

Getting Started

Dust off your rucksack, fish out your hiking boots and you're ready to go. The only difficult thing about planning a trip to Wales is deciding where to visit first. Do you go for the all-action hiking-cycling-surfing-rafting route, play the history buff and soak up the sights, or wallow in cosy pubs after windswept walks? Luckily nothing is too far away in Wales and it's easy to squeeze in a bit of everything – even on a short trip. Public transport is reasonable, there's accommodation to suit all budgets and, above all, the locals are very friendly.

See Climate Charts (p309) for more information.

WHEN TO GO

Wales is beautiful at any time of year, but the soggy Welsh weather means that summer (June to August) remains the busiest time for visitors. Most of the rain is concentrated in autumn and early winter, with the worst of the downpours generally between October and January. Winter days are startlingly short, and although you may get a picturesque blanket of snow, many smaller attractions, tourist offices and B&Bs close for the entire low season (October to Easter).

After January the rain slackens off and as temperatures pick up and days lengthen it's a good time to get out walking. Spectator sports, too, hit their peak, with both the rugby and football calendars coming to a close.

July and August is high season for Wales, coinciding with the major school-holiday period across Britain (see p313), hence attractions, accommodation and roads can get choked with visitors, prices are often inflated and even the kindest of locals can get annoyed with the crush. However, this is prime time for a long, lingering night at one of Wales' countless festivals or a concerted assault on its highest mountains.

To beat the crowds, May and September are great times to visit, combining the best of the weather with the colours of the countryside, but without the clogged roads and accommodation rush of midsummer.

COSTS

Prices in Wales will seem expensive to many overseas visitors; the cost of accommodation and restaurants tends to be slightly higher than in many other parts of the UK. Prices are noticeably higher around Cardiff and Snowdonia, and more expensive generally in high season (June to August), while prices everywhere tend to drop in the low season (October to Easter).

Backpackers using public transport, staying at hostels and eating a combination of supermarket food and modest restaurant meals could scrape by on about £30 per day. If you plan to hire a car, stay in B&Bs, eat out at midrange

HOW MUCH?

Ticket to national rugby game £15

B&B en-suite double room £50

Local newspaper 50p

Average single bus journey £1.20

A coffee and two slices of *bara brith* (spicy fruit loaf) £2.50

Three-course dinner £15

One hour's car parking £0.40

See also Lonely Planet Index on inside front cover.

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

Some swear by packing light, and you'll be very glad you did if you're lugging your backpack down a one-track road followed by a herd of rogue sheep; others pack for contingencies and feel safest with an outfit and accessory for every occasion. Just remember, everything you could ever need will be readily available in Wales.

Do pack your rain gear, however, as a downpour is a distinct possibility. Take some cool-weather gear as well, as cold snaps are also common, even in summer. Hostellers will be glad if they carry a padlock, while die-hard campers shouldn't leave home without good boots and a torch (flashlight), and the seriously active will need a compass and first-aid kit.

Lastly, don't forget a copy of your travel-insurance documents (see p313 for more details).

places and see some sights you'll need to budget about £80 per day. Those opting for top-end hotels and facilities should plan on about £150 per day.

For travellers with families it's worth looking into family passes for transport (p330) and sights and asking hotels for special family deals. All national

TOP TENS

Must-See Films

For a quick-fix taste of Wales before you leave home, nestle down on the sofa and nurture those daydreams with these flicks. Most of these films are reviewed on p45.

- *How Green Was My Valley* (1941)
Director: John Ford
- *Above Us the Earth* (1977)
Director: Karl Francis
- *Twin Town* (1997)
Director: Paul Turner
- *Hedd Wynn* (1994)
Director: Kevin Allen
- *The Englishman Who Went Up a Hill... (1995)* Director: Chris Monger
- *Tiger Bay* (1959)
Director: J Lee Thompson
- *Solomon and Gaenor* (Solomon a Gaenor; 1998) Director: Paul Morrison
- *Eldra* (2002)
Director: Tim Lyn
- *The Citadel* (1938)
Director: King Vidor
- *Human Traffic* (1999)
Director: Justin Kerrigan

Top 10 Novels

Wash away the old stereotypes and get a grasp of Cool Cymru with these top page-turners. Some of these books are reviewed on p42.

