill are the meagre remains of **Monmouth Castle**, where Henry V was born in 1397. Except for the great tower, it was dismantled in the 17th century and the stone used to build **Great Castle House** next door, now headquarters of the Royal Monmouthshire Regiment. Inside is the volunteer-run **Regimental Museum** (admission free; 𠄎 2-5pm daily



THE WYE TOUR

The Wye Valley has a valid claim to be the birthplace of British tourism. Boat trips along the River Wye began commercially in 1760, but a best-selling book – in fact, one of the first ever travel guidebooks – called *Observations on the River Wye and Several Parts of South Wales*, by William Gilpin, published in 1771, inspired hundreds of people to take the boat trip down the river from Ross-on-Wye (in England) to Chepstow, visiting the various beauty spots and historical sites en route. Early tourists included many famous figures, from poets William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge and painter JMW Turner, to celebrities such as Admiral Lord Nelson, who made the tour in 1802. Doing the Wye Tour soon became *de rigueur* among English high society.

Local people made good money providing crewed rowing boats for hire, which were equipped with canopies and comfortable chairs and tables where their clients could paint or write, while inns and taverns cashed in on the trade by providing food, drink and accommodation. It was normally a two-day trip, with an overnight stay in Monmouth and stops at Symonds Yat (a gorge on the English-Welsh border), Tintern Abbey and Chepstow Castle, among others. In the second half of the 19th century, with the arrival of the railways, the hundreds increased to thousands, and the tour became so commercialised that it was no longer fashionable.

You can still do the Wye Tour today, but these days it's a DIY affair. You can hire a two-person Canadian canoe from various places along the river, camping or staying overnight in B&Bs, but you'll need a guide to navigate the tidal section of the river downstream from Bigsweir Bridge, near Tintern. Beginners can opt for a half-day trip through the gorge at Symonds Yat, or an evening's leisurely paddle from Monmouth down to Redbrook.

For more information, contact **Monmouth Canoe & Activity Centre** (below) or **Mountain & Water** (% 01873-831825; www.mountainandwater.co.uk).

Apr-Oct, 2-4pm Sat & Sun Nov-Mar), a labour of love squeezed into a cupboard-sized space, tracing the regiment's history from the 11th century to the Gulf War.

Admiral Horatio Nelson visited Monmouth twice in 1802, officially en route to inspect Pembrokeshire forests for timber for his ships (though it may have had more to do with his affair with local heiress, Lady Emma Hamilton). Despite this tenuous connection Lady Llangattock, local aristocrat and mother of Charles Stewart Rolls, became an obsessive collector of 'Nelsoniana', and the results of her obsession can be seen in the **Nelson Museum & Local History Centre** (% 710630; Priory St; admission free; 10am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Sat, 2-5pm Sun). It's fascinating to see how complete Nelson worship was in 19th-century Britain, with forged relics such as locks of his hair, alongside copies of his first attempt to write with his left hand. Children can make Nelson hats and so on. There's also some general Monmouth history, illustrated by old photographs.

Monnow Bridge, at the southwest end of Monnow St, is the UK's only complete example of a late-13th-century fortified bridge. Much of what you see now was restored in 1705. On the far side of the bridge is the partly Norman **St Thomas's Church**.

Activities

Monmouth Canoe & Activity Centre (% 713461; www.monmouthcanoehire.20m.com; Castle Yard, Old Dixon Rd) offers half-day/full-day/week-long trips on the Wye in two-seater Canadian canoes (£25/30/180) or single kayaks (£18/20/120). Canoe transport and guides/instructors cost extra.

Sleeping

Monnow Bridge Caravan & Camping (% 714004; Dry-bridge St; sites per person £5) Just across the Monnow Bridge from the town centre, this tiny site has a quiet riverside location.

Casita Alva (% 713023; www.monmouthbedandbreakfast.co.uk; 15 Toynbee Close, Osbaston; s/d from £33/42) This B&B, in a quiet suburb 10 minutes' walk north of the town centre, enjoys beautiful views over the Monnow valley and is decorated with paintings by the owner, a trained artist. There are two rooms, one en suite and the other with a private bathroom across the hall.

Church Farm Guest House (% 712176; www.churchfarmmitcheltroy.co.uk; Mitchel Troy; s £30-45, d £52; p) Found in a tiny village 2 miles southwest of Monmouth, this sprawling 16th-century farmhouse retains its dark oak beams and stone fireplaces, and is peaceful, warm and welcoming. There are family rooms sleeping three or four, and vegetarian breakfasts.

Queen's Head Inn (☎ 712767; www.queensheadmonmouth.co.uk; St James St; s/d/tr £35/45/60) Recently refurbished, the Queen's Head is an appealing 16th-century pub with half a dozen brightly decorated bedrooms, all en suite.

Punch House Hotel (☎ 713855; punchhouse@sabrain.com; 4 Agincourt Sq; s/d from £44/54) An old coaching inn bang in the centre of town, the Punch House offers comfortable rooms with a traditional feel, upstairs from a popular pub. Ask for the four-poster room (£64) if you fancy something special.

Eating

Wedges Coffee House (☎ 713513; 94 Monnow St; mains £2-4; 9am-5pm Mon-Sat) This is a cosy family coffee house, serving excellent home-cooked

soups, curries and vegetarian dishes. In summer, the tables spill out into a sunny garden at the back.

Thyme Out (☎ 719339; 31-33 Monnow St; mains £3-6; 9am-5pm Mon-Sat) Located upstairs in the Salt & Pepper kitchenware shop, this stylish little café serves the best coffee in town, and also does breakfast (croissants, eggs or a fry up, 9am to 11am) and lunch (soup, quiche, baked potatoes, noon to 2.30pm).

Courtyard Café (☎ 719720; 2 Beaufort Arms Ct; mains £5-9) Grab an outdoor table in the cobbled courtyard here, among pot plants and flowers, and order succulent crab salad or bubbling Welsh rarebit, washed down with a glass of wine.

Misbah Tandoori (☎ 714940; 9 Priory St; mains £5-10; 11am-2pm & 6-11pm) One of the best curry houses

not only in Wales, but the whole of Britain, the Misbah is an authentic Bangladeshi family restaurant with a large and loyal following.

Malt House (☎ 772052; 10-12 St Mary's St; tapas £3-4, mains £7-11; 8am-10.30pm Mon-Sat, 5-11pm Sun) In this town of tearooms and cafés, the Malt House stands out with its chic designer décor and Spanish menu – choose from traditional tapas such as chorizo in wine, tortilla or calamari, and main dishes such as fish casserole or chicken brochettes with rosemary and lemon. There are also all-day breakfasts and a lunch menu of panini, pizza, pasta and tapas.

Self-caterers can stock up at the **Somerfield** (10 Oldway Centre, Monnow St; 8am-8pm Mon-Sat, 10am-4pm Sun) supermarket.

Drinking & Entertainment

Robin Hood Inn (☎ 719591; 126 Monnow St) The most family-friendly pub in town, the Robin Hood has a warm atmosphere, good food, and a big beer garden with children's play area.

Old Nag's Head (☎ 713782; Granville St) The Old Nag's Head is an old-fashioned, no-frills neighbourhood pub with friendly staff and a selection of real ales on tap. There's live Irish music on Thursday nights, and karaoke on Saturdays.

Savoy Theatre (☎ 772467; www.savoytrust.org.uk; Church St) This gorgeously decorated auditorium, built in 1928 on the oldest theatre site in Wales (its predecessor, the Bell Inn, opened in 1794), hosts modern drama, music gigs, live comedy and cinema.

Blake Theatre (☎ 719401; www.theblaketheatre.org; Almshouse St) The local theatre stages a varied programme of drama, music and children's shows.

St Mary's Church (☎ 740336; www.monmouthchoral.org.uk; Whitecross St) This church is the venue for regular performances by the Monmouth Choral Society.

Getting There & Away

Bus 69 runs along the Wye Valley between Monmouth and Chepstow (£4, 50 minutes, eight daily Monday to Saturday, four daily Sunday), calling at Tintern. Bus 83 runs from Abergavenny (£4, 40 minutes, six daily Monday to Saturday, four daily Sunday) to Monmouth via Raglan.

National Express coach service 536 goes from Cardiff to Monmouth (£9, one hour, one daily) and continues to Birmingham and Edinburgh.

AROUND MONMOUTH Raglan Castle

Magnificent **Raglan Castle** (Cadw; ☎ 01291-690228; adult/child £2.90/2.50; 9.30am-6pm Jun-Sep, 9.30am-5pm Apr, May & Oct, 9.30am-4pm Mon-Sat & 11am-4pm Sun Nov-Mar) was the last great medieval castle to be built in Wales. Designed more as a swaggering statement of wealth and power than a defensive fortress, it was built in the 15th and 16th centuries by Sir William ap Thomas and his son, the earl of Pembroke.

A sprawling complex built of dusky pink sandstone, its centrepiece is the lavish **Great Tower**, a hexagonal keep ringed by a moat. It bears a savage wound from the Civil Wars of the 1640s, when it was besieged by Cromwell's soldiers – the tower was bombarded and undermined, until eventually two of the six walls collapsed.

The impressive courtyards beyond the Great Tower display the transition from fortress to grandiose palace, with ornate windows and fireplaces, gargoyle-studded crenellations and heraldic carvings.

Raglan village is 8 miles southwest of Monmouth and 9 miles southeast of Abergavenny. Bus 83 from Monmouth to Abergavenny stops at the Beaufort Arms in the centre of Raglan (25 minutes, six daily Monday to Saturday, four Sunday), a five-minute walk from the castle.

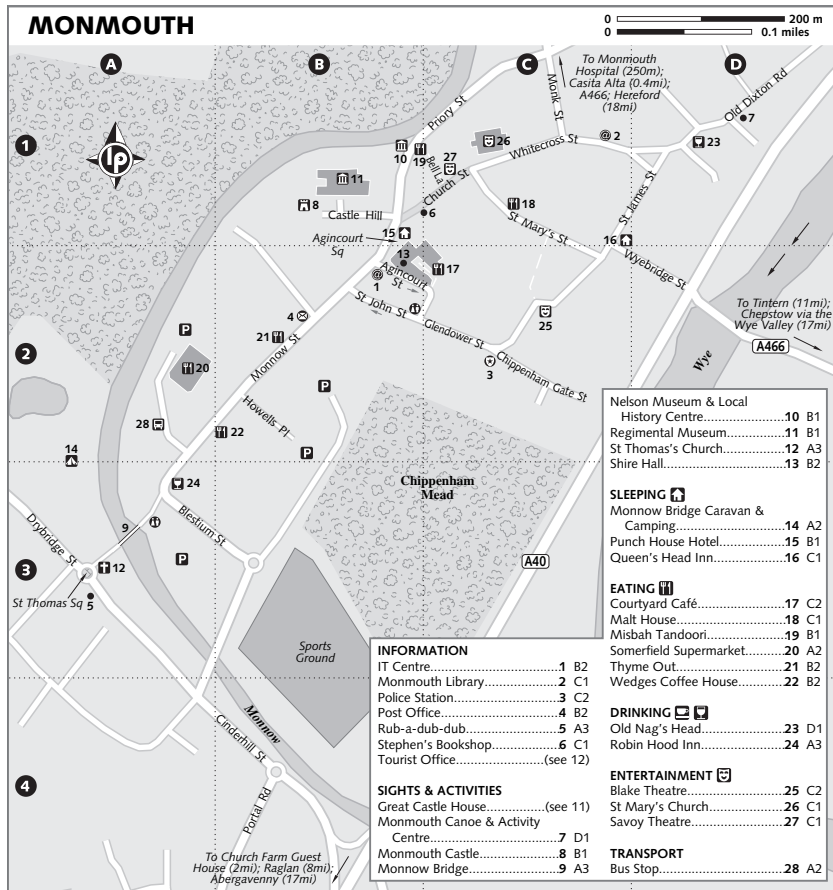
TINTERN

☎ 01291 / pop 750

The A466 road follows the snaking, steep-sided valley of the River Wye from Monmouth to Chepstow, passing through the straggling village of Tintern with its famous abbey. A mile or so upstream from the abbey is **Tintern Old Station** (☎ 689566; admission free, parking per 3/5 hr 50p/£1; 10am-6pm Easter-Oct), a Victorian train station with old railway coaches that house a tourist information desk, an exhibition about the long-gone Wye Valley railway, and a café. There's a large grassy play area for kids, and easy riverside walks.

Sights & Activities

The spectral ruins of **Tintern Abbey** (Cadw; ☎ 689251; adult/child £3.50/3; 9.30am-6pm Jun-Sep, 9.30am-5pm Apr, May & Oct, 9.30am-4pm Mon-Sat & 11am-4pm Sun Nov-Mar) sit by the River Wye, the worn stone scavenged with lichen and mottled grey, purple, pink and gold. Founded in 1131 by the Cistercian order, this sprawling monastic complex is one of the most intact medieval



SOUTHEAST WALES & BRECON BEACONS

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abbeys in Britain, its soaring Gothic arches and ornate tracery a testament to Cistercian wealth and power.

The haunting ruins and their riverside setting have inspired poets and artists through the centuries, including William Wordsworth, who penned *Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey* during a visit in 1798, and JMW Turner, who made many paintings and drawings of the abbey.

The huge abbey church was built between 1269 and 1301, and remains almost complete except for its roof; the finest feature is the magnificent west window. Spreading to the north are the remains of the cloisters, the infirmary, the chapter house, the refectory, the latrines and a complex system of drains and sewers. The site needs two hours at least to do it justice, and is best visited towards the end of the day after the coach-tour crowds have dispersed.

There are plenty of possibilities for riverside walks around Tintern. One of the best begins at the old railway bridge just upstream from the abbey, and leads up to the **Devil's Pulpit**, a limestone crag on the east side of the river with a spectacular view over the abbey (2.5 miles round trip).

