

Swansea, the Gower & Carmarthenshire



This corner of the country, between the valleys of Glamorgan and the rocky shores of Pembrokeshire, will forever be associated with Dylan Thomas. The wild boy of Welsh poetry was born in Swansea, Wales' city by the bay, a town busy pulling itself up by the bootstraps as it reinvents itself for the 21st century. By turns pretty and gritty, it offers an intriguing blend of seaside setting and big-city sophistication, with the new National Waterfront Museum as the jewel in its crown.

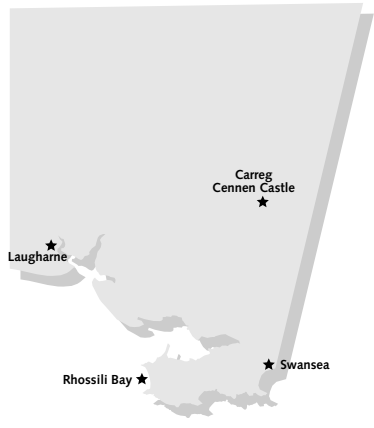
Swansea is the gateway to the Gower Peninsula, a compact compendium of coastal delights, from the golden-sand expanses of scenic Three Cliffs Bay to the pounding surf and wind-blown ridge-walking at Rhossili. Gower is the region's outdoor playground, offering easy coastal hiking, safe summer swimming, and some of the best surfing in the UK.

Carmarthenshire is too often passed by in the headlong rush towards the delights of neighbouring Pembrokeshire, but it's worth slowing down for a look. The county promotes itself as the 'Garden of Wales', and there are gardens aplenty to visit – from the formal walled gardens of Aberglasney to the magnificent National Botanic Garden with its spectacular, Norman Foster–designed glasshouse dome.

The rural hinterland of eastern Carmarthenshire brushes against the upland fringes of the Brecon Beacons National Park, where the craggy splendour of Carreg Cennen Castle rises above a jigsaw of limestone valleys, while down on the coast you can wander along the 'heron-priested shore' of the Taf estuary and visit the Boathouse, where Dylan Thomas wrote some of his finest work.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Learning about Swansea's fascinating history at the superb **National Waterfront Museum** (p143)
- Enjoying the best of Welsh seafood in the **restaurants** (p147) of Swansea and the Mumbles
- Watching the surf break on the majestic sweep of **Rhossili Bay** (p154) at the tip of the Gower Peninsula
- Gazing at the views that inspired Dylan Thomas at **Laugharne** (p160)
- Taking in the expansive views from the hilltop site of **Carreg Cennen Castle** (p157)



ACTIVITIES

The extensive coast and rolling inland valleys in this region provide an ideal environment for all sorts of outdoor fun. Sea kayaking, surfing, walking, horse riding, bird-watching and boating are just some of the pursuits available.

GETTING AROUND

The region's major bus operators are **First Cymru** (☎ 01792-572255; www.firstcymru.co.uk), **Roy Brown's Coaches** (☎ 01982-552597; www.roybrownscoaches.co.uk), **Pullman Coaches** (☎ 01792-851569; www.pullman-coaches.co.uk) and **Silcox Coaches** (☎ 01646-683143; www.silcoxcoaches.co.uk). For timetable information, call **Traveline** (☎ 0870 608 2 608; www.traveline-cymru.org.uk).

The West Wales Rover Ticket (adult/child £6/4) allows unlimited travel for one day on regional buses and on a few services to/from Swansea and Mid-Wales (but not Silcox, Postbus or National Express services, nor the No 100 Cardiff–Swansea shuttle).

Two railway lines run from Swansea – one through Mid-Wales skirting the Brecon Beacons (the Heart of Wales line) and the other via Carmarthen to Pembroke Dock, Haverfordwest and Fishguard. For route maps and timetables, see www.arrivatrainswales.co.uk.

SWANSEA (ABERTAWE)

☎ 01792 / pop 223,300

Dylan Thomas called Swansea an 'ugly, lovely town', and that remains a fair description today. Wales' second-largest city enjoys a stunning setting on the 5-mile sweep of Swansea Bay, but suffers from a less than stunning town centre, the result of unimaginative rebuilding after WWII bombing. But Swansea makes up for its visual shortcomings with a visceral charm that, if not able to out-dazzle more handsome places, can at least out-stare them.

In the National Waterfront Museum the city has one of the most exciting museum developments in Britain; it also has a superb Dylan Thomas Centre, a long seafront stretching down to the picturesque suburb of the Mumbles, and the glorious Gower Peninsula on its doorstep.

HISTORY

Swansea's Welsh name, Abertawe, describes its location at the mouth of the Tawe, where the river empties into Swansea Bay. The Vikings named the area Sveins Ey (Swein's

Island), probably referring to the sandbank in the mouth of the River Tawe.

The Normans built a castle here, but Swansea didn't really get into its stride until the Industrial Revolution, when it developed into an important copper-smelting centre. Ore was first shipped in from Cornwall, across the Bristol Channel, but by the 19th century it was arriving from Chile, Cuba and the USA, in return for Welsh coal.

By the 20th century, however, the city's industrial base had declined, although Swansea's oil refinery and smaller factories were still judged a worthy target by the Luftwaffe, which devastated the city centre in 1941. The insensitive rebuilding of the city's heart did not do much for its recovery, but in recent years, with the opening of the new National Waterfront Museum, a sparkling marina, and a thriving restaurant and bar scene, Swansea's future is looking more lovely than ugly.

ORIENTATION

The compact city centre clusters around Castle Sq and pedestrianised Oxford St on the west bank of the River Tawe, with the redeveloped docklands of the Maritime Quarter to its southeast. The bus station and neighbouring tourist office are on the western edge of the city centre, next to the Quadrant shopping centre. The train station is 600m north of Castle Sq along Castle St and High St.

The suburb of Uplands, where many of the city's guesthouses are found, is a mile west of the city centre, along Mansel St and Walter Rd. From the southern edge of the city centre, Oystermouth Rd runs for 5 miles west and then south along the broad sweep of Swansea Bay to the seaside resort of the Mumbles.