- *Work, Sex and Rugby* (1993)
Lewis Davies
- *My People* (1915)
Caradog Evans
- *Rape of the Country Fair* (1998)
Alexander Cordell
- *Entertainment* (2000)
Richard John Evans
- *Aberystwyth Mon Amour* (2001)
Malcolm Pryce
- *How Green Was My Valley* (1939)
Richard Llewellyn
- *Sugar and Slate* (1992)
Charlotte Williams
- *Flesh and Blood* (1974)
Emyr Humphreys
- *The Green Bridge* (1992)
John Davies (Ed)
- *One Moonlit Night* (1995)
Caradog Pritchard

Our Favourite Festivals & Events

Party with the best of them on Wales' packed festival circuit. From the divine to the dangerous there's almost always something of interest going on around the country.

- Six Nations Rugby Championship (Cardiff) February/March
- Sesiwn Fawr Festival (Dolgellau) July
- Urdd Eisteddfod (changing venues) May/June
- Cardiff Festival (Cardiff) July/August
- Hay Festival (Hay-on-Wye) May/June
- Brecon Jazz Festival (Brecon) August
- Man vs Horse Marathon (Llanwrtyd Wells) June
- Victorian Festival (Llandrindod Wells) August
- International Musical Eisteddfod (Llangollen) July
- Abergavenny Food Festival (Abergavenny) September

museums and galleries are free and most other attractions don't charge for children under five.

TRAVEL LITERATURE

Welsh travelogues range from the old and not so politically correct to the rosy-eyed and romantic. Some of the following titles are now out of print but can be found via online bookstores or in secondhand bookshops.

For a good overview of Welsh people and culture, Dannie Abse's stimulating *Journals from the Antheap* (1988) is a compilation of humorous accounts of his trips through Wales, musing with droll satire on the state of the nation.

Anthony Bailey's *A Walk Through Wales* (1992) is an engaging account of a three-week cross-country ramble that attempts to make sense of the legend-rich land through his encounters with farmers and poets, nationalists and clerics.

A more romanticised version of Wales is proposed in Jan Morris' *Wales: Epic Views of a Small Country* (1984), as she recounts her search across the valleys and mountains for the very origins of Welsh character, folklore and culture.

Muse over the passage of time and the shaping of a nation in *I Know Another Way* (2002), a compilation of stories by six of Wales' leading writers, which reflect on their journeys along an ancient pilgrimage route from Tintern to St David's.

Three astounding 18th-century guides to Wales are combined in *A Tour in Wales* (1773) by Thomas Pennant. The original works were largely responsible for the popularity of Wales with the Romantic Movement.

George Borrow's *Wild Wales: Its People, Language and Scenery* (1862) is an evocative and entertaining account of an 1854 walking tour of Wales, with the author's illuminating, if condescending, observations on Welsh people and places.

Hugh Oliff's *On Borrow's Trail: Wild Wales Then and Now* (2003) is a modern interpretation of Borrow's book as the author retraces his steps, recording changes in the landscape and people in a rich commentary accompanied by evocative photographs and illustrations.

INTERNET RESOURCES

Activity Wales (www.activitywales.com) The one-stop shop for everything from golf to abseiling.

Data Wales (www.data-wales.co.uk) A marvellous miscellany of cultural titbits.

ICWales (www.icwales.co.uk) Comprehensive and detailed news, plus features on all aspects of Welsh life.

Lonely Planet (www.lonelyplanet.com/destinations/europe/wales) Extensive information and links and tips from travellers.

V Wales (www.vwales.co.uk) A bottomless pit of information on Wales.

VisitWales (www.visitwales.com) A comprehensive website from the official Welsh tourism authority.

Itineraries

CLASSIC ROUTES

SOUTH WALES & THE PEMBROKESHIRE COAST 10 Days

If you're short on time and want to see a good cross-section of Wales, the southern end of the country is probably the most accessible.

Start off with the sights and sounds of **Cardiff** (p81), including its fantasy **castle** (p85), sparkling **Cardiff Bay** (p88) and the incredible **National Museum** (p86). When you've finished, take a side trip to whimsical **Castell Coch** (p105) and **Caerphilly Castle** (p105) before getting a real insight into Wales' past at the **St Fagans National History Museum** (p104) and **Rhondda Heritage Park** (p119).