Sleeping & Eating

Parva Farmhouse (% 689411; www.hotelintern.co.uk; s/d from £55/74, 4-course dinner £23) This cosy 17th-century farmhouse has low oak-beamed ceilings, leather Chesterfield sofas and a wood-burning stove in the lounge, and a garden with beautiful views across the valley. The bedrooms are chintzy and appealingly old-fashioned (two have four-posters; £85 per double), and the atmospheric Inglenook Restaurant serves fresh local produce and locally made wines.

Old Station Campsite (% 689566; Tintern Old Station; sites per person £2; h Easter-Oct) This basic, no-cars campsite is a handy overnight stop on the Wye Valley Walk or Offa's Dyke Path.

Getting There & Away

Bus 69 runs every 1½ to two hours from Chepstow (£2.20, 20 minutes) and from Monmouth (£2.70, 30 minutes), Monday to Saturday, stopping right in front of the abbey.

CHEPSTOW (CAS-GWENT)

% 01291 / pop 11,000

Chepstow is an attractive market town nestled in a great S-bend in the River Wye, with a splendid Norman castle perched dramati-

cally on a cliff above the river. The town is also home to one of Britain's best known racecourses.

Chepstow was first developed as a base for the Norman conquest of southeast Wales, later prospering as a port for the timber and wine trades. As river-borne commerce gave way to the railways, Chepstow's importance diminished to reflect its name, which means 'market place' in Old English.

Orientation

Chepstow sits on the west bank of the River Wye, at the north end of the old Severn Rd Bridge. The train station is 250m southeast of the compact town centre (follow Station Rd); the bus station is 250m west. There are convenient car parks off Welsh St and next to the castle.

Information

Chepstow Bookshop (13 St Mary St; h 9am-5.30pm Mon-Sat, noon-4pm Sun) The best of the local bookshops.

Chepstow Library (% 635730; h 9.30am-5.30pm Mon & Fri, 10am-5.30pm Tue, 9.30am-4pm Wed & Sat, 9.30am-8pm Thu) Free internet access.

Tourist Office (% 623772; chepstow.tic@monmouthshire.gov.uk; Castle Car Park, Bridge St; h 10am-5.30pm Apr-Oct, 10am-3.30pm Nov-Mar)

Sights

Magnificent **Chepstow Castle** (Cadw; % 624065; Bridge St; adult/child £3.50/3; h 9.30am-6pm Jun-Sep, 9.30am-5pm Apr, May & Oct, 9.30am-4pm Mon-Sat & 11am-4pm Sun Nov-Mar) perches atop a limestone cliff overhanging the river, guarding the main river crossing from England into South Wales (the best view is from the far bank – cross the 1816 Old Wye Bridge and turn left). It is one of the oldest castles in Britain – building began in 1067, less than a year after William the Conqueror invaded England – and the impressive Great Tower retains its original Norman architecture.

The castle's history is explained in an exhibition in the Lower Bailey, where you can see the oldest surviving castle door in Europe, a massive wooden barrier dated to before 1190. Nearby, beside the stairs down to the wine cellar, take a peek into the latrine and imagine baring your backside over this draughty stone box with a giddy drop straight down to the river. Kids will enjoy the castle grounds – lots of green space and plenty of staircases, battlements and wall-walks to explore.

A cave in the cliff below the castle is one of many places where legend says King Arthur and his knights are napping until the day they're needed to save Britain.

Just across the road from the castle is **Chepstow Museum** (% 625981; Bridge St; admission free; h 10.30am-5.30pm Mon-Sat & 2-5.30pm Sun), housed in an 18th-century town house. Good displays cover Chepstow's industrial and social history and a lot of effort is made to make it child friendly; upstairs are depictions of Chepstow Castle as well as some intriguing hair-styling devices, including a perm machine that looks like a 1950s sci-fi brain fryer.

The 13th-century **Port Wall**, the old town fortification, runs along the west side of the town centre. You can see it from the Welsh St car park and near the train station. Chepstow's main street, High St, passes through the **Gate House**, the original city gate, which was restored in the 16th century.

Chepstow Racecourse (% 622260; www.chepstow-racecourse.co.uk), set in rolling parkland alongside the River Wye found just north of the town centre, is one of Britain's most famous horse-racing venues and is home to Wales'

most prestigious race meeting, the Welsh National on 27 December.

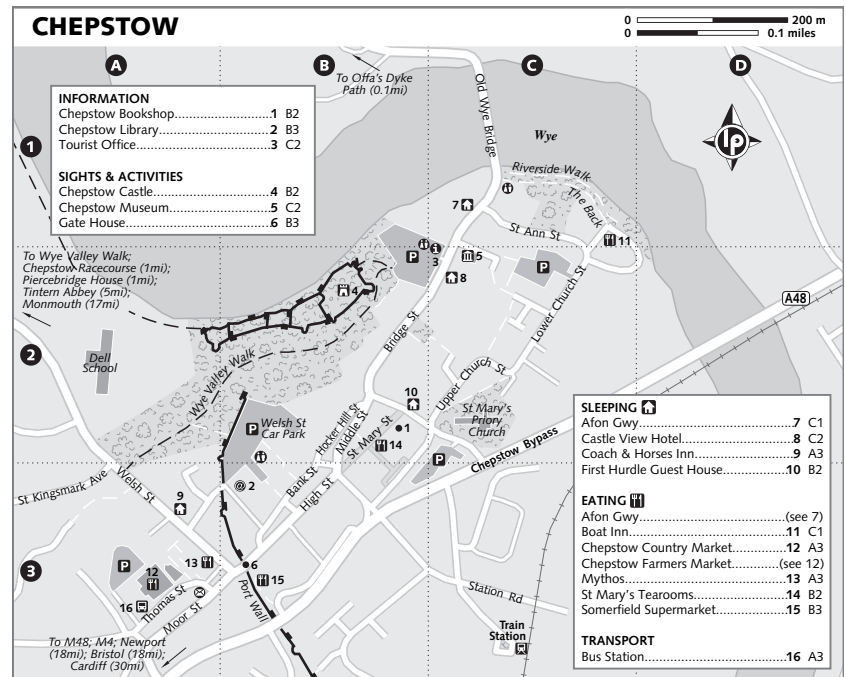
Activities

The classic **Tintern and Return** walk begins at the tourist office and heads upriver along the Wye Valley path to Tintern Abbey, returning via the Offa's Dyke Path on the eastern bank. The total distance is around 13 miles; allow a full day, with lunch at Tintern. The tourist office sells a leaflet to accompany the walk (£1.25), but you'll also need Ordnance Survey (OS) Landranger map No 162 (also available from the tourist office). You can cut the walk short at Tintern and return to Chepstow (or continue to Monmouth) by bus.

Festivals & Events

The month-long **Chepstow Festival** (www.chepstowfestival.co.uk) takes place every second year in July (even-numbered years), with medieval pageantry, drama and music, outdoor art exhibits, comedy, street entertainment and Shakespeare in the castle.

The second weekend in July sees the annual **Two Rivers Folk Festival** (www.tworiversfolkfestival.com),



three days of traditional music, morris dancers and concerts in the castle, which happily coincides with a beer and cider festival at the Coach & Horses Inn.

On the last Sunday of each month, weather permitting, the **Chepstow Garrison** (www.chepstowe.co.uk) living history group performs some fancy footwork at the castle, dressed in 17th-century costume.

Sleeping

First Hurdle Guest House (☎ 622189; www.firsthurdle.guesthouse.co.uk; 9-10 Upper Church St; s/d £35/50) This elegant Georgian-style house has a top location right in the middle of town, and nine smallish, unfussy rooms with period furniture and en suites.

Coach & Horses Inn (☎ 622626; www.thecoachandhorsesinn.co.uk; Welsh St; s/d £35/50; ☎) The owners of this welcoming pub-cum-B&B are from South Africa, a connection reflected in the décor of the bright but basic bedrooms (pics of antelopes, lions and giraffes everywhere). There's a family room that can sleep up to five.

Afon Gwy (☎ 620158; www.afongwy.co.uk; 28 Bridge St; s/d/tr £45/65/80) The four bedrooms at the Afon Gwy are plain but homey, with pine furniture and en suites, but the big selling point is the view over the river. There are friendly owners and a good restaurant.

Castle View Hotel (☎ 620349; www.hotelchepstow.co.uk; 16 Bridge St; s/d/ste £55/77/85) Converted from a 300-year-old private residence, the Castle View is filled with delightful historic details, from 18th-century wall paintings (in bedrooms 2 and 4) to hand-painted glass in the back door. Rooms are small and floors creaky, but the atmosphere is authentic. The 'suite' in the neighbouring cottage has a double bedroom with separate lounge area.

Eating & Drinking

St Mary's Tearooms (☎ 621711; 5 St Mary's St; mains £2-4; ☎ 9am-5.30pm Mon-Sat) A traditional tearoom serving home baking, sandwiches and hot lunches, St Mary's also dishes up a decent fried breakfast.

Boat Inn (☎ 628192; The Back; mains £9-14) A great riverside pub strewn with nautical knick-knacks, the Boat has a good menu of daily specials, including plenty of seafood. The three best tables in the house are upstairs, beside the windows overlooking the river.

Mythos (☎ 627222; Welsh St; mains £9-15; ☎ noon-2am Mon-Sat, 5pm-midnight Sun) This lively Greek

bar and restaurant serves authentic Mediterranean mezes, from tatziki and *spanakopita* (spinach-filled pastries) to souvlaki and *stifado* (rabbit and red wine casserole).

Afon Gwy Inn (☎ 620158; www.afongwy.co.uk; 28 Bridge St; 2-/3-course dinner £14/16, mains £11-14) This riverside restaurant is a local favourite, especially in summer when you can dine outdoors in the garden overlooking the river. The food is no-nonsense home cooking, with dishes such as roast Welsh lamb with recurrrant and rosemary gravy.

Self-caterers can stock up at **Somerfield Supermarket** (Thomas St; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Sat, 10am-4pm Sun), or check out the local produce at **Chepstow Country Market** (Cormelies Sq; ☎ 8am-noon Fri) or **Chepstow Farmers' Market** (Cormelies Sq; 2nd & 4th Sat of month).

Getting There & Away

First buses X10 and X14 run to Chepstow from Bristol (£4, 50 minutes, hourly); bus X14 continues to Newport (50 minutes). Bus 69 links Chepstow with Monmouth via Tintern (see p115).

There are daily direct train services to Chepstow from Cardiff (£6, 40 minutes, hourly) via Newport.

SOUTH WALES VALLEYS

The valleys of Glamorgan and Monmouthshire, fanning northwards from Cardiff and Newport, were once the heart of industrial Wales. Although the coal, iron and steel industries have withered, the valley names – Rhondda, Cynon, Rhymney, Ebbw Vale – still evoke a world of tight-knit working-class communities, male voice choirs, and rows of neat terraced houses set amid a scarred, coal-blackened landscape.

The valleys' industrial economy emerged in the 18th century, based on the exploitation of the region's rich deposits of coal, limestone and iron ore. At first the iron trade dictated the need for coal, but by the 1830s coal was finding its own worldwide markets and people poured in from the countryside looking for work. The harsh and dangerous working conditions provided fertile ground for political radicalism – Merthyr Tydfil elected Britain's first ever Labour Party MP in 1900, and many locals went to fight in the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s.

Today, the region has fought back against its decline by creating a tourist industry based on industrial heritage – places such as the

Rhondda Heritage Park, Big Pit National Coal Museum and Blaenafon Ironworks are among Wales' most impressive tourist attractions.

RHONDDA VALLEY

Northwest of Cardiff, the Rhondda valley – the most famous of the South Wales valleys – was once synonymous with coal mining. The closure of the last pit in 1990 left the valley bereft, but since then Rhondda has succeeded in converting its abandoned colliery into a stunning exploration of the region's industrial heritage.

Rhondda Heritage Park (☎ 01443-682036; www.rhonddaheritagepark.com; Lewis Merthyr Colliery, Trehafod, Rhondda Cynon Taff; adult/child £5.75/4.45; ☎ 10am-6pm Apr-Sep, 10am-6pm Tue-Sun Nov-Mar) brings new life to the old colliery buildings of the Lewis Merthyr coal mine (which closed in 1983). The highlight is the Underground Tour, where you don a miner's helmet and lamp and, accompanied by a guide (all are ex-miners), experience a simulated descent to the coalface. The compelling commentary vividly re-creates the experience of mine workers in the 1950s, and hammers home the social impact of the coal industry.

Back at the surface, the Black Gold multimedia show explores the history of coal mining in South Wales, including what life was like for women and children. There's also an adventure playground for kids. Allow at least two hours for your visit.

The park is 12 miles northwest of Cardiff, just off the A470 between Pontypridd and Porth. There are frequent trains from Cardiff Central station to Trehafod (£3, 35 minutes, every half hour). Alternatively, take Stagecoach bus 132 (£2, one hour, half-hourly Monday to Saturday, hourly Sunday).

MERTHYR TYDFIL

☎ 01685 / pop 55,000

Merthyr Tydfil (*mur-thir tid-vil*) occupies a spectacular site, sprawled across a bowl at the head of the Taff Valley, ringed and pocked with quarries and spoil heaps. It was even more spectacular 200 years ago when the town was at the heart of the Industrial Revolution, and this bowl was a crucible filled with the fire and smoke of the world's biggest ironworks.

Today, all the industry has gone. Unemployment (6.6% in 2006) runs at around 20% more than the national average, and shopfronts such as Employment Matters, Tydfil Training and Army Careers Office are prominent in the town centre. But the town is turning itself

around, redeveloping former industrial sites, attracting new businesses, and turning its past into a tourist attraction. There are museums to visit at Cyfarthfa Castle and Joseph Parry's Cottage, and wild landscapes to explore in the nearby Brecon Beacons National Park, whose border lies just north of Merthyr.

Perhaps unusually for such an industrial town, Merthyr Tydfil has produced two internationally famous fashion designers – Laura Ashley (famed for her flowery, feminine designs in the 1970s) and Julien Macdonald (he of the shimmering, figure-hugging dresses favoured by Kylie and Britney).