INFORMATION

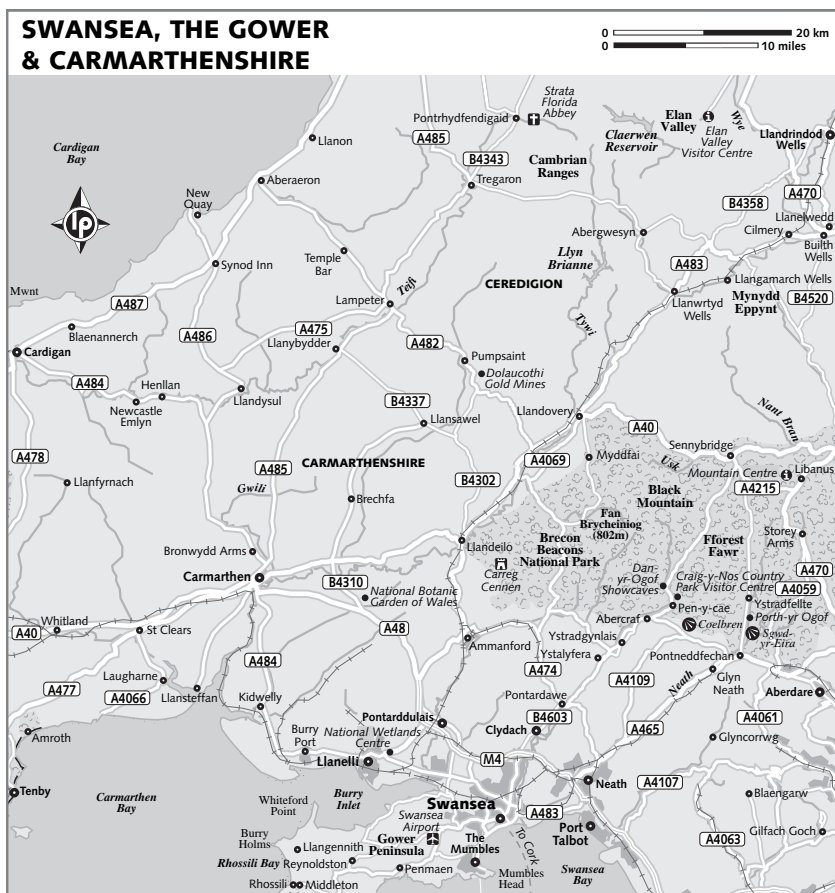
Bookshops

Dylan's Books (☎ 463 980; www.dylan-thomas-books.com; Dylan Thomas Centre, Somerset Pl; 11 10am–4.30pm) All of Thomas' works, plus biographies, CDs of *Under Milk Wood* etc.

Dylans Book Store (☎ 65255; 23 King Edward Rd) Antiquarian and secondhand books; Thomas 1st editions, collectors items.

Siop Tŷ Tawe (☎ 460906; 9 Christina St) Welsh-language books.

Waterstone's (☎ 463567; 17 Oxford St; 11 9.30am–5.30pm Mon–Sat, 10.30am–4.30pm Sun) Good selection of local interest books, maps and guides.



Disabled Travellers

Swansea Shophmobility (% 461785; St David's Sq, off Princess Way; h 9am-4.30pm Mon-Sat) Provides wheelchairs and electric scooters for a small fee.

Internet Access

County Library (% 516757; Alexandra Rd; h 9.30am-6pm Mon-Wed, 9.30am-5pm Thu & Sat, 9.30am-7pm Fri) Free internet access.

Crossfire (% 461144; 46 Princess Way; per hr £2.40; h 10am-7pm) Internet access, plus printing, CD burning etc.

Laundry

Lendart Laundrette (% 644682; 19 Bryn-y-Mor Rd)

Uplands Laundrette (% 644238; 73 Uplands Cres)

Medical & Emergency Services

Morrison Hospital (% 702222; Heol Maes Eglwys, Morrison) Accident and emergency department, 5 miles north of the city centre.

Police Station (% 456999; Grove Pl)

Money

Loads of banks dot the streets between the Kingsway and the Quadrant Shopping Centre. All have ATMs.

Post

Main Post Office (WH Smith, 37 the Quadrant Shopping Centre;

h 9am-5.30pm Mon-Sat)

Uplands Post Office (25 Uplands Cres, Uplands; h 9am-1pm Mon-Fri, 9am-12.30pm Sat)

Tourist Information

Mumbles Tourist Office (% 361302; www.mumblestic.co.uk; Methodist Church, Mumbles Rd; h 10am-5pm Mon-Sat year-round, noon-5pm Jul & Aug)

Swansea Tourist Office (% 468321; www.visitswansea.bay.com; Plymouth St; h 9.30am-5.30pm Mon-Sat year-round, 10am-4pm Sun Easter-Sep) Can book accommodation and has walking and cycling information.

SIGHTS

Swansea's city centre and Maritime Quarter, and the new SA1 district on the east bank of the Tawe, are undergoing a major redevelopment that plans to transform the city by 2020; during that time building sites and road works will be a feature of any visit.

WWII bombing flattened much of central Swansea, which was rebuilt as a rather soulless retail development in the 1960s, '70s and '80s. What little remains of Georgian and Victorian Swansea stretches from Wind St and York St to Somerset Pl and Cambrian Way in the Maritime Quarter; this is the most attractive part of the city centre.

City Centre

The ruins of 14th-century **Swansea Castle** (closed to the public) stand on the east side of Castle Sq, hemmed in by modern buildings and dwarfed by the gleaming blue skyscraper of the BT Tower. The castle was mostly destroyed by Cromwell in 1647, but had a brief lease of life as a prison in the 19th century.

Housed in an elegant Italianate building in the north of the city centre is the **Glynn Vivian Art Gallery** (% 516900; www.swansea.gov.uk/glynnvivian; Alexandra Rd; admission free; h 10am-5pm Tue-Sun) displays a wide range of Welsh art – Richard Wilson's evocative landscapes, haunting works by Gwen John, bold portraits by her brother Augustus, and a whole room devoted to the more contemporary Ceri Richards. There are also fine works by Walter Sickert, Wyndham Lewis, Stanley Spencer and John Nash, alongside multimedia temporary exhibitions. There's also a collection of ceramics.

A huge glass pyramid parked between the Parc Tawe Shopping Centre and the river contains **Plantasia** (% 474555; www.plantasia.org; Parc Tawe Link Rd; adult/child £3.30/2.30; h 10am-5pm), a botanical exhibition containing hundreds of species of exotic plants, plus attendant insects, reptiles, tropical fish, birds and tamarin monkeys. A coffee shop and range of kids' activities make it a popular rainy-day retreat.

Maritime Quarter

The area around the former docks to the south-east of the city centre was originally redeveloped as a residential area in the 1980s – low-rise red- and yellow-brick apartment blocks with blue-painted steel balconies that are beginning to look a little tired now. The South Dock and the Tawe Basin (enclosed by a smaller version of Cardiff Bay's tidal barrage) are now busy marinas, surrounded by bars, restaurants and cafés, and the odd bit of public art – there's a seated statue of Dylan Thomas, and the old sailor with the bell nearby is the fictional Captain Cat from Thomas's play *Under Milk Wood*.

The process of regeneration is still going on, with a big new commercial complex – the SA1 Waterfront development – on the far bank of the river, linked to the Maritime Quarter by the graceful swoop of the spectacular new **Sail Bridge**. The 26-storey Marina Tower, under construction at the time of research, will be the tallest building in the city.

The Maritime Quarter's flagship attraction is the **National Waterfront Museum** (% 638950; www.waterfrontmuseum.co.uk; admission free; h 10am-5pm), housed partly in a 1901 dockside warehouse (formerly the Industrial and Maritime Museum) and partly in a stunning modern extension built from glass and slate. A series of themed exhibition galleries covers the history of Welsh industry and innovation, making much use of interactive computer screens and audiovisual presentations. The effect can be a bit overwhelming – at times you feel as if you're being bombarded from all directions with moving images, scrolling text, speech and sound effects – but there is a lot of interesting stuff here.