When you've had your fill of history, head for the **Brecon Beacons National Park** (p123) for a breath of fresh mountain air and some excellent walking. From here head south and breeze through **Swansea** (p141) and on to Wales' first declared Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), the **Gower Peninsula** (p151), a hot spot for adrenaline junkies. Head further west to Pembrokeshire, where some good spots to visit include **Tenby** (p165), **Manorbier** (p169), **Carew Castle** (p181) and **Tidal Mill** (p181), and the puffin colony on **Skomer Island** (p183). It's also well worth walking part of the clifftop **Pembrokeshire Coast Path** (p197), perhaps from Dale to Martin's Haven, before finishing up with a bracing walk along the fine sandy beaches of **St Bride's Bay** (p182).



See the best of South Wales and the Pembrokeshire Coast on this leisurely 190-mile trip around heritage sites, moody mountains and surf-swept shores.

THE WELSH LOOP

Three Weeks

One of the most popular routes is a wide loop taking in all the Welsh high-lights: castles and mountains, a good dose of spectacular countryside and the buzzing capital.

Begin in **Cardiff** (p81) for a taste of modern Welsh life before heading north for your first glimpse of Wales' spectacular scenery at the **Brecon Beacons National Park** (p123). From here head west to **St David's** (p184) with its cathedral and gateway to the **Pembrokeshire Coast National Park** (p163). A good pit stop north of here is the university town of **Aberystwyth** (p211), only a short hop from the **Vale of Rheidol Railway** (p213) and incredible **Devil's Bridge** (p215). North again are cosmopolitan **Machynlleth** (p231) and the superb **Centre for Alternative Technology** (p234). Fans of kitsch shouldn't miss the Italianate village of **Portmeirion** (p252) before the essential trip to **Snowdonia National Park** (p237). **Betws-y-Coed** (p260) makes the best base with a slew of hiking and biking trails within easy reach of town. More World Heritage Sites await in the imposing castles of **Caernarfon** (p254) and **Conwy** (p288), then it's time to relax at the elegant seaside resort of **Llandudno** (p292), which is today reinventing itself as a stylish weekend break with a dash of adrenaline-sport chic.

The 480-mile Welsh Loop takes in all the classic pit stops from cosmopolitan Cardiff to the stunning scenery of the national parks, the mighty grandeur of Wales' best castles and the scarred slopes of the southern coal valleys.



ICONS OF WELSH CULTURE

One Week

This route celebrates the very essence of being Welsh, taking in the birth-places of national icons and visiting towns most closely associated with the Welsh identity.

Start in **Portmeirion** (p252) near the home of visionary architect Sir Clough Williams-Ellis, before heading west to the Llŷn Peninsula and following the backroads around the peninsula to Nant Gwrtheyrn and its **Welsh Language and Heritage Centre** (p274) to learn about the renaissance of the Welsh language. The journey back to Porthmadog takes in the whitewashed village of **Aberdaron** (p271), the home base of firebrand preacher turned poet RS Thomas, with views offshore to the mystical **Bardsey Island** (p272), the alleged resting place of some 2000 saints. Also, just outside Pwllheli lies the village of **Llanystumdwy** (p268), the final resting place of David Lloyd George, the late great Welsh political leader.

Head south with the Cambrian Coast line to **Aberystwyth** (p211) where the National Library of Wales, a prestigious seat of learning, celebrates its centenary in 2007. Follow the Pembrokeshire Coastal Path south from here to **St David's** (p184), the cathedral town named after Wales' very own patron saint and the epitome of saintly virtue. Finally, skirt the bottom of the country with a dash across Carmarthenshire to **Swansea** (p141), the town most closely associated with that great icon of Welsh culture, Dylan Thomas.



Take a trip through the places associated with Welsh cultural icons to get under the skin of the national identity on this 300-mile trip.

ROADS LESS TRAVELLED

THE VALLEYS

The Welsh valleys boomed with Britain's Industrial Revolution and were devastated by its demise. Today they are scarred and suffering but the tightly packed pit villages and rusting relics give a telling insight into the history and the plight of rural South Wales.