History

Merthyr Tydfil means 'the place of Tydfil's martyrdom' – according to legend, the town was named in honour of a Welsh princess who was murdered for her Christian beliefs in the 5th century. St Tydfil's Church is said to mark the spot where she died.

Merthyr remained a minor village until the late 18th century, when its proximity to iron ore, limestone, water and wood led it to become a centre of iron production. The subsequent discovery of rich coal reserves upped the ante, and by 1801 a string of settlements, each growing around its own ironworks – Cyfarthfa, Pentydarren, Dowlais, Pentrebach and others – had merged together to become the biggest town in Wales (population 10,000, eight times the size of Cardiff at that time). Immigrants flooded in from all over Europe, and the town's population peaked at 81,000 in the mid-19th century.

By 1803, Cyfarthfa was the world's biggest ironworks. Ever more efficient ways to make iron were pioneered, on the backs of overworked labourers (including, until 1842, women and children as young as six) who lived in appalling, disease-ridden conditions. By the 19th century Merthyr was a centre of political radicalism. The Merthyr Rising of 1831 was the most violent uprising in Britain's history – 10,000 ironworkers, angry over pay-cuts and lack of representation, faced off against a handful of armed soldiers, and rioting continued for a month.

As demand for iron and steel dwindled in the early 20th century, one by one the ironworks closed down. Unemployment soared, reaching as high as 60% in 1935. In 1939 a Royal Commission even suggested that the whole town should be abandoned. But community ties were strong and people stayed on,

despite the lack of work, and today the town is slowly getting back on its feet.

Orientation & Information

Merthyr sprawls across the head of the Taff Valley, and you'll need to do a bit of walking or cycling to see all the sights. The train and bus stations are close together at the south end of town; Cyfarthfa Castle is a mile to the north.

The **tourist office** (☎ 379884; tic@merthyr.co.uk; 14 Glebeland St; 𠄎 9.30am-5.30pm Mon-Sat Apr-Oct, 9.30am-4.30pm Mon-Sat Nov-Mar) is in a shop beside the bus station.

Sights

For a measure of the wealth that accumulated at the top of the industrial pile, check out **Cyfarthfa Castle** (☎ 723112; Brecon Rd; admission free; 𠄎 10am-5.30pm Apr-Sep, 10am-4pm Tue-Fri, noon-4pm Sat & Sun Oct-Mar), built in 1824 by Cyfarthfa's owner, William Crawshay II, overlooking his ironworks (now gone). The basement now houses an excellent exhibition on Merthyr's gritty history, including a section on the Cornish engineer Richard Trevithick, who in 1804 built the world's first steam locomotive to haul a load on rails. Set into the hillside across the river from the castle are the **Cyfarthfa Blast Furnaces**, all that remains of the ironworks that made the Crawshays rich; there are plans to convert the site into a tourist attraction.

A half-mile to the south of the castle, a row of pint-sized 19th-century ironworkers' houses, built by the Crawshays, stands in bald contrast to Cyfarthfa Castle. At No 4 is **Joseph Parry's Cottage** (☎ 723112; 4 Chapel Row; admission free; 𠄎 2-5pm Thu-Sun Apr-Sep) furnished in 1840s style. It was the birthplace of Welsh composer and songwriter Joseph Parry.

Across the river from the bus station is **Ynys-fach Engine House**, which once housed the huge beam engines that created the blast of hot air for the iron furnaces. If all goes according to plan, the engine house should be open to the public from 2007.

Trainspotters will relish **Trevithick's Tunnel**, site of the first test of Trevithick's steam-powered locomotive in 1804 – it hauled 10 tonnes of iron for 9.5 miles, at a speed of 4mph. It's off the A470 in Pentrebach, 1.25 miles south of Merthyr.

The narrow-gauge **Brecon Mountain Railway** (☎ 722988; www.breconmountainrailway.co.uk; return £8.50; 𠄎 9.30am-6pm Easter-Oct), which operated between 1859 and 1964, once hauled coal and

passengers between Merthyr and Brecon. A 5.5-mile section of track, between Pant Station and Torpantau at the head of Pontsticill Reservoir, has been restored and operates steam locomotive trips. There are five or six departures a day (the first at 11am) and the trip takes 65 minutes, with a 20-minute stop at Pontsticill (you can stay longer if you like and return on a later train). Pant Station is 3.5 miles north of Merthyr bus station; take bus 35 (20 minutes, four per hour Monday to Saturday only) to the Pant Cemetery stop, from where it's a five-minute walk. The Beacons Bus B6 service (p125) stops at Pant Station.

Activities

The **Taff Trail** runs along the river on the western edge of town, crossing the handsome railway viaducts of Cefn Coed (the third biggest in Wales) and Pontsarn, both completed in 1866, as it heads up to Pontsticill Reservoir (5 miles from the bus station to the Brecon Mountain Railway). The tourist office can provide details on half-day walks around town.

Fit walkers can hike across the Brecon Beacons from Merthyr to Brecon via the Taff Trail and the Gap Rd (18 miles), or you can cycle there following the Taff Trail all the way (25 miles).

The Forestry Commission's Garwnant Visitor Centre, at the head of Llwyn Onn Reservoir (5 miles north of Merthyr on the A470) is the starting point for a couple of easy forest walks, and also has an adventure play area and rope-swing 'assault course' for kids.

At Taff Bargoed, near Trelewis, 8 miles south of Merthyr, is the huge **Welsh International Climbing Centre** (☎ 01443-710749; www.indoorclimbingwalls.co.uk; Trelewis, Treharris; admission £5-7.70; 𠄎 9am-10pm), one of Europe's biggest indoor climbing facilities, offering instruction in rock climbing, caving and abseiling.

Sleeping & Eating

Penylan Guest House (☎ 723179; 12 Courtland Terrace; s/d £20/40) A tidy terraced house off Union St, just 200m east of the train station, the Penylan is as central as you'll get. Rooms are good value, but nothing special.

Llwyn Onn Guest House (☎ 384384; www.llwynonn.co.uk; Llwyn Onn, Cwm Taff; s/d £40/70; 𠄎) A 200-year-old farmhouse set in a quiet village 4 miles north of Merthyr on the A470, this guesthouse has spacious and stylish rooms and a beautiful garden with views across Llwyn Onn reservoir.

Tregenna Hotel (☎ 723627; www.tregennahotel.co.uk; Park Tce; s/d £50/68; 𠄎) The Tregenna is 500m north of the train station, and has comfortable, if rather chintzy and old-fashioned, rooms.

Bessemer Hotel (☎ 350780; www.bessemerhotel.co.uk; Hermon Close, Dowlais; s/d from £60/65; 𠄎) Named after a steel-making process, the Bessemer has forged a reputation as the best place to stay, and to eat, in Merthyr. Still shiny and new with lots of polished wood, the rooms are spacious, the service professional, and the carvery restaurant's roast lunches very good indeed. Meals are available for £6 to £12.

Wellington Boot Brasserie (☎ 370665; 1 Bethesda St; mains £8-12; 𠄎 7-9.30pm Tue-Sat, 12.30-2.30pm Sun) Merthyr is not exactly a gourmet's delight, but this inviting pizzeria-wine bar down by the river serves excellent Italian food, and also does traditional Sunday lunches.

Coffee Grandee (Beacons Place Shopping Centre, John St) a Starbucks-style coffee shop with comfy sofas and armchairs, this is the only place in town for decent espresso and cappuccino.

The nearest budget accommodation is the bunkhouse at the **Welsh International Climbing Centre** (☎ 01443-710749; www.indoorclimbingwalls.co.uk; dm £12), 8 miles south, or at **Hobo Backpackers** (☎ 01495-718422; www.hobo-backpackers.com; Morgan St, Tredegar; dm £12) in Tredegar, 7 miles east of Merthyr.

The nearest campsite is at Llwyn Onn, 4 miles north on the A470.

Getting There & Away

From Monday to Saturday, Stagecoach bus X4 runs from Cardiff (£4, one hour, every 15

minutes) to Merthyr, and from Merthyr to Abergavenny (£5, 1½ hours, hourly). There is no Sunday service. Sixty-Sixty bus X43 (Cardiff to Abergavenny service) runs from Merthyr to Brecon (£3, 35 minutes, every two hours Monday to Saturday, twice on Sunday) and on to Crickhowell and Abergavenny. Bus services are limited or nonexistent on Sunday, with the exception in summer of the Beacons Bus (p125).

Merthyr is also linked to Cardiff by train (£4, one hour, hourly Monday to Saturday, every two hours on Sunday).

BLAENAVON (BLAENAFON)

☎ 01495 / pop 6000

The coal and iron town of Blaenavon (blye-nahv-on) is home to the best-preserved 18th-century ironworks in the world. The bleak industrial landscape around the town, with its abandoned coal and iron ore mines, limestone quarries and primitive railway system, became a Unesco World Heritage Site in 2000, as testament to South Wales' global importance as a producer of iron and coal in the 19th century.

In addition to its status as an industrial heritage site, Blaenavon has attempted to muscle in on Hay-on-Wye's territory by re-inventing itself as a 'book town' (see www.booktownblaenafon.com). In 2006 the plan faltered amid infighting and lack of funding, and the future of the project is uncertain. At the time of research, Broad St was in the process of being refurbished and prettified, and still had four secondhand bookshops who

THE ABERFAN DISASTER

On 21 October 2006 a low-key memorial service marked the 40th anniversary of one of the worst disasters ever to strike Wales. On that day in 1966, heavy rain loosened an already dangerously unstable spoil heap above Aberfan, 4 miles south of Merthyr Tydfil, and sent a half-million-tonne mudslide of liquefied coal slurry down onto the village. It wiped out a row of terraced houses and ploughed into Pantglas primary school, killing 144 people, most of them children.

To cap tragedy with scandal, the state-owned National Coal Board refused to accept responsibility for the mudslide and the Labour government of the day raided the disaster relief fund of £150,000 to pay for the removal of the remaining spoil heaps. In 1997, a newly elected Labour government repaid the money. But despite the fact that the 1966 amount would have been worth £1.5 million in 1997, they repaid only £150,000; many people feel this was a shabby gesture, and call for the government to repay the full amount to help maintain Aberfan cemetery and memorial.

Today, the A470 Cardiff to Merthyr Tydfil road cuts right through the spot where the spoil heap once stood. The site of the school has been turned into a memorial garden, while the village cemetery contains a long, double row of matching headstones, a mute and moving memorial to those who died.

were determined to make a go of things, plus a smattering of antique shops and cafés.

There's nowhere to stay overnight in Blaenavon; the nearest accommodation is in Abergavenny.

Orientation & Information

Blaenavon sits at the head of the Llwyd Valley, 16 miles north of Newport. Most buses stop in High St, in the centre of town. Broad St, with its bookshops, is a block to the east. Blaenavon Ironworks is 400m west of High St: walk uphill to the top of High St, turn left on Upper Waun St, then left again on North St. Big Pit National Coal Museum is another mile west of the ironworks.

The **tourist office** (☎ 792615; www.blaenavontic.com; North St; 10am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 10am-5pm Sat, 10am-4.30pm Sun Apr-Oct) is at the entrance to Blaenavon Ironworks.

Sights

When it was completed in 1788, **Blaenavon Ironworks** (Cadw; ☎ 792615; North St; adult/child £2.50/2; 10am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 10am-5pm Sat & 10am-4.30pm Sun Apr-Oct) was one of the most advanced in the world. Its three huge coal-fired blast furnaces were provided with air powered by a steam engine, making them much more powerful than older, smaller furnaces fired with charcoal and blasted with air from a waterwheel-powered bellows. Within a few years it was the world's second-biggest ironworks, after Cyfarthfa at Merthyr Tydfil. Innovation and development continued here until 1904, when the last furnace was finally shut down.

Today the site is one of the best-preserved of all the Industrial Revolution ironworks. You can follow the whole process of production, from the charging of the furnaces to the casting of molten iron in the casting sheds. Also on display are the ironworkers' tiny terraced cottages. The surrounding hillsides are pitted with old tramlines, mines, tunnels and 'scouring' sites, where water was released from holding ponds to wash away topsoil and expose ore seams.

The atmospheric **Big Pit National Coal Museum** (☎ 790311; www.museumwales.ac.uk; admission free; 10am-5pm Feb-Nov, 10am-4.30pm Dec & Jan, guided tours 10am-3.30pm) provides an opportunity to explore a real coal mine and feel what life was like for the miners who extracted coal here for 200 years. Visitors descend 90m into a genuine coal mine and explore the tunnels and coalfaces in the company of an ex-miner

guide. It's sobering to experience something of the dark, dank working conditions, particularly considering the children who once worked here by candlelight.

Above ground, you can see the pithead baths, blacksmith's workshop and other colliery buildings, filled with displays on the industry and the evocative reminiscences of ex-miners.

You'll be decked out in hard hat, power pack and other safety gear weighing some 5kg, and won't be allowed to take matches or anything electrical (including photo equipment and watches) down with you. It's cold underground, so take extra layers, and wear sturdy shoes. Children must be at least 1m tall. Disabled visitors can arrange tours in advance.

The **Pontypool & Blaenavon Railway** (☎ 792263; www.pontypool-and-blaenavon.co.uk; return adult/child £2.40/1.20; 10 departures half-hourly 11.30am-4.30pm Sat, Sun & bank holidays Apr-Sep) was built from Pontypool to Brynmawr to haul coal and passengers up and down the valley. Passenger traffic ceased in 1941, and coal haulage stopped when the Big Pit was closed in 1980.

Since then a 0.8-mile section, running northwest from Furnace Sidings near Big Pit, has been restored and maintained by local volunteers. Whistle Halt, at the north end, is the highest train station in England and Wales at 396m. The Whistle Inn Pub, beside the station, has a huge collection of miners' lamps. In 2006 approval was obtained to extend the line 1.25 miles south to Blaenavon, but it will be a few years before it opens.

Eating & Drinking

Old Lipton's Coffee Shop (☎ 792828; 76 Broad St; snacks £2-5) Housed in a converted grocery, this is a friendly traditional café serving tea, coffee, sandwiches, homemade soup and greasy-spoon standards such as sausage, egg and chips.