Highlights include the *People* exhibit, which brings whole communities back to life by using the records from the 1851 census to tell the stories of real Swansea people, and the Sea gallery, with its tales of Cape Horn clipper ships and how Swansea became the 19th-century copper capital of the world. Best of all is the Industrial Hall, where computers give way to real, historic artefacts from Welsh coal pits, iron works, copper smelters, gold mines and slate quarries.

It would be hard to find a more complete contrast to the Waterfront Museum than the gloriously old-fashioned **Swansea Museum** (% 653763; Victoria Rd; admission free; h 10am-5pm Tue-Sun) – Dylan Thomas referred to it as 'the museum which should have *been* in a museum'. Founded in 1834, it remains charmingly low-tech, from

Oystermouth Castle (☎ 635436; adult/child £1.20/60p; Castle Ave; 𠄎 11am-5pm Apr-Sep), once the stronghold of the Norman lords of Gower, but now the focus of summer mock medieval battles and Shakespeare performances. There's a fine view to enjoy over Swansea Bay from the battlements.

Newly fashionable in recent years, with gourmet restaurants vying for trade along the promenade, the Mumbles got a boost to its reputation when its most famous daughter, Hollywood actress Catherine Zeta-Jones, built a £2 million luxury mansion at Limeslade, on the south side of the peninsula.

For transport to the Mumbles, see p151.

ACTIVITIES

Walking & Cycling

You can walk or cycle along the **Swansea Bike Path**, a pleasingly flat 5-mile waterfront trail that runs from the Maritime Quarter to the Mumbles. The **Tawe Tour** is another 5-mile trail, running northwards along the River Tawe, past former industrial sites, to Morriston. You can get free booklets and maps from the tourist office.

From the parking area beyond Mumbles Head (continue along Mumbles Rd, past the pier), you can hike along a clifftop path for a mile to **Langland Bay**, and on for another mile to **Caswell Bay**; both are popular swimming and surfing beaches. You can return to the Mumbles waterfront by walking back along Caswell Rd, Langland Rd and Newton Rd.

Action Bikes (☎ 464640; 5 St David's Sq; 𠄎 9am-5.30pm Mon-Sat, 11am-4pm Sun) rents bikes for £15 per day.

Swimming

The shiny new **Wales National Pool** (☎ 513513; www.walesnationalpoolswansea.co.uk; Sketty Lane, Sketty; adult/child £3.40/2.30) is the only 50m swimming pool in Wales; it's open for lane-swimming only during the week, but on Saturday and Sunday the 25m training pool is open for recreational swimming sessions from 1pm to 3pm, and kids' fun sessions from 3pm to 5pm.

Swansea Leisure Centre, closed down in 2003, was being given a total makeover at the time of research, and is scheduled to re-open in 2008 as an indoor water park, with swimming and paddling pools, hydrosides, wave pools, water-rides and, the icing on the cake, Europe's first indoor surfing centre.

Water Sports

You can hire surf-skis and windsurfers at **Bay Watersports** (☎ 534858; www.baywatersports.co.uk; Oystermouth Rd; 𠄎 May-Oct); a two-person surf-ski costs £12 for an hour. You can also get windsurfing lessons (1½-hour beginner's session £20). Opening times depend on tides and weather.

You can go **surfing** at Langland and Caswell bays, near the Mumbles – get advice and hire gear from **Nucleus** (☎ 361525; 75 Newton Rd, Mumbles); hire of a board and wetsuit for a half-/full-day costs £10/16.

If the sight of all those yachts in the marina has tempted you to have a go at sailing, **Rainbow Sailing School** (☎ 0844 545 7575; www.rainbowsailingschool.com; 5 Prospect Pl, Maritime Quarter; 𠄎 9am-4pm Mon-Fri) offers taster days that are suitable for families and beginners who have no previous experience of sailing (£75 per person, minimum of three people).

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

From May to September, the waterfront from the city round to the Mumbles is taken over by the **Swansea Bay Summer Festival** (www.swanseabayfestival.net), a smorgasbord of shows, fun fairs, carnivals, music, exhibitions, children's events and smaller festivals, including the **Swansea Film Festival** (www.swanseafilmmfestival.com) in June, and the **Mumbles Beer Festival** (☎ 363391) in August.

The cultural celebrations continue with the **Swansea Festival of Music and the Arts** (www.swanseafestival.co.uk) in the first three weeks of October, with classical concerts, drama, lectures and exhibitions, swiftly followed by the **Dylan Thomas Festival** (☎ 463980; www.dylanthomasfestival.org), which celebrates Swansea's most famous son with poetry readings, talks, films and performances, and is held from 27 October (his birthday) to 9 November (the date he died).

Escape into the Park (www.escapefestival.com) is Wales' biggest outdoor dance-music festival, a one-day event featuring lots of different tents with big-name DJs enthusing the crowd. It takes place in August at Singleton Park (next to Swansea University campus), and tickets cost around £35.

SLEEPING

Most of Swansea's midrange accommodation is in Uplands, along Oystermouth Rd and in Mumbles; the city centre options are mostly chain hotels and more expensive independent hotels.

City Centre

Windsor Lodge Hotel (☎ 642158; www.windsor-lodge.co.uk; Mount Pleasant; s/d from £50/65; 𠄎) Could do with a bit of TLC, and some of the rooms, especially the singles, are a bit cramped, but the elegant Georgian building, fresh, modern décor and quiet but central location make the Windsor a decent choice.

Morgans Hotel (☎ 484848; www.morganshotel.co.uk; Somerset Pl; d £125-250; 𠄎) The city's first boutique hotel, set in the gorgeous red-brick and Portland stone former Ports Authority building, Morgans combines historic elegance with contemporary design, and a high pamper factor – Egyptian cotton bed linen, suede curtains, big bathrobes, flat-screen TVs. It has a great restaurant and a lovely champagne bar, too.

West of the Centre

Christmas Pie B&B (☎ 480266; www.christmaspie.co.uk; 2 Mirador Cres; s/d £30/60; 𠄎) The name suggests something warm and comforting, and this suburban villa does not disappoint – hospitable owners, three tastefully decorated en suite bedrooms, vases of fresh flowers and an out-of-the-ordinary, vegetarian-friendly breakfast menu (kidney bean and sun-dried tomato sausages, anyone?).

Crescent Guest House (☎ 466814; www.crescentguesthouse.co.uk; 132 Eaton Cres; s/d from £40/60; 𠄎) The Crescent has a great location, perched on a slope with great views from the lounge across the rooftops to Swansea Bay. The bedrooms are clean and comfortable, and the couple who run the place are a fount of knowledge about local attractions.