Start off at the **Rhondda Heritage Park** (p119) near Cardiff, a fascinating introduction to the industrial life of the valleys. From here head north to **Aberfan** (p121) for a poignant reminder of the risks of industrialisation. Further north you'll hit Merthyr Tydfil, a former iron and steel centre, where you can visit **Cyfarthfa Castle** (p120) and the **old ironworks furnaces** (p120), and take a trip on the **Brecon Mountain Railway** (p120). Continue east to **Blaenavon** (p121) to visit its Unesco World Heritage Sites highlighting the best and worst of the Industrial Revolution.

East of the iron and coal valleys, you'll find the meandering Wye Valley where you can explore Britain's last medieval castle in **Raglan** (p115) and the famous fortified bridge at **Monmouth** (p111). The drive south from here rolls through a lush stretch of waterway. The jewel in this valley, though, is **Tintern Abbey** (p115), one of the most hauntingly beautiful ruins in Wales. From here you can wander **Offa's Dyke Path** (p124) or the **Wye Valley Walk** (p111) before finishing in **Chepstow** (p116) to ramble around the Norman castle or spend a day at the races.

Go underground in mining towns and at heritage sites on the Valleys tour, and trace the course and consequence of Wales' headlong industrialisation before gently meandering down the glorious Wye Valley. This quick trip covers 70 miles.



Three Days

TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH

Three Days

One of the least explored and least spoilt regions for tourism is the Llŷn Peninsula, an expanse of verdant countryside and coastal walks that personifies Wales' rural idyll.

Start in **Criccieth** (p267) with its fairy-tale castle. Head southwest to **Pwllheli** (p268) to stock up on brochures at the only official tourist office on the peninsula. Then point the car south and head out to join the waxheads and beach bums at **Abersoch** (p270), the peninsula's main centre for water sports. Continue on to **Aberdaron** (p271) where boats depart for **Bardsey Island** (p272), a mystical place linked to the legend of King Arthur. Head northeast along the west coast of the peninsula to **Morfa Nefyn** (p273), a small village with stunning views from the headland and a glorious beach to wander along en route to the **Ty Coch Inn** (p273), a historic pub that has also been used as an atmospheric film set. The ultimate destination, however, is the village of **Llithfaen** (p274), home to **Nant Gwrtheyrn** (p274) and the Welsh Language and Heritage Centre. This centre for residential Welsh language courses feels like the end of the earth and, indeed, is the ultimate location to lose yourself in the Welsh culture.



This alternative route travels 100 miles along the backroads and country lanes of one of the least-known but most scenic areas of Wales.

TAILORED TRIPS

GREEN WALES

Get in touch with the green Wales movement by blazing a trail to save the planet.

Start things off at Swansea and hook up with **Dryad Bushcraft** (p73), a cooking school with a difference: teaching students how to live off the land not exploit it. Then head west to **St David's** (p184), the spiritual home of Wales' patron saint and original father of the green movement who lived off and cared for the land. Tipi West, Wales' original alternative community with the ultimate in green-friendly accommodation, is further north overlooking **Cardigan Bay**. Head east to the spa towns of Mid-Wales, which are littered with options for sleeping and eating that adhere to a strict environmental policy. Of these, the workaday town of **Builth Wells** (p218) is a great spot for organic produce.

Northwest of here is the country's green capital at **Machynlleth** (p231), home to the **Centre for Alternative Technology** (p234) and the nation's green conscience. Finally, hightail up north to the genteel seaside resort of **Llandudno** (p292). Not only is the north coast of Wales home to a growing army of wind farms, but several of the hotels here have won a Green Dragon Award under the Welsh environmental scheme.



WALES FOR ADRENALINE JUNKIES

Wales is a great place to get your heart-racing kicks.

Start off in the **Brecon Beacons National Park** (p123) for some excellent walking, caving and biking. From there head to the **Gower Peninsula** (p151), the home of Welsh surfing and great climbing. West of here is the **Pembrokeshire Coast National Park** (p163), famous for kayaking, coasteering and as a place to climb sea cliffs. Surf, windsurf and kite surf at **Dale** and **Newgale** beaches (p183); or go diving at the dive sites around **Skomer** (p183) and **Ramsey** (p188).