Pottery (☎ 790395; Llanover Rd; mains £6-12; 10 Wed-Sun) This welcoming pub has an array of real ales and a beer garden with views over the hills, and dishes up excellent bar meals, including a great Sunday lunch. It's uphill from the roundabout on the A4043 on the southern edge of town.

Getting There & Away

Stagecoach bus X24 goes direct from Newport to Blaenavon (£3, 40 minutes, every 15 minutes Monday to Saturday); bus 23 serves the same route hourly on Sunday. Bus 30 from Newport to Blaenavon (hourly) continues to

Brynmawr; four per day (check times in advance) stop at Big Pit on the way.

At Brynmawr you can change to bus X4 (every 30 minutes) for Abergavenny, Merthyr Tydfil or Cardiff.

BRECON BEACONS

BRECON BEACONS NATIONAL PARK

Founded in 1957, the Brecon Beacons National Park (Parc Cenedlaethol Bannau Brycheiniog) stretches from Llandeilo and Llandovery in the west to Hay-on-Wye and Abergavenny in the east, encompassing some of the finest scenery in South Wales. High mountain plateaus of grass and heather, their northern rims scalloped with glacier-scoured hollows, rise above wooded, waterfall-splashed valleys and green, rural landscapes.

There are four distinct regions within the park, neatly bounded by main roads: the wild, lonely **Black Mountain** (Mynydd Du) in the west, with its high moors and glacial lakes; **Fforest Fawr** (Great Forest), which lies between the A4067 and A470, whose rushing streams and spectacular waterfalls form the headwaters of the Rivers Tawe and Neath; the **Brecon Beacons** (Bannau Brycheiniog) proper, a group of very distinctive, flat-topped hills that includes Pen-y-Fan (886m), the park's (and southern Britain's) highest point; and, from the A40 northeast to the English border, the rolling heathland ridges of the **Black Mountains** (Y Mynyddoedd Duon) – don't confuse them with the Black Mountain (singular) in the west.

In 2005 the western half of the national park was given geopark recognition by Unesco. The **Fforest Fawr Geopark** stretches from Black Mountain in the west to Pen-y-Fan in the east, and it takes in important landscape features such as the ice-sculpted northern faces of the Brecon Beacons, the gorges and waterfalls around Ystradfellte, and the caves and limestone pavements of the southern Black Mountain.

Information

The **National Park Visitor Centre** (☎ 01874-623366; www.breconbeacons.org; Libanus; admission free; 10am-5pm Mar-Jun, Sep & Oct, 9.30am-6pm Jul & Aug, 9.30am-4.30pm Nov-Feb; meals around £4), set high on a ridge with fine views of Pen-y-Fan and Corn Du, is the park's main information point with full details of walks, hiking and biking trails, outdoor activities, wildlife and geology. It has easy disabled ac-

cess, and there's a book and gift shop, tearoom, and picnic tables. During school holidays there are kids' activities, organised farm visits, guided walks and themed minibus tours.

The centre is off the A470 road 5 miles southwest of Brecon and 15 miles north of Merthyr Tydfil. The Beacons Bus B6 stops at the centre. Otherwise, Sixty-Sixty bus X43 (Cardiff-Merthyr Tydfil-Brecon-Abergavenny) stops in Libanus village, a 1.25-mile walk from the centre.

The **Craig-y-Nos Country Park Visitor Centre** (☎ 01639-730395; Brecon Rd, Pen-y-Cae; admission free; 10am-6pm Mon-Fri & 10am-7pm Sat & Sun May-Aug, 10am-5pm Mon-Fri & 10am-6pm Sat & Sun Mar, Apr, Sep & Oct, 10am-4pm Mon-Fri & 10am-4.30pm Sat & Sun Nov-Feb) is in the western part of the park near Dan-yr-Ogof caves. As well as park information, there are easy forest walks and picnic areas.

There are tourist offices at Abergavenny, Crickhowell, Brecon, Merthyr Tydfil, Llandeilo and Llandovery.

Out & About, the national park's free visitor newspaper, is available at tourist offices, and is full of useful information. OS Landranger maps 160 and 161 cover most of the park, and have all the walking and cycling trails marked.

Activities

WALKING

There are hundreds of walking routes in the park, ranging from gentle strolls to strenuous climbs. The park's staff organise guided walks and other active events throughout the summer – details are listed in *Out & About*. They also supply a booklet, *Walks in the Brecon Area* (£1.50), which details many hikes including the standard route up Pen-y-Fan and walks along the Monmouthshire and Brecon Canal.

Three long-distance walking trails pass through the park:

Beacons Way

The Beacons Way (www.breconbeaconsnationalpark.org) is a 100-mile trail that wends its way across the park from Abergavenny to Llangadog (on the A40 between Llandovery and Llandeilo), taking in all the highest summits in the Black Mountains, the Brecon Beacons, Fforest Fawr and Black Mountain; the recommended time for the entire route is eight days. An illustrated route guide, *The Beacons Way* by John Sansom and Arwel Michael (£12), is available from bookshops and information centres.

Taff Trail

The Taff Trail (p66) walking and cycling route from Cardiff to Brecon cuts right across the middle of the park. The main route follows minor roads north from Merthyr Tydfil past the Pontsticill Reservoir to Talybont-on-Usk and the Monmouthshire and Brecon Canal. An alternative route, for walkers only, follows the Taf Fawr valley (as does the main A470 road), via Nant-ddu and the Storey Arms.

Offa's Dyke Path

The Offa's Dyke Path (p63) runs along the eastern fringe of the national park. The 17.5-mile section from Pandy (north of Abergavenny) to Hay-on-Wye offers splendid high-level walking with great views. It makes a great two-day outing; start from Abergavenny and follow the first part of the Beacons Way to Llanthony, where you can spend the night (10 miles), then climb back up to the ridge and continue on the Offa's Dyke Path to Hay-on-Wye (12 miles).

CYCLING & MOUNTAIN BIKING

The 55-mile Taff Trail from Cardiff to Brecon is the best known cycle route in the park, passing through some great scenery between Merthyr Tydfil and Brecon. Other waymarked cycle routes on minor roads include Abergavenny to Hay-on-Wye via the Vale of Ewyas,

and Hay to Brecon via Talgarth. Cycle hire is available in Brecon and Abergavenny.

There are many excellent off-road mountain-biking routes in the park, including a series of graded and waymarked trails laid out by the national park authority. These are detailed in a map and guidebook pack, *Mountain Biking in the Brecon Beacons* (£7), available from the National Park Visitor Centre, tourist offices and at www.mtbbreconbeacons.co.uk.

Sleeping

The website of the **Association of Bunkhouse Operators** (% 07071-780259; www.hostelswales.com) has a full listing of independent bunkhouses in the national park area; a leaflet with the same information is available from tourist offices.

The park also has five YHA/HI youth hostels (www.yha.org.uk). From west to east they are: **Llanddeusant Youth Hostel** (% 0870 770 5930; Old Red Lion, Llanddeusant; dm £11; 11 Easter-Oct) A tree-shaded former inn nestled next to a 14th-century church, on the western fringes of Black Mountain.

Llwyn-y-Celyn Youth Hostel (% 0870 770 5936; Libanus; dm £14; 11 Easter-Oct) An 18th-century farmhouse in 15 acres of woodland, 7 miles south of Brecon. Handy for climbing Pen-y-Fan.

Tyn-y-Caeau Youth Hostel (% 0870 770 5718; Groesfordd, Brecon; dm £14; 11 year-round) Lovely Victorian farmhouse 2 miles east of Brecon.

CLIMBING PEN-Y-FAN

One of the most popular hikes in the national park is the ascent of Pen-y-Fan (886m), the highest peak in the Brecon Beacons (around 120,000 people each year make the climb). The shortest route to the summit begins at the Pont ar Daf car park on the A470, 10 miles southwest of Brecon. It's a steep but straightforward slog up a deeply eroded path (now paved with natural stone) to the summit of Corn Du (873m), followed by a short dip and final ascent to Pen-y-Fan (4.5 miles round trip; allow three hours). A slightly longer (5.5 miles round trip) but just as crowded path starts at the Storey Arms outdoor centre, a mile to the north. The X4 Cardiff–Merthyr Tydfil–Brecon–Abergavenny bus and the Beacons bus (B1, B3, B6 and B9) stop at the Storey Arms. (Be aware the Storey Arms is not a pub!)

You can avoid the crowds by choosing one of the longer routes on the north side of the mountain, which also have the advantage of more interesting views on the way up. The best starting point is the Cwm Gwdi car park, at the end of a minor road 3.5 miles southwest of Brecon. From here, you follow a path along the crest of the Cefn Cwm Llwhc ridge, with great views of the neighbouring peaks, with a final steep scramble up to the summit. The round trip from the car park is 7 miles; allow three to four hours. Starting and finishing in Brecon, the total distance is 14 miles.

Remember that Pen-y-Fan is a serious mountain – the weather can change rapidly, and people have to be rescued here every year. Wear hiking boots and take warm clothes, waterproofs, and a map and compass. You can get advice and weather forecasts at the **National Park Visitor Centre** (% 01874-623366; www.breconbeacons.org; Libanus). Weather forecasts are also available on % 0870 900 0100 and at www.meto.gov.uk/outdoor/mountainsafety.

Danywenallt Youth Hostel (% 0870 770 6136; Talybont-on-Usk; dm £17.50; 11 year-round) Converted farmhouse nestling beneath the dam of Talybont Reservoir, halfway between Brecon and Crickhowell.

Capel-y-Ffin Youth Hostel (% 0870 770 5748; Capel-y-Ffin, Llanthony; dm £11; 11 year-round) A former hill farm in a remote setting near the head of the Vale of Ewyas.

Camping anywhere in the national park, even on open land, requires the permission of the farmer or landowner; all camping is prohibited on National Trust land. Tourist offices have lists of camping grounds with full facilities.

Getting There & Around

BUS

Most regional buses to and around the national park are operated by Stagecoach, with a few by local operators; for timetable information call **Traveline** (% 0870 608 2608; www.traveline-cymru.org.uk). You can pick up a national park timetable booklet at information offices. Some useful routes are listed in the table below. Most of these routes have no Sunday services, though – for travel on Sundays and bank holidays, you'll need to take the Beacons Bus and Beacons Roundabout services (see below).

Useful rail services are limited to Cardiff–Merthyr Tydfil, Cardiff–Newport–Abergavenny, and Swansea–Llandeilo–Llandovery (roughly hourly, Monday to Saturday; Sunday services are less frequent).

The **Beacons Bus** (% 01873-853254; www.visitbreconbeacons.com) is a network of special tourist bus services that operates on Sundays and bank holidays from late May to mid-September. You can pick up a leaflet with route map and timetables at any tourist office. There is also a leaflet, *One Way Walks with Beacons Bus*, detailing

BEACONS BUS ROUTES

Route	Destination/s	Frequency (daily)
B1	Cardiff–Merthyr Tydfil–Brecon	1
B2	Swansea–Dan-yr-Ogof–Brecon	1
B3	Bridgend–Penderfryn–Brecon	1
B4	Newport–Abergavenny–Brecon	1
B5	Brecon–National Park Visitor Centre	6
B6	Roundabout Service	4
B7	Hay-on-Wye–Llanfihangel Crucorney	3
B8	Brecon–Crickhowell–Abergavenny	2
B9	Porthcawl–Merthyr Tydfil–Brecon	1
B10	Carmarthen–Llandeilo–Brecon	1
B11	Brecon–Hay-on-Wye	1

walks accessible from the bus routes. Two of the services (B1 and B8) can carry bicycles.

On the circular routes B6 (also called the Beacons Roundabout) and B7 you can get on and off at any point. The B6 route takes in Brecon, the National Park Visitor Centre, the Storey Arms, Garwnant Forest Centre, Brecon Mountain Railway and Talybont-on-Usk. You can buy an all-day ticket (adult/child £6.50/4, bike £2.50) on the first Beacons Bus you board, which then remains valid all day on all other services. There are also cheaper single fares.

ABERGAVENTY (Y-FENNI)

% 01873 / pop 14,000

The handsome market town of Abergavenny is set amid shapely, tree-fringed hills on the eastern edge of Brecon Beacons National Park. Its ancient name, Y-Fenni (uh-*ven*-ni; Welsh for 'place of the smiths') was given to a stream that empties into the River Usk here, and later anglicised to Gavenny (Abergavenny means 'mouth of the Gavenny').

The Romans established Gobannium Fort, exactly a day's march from their garrison at Caerleon (p108), near Newport, and stayed from AD 57 to 400. But the town grew in importance after a Marcher lord, Hamelin

BUS SERVICES IN THE BRECON BEACONS

Service	Destination/s	Frequency (daily)
X4	Cardiff–Merthyr Tydfil–Abergavenny	every 30min
G14	Llandovery–Brecon	6
X43	Merthyr Tydfil–Brecon–Abergavenny	7
63	Swansea–Craig-y-Nos–Brecon	3
704	Llandrindod Wells–Brecon	7

de Ballon, built a castle here around 1100. Today it thrives as a market, shopping and tourist centre.

Abergavenny makes a fine base for walks in the surrounding hills, and is one of only two towns providing rail access to the national park (the other is Merthyr Tydfil). The area has several excellent restaurants, and the

annual Abergavenny Food Festival is a world-famous event.

Orientation

The tourist office is next to the bus station, a few minutes' walk southeast of the town centre; the train station is a further half a mile walk along Monmouth Rd and Station

Rd. There are convenient central car parks on Tudor St and Castle St.

Information

Abergavenny Bookshop (☎ 850380; 1 High St) Local interest books, Ordnance Survey maps.

Abergavenny Library (☎ 735980; Baker St; 11-9.30am-5.30pm Mon & Fri, 10am-5.30pm Tue, 9.30am-5pm Wed, 9.30am-8pm Thu, 9.30am-1pm Sat) Free internet access.

Nevill Hall Hospital (☎ 732732; Brecon Rd) With 24-hour emergency service.