White House Hotel (☎ 473856; www.thewhitehousehotel.co.uk; 4 Nyanza Tce; s/d from £42/72) It seems like nothing is too much trouble at this friendly, flower-bedecked hotel – staff are only too pleased to help out with any query or request. The nine rooms are smart and well equipped; even the smallish singles feel more like cosy, well-designed ship's cabins than cramped hotel rooms.

Leonardo's Guest House (☎ 470163; www.leonardosguesthouse.co.uk; 380 Oystermouth Rd; s/d from £43/56) Leonardo's is one of the best in the long strip of seafront guesthouses on Oystermouth Rd, with a warm welcome and recently redecorated rooms in bright, sunny colours. Five of the nine bedrooms enjoy sea views over Swansea Bay.

Other places worth considering on Oystermouth Rd include:

Oyster Hotel (☎ 654345; oysterhotel@yahoo.co.uk; 262 Oystermouth Rd; s/d from £27/34)

Beachcomber Hotel (☎ 651380; www.beachcomberhotel.co.uk; 364 Oystermouth Rd; s/d from £25/40)

The Mumbles

Coast House (☎ 368702; 708 Mumbles Rd; s/d from £35/50) Ask for one of the 1st-floor front bedrooms at this spick-and-span seafloor guesthouse – the décor leans toward the chintzy, floral look, but the views from the big bay windows more than compensate for any Laura Ashley overload.

Alexandra House (☎ 406406; www.alexandra-house.com; 366 Mumbles Rd; s/d from £40/55; 𠄎) On the promenade just north of Mumbles village, this terraced Victorian house goes for the old-fashioned look, with grandfather clock and crystal chandeliers in the lounge, and flowery bedspreads and lacy frills in the bedrooms.

Tides Reach Guest House (☎ 404877; 388 Mumbles Rd; www.tidesreachguesthouse.com; s/d £50/65) From the colourful hanging baskets outside the door to the polished furniture and fresh flowers throughout the house, this place exudes an air of homey comfort. Several rooms have sea views, as does the cosy lounge with its leather sofas and armchairs.

Patricks with Rooms (☎ 360199; www.patrickswithrooms.com; 638 Mumbles Rd; d £105) That rarest of things, a child-friendly boutique hotel, Patricks has eight individually styled designer bedrooms in bold contemporary colours, with art on the walls, fluffy robes and roll-top baths in the en suites, and sea views from the windows.

EATING

Swansea has an impressive range of eateries, clustered around Wind St, along St Helen's Rd (chock-a-block with curry houses) and out at the Mumbles.

City Centre

Govinda's (☎ 468469; 8 Cradock St; mains £4-6; 𠄎 noon-3pm Mon-Thu, noon-6pm Fri & Sat) This sparkling restaurant specialises in vegetarian and vegan cuisine using locally sourced organic produce. The menu ranges from Indian samosa, dhal and vegetable curry, to veggie lasagne, nut burger and vegan cheesecake. It's run by Hare Krishna, but there's no proselytising.

Dylan's Books'n'Bites (☎ 463980; Dylan Thomas Centre, Somerset Pl; mains £3-8; 𠄎 café 10am-4.30pm, lunch noon-2pm) Armchairs and tables scattered among the bookshelves in the Dylan Thomas Centre bookshop make an agreeable spot for

a coffee and a read. The lunch menu includes homemade soup and sandwiches, plus dishes from the more formal restaurant upstairs.

Wild Swan (☎ 472121; 14 Orchard St; mains £6-9) Swansea's best Cantonese restaurant is sumptuously decked out with red leather sofas, delicate Chinese screens, and even a pond filled with koi carp. The menu covers all the classics from stir-fried squid with black bean sauce to aromatic crispy duck.

Bella Napoli (☎ 644611; 66 Wind St; mains £6-14; 11 noon-2.30pm & 5.30-11pm Tue-Fri, noon-11pm Sat & Sun) This cheery little southern Italian restaurant serves up classic pizza and pasta dishes, and is staffed by cheeky waiters who occasionally burst into song. Children are welcome.

La Braseria (☎ 469683; 28 Wind St; mains £8-15; 11 noon-2.30pm & 7-11.30pm Mon-Sat) Having gained a reputation as a favourite hang-out of the Swansea glitterati (Catherine Zeta-Jones is a fan), this place is enormously popular, often packed solid at weekends. It's a Spanish bodega-style place, with a global menu ranging from beef stacy to local lobster.

Chelsea Café (☎ 464068; 17 St Mary's St; mains £10-15; 11 noon-2.30pm & 7-11.30pm Mon-Sat) Golden yellow tablecloths and dark-red banquettes against wood-panelled walls and a red-brick chimney breast make for a snug dining room at this popular restaurant. Check the blackboard specials for filo-pastry parcels filled with prawns, squat lobster tails, cockles and laver bread, and roast loin of lamb with a smoked bacon, date and rosemary jus.

Morgans Restaurant (☎ 484848; Morgans Hotel, Somerset Pl; mains £15-20) The grand former boardroom of the British Ports Authority building (now Morgans Hotel) is the setting for this sophisticated restaurant, all crisp white table linen and designer chairs with a single rose on each table. Relax with a G&T in the candle-lit bar before choosing from a menu that runs from asparagus, sage and orange risotto to seared fillet of sea bass with vanilla bean sauce.

West of the Centre

Joe's Ice Cream Parlour (☎ 653880; 85 St Helen's Rd; ice creams £1.20-3; 11am-9pm Mon-Fri, noon-8pm Sat & Sun) Joe's, established in 1922, is a Swansea institution, serving traditional fruit sundaes and knickerbocker glory, or just a dish of delicious buttery vanilla ice cream with a crisp wafer and a choice of toppings. There are two other branches – in the Parc Tawe Shopping

Centre in the city centre, and at 524 Mumbles Rd in the Mumbles.

Retreat (☎ 457880; 2 Humphrey St, Uplands; mains £3-5; 11 noon-7.30pm Tue-Fri, noon-6pm Sat) Part of an incense-perfumed holistic centre, this New Age vegetarian and vegan café serves a range of healthy salads and sandwiches, as well as some naughty dishes, including a delicious dairy-free chocolate fudge brownie.

Vietnam (☎ 650929; 36 Uplands Cres, Uplands; mains £6-9) Rather girly red, pink and white décor here, but it's a firm favourite with the local Asian community so the kitchen must be doing something right. Authentic Vietnamese dishes such as *bo bia* (rice-paper rolls with peanut sauce) and *thit vit quay* (roast duck with rice).

Miah's (☎ 466244; 137-138 St Helen's Rd, Uplands; mains £6-10; 11 noon-2pm & 6pm-midnight Mon-Sat, noon-midnight Sun) Housed in a beautifully converted church with bare stone walls, exposed roof beams and tables ranged around a mezzanine at half-height, Miah's is a cut above the six-pints-and-a-curry type of Indian restaurant. The tandoori trout is exquisite.