Head north to **Machynlleth** (p231) for some excellent mountain biking or further north to climb the crags at **Tremadog** (p252). Roll on to **Snowdonia National Park** (p237) and indulge in some thrilling climbs, white-water rafting and excellent mountain biking. Inland, water rats should also take a trip to **Bala** (p245). In North Wales hop over to **Prestatyn** (p276) to begin the walk along **Offa's Dyke Path** (p124) back to where you started.



WALES FOR KIDS

From beaches and barnyards to castles and caves, Wales has plenty to keep both you and the little darlings on the back seat happy.

Start off in Cardiff at the **National Museum Wales** (p86), a fantastic place with great displays on dinosaurs and volcanoes, as well as some massive marine life. Then head for **Techniquet** (p90) to blow square bubbles and find out why bogeys are green. Just south of Cardiff are the reconstructed houses of the **St Fagans National History Museum** (p104) or head north and descend into the depths at **Big Pit** (p122) in Blaenavon. Then head west to the Pembrokeshire coast to search for seals near **St David's** (p184), or build empires in the sands of **St Bride's Bay** (p182). Head north to take in the **Welsh Wildlife Centre** (p210) before turning inland to pan for gold at **Dolaucothi Gold Mine** (p159). Discover giant insects as you crawl through the mole hole at the **Centre for Alternative Technology** (p234) in Machynlleth. Further north is **Anglesey Sea Zoo** (p282), with wave tanks and sea pools teeming with marine life, and the family-friendly resort of **Llandudno** (p292).



ON THE TRAIL OF KING ARTHUR

The legend of King Arthur is deeply engrained in Welsh folklore and recalled in many place names. This journey leads through beautiful countryside and takes in ancient monuments – a true quest for the Holy Grail.

Start off in **Monmouth** (p111), where the 12th-century Benedictine monk, Geoffrey of Monmouth, first popularised the Arthurian legend in *Historia Regum Britanniae*. Then head for **Carmarthen** (p156), which is alleged to be the birthplace of Merlin the magician. According to local legend, the hill outside the town is his final resting place. From here follow the trail north to **Blaenau Ffestiniog** (p259) close to where Arthur is said to have fought his final battle, the Battle of Camlan. Marchlyn Mawr near **Llanberis** (p263) is said to be the site of buried Arthurian treasure, while **Ruthin** is associated with another battle, in which Arthur took revenge on his enemy Huail; the site is now marked by a boulder in the town's Peter's Square. The quest for the Holy Grail terminates at **Llangollen** (p297) – legend says this most treasured Christian relic is contained within the walls of Castell Dinäs Bran.



Snapshot

From Llandudno to Llandaff, the topics under discussion in pubs, classrooms and community centres across the country all return to one subject: what does it mean to be Welsh in the early 21st century? Overall there is a positive sense that being Welsh is about looking to the future.

Wales has been battered in recent decades by industrial decline, rural poverty and a loss of its traditional identity. These spectres still make their presence felt occasionally, but Wales today is more hopeful, buoyed by a renewed sense of Welsh culture and pride, and spurred on by initiatives to embrace new industries and new cultural forms of expression. As such, it's high time to assign the hackneyed stereotypes to the dustbin of history and move on.

First and foremost Wales is growing: the population of Wales is just a whisker away from reaching the three-million mark, with the country predicted to reach the landmark figure by 2008. Since the expansion of the European Union (EU), when 10 new states joined in 2004, an influx of Eastern European workers has significantly boosted the figures.

The issue of political devolution has dominated Welsh politics in recent years. While many people felt removed from the political process and voter turnout has been low in regional elections, the new National (Welsh) Assembly is now established as the voice of the country. Furthermore, Wales took a step towards a full parliament during the summer of 2006 when the Queen signed into law the Government of Wales Act 2006.

Under the new Act, the Assembly Government will be able, from May 2007, to draw up its own laws for the first time – provided Westminster agrees first. The current Welsh Secretary, Peter Hain MP, said the new Act was more momentous than the 1998 legislation that set up the National Assembly. The move also boosts the position of Rhodri Morgan, who has long styled himself as the first minister of the Welsh Assembly Government.