Police Station (☎ 852273; Tudor St)

Post Office (Castle St)

Tourist Office (☎ 857588; www.abergavenny.co.uk; Swan Meadow, Cross St; 11-9.30am-5.30pm Apr-Oct, 10am-4pm Nov-Mar) Also houses a national park visitor centre.

Sights

The modest-looking **St Mary's Priory Church** (☎ 853168; www.stmarys-priory.org; Hereford Rd; admission free, donation requested; 11-10am-noon & 2-4pm Mon-Sat, 2-4pm Sun) has been described as 'the Westminster Abbey of South Wales', because of the remarkable treasury of aristocratic tombs that lies within. The church was founded as part of a Benedictine priory around the time the castle was built (1100), but the present building dates mainly from the 14th century, with many 19th-century additions and alterations. There's always a volunteer warden around to answer questions.

The oldest memorial, dating from around 1325, is a graceful, worn, carved-oak effigy of Sir John de Hastings II, who was probably responsible for the church's 14th-century restoration. In the northern transept is one of the most important medieval carvings in Europe – a monumental 15th-century wooden representation of the biblical figure of Jesse. It was the base of what must have been a mighty altarpiece showing the lineage of Jesus.

The Herbert Chapel is packed with recumbent effigies. Most depict members of the Herbert family, starting with Sir William ap Thomas, founder of Raglan Castle (p115), and his wife Gwladys – Sir William's feet rest on a lion that looks like it was modelled on a sheep. The oak choir stalls were carved in the 15th century (note the lively misericords and the little dragons at the ends).

The huge medieval **tithe barn** next to the church is being restored as a heritage and arts centre, and will also be used as a venue during the food festival (see p128).

Not much remains of **Abergavenny Castle** except for an impressive stretch of curtain wall on either side of the gatehouse on the northwest side. Elsewhere, the ruins of towers and fragments of wall peek out from among the trees. Frequently besieged but never taken, the castle was wrecked by royalist forces in 1645 during the Civil War in order to keep it out of parliamentary hands, and it has gone largely untouched since then.

The castle keep, converted into a hunting lodge by the Victorians, now houses the small but perfectly formed **Abergavenny Museum** (☎ 854282; Castle St; admission free; 11-11am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Sat Mar-Oct, 11am-1pm & 2-4pm Mon-Sat Nov-Feb). It tells the history of the castle and the town, and includes re-creations of a Victorian Welsh farmhouse kitchen, a saddlery workshop, and Basil Jones' grocery shop. The latter was transferred intact when it closed in the 1980s and makes a fascinating display, with many items dating back to the 1930s and '40s.

The 19th-century **Market Hall** (☎ 735811; www.abergavennymarket.co.uk; Cross St) is a lively place, hosting a general market (food, drink, clothes, household goods) on Tuesday, Friday and Saturday, a flea market (bric-a-brac, collectables, secondhand goods) on Wednesday, regular weekend crafts and antiques fairs, and a farmers market on the fourth Thursday of each month.

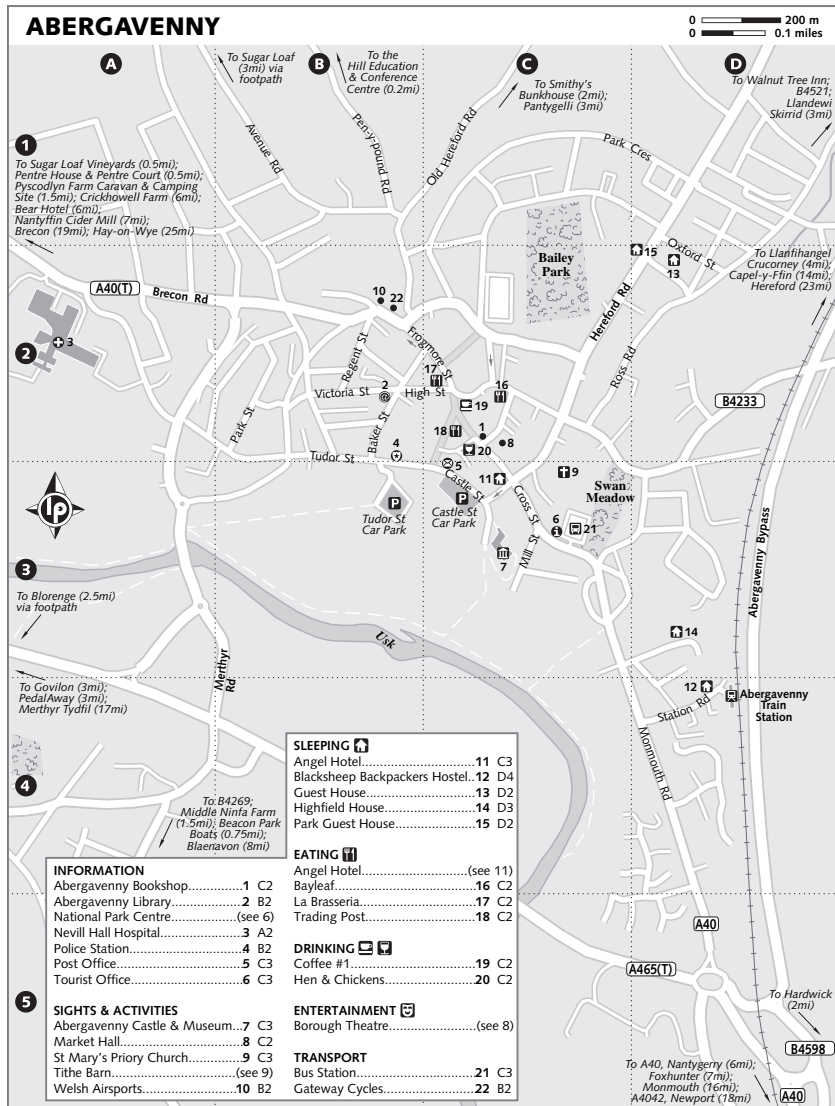
On the western edge of town are the **Sugar Loaf Vineyards** (☎ 853066; 11-10.30am-5pm Mon-Sat, noon-5pm Sun May-Oct, 10.30am-5pm Tue-Sat, noon-5pm Sun Mar & Apr, 11am-4pm Tue-Sat, noon-4pm Sun Nov-24 Dec), established in 1992 and producing around 12,000 bottles per year of award-winning Welsh wine. You can take a self-guided tour before sampling the goods at the café and gift shop.

Activities

WALKING

Abergavenny sits amid three glacially sculpted hills – **Ysgyryd Fawr** (Skirrid; 486m) to the northeast; **Sugar Loaf**, (596m) to the northwest; and the **Bloreng** (559m) to the southwest. Each has rewarding walks and fine views of the Usk Valley and the Black Mountains.

Easiest of the three is the cone-shaped **Sugar Loaf**, which offers a 9-mile return trip from the centre of town to the summit via heath, woodland and the superb viewpoint of Mynydd Llanwenarth. You can cheat by driving to a car park about halfway up on Mynydd



Llanwenarth; from here it's a 4-mile round trip. Head west on the A40, and at the edge of town turn right for Sugar Loaf Vineyards, then go left at the next two junctions.

Although the summit of the **Bloreng** is closer to town – the round trip is only 5 miles – it is a much steeper and more strenuous outing, and good walking boots are recommended. Cross the bridge over the Usk on Merthyr Rd and immediately turn right and follow the lane past the cemetery and under the main road. Cross the B4269 road in Llanfoist and follow the lane beside the church until it bends left; continue through a tunnel under the canal, and then follow a steep path straight uphill (a former tramroad that carried coal down to the canal). When you emerge from the woods, there is a final steep climb up an obvious path to the summit.

For more leisurely walks, you can follow easy paths along the banks of the River Usk, or explore the towpath of the Monmouthshire and Brecon Canal, which passes a mile southwest of the town.

You can buy a booklet called *Walks from Abergavenny* (£2) from the tourist office. There are also various guided walks on offer – again, ask at the tourist office.

BOATING

The Monmouthshire and Brecon Canal runs along the foot of the Bloreng mountain, southwest of town. You can take to the water with **Beacon Park Boats** (% 858277; www.beaconparkboats.com; The Boathouse, Llanfoist; h 10am–6pm Mar–Oct), which rents out electric-powered boats (up to six persons) for £50 a day (£65 in July and August). In a day, you can cruise south to Goytre Wharf, or north to Llangattock and back.

PARAGLIDING

The Bloreng, rising above Abergavenny to the southwest, is one of Britain's finest paragliding and hang-gliding sites. In fact, it is so important that the Southeast Wales Hang-Gliding and Paragliding Club purchased the mountain in 1998. Several records have been set from here, and the mountain regularly hosts competition events.

Welsh Airsports (% 950910; www.welshairsports.com; Frogmore St) offers instruction in paragliding seven days a week, weather permitting – a one-day course costs £150.

Courses

Franco Taruschio (who founded the Walnut Tree Inn) and Lindy Wildsmith run one-/two-day cookery courses at the **Hill Education & Conference Centre** (% 333777; www.conferencecentre.wales.co.uk; Pen-y-Pound) teaching Italian cooking with Welsh ingredients. Courses run once or twice a month, and cost £80/180 excluding accommodation.

Festivals

Abergavenny Food Festival (% 851643; www.abergavennyfoodfestival.co.uk) is the most high-profile foodie event in Wales and has lots of demonstrations, competitions, courses and stalls. The two-day event is held on the third weekend in September.

Sleeping

BUDGET

Pyscodlyn Farm Caravan & Camping Site (% 853271; www.pyscodlyncaravanpark.com; Llanwenarth Citra; sites per tent £4–12) This sheltered, grassy camping ground is beside the River Usk, 2 miles west of Abergavenny on the A40.

Smithy's Bunkhouse (% 853432; www.smithysbunkhouse.com; Lower House Farm, Pantygelli; sites per person £3, dm £8.50–9.50) Another independent bunkhouse with two comfortable 12-bed dorms plus laundry, kitchen and common room, this one on a working farm on the edge of the Black Mountains. It's 2 miles north of town along Old Hereford Rd; at Pantygelli turn right down the track opposite the Crown Inn.

Middle Ninfa Farm (% 854662; www.middleinfa.co.uk; Llanellen; sites per person £3, dm £10–12) Back-to-nature farm on the flanks of the Bloreng, with a comfortable six-bed bunkhouse and camping space for three tents. It's 2 miles south of Abergavenny – take the B4269 south from Llanfoist and go steeply up the first road on the right.

Blacksheep Backpackers (% 859125; www.blacksheepbackpackers.com; 24 Station Rd; dm/d £14/30; i) This independent hostel is across the street from the train station. It has a homey, cheerful atmosphere, comfy beds and a bar and pool room (generally not too noisy). Facilities include kitchen, TV lounge and mountain bike hire.

Guest House (% 854823; theguesthouseabergavenny@hotmail.com; 2 Oxford St; s/d from £25/45; p) This family-friendly B&B with cheerful, flouncy rooms has a special treat for kids in the garden – a mini-menagerie of pigs, rabbits and chickens. There's a drying area for wet hiking gear, and

healthy breakfasts (including vegetarian) to set you up for the day.

MIDRANGE

Park Guest House (% 853715; www.parkguesthouse.co.uk; 36 Hereford Rd; s/d £35/50; p) The seven bedrooms in this large former farmhouse are bright and cheerful, each with comfy duvets, pot plants and a chair for reading. Three are en suite; those with shared bathroom cost £25/40.

Highfield House (% 852371; www.highfieldabergavenny.co.uk; 6 Belmont Rd; s/d £36/58) A handsome Victorian villa set in spacious landscaped gardens, the Highfield has three comfortable, en suite bedrooms named after local castles, and enjoys a peaceful location not far from the town centre with views toward the Sugarloaf hill.

Pentre Court Guest House (% 853545; www.pentre-court.com; Brecon Rd; d £50–70; s) A splendid, rambling Georgian country house, the Pentre Court is packed with polished antiques and period furniture, with four-poster beds and plush sofas in the bedrooms, and a heated swimming pool and sun terrace in three acres of manicured gardens. One drawback – credit and debit cards are not accepted.

TOP END

Angel Hotel (% 857121; www.angelhotelabergavenny.com; 15 Cross St; s/d/tr from £60/85/105; p) Abergavenny's top hotel is housed in a fine Georgian building that was once a famous coaching inn. Recently refurbished, the bedrooms are stylish and understated, with clean lines and neutral colours set off with a touch of blue. Deluxe rooms (£100 to £120) have designer Villeroy and Boch bathrooms, and there's one bedroom with a four-poster bed. Note that rooms overlooking the street can be a bit noisy on Friday and Saturday nights.

Eating & Drinking

Trading Post (% 855448; 14 Nevill St; mains £3–8; h 9.30am–5pm Mon–Sat) Housed in a 16th-century town house that was formerly the Cow Inn (check out the carved cow's heads on the outside), the Trading Post is a pleasantly old-fashioned café serving a wide range of teas and coffees as well as a bistro menu of light meals.

Bayleaf (% 851212; 7 Market St; mains £6–9; h 6–11pm Tue–Thu & Sun, 6–11.30pm Fri & Sat) Abergavenny's best curry house, the Bayleaf specialises in Northern Indian and Bangladeshi cuisine, with dishes such as *gustaba* (a hot and sour lamb curry) and *aam achari* chicken (cooked in mango chutney).

La Brasserie (% 737937; Lewis' Lane; mains £8–13) This lively little bistro has a warm, sunny Mediterranean vibe, with a French-inspired menu that includes the likes of garlic mushrooms, roast duck (with chunky, homemade chips), and roast sea bream.

Angel Hotel (% 857121; 15 Cross St; mains £8–15) The Angel offers a choice of eating options, from an informal meal in front of the log fire in the bar, to the sophisticated restaurant with its crisp white linen and attentive service, to a romantic dinner in the candle-lit courtyard. The menu makes the most of local produce – the roast lamb is tender and succulent – and there's an excellent wine list.