Bizzie Lizzie's Bistro (☎ 473379; 55 Walter Rd, Uplands; mains £8-14; 11 closed Sat lunch & all day Sun) A warmly lit basement with country-kitchen pine furniture and green-and-white check tablecloths, decorated with bric-a-brac and old street signs, Bizzie's has a half-vegetarian, half-carnivore menu – whichever you are, go for the delicious nut roast with chilli and tomato sauce.

Didier & Stephanie (☎ 655603; 56 St Helen's Rd, Uplands; mains £9-18; 11 closed Mon) An intimate and relaxed French restaurant run by the eponymous Gallic duo. Didier and Stephanie combine classic French dishes, such as saddle of rabbit with mustard sauce with more adventurous offerings, such as a starter of seared foie gras with mango ice cream.

The Mumbles

Mermaid Restaurant & Coffee Lounge (☎ 367744; 686 Mumbles Rd; mains £7-15, 2-course lunch £10; 11 closed Sun & Mon dinner) A bright décor of blond wood and fresh flowers complement the menu of fresh local produce, home-baked bread, good wine and real ale. The Mermaid is famous for its slow-roast salt-marsh lamb from the Gower Peninsula, and a kids' menu where everything is freshly prepared – no frozen chicken nuggets here. The building was once the Mermaid Hotel, a favourite haunt of Dylan Thomas.

Knights Restaurant (☎ 363184; 614 Mumbles Rd; mains £14-16) Seafood is the speciality of the

house at this intimate and elegant waterfront restaurant (chef Michael Knight is a favourite of Michael Douglas and Catherine Zeta-Jones). Local crab, sea bass, salmon and Dover sole make regular appearances on the menu, as does sewin (wild sea trout) in season. The monkfish with bacon, leeks and brandy sauce is recommended.

698 (☎ 361616; 698 Mumbles Rd; mains £15-20; 11 10am-11pm) A very stylish bistro and coffee lounge with a modern European menu; try pan-fried scallops on pea purée to start, followed by grilled fillet steak with creamy mash and a wild mushroom jus. The 698 is also family-friendly, with highchairs, baby-changing facilities, and books and toys to borrow.

DRINKING

Swansea's main boozing strip is Wind St (pronounced to rhyme with 'blind', as in drunk), and on Friday and Saturday nights it can be a bit of a zoo; however, there are one or two bars where you can have a conversation that doesn't require shouting.

City Centre

No Sign Bar (☎ 465300; 56 Wind St) Once frequented by Dylan Thomas (it appears as the Wine Vaults in his story *The Followers*), the No Sign stands out as the only vaguely traditional bar left on Wind St, a long narrow haven of dark-wood panelling, friendly staff and decent beer. How long will it survive?

Mambo (☎ 456620; 46 The Kingsway) A Latin American-themed cocktail bar, serving margaritas (made with Patron tequila) by the glass or the pitcher, amid a swirl of mosaics and Latino music.

Queen's Hotel (☎ 521531; Gloucester Pl) This is an old-fashioned corner pub with polished mahogany and brass bar, old tiles and a range of cask-conditioned beers on tap, including Theakston's Old Peculier.

West of the Centre

Uplands Tavern (☎ 458242; 42 Uplands Cres) A classic student pub, big and brassy with reasonably priced beer (Greene King Abbott real ale), a poolroom, and live music – folk, rock, blues, country – five nights a week, open-mic night on Tuesday. Yet another place where Dylan Thomas used to hang out.

Bryn-y-Mor (☎ 466650; 17 Bryn-y-Mor Rd) Another friendly local that's popular with students, the Bryn-y-Mor has cheap beer, pool tables,

large-screen TV, a decent jukebox and service with a smile.

The Mumbles

The famous Mumbles Mile – a pub crawl through the bars between Newton Rd and Bracelet Bay – is not what it once was; most of the old pubs have succumbed to pumping house music and boisterous crowds of alcopop-fuelled teens.

One place worth seeking out is the **Park Inn** (☎ 366738; 23 Park St), set a block inland from the promenade and away from the crowds (coming out of the tourist office, turn left, then left again into Dunns Lane, and again into Park St; the pub's at the far end). It's a friendly local serving real ale, where any music you hear will be knocked out on the pub piano.

ENTERTAINMENT Nightclubs

Check out *Buzz* magazine (available from bars or the tourist office) for what's-on listings of clubs and live music venues.

Monkey Bar (☎ 480822; 13 Castle St; 11 11am-2am or 3am, club nights from 9pm, food served 11am-5.30pm) An organic, vegetarian café-bar by day, with chunky tables, big sofas, modern art and cool tunes, this funky little venue transforms after dark into Swansea's best alternative club, where weekend DJs play drum and bass, hip hop, dub, reggae, salsa and world music.

Escape (☎ 652854; www.escapegroup.com; Northampton Lane; 11 from 10pm) This is Swansea's mainstream house club, with touring DJs pumping it up every Saturday. The venue occasionally stages live bands too.

Bar Creation & Club Eden (☎ 410964; www.gayswansea.co.uk; 233 High St; bar 11 noon-11pm daily, club 11 10pm-2.30am Tue & Wed, 10pm-3.30am Thu, 10pm-4.30am Fri & Sat, 9pm-1.20am Sun) One of the biggest gay venues in Wales, this bar and club combo stages a packed programme of club nights, drag acts, film screenings and cabaret shows.

Theatre & Music

Swansea Grand Theatre (☎ 475715; www.swansea-grand.co.uk; Singleton St) The town's largest theatre stages a mixed programme of ballet, opera, musicals, pantomimes and a regular comedy club.

Dylan Thomas Theatre (☎ 473238; www.dylan-thomas-theatre.org.uk; Gloucester Pl) Home to the Swansea Little Theatre Company, an amateur dramatics group of which DT was once a member. The company puts on productions of classic plays

by Shakespeare, Oscar Wilde and Arthur Miller, among others, as well as the occasional performance of your man's *Under Milk Wood*.

Taliesin Arts Centre (☎ 602060; www.taliesinartscentre.co.uk; Singleton Park, Mumbles Rd) Part of the University of Wales, Swansea, this vibrant arts centre has a programme of contemporary, international music, theatre, dance and film.

Brangwyn Hall (☎ 635489; Guildhall Rd South) This handsome Art Deco hall, decorated with colourful painted panels by 1930s artist Frank Brangwyn, hosts choral and orchestral performances.

SHOPPING

Most of Swansea's retail therapy is crammed into the vast, soulless shopping centres of the Quadrant, St David's Centre and Parc Tawe.

Nudeus (☎ 466616; 230 Oxford St) A surf, snow and skate shop with a good range of T-shirts, shoes and skatewear, as well as boards, wetsuits and bags.

Musiquarium (☎ 465256; 61 Swansea Market) A great source for alternative music CDs and vinyl, with a wide range of indie, rock, funk, soul, country, folk, jazz, blues, R&B and punk.

Derricks Music (☎ 654226; 221 Oxford St) A good, varied CD shop and gig-ticket outlet.

Hobo's (☎ 654586; 214 Oxford St) Sells groovy secondhand '60s and '70s clothing, and is a good place to find out about local music events.