On the financial front, the Welsh economy is improving and the National Assembly is portraying the country as an ideal location for foreign investment. But Wales still qualifies for EU aid and traditional industry is all but dead. While the Bay area and Mermaid Quay in Cardiff may seem to have experienced a renaissance, the closure of a major semiconductor plant by South Korean TV and electronics firm LG, near Newport, is a reminder that the recovery is fragile and Asian investment not a catch-all solution.

How to compete economically as well as solve the social and environmental problems of the 21st century were the primary concerns of the inaugural Innovation Wales Conference in 2006, with hi-tech companies, venture capitalists and public and private bodies considering how Wales can capitalise on its vast innovative potential.

At a more personal level, green and health issues are moving on apace, with the National Assembly Government announcing in 2006 that it would ban smoking in all enclosed public places in Wales from 2 April 2007.

Finally, the hot topic for all concerned with the Welsh identity was the popular TV series *Big Brother's* 2006 final. Welsh finalist Glyn Wise, an 18-year-old student from Blaenau Ffestiniog, came in second place behind Tourette's sufferer Pete Bennett. Interviewed on the show, Wise draped a Welsh flag around his shoulders and professed his desire to see the Welsh language and culture continue to flourish.

How ironic that it fell to a reality TV-show contestant to convince the world that Wales is truly moving with the times.

FAST FACTS

Population:	2.9 million
Sheep population:	10.2 million
Inflation:	2.4%
Unemployment rate:	4.5%
GDP per capita:	£12,000
Size:	20,000 sq km
Rate of house price inflation:	10.5%

The Authors



DAVID ATKINSON **Introductory Chapters; Mid-Wales; Snowdonia & the Llŷn; Anglesey & the North Coast**

Working on the Wales book is something of a prodigal return for David Atkinson. Born just across the border in North Wales, and a veteran of family holidays from Snowdonia to Anglesey, David has since carved a career as a travel writer with guidebook assignments taking him from Japan to South America. Summer 2006 saw him back in Wales and marvelling at how the country has moved forward since those halcyon days of building sand castles on the beach at Beaumaris aged seven. What's more, he took a fresh pair of eyes with him to survey the landscape, accompanied by his baby daughter.

My Favourite Trip

My favourite trip? Tricky. For activities, it's glorious summer day-walking in the Clwydian Ranges (p302), or learning a new skill at the Plas y Brenin National Mountain Centre near Capel Curig (p263). For deserted beaches and some great Welsh ozone, it's hard to beat hugging the coast of the Isle of Anglesey by car or on foot (p280), followed by some hearty local fare and a pint of bitter from a local microbrewery (p251). But, most of all, my two personal favourites are Machynlleth for its Centre for Alternative Technology (p234) and Portmeirion (p252) for its fairy-tale village and a chance to spend the night in a castle.



NEIL WILSON **Cardiff; Southeast Wales & Brecon Beacons; Swansea, the Gower & Carmarthenshire; Pembrokeshire; Pembrokeshire Coastal Path; Directory; Transport**

Neil's first trip to Wales was as a geology student more than 20 years ago, breaking rocks in Anglesey and trying to pronounce Llanfairpwllgwyngwotsitsname. He has been back to explore the Welsh landscape many times, whether rock-climbing in the Llanberis Pass, trying to surf (and failing miserably) in the Gower Peninsula, or cruising the coast from Caernarfon to Pembrokeshire in a traditional wooden sailboat. On this trip he added Pen-y-Fan and Cribryn to his list of Welsh summits gained, explored the more remote reaches of the Pembrokeshire Coast Path, and developed a taste for cockles and laver bread.

My Favourite Trip

As a fan of good food as well as the great outdoors, I really enjoyed travelling through the Brecon Beacons National Park, which offers the chance to combine the two. From the foodie capital of Abergavenny (p125) I headed north into the magical Vale of Ewyas (p132), with its haunting ruined priory and wild, windswept hills, before returning to civilisation and a giant scoff at the Bear in Crickhowell (p130). Then I donned my hiking boots for an ascent of Pen-y-Fan (p124) above Brecon, followed by a slap-up meal in Brecon's Felin Fach Griffin (p137). Finally, a meander southwest to see the caves of Dan-yr-Ogof (p138) and Carreg Cennen Castle (p158) was topped off with dinner at the King's Head in Llandoverly (p159).



LONELY PLANET AUTHORS

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