Coffee #1 (% 737800; 14 High St) Wales' answer to Starbucks is a cosy nook of dark wood, brown leather and chilled music, and offers an extensive menu of organic and Fairtrade espresso, cappuccino and latte.

Hen & Chickens (% 853613; 7 Flannel St) A traditional real-ale pub tucked down a pedestrianised alley, the Hen & Chickens hosts live jazz sessions on Sunday afternoons (outside when it's sunny), and fortnightly folk music.

See also the boxed text, p130, for restaurants in the surrounding area.

Entertainment

The small **Borough Theatre** (% 850805; www.boroughtheatreabergavenny.co.uk; Cross St) in the Town Hall stages a varied programme of drama, opera, dance, comedy and music; the Beatles played here in 1963.

St Mary's Priory Church has regular evening choral concerts.

Getting There & Away

Stagecoach bus X3 runs to Abergavenny from Cardiff (£4, 1½ hours, hourly Monday to Saturday); five per day continue to Hereford (£4.50, one hour) in England. Sixty-Sixty bus X43 runs from Merthyr Tydfil to Abergavenny (£6, 1¼ hours, every two hours Monday to Saturday, twice on Sunday) via Brecon and Crickhowell.

The Beacons Bus (route B4) links Abergavenny with Brecon and Newport (p125).

There are trains from Cardiff (£8.20, 40 minutes, at least hourly Monday to Saturday, eight Sunday) to Abergavenny via Newport, continuing to Hereford (£6.20, 25 minutes).

Getting Around

You can rent bikes from **Gateway Cycles** (% 858519; 32 Frogmore St) in the town centre, and

EATING OUT & ABOUT

The countryside around Abergavenny is dotted with some of the best places to eat in South Wales. Here are five of the best within easy reach of the town:

Bear Hotel (☎ 01873-810408; Beaufort St, Crickhowell; mains £7-16) A fine old coaching inn with low-ceilinged rooms, stone fireplaces, blackened timber beams and antique furniture, the Bear serves top-quality bar meals as well as having a more formal restaurant. The menu ranges from heart-warming home cooking (sausages and mash with onion gravy, faggots with peas and chips) to the finest Black beef steaks and Welsh seafood. The Bear is in Crickhowell, 6.5 miles west of Abergavenny.

Nantyffin Cider Mill (☎ 01873-810775; Brecon Rd, Crickhowell; mains £8-15, 2-/3-course set menu £13/17; ⌈ closed Mon) One of the pioneers of fine dining in South Wales, this 16th-century drovers' inn takes great pride in using local produce (much of it from a farm just 5 miles down the road). The dining room is a stylish blend of bare stone, exposed roof beams, designer chairs and white table linen, while simple, unfussy dishes such as confit of lamb with garlic and rosemary sauce, or rib-eye steak with tarragon butter, allow the quality of the food to shine through. The Nantyffin is 7 miles west of Abergavenny, off the A40 just past Crickhowell.

Hardwick (☎ 01873-854220; Old Raglan Rd, Abergavenny; mains £12-16; ⌈ noon-3pm Tue-Sun, 6-10pm Tue-Sat) The Hardwick is a traditional pub-style restaurant with old stone fireplace, low ceiling beams and terracotta floor tiles. The combination of an ex-Walnut Tree chef and a gloriously unpretentious menu, from leek and potato soup to corned beef hash to juicy roast pork with perfect, crisp crackling, make for a delightful dining experience. The Hardwick is 2 miles south of Abergavenny on the B4598.

Walnut Tree Inn (☎ 01873-852797; Llandewi Skirrid; mains £10-20; ⌈ closed Sun dinner, all day Mon) Established by Franco Taruschio in 1963, the legendary Walnut Tree Inn remains one of Wales' finest restaurants. The produce is Welsh but the cuisine is Italian, with dishes such as crab tart, roast gnocchi with wild mushrooms, pan-fried sea bass with plum sauce, and shoulder of lamb roasted to pink and juicy perfection. The Walnut Tree is 3 miles northeast of Abergavenny on the B4521.

Foxhunter (☎ 01873-881101; Nant-y-Derry; mains £14-19; ⌈ closed Mon) An old Victorian pub with flagstone floors and wood-burning stoves that's had an elegant contemporary makeover, the Foxhunter brings an adventurous approach to fresh, seasonal produce with dishes such as sautéed duck liver and foie gras on toasted brioche, brown trout with *beurre blanc* (white butter sauce), sorrel and wild garlic, and (in season) deep-fried wild eelers (baby eels from the River Wye) with wild garlic mayonnaise. The Foxhunter is 7 miles south of Abergavenny, just east of the A4042.

from **PedalAway** (☎ 830219; www.pedalaway.co.uk), 3 miles west of Abergavenny near Govilon. Rates range from £10 to £30 per day, depending on type and features.

Local taxi companies include **Lewis Taxis** (☎ 854140) and **Station Taxis** (☎ 857233).

AROUND ABERGAVENNY Crickhowell (Crughywel)

☎ 01873 / pop 2800

This prosperous, picturesque, flower-bedecked village on the Abergavenny to Brecon road is named after the distinctive flat-topped Crug Hywel (Table Mountain) that rises to the north. There's not a lot to see in town, but it's a pleasant place for lunch or an overnight stop.

At research time, the **tourist office** (☎ 812105; Beaufort Chambers, Beaufort St) was scheduled to move across the street to the newly renovated Market Hall.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

The town grew up around the Norman motte (mound) and bailey castle and the nearby fording place on the River Usk. All that remains of the **castle** is a few tumbledown towers beside the High St, but the ford was superseded by an elegant 17th-century **stone bridge**, leading to the neighbouring village of Llangattock; it's famous for having 12 arches on one side, and 13 on the other.

You can hike to the top of **Crug Hywel** (Hywel's Rock; 451m), better known as Table Mountain (3 miles round trip); the tourist office has a leaflet showing the route. The summit is occupied by the remains of an Iron Age fort.

The Crickhowell area is perfect horse-riding country. **Golden Castle Riding Stables** (☎ 812649; www.golden-castle.co.uk), across the river in Llangattock, offers pony trekking, hacking, trail riding and children's activity days.

There's salmon and trout **fishing** on the River Usk; the Gliffaes Hotel beats are open to nonresidents for £22 to £30 a day.

SLEEPING

Riverside Caravan Park (☎ 810397; New Rd; sites per tent/person/car £3/2/2; ⌈ Mar-Sep) The Riverside is well kept and very central, next to the bridge, but it's small and can get a bit crowded in high summer.

Greenhill Villas (☎ 811177; www.greenhillvillas.com; 2 Greenhill Villas, Beaufort St; s/d from £30/40) On the main road at the east end of town, this handsome town house presses all the right buttons, with bedside reading lamps, big fluffy towels and an armchair in each bedroom.

Dragon Hotel (☎ 810362; www.dragonhotel.co.uk; 47 High St; s/d from £45/60; Ⓟ) Though set in an 18th-century listed building, the Dragon has a more modern feel than the Bear (see opposite) – the 15 bedrooms boast crisp, clean design with pine furniture, bold colours, and wi-fi access.

Tŷ Gwyn (☎ 811625; Brecon Rd; d £55) Tŷ Gwyn is a lovely old Georgian country house with three spacious en suite rooms. It's only two minutes' walk from the town centre, and it

was once the home of the Regency architect John Nash.

Bear Hotel (☎ 810408; www.bearhotel.co.uk; Brecon Rd; s/d from £58/77; Ⓟ) The Bear is a local institution, a fine old coaching inn with a range of chintzy, old-fashioned rooms, the more expensive ones with four-posters and Jacuzzis. See also the boxed text, opposite.

Gliffaes Hotel (☎ 730371; www.gliffaeshotel.com; Gliffaes Rd; s/d from £75/137) This Victorian country-house hotel, set in thickly wooded grounds on the banks of the Usk, has the sort of plush, luxurious rooms that you could happily spend all day in. The more expensive ones have beautiful views across the valley. It's about 4 miles northwest of Crickhowell, off the A40.

EATING & DRINKING

Cheese Press (☎ 811122; 18 High St; snacks £2-5; ⌈ 9.30am-4.15pm Mon, Tue & Thu-Sat, 9.30am-1.30pm Wed, 10.30am-4pm Sun) This pleasant tearoom is perched above a craft shop, a great place for a cuppa, a cake and a read of the papers.

Bridge End Inn (☎ 810338; Bridge St) The pub by the bridge is all timber beams and angling paraphernalia; it serves a range of real ales,

LOCAL VOICES *Jessica Bridgeman*

Name? Jessica Bridgeman.

Occupation? With my husband Glyn and our business partner Sean Gerrard, we run the Nantyffin Cider Mill, Peterstone Court Hotel and Manor Hotel near Brecon.

Where are you from? I grew up on Glaisfer Uchaf Farm, a 100-acre hill farm up in the Brecon Beacons. When I was a kid there was always work to be done and the whole family was involved – gathering the sheep from the mountain, feeding the calves, stone-picking the fields ready for hay-making, shearing and dipping the sheep, feeding, bedding and mucking out the animals during the winter. It was a great time – the farm was a so energetic and alive.

How did you get into the hotel/restaurant business? The farm started to struggle in the 1980s. My sister, my younger brother and I all worked for a year or so on the farm when we left school, but there was no way we could earn any money and my sister and I both moved to other jobs. We opened the Nantyffin Cider Mill in 1991 and moved back to the area, buying my grandparents' house off Dad to stop the farm going bankrupt. The farm was a shadow of its former self, as if all the stuffing had been knocked out of it. But Dad was determined that he wouldn't lose the farm – and so was I. There had to be a way forward.

So what did you do? We had talked many times about the farm supplying meat to our restaurants. Sean (who's still head chef of the Nantyffin) has always been passionate about sourcing food locally – he was banging this drum long before it became the 'in' thing to do. Slowly the farm produced a wider range of meat than just lamb – pork came on line, followed by chicken, duck, guinea fowl and finally beef. The farm now supplies not only our businesses but also sells locally to private customers and they do the farmers' markets every week.

The biggest impact all this has made? Well both my dad and my brother are now able to work full time on the farm – something, if we're honest, we didn't think would ever happen again. My brother's children (and mine) are being brought up on a busy, energetic and positive farm with the way of life and the values that were so important to us as children.

including Hancocks and Speckled Hen, and has a riverside beer garden across the road.

The Gliffaes Hotel does a sumptuous afternoon tea. See also the Bear Hotel and Nant-y-fyn Cider Mill in the boxed text, p130.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Crickhowell is served by the Beacons Bus routes B4 and B8, and bus X43 (see p129).

Tretower Court & Castle

Originally the home of the Vaughan family, **Tretower Court & Castle** (Cadw: % 01874-730279; adult/child £2.90/2.50; h 10am-5pm Tue-Sun Apr-Sep, 10am-4pm Tue-Sun Oct-Mar) gives you two historic buildings for the price of one – the sturdy circular tower of a Norman motte-and-bailey castle, and a 15th-century manor house with a fine medieval garden. Together they illustrate the transition from military stronghold to country house that took place in late medieval times. Staff deliver talks on the medieval garden on certain Saturdays from May to August (ask for dates at a tourist office), and there are occasional performances of Shakespeare plays in the manor house courtyard.

Tretower is 3 miles northwest of Crickhowell on the A479.

BLACK MOUNTAINS

The hills that stretch northward from Abergavenny to Hay-on-Wye, bordered by the A479 road to the west and the English border to the east, are known as the Black Mountains (not to be confused with the Black Mountain, singular, Mynydd Du in Welsh, at the western end of the Brecon Beacons National Park). The hills are bleak and wild and largely uninhabited, making this a popular walking area; the highest summit is Waun Fach (811m). The Offa's Dyke Path runs along the easternmost ridge between Pandy and Hay-on-Wye (see p63).

Llanfihangel Crucorney

The name of this little village, 4.5 miles north of Abergavenny, means 'Church of St Michael at the Corner of the Rock'. It's famous as the home of the **Skirrid Mountain Inn** (% 01873-890258; www.skirridmountaininn.co.uk; mains £8-9), said to be the oldest pub in Wales. From the early 12th century until the 17th century this was a courthouse as well as an inn, where almost 200 prisoners were hanged – you can still see rope marks on one of the beams. It serves

decent pub grub, and has three rooms offering B&B (doubles £85).

The inn makes a good base camp or finishing point for an ascent of **Ysgryd Fawr** (Skirrid; 486m), the steep-sided peak to the south; it's a 4-mile round trip from pub to summit. Alternatively you can follow the Beacons Way hiking trail from Abergavenny over Skirrid and down to the pub.

Vale of Ewyas

The scenic and secluded valley of the River Honddu runs through the heart of the Black Mountains from Llanfihangel Crucorney to the 542m-high Gospel Pass, which leads down to Hay-on-Wye. It's a magical place, with only a very narrow, single-track road running along it, best explored on foot, bike or horseback.

Just west of the entrance to the valley, halfway up a hillside on a narrow country lane, is the remote and beautiful **Partrishow Church**. Part Norman and part medieval, this tiny church contains a remarkable, finely carved wooden rood screen and loft, dating from around 1500. On the walls are medieval frescoes of biblical texts, coats of arms, and a red-ochre skeleton bearing hourglass and scythe – the figure of Death. The church is usually open; leave a donation in the box.

Halfway along the valley lie the atmospheric ruins of the 13th-century **Llanthony Priory** (always open), set among grasslands and wooded hills by the River Honddu. Though not as grand as Tintern Abbey, the setting is even more romantic; JMW Turner painted the scene in 1794.

ACTIVITIES

Court Farm (% 01873-890359; www.llanthony.co.uk; half/full day beginners £18/36, experienced £24/42), next door to Llanthony Priory and the Abbey Hotel, offers **pony trekking** and hacking. Half-day rides begin at 10am and 2pm.

There are lots of **walking** possibilities. From Llanthony, several paths lead up to the top of the Hatterall ridge to the east; it's a stiff climb, but straightforward (2 to 3 miles round trip). For a more ambitious hike, follow the ridge north for 4 miles then descend to Vision Farm, then back along the valley road to Llanthony (9 miles round trip).