Swansea Market (entrances on White Walls & Union St; closed Sun) Dates from 1830, and sells fresh fish, meat, cheese and vegetables, as well as clothing, books, music and hardware.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Boat

Swansea Cork Ferries (☎ 456116; www.swansea-corkferries.com; King's Dock) sails to Cork (Ireland) four to six times per week; the 10-hour trip costs £23 to £34 for foot passengers, £85 to £199 for a standard car, one way. The ferry terminal is a mile east of the centre, on the east side of the river mouth.

Bus

First bus 100 is a shuttle service between Swansea and Cardiff (£4, one hour, every 30 to 45 minutes Monday to Saturday, five daily Sunday). Stagecoach bus 63 links Swansea with Brecon (£4, 1½ hours, three daily Monday to Saturday) via Dan-yr-Ogof Showcaves.

National Express coach 508 runs direct from London (Victoria station) to Swansea (£22, 4½ hours, twice daily), continuing to Carmarthen, Tenby, Pembroke and Haverfordwest. National Express also runs coach 528 from Swansea to Haverfordwest (£8, 2¼ hours, one per day).

Train

There are direct trains to Swansea from Cardiff (£4, one hour, every 45 minutes Monday to Saturday, every two hours Sunday), Tenby (£10, 1½ hours, seven daily Monday to Saturday, one on Sunday) and Haverfordwest (£10, 1½ hours, every two hours).

Swansea is the southern terminus of the scenic Heart of Wales line (www.heart-of-wales.co.uk), which runs across southern Mid-

Wales to Shrewsbury in England, passing through Llandeilo (£5, one hour), Llandovery (£5.50, 1¼ hours) and Llandrindod Wells (£8.30, 1¼ hours, four daily Monday to Saturday, two on Sunday).

GETTING AROUND

Bus

First Cymru runs local services between Swansea and the Mumbles (£2, every 15 minutes, half-hourly on Monday to Saturday, hourly on Sunday). A Swansea Bay Day Ticket offers all-day bus travel in the Swansea and Mumbles area for £3.60 (£3 if bought after 10am). Buy a ticket from the driver.

During summer the **Swansea Bay Rider** (☎ 635436), a toy-town road-train, runs between Swansea and the Mumbles.

A new Swansea Metro rapid transit bus route will start operating in late 2008, linking the train station, bus station, Swansea University and the Mumbles.

Taxi

Try **Yellow Cabs** (☎ 644446). It costs about £10 to go from the train station to the Mumbles.

GOWER PENINSULA

☎ 01792

With its grey limestone cliffs, sweeping butter-scotch-coloured beaches and pounding surf, the Gower Peninsula (Y Gŵyr) feels like a little chunk of the Pembrokeshire coast tacked onto Swansea's back yard.

A 15-mile long thumb of land stretching westward from the Mumbles, Gower was designated the UK's first official Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) in 1956. The National Trust (NT) owns about three-quarters of the coast and, although there is no continuously waymarked path, you can hike almost the entire length of the coastline. The peninsula also has the best surfing in Wales outside Pembrokeshire.

The main family beaches, patrolled by lifeguards during the summer, are Langland Bay, Caswell Bay and Port Eynon. The most impressive, and most popular with surfers, is the magnificent 3-mile sweep of Rhossili Bay at the far end of the peninsula. Much of Gower's northern coast is salt marsh that faces the Burry Inlet, an important area for wading birds and wildfowl.

Information

The Swansea and Mumbles tourist offices (p143) provide information and advice on Gower, including accommodation listings and bus timetables. The NT runs a good, year-round visitor centre at Rhossili, which is stocked with informative leaflets on walking and wildlife.

Tide tables are important here – at high water many beaches shrink to a narrow strip of sand or shingle, and some coastal walks become impossible; surf conditions also depend on the state of the tide. You can pick up tide tables at tourist offices, or check them online at www.bbc.co.uk/weather/coast/tides/wales.shtml.

Gower is covered by both the OS Landranger map 159 and the OS Explorer 164.

Activities

WALKING

There are dozens of excellent walks in Gower, from clifftop coastal paths to inland heath. Tourist offices stock leaflets and maps, plus half a dozen dedicated walking guidebooks (see www.visitswanseabay.com/walking).

The National Trust website (www.nationaltrust.org.uk) also has five downloadable walks – go to the Rhossili Visitor Centre page and click on the Walks link.

The **Gower Way** is a waymarked footpath that runs for 35 miles from the ancient hill fort of Penlle'r Castell (on a minor road 10 miles north of Swansea) to Rhossili, along the central spine of the peninsula. There are three leaflets (£1.05 each) describing the route, available from tourist offices. The final section, from Penmaen to Rhossili via the ridge of Cefn Bryn, Reynoldston and Old Henllys (10 miles) makes a good one-day walk.

HORSE RIDING

The rural byways and bridleways of Gower are ideal territory for exploring on horseback. Several places offer pony trekking and hacking, with rates around £22/35 a half-/full day, including **Parc-Le-Breos Pony Trekking** (☎ 371636; www.parc-le-breos.co.uk; Parc-Le-Breos House, Parkmill).

SURFING

The Gower Peninsula has several good surf beaches, notably Llangennith, which is one of the best beaches in Wales for beginners. You can take lessons with the **Welsh Surfing Federation School** (☎ 386426; www.wsfurfschool.co.uk; The Croft, Llangennith); a half-day session costs £25.

THE DYLAN THOMAS TRAIL

There are several sites in Swansea and southwest Wales associated with the poet Dylan Thomas. The tourist office and the Dylan Thomas Centre have various maps, leaflets and booklets describing self-guided walks and trails, though many of the places mentioned no longer exist.

Here is a list of the major sites with something to see, or an exhibition to visit.

5 Cwmdonkin Drive, Swansea The unassuming terraced house where Thomas was born in 1914, and where he wrote two-thirds of his poetry. At the time of writing, the house had recently been purchased and the new owners intend to restore it and open it to the public.

Dylan Thomas Theatre, Swansea The present home of the amateur theatrical company of which Thomas was once a member (see p149).

Dylan Thomas Centre, Swansea Exhibition on Thomas' work and life (see p145).

New Quay, Cardiganshire Thomas and his wife Caitlin lived here for nine months in 1944–45, and the fictional Llareggub in *Under Milk Wood* was partly based on New Quay.

Boathouse, Laugharne The house where Thomas lived from 1949 until his death; the Boathouse is now home to a museum and exhibition (see p161).

St Martin's Church, Laugharne Both Thomas and his wife are buried in the cemetery here (see p161).



You can check surf conditions online at www.gowerlive.co.uk.

Getting There & Around

Bus services in the Gower Peninsula are operated by First and Pullman Coaches. For route and timetable information, call **Traveline** (% 0870 608 2 608; www.traveline-cymru.org.uk) or pick up a timetable booklet from a tourist information centre.