SLEEPING & EATING

Barn B&B (% 01873-890477; www.thebarn-wales.co.uk; Pen-y-Maes, Capel-y-Ffin; s/d £25/50) The Barn is a warm and welcoming B&B in a delightful setting at

the head of the valley, with stunning views from the conservatory-cum-breakfast room.

Abbey Hotel (% 01873-890487; www.llanthonyprioryhotel.co.uk; Llanthony; s/d £40/65) Seemingly growing out of the priory ruins, and incorporating some of the original medieval buildings, the Abbey Hotel is wonderfully atmospheric, with four-poster beds, stone spiral staircases and rooms squeezed into turrets; there are only five rooms, so book ahead. The vaulted cellars house a cosy bar that serves good pub lunches. Meals are available for £7 to £9.

There's bunkhouse accommodation at Court Farm, next to Llanthony Priory, and at **Capel-y-Ffin Youth Hostel** (% 0870 770 5748; Capel-y-Ffin, Llanthony; dm £11; h year-round) near the head of the valley. There are also several basic camp sites in the valley.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Beacons Bus B7 – also called the Offa's Dyke Flyer – runs on Sundays and bank holidays from late May to mid-September, following a circular route from Hay-on-Wye to Llanfihangel Crucorney via Capel-y-Ffin (30 minutes, three daily) and Llanthony (45 minutes), returning via Longtown and Craswall on the English side of the border. There is no other public transport.

BRECON (ABERHONDDU)

% 01874 / pop 7000

The handsome stone market town of Brecon stands at the meeting of the River Usk and the River Honddu. For centuries the town thrived as a centre of wool production and weaving; today it's the main transport hub for the national park and a natural base for exploring the surrounding countryside.

An Iron Age hill fort on Pen-y-Crug, northwest of town, and the remains of a Roman camp at Y Gaer, to the west, testifies to the site's antiquity. After the Romans, the area was ruled by the Irish-born king Brychan, who married into a Welsh royal house in the 5th century. The town takes its name from him, and his kingdom, Brycheiniog (anglicised to Brecknock), gave its name to the old county of Brecknockshire. Merthyr Tydfil was named for Brychan's daughter, St Tudful.

It was not until Norman times that Brecon began to burgeon. The local Welsh prince, Rhys ap Tewdwr, was defeated in 1093 by Bernard de Newmarch, a Norman lord, who

then built the town's castle and church (which later became a cathedral).

Orientation

The main bus stop is on the Bulwark, the town's main street, next to St Mary's Church. The tourist office is on the town's main car park, a short walk north through Bethel Square Shopping Centre.

Information

Andrew Morton Books (% 620086; 7 Lion St) Staggering selection of fiction, nonfiction and local interest books. There's another branch at 10-11 Lion Yard.

Brecon Cyber Café (% 621912; 10 Lion St; h 10am-5pm Mon-Sat; per 30 min £2.50)

Brecon Hospital (% 622443; Cerrigcochion Rd)

Brecon Library (Ship St; h 9.30am-5pm Mon & Wed-Fri, 9.30am-7pm Tue, 9.30am-1pm Sat) Free internet access.

Police Station (% 0845 330 2000; Lion St)

Post Office (Co-op Supermarket, Lion St; h 8.30am-5.30pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-7.30pm Sat, 9.30am-4pm Sun)

Tourist Office (% 622485; Cattle Market car park; h 9.30am-5.30pm Mon-Sat, 10am-4pm Sun) See also the National Park Visitor Centre (p123), 5 miles southwest of Brecon.

Sights

There's not a great deal to see in town – Brecon is more a base for exploring the surrounding hills – but there are a couple of sights for rainy days.

Beyond the stolid neoclassical exterior of the former Shire Hall is the impressive **Brecknock Museum & Art Gallery** (% 624121; Captain's Walk; adult/child £1/50p; h 10am-5pm Tue-Fri, 10am-1pm & 2-5pm Sat year-round, noon-5pm Sun Apr-Sep only). Exhibits include a 1200-year-old dugout canoe found at Llangorse Lake, a complete Victorian assize court complete with a stilted recording of court pronouncements, and that favourite of Welsh museums, a re-created Welsh kitchen. Also featured are the archaeology, history and natural history of the Brecon area, and an art gallery with changing exhibits.

The **South Wales Borderers Museum** (% 613310; www.rw.org.uk; The Barracks; adult/child £3/free; h 10am-5pm Mon-Fri year-round, 10am-4pm Sat & bank holidays Easter-Sep) commemorates the history of the Royal Regiment of Wales, which is based in Brecon. Many of the soldiers are Gurkhas, often to be seen in their civvies around the town. The highlight is the Zulu War Room – the regiment's predecessor fought in the 1879 Anglo-Zulu war in South Africa, inspiration for the 1964 film *Zulu* starring Michael

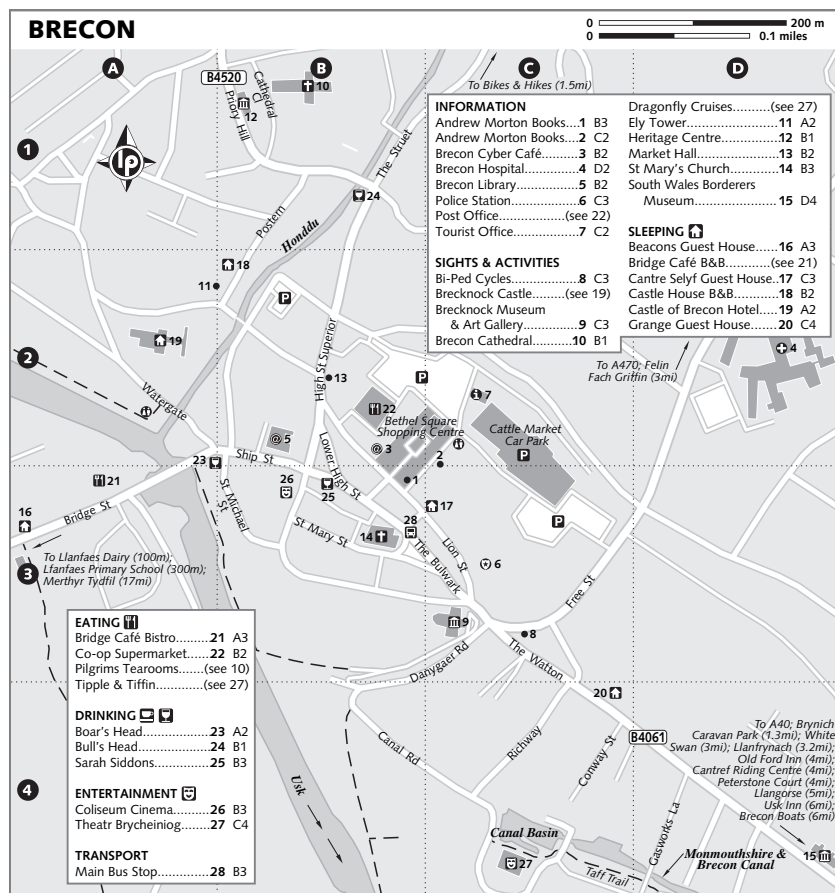
Caine. The fascinating collection of artefacts recalls the defence of Rorke's Drift, when 150 Welsh soldiers held out against 4000 Zulu warriors.

Brecon Cathedral (☎ 623857; Cathedral Cl), perched on a hill above the River Honddu, was founded as part of a Benedictine monastery in 1093, though little remains of the Norman structure except the font and parts of the nave. At the western end of the nave, just inside the door, is a stone cresset (an ancient lighting device), the only one in Wales; the 30 cups carved into the stone slab once held oil for the cathedral's lamps. The nave is draped with regimental banners from the Zulu wars (the cathedral contains the regimental chapel of the South Wales Borderers). In the cathedral

grounds is a **Heritage Centre** (☎ 625222; admission free; 10am-4.30pm Mon-Sat Apr-Dec) and gift shop housed in a restored 15th-century tithe barn. The cathedral hosts regular choral concerts.

What little remains of Brecon's Norman **castle** was incorporated into the Castle of Brecon Hotel. Across the road from the hotel is the original Norman motte, capped by the ivy-clad **Ely Tower** (not open to the public).

Brecon is the northern terminus of the **Monmouthshire & Brecon Canal**, built between 1799 and 1812 for the movement of coal, iron ore, limestone and agricultural goods. The 33 miles from Brecon to Pontypool is back in business moving tourists around, and the busiest section is around Brecon. The canal basin is 400m south of the town centre.



Activities

WALKING

The conical hill of **Pen-y-Crug** (331m), capped by an Iron Age hill fort, rises to the northwest of the town, and makes a good objective for a short hike (2.5 miles round trip). There's a superb view of the Brecon Beacons from the summit.

A peaceful 8.5-mile walk along the towpath of the Monmouthshire & Brecon Canal leads to the picturesque village of **Talybont-on-Usk**. You can return on the X43 bus from Abergavenny to Brecon, or the Beacons Bus B4, B6 or B8.

For information on climbing Pen-y-Fan, see the boxed text, p124.

The tourist office sells a national park booklet, *Walks in the Brecon Area*.

CYCLING & MOUNTAIN BIKING

There are lots of opportunities for both on-road cycle-touring and off-road mountain biking around Brecon; the National Park Visitor Centre at Libanus (p123) has information on routes, some of which begin at the centre itself.

The classic off-road route in the Brecon Beacons is the **Gap Road**, a 24-mile loop from Brecon that takes in a high pass through the hills close to Pen-y-Fan, a descent through Talybont-on-Usk and a final easy return stretch along the Monmouthshire & Brecon Canal. Ask for details at Brecon tourist office or the National Park Visitor Centre.

At the beginning of September, Brecon hosts the annual **Brecon Beast** (www.breconbeast.co.uk) mountain-bike race, a gruelling 68-mile off-road event that starts and finishes in the town.

You can rent bikes at the following places: **Bikes & Hikes** (☎ 610071; www.bikesandhikes.co.uk; 1 Warle Cottage, near Llandew) Rental per half-/full day £11/16; also runs guided trips.

Bi-Ped Cycles (☎ 622296; www.bipedcycles.co.uk; 10 Ship St) Rental per half-/full day £10/15; can also arrange guided rides for £30 per guide.

HORSE RIDING

The **Cantref Riding Centre** (☎ 665233; www.cantref.com; Upper Cantref Farm, Llanfrynach; per hr/half-/full day £10/20/40) offers pony trekking and hacking, and also runs two- to five-day guided treks into the Brecon Beacons.

BOATING

Dragonfly Cruises (☎ 685222; www.dragonfly-cruises.co.uk; adult/child £6/4; 1 Apr-Oct), based in the canal

basin in Brecon, runs 2½-hour canal boat trips; there are departures once or twice daily on Wednesday, Saturday and Sunday (as well as Thursday in July, plus Tuesday, Thursday and Friday in August).

If you prefer the self-drive experience, **Brecon Boats** (☎ 676401; Travellers Rest Inn, Talybont-on-Usk; 1 Apr-Oct) hires out boats by the hour, charging £20/40/50 for 1/4/6 hours. They're at Talybont-on-Usk, southeast of Brecon (about 6 miles by road or 8.5 miles along the towpath).

Festivals

On the second weekend in August, the town hosts the **Brecon Jazz Festival** (www.breconjazz.co.uk), one of Europe's leading jazz events, attracting thousands of fans for a long, laid-back party. Accommodation is hard to find at this busy time, although open areas all over town become makeshift camping grounds. Previous headlining acts have included Sonny Rollins, Courtney Pine, Dr John, and George Melly (who has a house nearby).

The annual **Brecon Beacons Food Festival** (☎ 624979; www.breconbeaconsfoodfestival.com) takes place on the first Saturday in October, and is centred on the Market Hall.

Sleeping

BUDGET

Cantref Riding Centre (☎ 665233; www.cantref.com; Upper Cantref Farm, Llanfrynach; sites per person £3.50, dm £11.50) In a ravishing setting overlooking the hills, this family-run riding centre has two comfortable bunkhouses and a camping ground. It's 2 miles south of Brecon on foot, or 4 miles by car – take the A40 towards Abergavenny, then the B4558 towards Llanfrynach.

Brynich Caravan Park (☎ 623325; www.brynich.co.uk; Brynich; sites per tent & car plus 2 people £14-16; 1 Apr-Oct) About 1.5 miles east of Brecon, Brynich is a cut above the usual camping ground with disabled access, an indoor children's play park, adventure playground, and an impressive barn restaurant.

Bridge Café B&B (☎ 622024; www.bridgecafe.co.uk; 7 Bridge St; s/d from £20/40; 1 closed Nov-Jan) Owned by keen mountain-bikers and hill walkers who can advise on local activities, the Bridge has three plain but comfortable bedrooms with down-filled duvets and crisp cotton sheets. Bike storage is available. See also Bridge Café Bistro under Eating.

Grange Guest House (☎ 624038; 22 The Watton; s/d £35/48; p) A spacious Victorian town house

with leafy gardens, the Grange is only a few minutes' stroll from both town centre and canal. Hikers, cyclists and motorbikers are welcome, and there's secure storage for bikes. Rooms with shared bathroom are £28/40.

MIDRANGE

Beacons Guest House (‰ 623339; www.beacons.brecon.co.uk; 16 Bridge St; s/d £40/52) Set in a former farmhouse with a Georgian frontage, the Beacons is just across the river from the town centre. As well as a couple of sprucely decorated rooms in the main house, there are a couple of self-contained suites, suitable for families, in the old barn and cottage out the back.

Castle House B&B (‰ 623343; www.castle-house.co.uk; The Postern; s/d £40/60) Located on a quiet back street close to the town centre, the Castle is a smartly renovated Victorian town house attractively furnished with period pieces and a pleasant lounge/dining room with leather sofas and a wood-burning stove. The 'dragon sausages' (made with pork, leek and a touch of chilli) add a bit of spice to breakfast!