Frequent buses cover pretty much the whole peninsula, running hourly Monday to Saturday and every two hours on Sunday. The most useful routes for visitors, departing from Swansea bus station, include 14 (to Pennard Cliffs via Bishopston), and 118 (to Rhossili via Uplands, Parkmill, Penmaen, Oxwich, Port Eynon and Reynoldston).

You can buy a Swansea Bay Day Ticket (First buses) or Gower Day Explorer Ticket (Pullman buses) for £3.50, gaining unlimited travel on both companies' services for a day.

SOUTH COAST Mumbles Head to Three Cliffs Bay

Going west from Mumbles Head there are two small bays, **Langland Bay** and **Caswell Bay**, shingly at high tide but exposing acres of golden sand at low water; both are easily reached from Swansea and are popular with families and surfers. About 500m west of Caswell along the coast path is beautiful **Brandy Cove**, a tiny secluded beach away from the crowds.

West again is **Pwlldu Bay**, a shingle beach backed by a wooded ravine known as Bish-

opston Valley; you can walk there from Bishopston village (1.5 miles).

From Pwlldu Head the limestone **Pennard Cliffs**, honeycombed with caves, stretch westwards for 2 miles to Three Cliffs Bay. Halfway along is the National Trust's Pennard Cliffs car park (a little confusingly, it's in the village of **Southgate**, not Pennard; the Pennard Cliffs bus stop is also here). The car park is the starting point for scenic coastal walks east to Pwlldu (1.5 miles), and west to Three Cliffs Bay (1 mile).

Next to the car park is the **Three Cliffs Coffee Shop** (% 233230; 68 Southgate Rd, Southgate; 11 9am-6pm daily), which has good cakes, coffee and ice cream.

Three Cliffs Bay is named for the triple-pointed crag, pierced by a natural arch, that guards its eastern point. It is regularly voted one of the most beautiful beaches in Britain, even though the sand disappears completely at high tide.

The only way to get there is on foot. The most scenic approach is along the Pennard Cliffs, but you can also walk in from Parkmill village (1 mile), either along the valley of Pennard Pill, or along the edge of the golf course to the east via the ruins of Pennard Castle.

It is dangerous to swim here at high tide, because of river currents, but safe at low water. The triple-pointed crag is a popular rock-climbing site.

Parkmill

The village of Parkmill is home to the **Gower Heritage Centre** (% 371206; www.gowerheritagecentre.co.uk; Parkmill; adult/child £3.95/2.80; 11 10am-5.30pm

Apr-Sep, 10am-4.30pm Oct-Mar), housed in a restored watermill, with a café, puppet theatre, craft centre, farm and fish pond. It's Gower's main rainy-day option for kids.

Penmaen

On **Penmaen Burrows**, the headland on the western side of Three Cliffs Bay, are the remains of a medieval church and the buried remains of a Viking village known as Steadworlango, fragments of a Norman tower, a huge Neolithic burial chamber and a limekiln used until a century ago for the production of quicklime fertiliser. Access is on foot from Penmaen.

Parc-le-Breos (% 371636; www.parc-le-breos.co.uk; Penmaen; B&B per person £29; 11), set in its own private estate north of the main road, offers accommodation in a Victorian hunting lodge, with log fires in winter. It's also a pony-trekking centre (see p151).

Nicholaston Farm Caravan & Camping Site (% 37109; www.nicholastonfarm.co.uk; Penmaen; sites per 2 people, tent & car £10-12; 11 Apr-Oct) is a working farm at the western end of Penmaen, a short walk from beaches at Tor Bay and Three Cliffs Bay.

Oxwich Bay

Oxwich Bay is a windy, 2.5-mile-long curve of sand backed by dunes. Road access and a large car park (£2) make it popular with families and water sports enthusiasts (no lifeguard, though).

Set on a hillside above the beach is the Cadw-operated (Cadw is the Welsh historic monuments agency) stately grey ruin of **Oxwich Castle** (% 390359; Oxwich Castle Farm; adult/child £2.50/2; 11 10am-5pm Apr-Sep), less a castle and more a sumptuous 16th-century, mock-military Tudor mansion.

Behind the beach lies **Oxwich Nature Reserve**, an area of salt and freshwater marshes, oak and ash woodlands, and dunes; it is home to a variety of birdlife and dune plants.

Euphoria Sailing (% 0870 770 2890; www.euphoria-sailing.co.uk; Watersports4:all Beach Club, Oxwich Bay) runs water-skiing and wake-boarding sessions (£40), and rents out sailing dinghies (£30 an hour) and kayaks (£10 an hour).

SLEEPING & EATING

Oxwich Camping Park (% 390777; Oxwich; sites per tent & 2 people £6-11; 11 Mar-Oct) This park has a good location at the top of the hill above the bay with views along the beach.

Woodside Guest House (% 390791; Woodside, Oxwich; s/d from £38/50; 11) In the village centre, Woodside is close to the beach and nature reserve.

Oxwich Bay Hotel (% 390329; www.oxwichbayhotel.co.uk; Oxwich Bay; s/d from £55/66; 11) This hotel is right on the beach – you can have a drink or a meal overlooking the sands – and has plush rooms with big windows and sea views. It serves snacks and bar meals and also has a formal restaurant (mains £12 to £16).

Port Eynon

The three-quarter-mile stretch of dunes at Port Eynon is Gower's busiest beach (in summer, at least), with half a dozen camping and caravan sites nearby. It's safe for swimming.

Gower Coast Adventures (% 250440; www.gowercoastadventures.co.uk; adult/child £24/16) runs two-hour speedboat trips to Worms Head from Port Eynon beach (you have to paddle out to the boat).

Around the southern point of the bay is **Culver Hole**, a curious stone structure built into a gash in the cliff. Legend has it that it was a smugglers' hiding place, but the mundane truth is that it served as a dovecote (pigeons were a valuable food source in medieval times; the name comes from Old English *culufre*, meaning 'dove'). It's quite tricky to find – the easiest route is signposted from the youth hostel – and is only accessible for three hours either side of low tide; make sure you don't get caught out by the rising waters.

The coastal walk west from Port Eynon to Rhossili (7 miles) is the wildest and most dramatic part of the Gower coast, and fairly rough going. Halfway along is **Paviland Cave** (see the boxed text the Red Lady of Paviland Cave, p154).

SLEEPING & EATING

Port Eynon Youth Hostel (YHA; % 0870 770 5998; Old Lifeboat House; dm £14; 11 year-round) This is a former lifeboat station with a stunning beachside location, and the warden is a mine of information on the local area.

Carreglwyd Park (% 390795; www.porteynon.com; The Seafort; sites per tent & 2 people £15; 11 Mar-Dec) Perched above the western end of the beach, with good views along the coast.

Culver House Hotel (% 390755; www.culverhousehotel.co.uk; Port Eynon; s/d from £40/66) A lovely old country house just 100m from the beach; rooms 7 and 10, both with balconies, have the best sea views. It doesn't have a restaurant, but

THE RED LADY OF PAVILAND CAVE

Halfway along the Gower coast between Port Eynon and Rhossili is Paviland Cave, where in 1823 the Reverend William Buckland discovered a Stone Age human skeleton dyed with red ochre. As he also found jewellery buried along with the bones, the good Reverend assumed the deceased must be a woman. Being also a devout Christian, he believed she must date from the Roman era, as she could not be older than the biblical flood. The 'Red Lady', as the skeleton became known, was therefore a Roman prostitute or witch, according to Buckland.