Castle of Brecon Hotel (‰ 624611; www.breconcastle.co.uk; Castle Sq; s/d from £50/60) Built into the ruined walls of Brecknock Castle, this grand old hotel is getting a bit creaky but is still good value. It's worth splashing out for the spacious, south-facing deluxe rooms (singles/doubles £74/85), which have four-poster beds and great views of the Brecon Beacons.

Cantre Selyf Guest House (‰ 622904; www.cantreselyf.co.uk; 5 Lion St; s/d £48/72; P) This elegant Georgian town house, right in the middle of Brecon, has atmospheric period décor and furnishings, including plaster mouldings, original fireplaces and cast-iron bedsteads.

TOP END

Felin Fach Griffin (‰ 620111; www.eatdrinksleep.ltd.uk; Felin Fach; d £98-125) The Griffin prides itself on simplicity and quality: there are no chintz or floral patterns here, just neutral décor with a splash of colour to set off antique four-poster beds equipped with goose-down pillows and duvets. It also has a highly rated restaurant (see the boxed text, opposite). The Griffin is 5 miles northeast of Brecon, just off the A470.

Eating & Drinking

Most of the quality eating places in town are cafés that close around 5pm or 6pm. For an evening meal, you'll have to try a bar meal at one of the pubs (generally 6.30pm to 8.30pm),

or head for one of the out-of-town places recommended in the boxed text, opposite.

Pilgrims Tearooms (‰ 610610; Brecon Cathedral Cl; mains £3-7; 7 10am-5pm, lunch noon-2.30pm) The café in the cathedral grounds is housed in a tithe barn-style building, with outdoor tables beside a herb garden. The menu includes home-baked bread, salads, jacket potatoes and daily specials, and a Sunday lunch of roast lamb, beef or chicken.

Bridge Café Bistro (‰ 622024; www.bridgecafe.co.uk; 7 Bridge St; mains £4-7; 7 food served 11am-6pm) A great little bistro with a rustic, farmhouse kitchen look, the Bridge serves simple, home-cooked dishes using fresh, seasonal, organic produce, from onion soup to lamb stew, falafel to mushroom stroganoff. It also serves organic beer, wine and cider, and Welsh-made Brecon gin and Penderwyn whisky.

Tipple & Tiffin (‰ 611622; Theatr Brycheiniog, Canal Wharf; mains £6-8; 7 noon-2.30pm & 7-9pm Mon-Sat) The restaurant attached to Brecon's theatre has outdoor tables beside the canal basin, and serves fresh, tasty fare such as game sausages and mash with onion gravy, and pasta with vegetable ragout.

Bull's Head (‰ 622044; The Struet; mains £7-9) Probably the best real-ale pub in town, with Evan Evans beer from Llandeilo and a range of guest ales, the Bull's Head is cosy, quiet and friendly. It also serves very good pub grub (until 9pm Monday to Friday, and 8pm weekends).

Boar's Head (Ship St) The Boar's Head is a lively local pub, with sofas in the back room and the full range of Breconshire Brewery real ales on tap. There's a sunny beer garden overlooking the river, and regular live music.

Llanfaes Dairy (‰ 625892; Bridge St) The local dairy has a café that serves fresh-ground Italian coffee, and homemade ice cream in a wide range of flavours.

Self-caterers can stock up at the **Co-op Supermarket** (Lion St; 7 8am-9pm Mon-Sat, 10am-4pm Sun).

Entertainment

Theatr Brycheiniog (‰ 611622; www.theatrbrycheiniog.co.uk; Canal Rd) The canalside theatre complex is the town's main venue for drama, comedy and music. It also has an exhibition centre.

Coliseum Cinema (‰ 622501; Wheat St; adult/child £5.50/4.50) The Coliseum is a refreshingly old-fashioned family cinema with two screens. As well as mainstream films, the local film society shows art-house films on Monday evenings.

Brecon Male Voice Choir (Llanfaes Primary School, Orchard St; 7 7.30-9.30pm Fri) For a few booming harmo-

TOP NOSH

The countryside around Brecon is dotted with pubs and restaurants that take great pride in using local Welsh produce that is fresh, seasonal and often organic. Here's our pick of the best:

Felin Fach Griffin (‰ 01874-620111; Felin Fach; mains £10-17; 7 closed Mon Lunch) With a string of awards as long as its extensive wine list, the Griffin offers gourmet dining in a relaxed and unpretentious setting. Open fires, leather sofas and timber beams create a comfortable atmosphere, while the kitchen makes the most of local fish, meat and game (they even grow their own veggies), serving dishes such as roast venison with braised red cabbage, wild mushroom risotto with sherry butter, and steak with braised leeks, chips and Béarnaise sauce. The Griffin is 5 miles northeast of Brecon on the A470.

Old Ford Inn (‰ 01874-665220; Llanhamlach; mains £7-12) The Old Ford is an old-fashioned country pub with weathered oak beams, stone fireplace and a range of well-looked-after real ales. You can eat in the bar, or opt for a more formal meal in the farmhouse-kitchen-style restaurant. Llanhamlach is on the A40, 4 miles southeast of Brecon.

Usk Inn (‰ 01874-676251; Talybont-on-Usk; 2-/3-course dinner £20/25) This appealing Victorian country inn, close to the Brecon Canal, serves hearty local fare such as twice-cooked lamb shank with minted rosemary jus; ricotta cheese and basil ravioli with creamy tomato and spinach sauce; and seafood dishes such as swordfish fillet with a sesame crust. There's also an excellent three-course Sunday lunch for £15, served noon to 3pm. The Usk Inn is 6 miles southeast of Brecon on the B4558.

White Swan (‰ 01874-665276; Llanfrynach; mains £13-16) A traditional village inn that offers a candlelit dining room with old wood floors, a bar with comfortably worn leather sofas and armchairs, and a beautiful garden terrace. The White Swan is a great place to relax after a walk along the canal or a hike in the Brecon Beacons. The menu emphasises Welsh lamb, beef and venison, with daily fish and vegetarian specials. Llanfrynach is 3.5 miles southeast of Brecon off the B4558.

nies, head to the practice sessions of the Brecon Male Voice Choir; visitors are welcome.

Getting There & Away

Sixty-Sixty bus X43 runs from Cardiff to Brecon (£4, 1½ hours, five daily Monday to Saturday, one on Sunday) via Merthyr Tydfil (40 minutes, six daily Monday to Saturday, two on Sunday). The same service continues from Brecon to Crickhowell and Abergavenny (£4, 50 minutes, six daily Monday to Saturday, no Sunday service). All the Beacons Bus routes (see p125) converge on Brecon.

Stagecoach bus 63 links Brecon with Swansea (£4, 1½ hours, three daily Monday to Saturday) via Dan-yr-Ogof Showcases. For Llandovery, take bus 714 (£4, 40 minutes, six daily Monday to Saturday), and for Newtown (£8, two hours, six daily Monday to Saturday) via Builth Wells and Llandrindod Wells take Stagecoach bus 704.

AROUND BRECON

Llangorse Lake

Reed-fringed Llangorse Lake (Llyn Syfaddan), to the east of Brecon, may be Wales' second-largest natural lake (after Llyn Tegid), but it's barely more than a mile long and half a mile

wide. Close to the northern shore is a **crannog**, a lake dwelling built on an artificial island. Such dwellings or refuges were used from the late Bronze Age until early medieval times. Tree-ring dating shows that this one (of which only the base remains) was built around AD 900, probably by the royal house of Brycheiniog. Among the artefacts found here was a dugout canoe, now on display in Brecon's Brecknock Museum; other finds can be seen at the National Museum & Gallery of Wales in Cardiff (p86). There's a reconstruction of a crannog house on the shore at Lakeside Caravan Park.

ACTIVITIES

The lake is the national park's main water sports venue, with facilities for sailing, windsurfing, canoeing and water-skiing. **Lakeside Caravan Park** (‰ 01874-658226; www.llangors.com; Llangorse), on the north shore, rents rowing boats year-round for £8 per hour; Canadian canoes for £7 per half-hour (April to September); Wayfarer sailing dinghies for £16 per hour; and bicycles for £10/14 per half-/full-day.

Set on a hillside above the eastern end of Llangorse Lake is the **Llangorse Multi-Activity Centre** (‰ 658272; www.activityuk.com; Giffach Farm, Llangorse; 7 9am-5pm). It offers a range of adventure

AUTHOR'S CHOICE

An elegant Georgian manor house overlooking the River Usk, **Peterstone Court** (☎ 01874-665387; www.peterstone-court.com; Llanhamlach, near Brecon; s/d from £80/90; Ⓟ) enjoys a fantastic location with views across the valley to the peaks of Cribyn and Pen-y-Fan. Despite the country house setting the atmosphere is relaxed and informal, the oak floors, marble fireplaces, antique furniture and leather armchairs set off with fresh flowers and modern art. The bedrooms are large and luxurious, with crisp bed linen and comfy mattresses, while the restaurant is one of the best in the area. The basement leisure suite contains a candle-lit meditation room, four-seater sauna, Jacuzzi and gym, with a whole range of spa treatments on offer. Outside, there's a heated pool, and wooden decks with mountain views, and you're only a few yards from the hiking and biking trails along the river and the Monmouthshire & Brecon Canal. The hotel is 3 miles southeast of Brecon, just off the A40.

activities, the most popular of which is an outdoor aerial assault course that involves clambering up cargo nets, balancing along logs, swinging on tyres and zipping through the air on a 100m long ropeway (£18 for two hours). There's also an indoor facility with artificial rock-climbing walls, a log climb, abseil area, rope bridge and even an artificial caving area. A one-hour climbing 'taster' session costs £12.

The centre also offers pony trekking (£21 for two hours), horse riding (£26 for two hours), and gentle pony rides for kids aged four to seven years (£7), as well as three- to five-day riding holidays in the Brecon Beacons and Black Mountains.

SLEEPING

The **Lakeside Caravan Park** (☎ 01874-658226; www.llangors.com; Llangorse; sites per person £4.25-5.25) runs a well-appointed camp site, and there is a range of places to stay that can be arranged at Llangorse Activity Centre, from **Pen-Y-Bryn Guest House** (☎ 658606; d from £45), which offers B&B in a farmhouse in Llangorse village, to bunkhouse accommodation (£13 to £15.50 per person) and camping (£4 per person) at the centre itself.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Llangorse Lake is 6 miles east of Brecon. The Postbus service from the Bulwark in Brecon stops in Llangorse village (30 minutes, one daily Monday to Friday), as does Beacons Bus route B11.

FFOREST FAWR & BLACK MOUNTAIN

The **Fforest Fawr** (Great Forest), once a Norman hunting ground, is now a UNESCO geopark famous for its varied landscapes, ranging from bleak moorland to flower-flecked limestone pavement and lush wooded ravines choked with moss and greenery.

Near the isolated village of **Ystradfellte** lies a series of dramatic waterfalls, the finest being Sgwd-yr-Eira (Fall of Snow) where you can actually walk behind the waterfall. The **Waterfalls Walk** is a 9.5-mile circuit that takes in Sgwd-yr-Eira and seven other waterfalls, beginning and ending at the car park in Ystradfellte – ask for a leaflet with a map at the small shop in the village. Take special care – the footpaths can be slippery, and there are several steep, stony sections.

Just a mile south of the car park, along a signposted trail, the River Mellte disappears into **Porth-yr-Ogof** (Door to the Cave), the biggest cave entrance in Britain (3m high and 20m wide), only to reappear 100m further south.

If the weather's a bit cold and wet, you can warm up with a shot of whisky from **Penderyn Distillery** (☎ 01685-813300; www.welsh-whisky.co.uk), in the village of Penderyn, 4 miles south of Ystradfellte. Opened in 2004, the distillery produces Brecon Gin, Brecon Five Vodka and Merlyn Cream Liqueur as well as Penderyn single malt whisky. There are plans to build a visitor centre, which is scheduled to open in September 2007. A Welsh on the rocks, anyone?

The limestone plateau of the southern Fforest Fawr around the upper reaches of the River Tawe is riddled with some of the largest and most complex cave systems in Britain. Most can be visited only by experienced cavers, but the **Dan-yr-Ogof caves** (☎ 01639-730801; www.showcaves.co.uk; adult/child £10/6.50; ⌚ 10am-4pm Apr-Oct, last entry to caves 3pm), near the Craig-y-Nos Country Park, are open to the public. The highlight of the 1.5-mile self-guided tour is the **Cathedral Cave**, a high-domed chamber with a lake fed by two waterfalls that pour from openings. Nearby is the **Bone Cave**, where 42 Bronze Age skeletons were discovered. The admission fee also gives entry to various other attractions

on site, including a museum, a reconstructed Iron Age farm, a prehistoric theme park filled with life-sized fibreglass dinosaurs, a shire-horse centre, and even a dry ski slope. The caves are just off the A4067 north of Abercraf, 20 miles south of Brecon.

Beneath the hillside to the east of Dan-yr-Ogof lies the twisting maze of subterranean chambers known as **Ogof Ffynnon Ddu** (Cave of the Black Spring), the deepest and third-longest cave system in the UK (308m deep, with 31 miles of passages). This one is for expert potholers only, but you can explore it virtually at www.ogof.net.

Black Mountain, the western section of the national park, contains the wildest, loneliest and least visited walking country. Its finest

feature is the sweeping escarpment of **Fan Brycheiniog** (802m), which rises steeply above the scenic glacial lakes of Llyn y Fan Fach and Llyn y Fan Fawr. It can be climbed from the Llanddeusant Youth Hostel (p124); the round trip is 12 miles.

Carreg Cennen Castle, in the far southwestern corner of the national park, is best approached from Llandeilo; see p158.

Getting There & Away

Stagecoach bus 63 between Swansea and Brecon stops at Dan-yr-Ogof (three per day Monday to Saturday). Beacons Bus B2 links Brecon and Swansea with Dan-yr-Ogof; B3 goes from Brecon to Penderyn. There is no public transport to Ystradfellte or Llanddeusant.

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