Modern analysis shows that the Red Lady was actually a man – possibly a tribal chief – who died, aged around 21, some 29,000 years ago. His are the oldest human remains yet found in the UK: you can see a replica of his skeleton and burial in Swansea Museum.

you can eat at the nearby **Ship Inn** (☎ 390204; Port Eynon; mains £4-7).

WEST GOWER Rhossili Bay

The western end of the Gower Peninsula bears the full brunt of Atlantic storms, whose waves have carved out some of Wales' most dramatic coastal scenery in the form of Rhossili Bay. The waves also make this one of Wales' best and most popular surfing beaches.

The dramatic 3-mile sweep of golden sand is backed by the steep slopes of **Rhossili Down** (193m), a humpbacked, heather-covered ridge whose updraughts create perfect soaring conditions for hang-gliders and paragliders. On the summit are numerous Iron Age earthworks, a burial chamber called Sweeney's Howes and the remains of a WWII radar station. At its foot, behind the beach, is the Warren, the sand-buried remains of an old village. At low tide the stark, ghostly ribs of the *Helvetica*, a Norwegian barque wrecked in a storm in 1887, protrude from the sand in the middle of the beach.

Access to the beach is via a path leading next to the Worms Head Hotel, across from the car park. Swimming at the beach is dangerous if there is any surf.

RHOSSILI VILLAGE

The National Trust's **Rhossili Visitor Centre** (☎ 390707; Coastguard Cottages; admission free; 10.30am-5.30pm Apr-Oct, 11am-4pm Wed-Sun Nov-Mar), at the downhill end of the car park, has information on local walks and wildlife. There are good hikes out to the headland overlooking Worms Head (1 mile), and up to the summit of Rhossili Down (a very steep half a mile).

South of the village is the **Viel** (pronounced 'vile'), a rare survival of a patchwork of strip-fields first laid out in medieval times.

The **Bay Bistro & Coffee House** (☎ 390519; 10am-5pm) does good coffee, cakes and light meals.

The neighbouring **Worms Head Hotel** (☎ 390512; www.thewormshead.co.uk; s/d from £53/70) trades mostly on its incredible views of Worms Head and the beach, but is overpriced in terms of the standard of accommodation.

WORMS HEAD

The southern extremity of Rhossili Bay is guarded by Worms Head (from the Old English *wurm*, meaning 'dragon' – the rocks present a snaking, Loch Ness-monster profile). There is a four-hour window of opportunity (two hours either side of low tide) when you can walk out across a causeway and along the narrow crest of the Outer Head to the furthest point of land. There are seals around the rocks, and the cliffs are thick with razorbills, guillemots, kittiwakes, fulmars and puffins during nesting season (April to July).

Pay close attention to the tides – tide tables are posted at the Rhossili Visitor Centre – as people are regularly rescued after being cut off by the rising waters. Among those who have spent a cold, nervous half-night trapped there was the young Dylan Thomas, as he relates in the story 'Who Do You Wish Was with Us?', from *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog*. If you do get stuck, do not try to wade or swim back. Currents are fierce and the rocks treacherous.

Llangennith

The northern end of Rhossili Bay is one of the best surfing beaches in Britain. Behind it is the pretty village of Llangennith, the hub of the surfer social scene.

PJ's Surfshop (☎ 386669; www.pjsurfshop.co.uk) owned by Pete Jones, the ex-European surf champion, stocks all the gear you'll need, and

LOVESPOONS

All over Wales, craft shops turn out wooden spoons with contorted handles in a variety of different designs, at a speed that would have left their original makers – village lads with their eyes on a lady – gawking in astonishment. The carving of these spoons seems to date back to the 17th century, when they were made by men to give to women to mark the start of a courtship.

Various symbols were carved into the spoons; the meanings of a few of them are as follows:

Anchor I'm home to stay; you can count on me.

Balls in a cage, links in a chain Captured love, together forever; the number of balls or links may correspond to the number of children desired, or the number of years already spent together.

Bell Marriage.

Celtic cross Faith; marriage.

Double spoon Side by side forever.

Flowers Love and affection; courtship.

Horseshoe Good luck; happiness.

Key, lock, little house My house is yours.

One heart My heart is yours.

Two hearts We feel the same way about one another.

Vines, trees, leaves Our love is growing.

Wheel I will work for you.

If you want to see carving in progress, the St Fagan's National History Museum (see p104) can usually oblige. Any number of shops will be happy to sell you the finished product.

rents out wetsuits (£9 per day), surfboards (£9 per day) and bodyboards (£5 per day).

SLEEPING & EATING

Hillend Campsite (☎ 386204; sites per 2 people, tent & car £15; 1 Easter-Oct) As close to the beach as you can get. The on-site Eddy's Restaurant has brilliant views, and rustles up breakfast for under a fiver, and dinner for £7 or £8.

Bremmel Cottage (☎ 386308; s/d from £20/30; P) Another surfer-friendly place, this pretty little cottage is like a warren, with appealing attic rooms.

College House (☎ 386214; s/d £30/50) Down the lane between PJ's and the church, this is a charming B&B in a lovely house decorated with sculptures and paintings. The garden backs onto the church.

The centre of the village's social life is the **King's Head** (☎ 386212; mains £5-12), which serves real ales and home-cooked bar meals, including a good range of vegetarian dishes.

CENTRAL & NORTH GOWER

In complete contrast to the south coast, Gower's northern fringe is a series of salt marshes and mud flats, not much to look at but an important wildlife habitat. This coast also produces some of the region's most famous foodstuffs: Gower lamb, whose diet of salt-marsh vegetation

imparts a distinct and delicious flavour; and Penclawdd cockles, harvested from the mud flats at the eastern end of the coast.

Arthur's Stone

Cefn Bryn is the name for the Gower's breezy, 186m-high central uplands. On the summit moor, north of the minor road from Reynoldston to Llanrhidian, is a 25-tonne quartz boulder, the fallen capstone of a Neolithic burial chamber known as Arthur's Stone (Coeten Arthur). In legend it's a pebble that Arthur removed from his boot and flung across the Burry Inlet on his way to the fateful Battle of Camlan. Local lore also says that a woman who crawls around the stone at midnight during the full moon would be joined by her lover – if he was faithful.

The view from the top is fantastic – you can see out to the edges of the Gower in every direction, and on a clear day you can see south to Lundy Island and the Devon and Somerset coast. It's a great spot to watch the sunset.

The **King Arthur Hotel** (☎ 390775; www.kingarthurhotel.co.uk; Higher Green, Reynoldston; s/d from £55/65; mains £6-14) in Reynoldston has a lovely, old-fashioned, wood-pannelled bar with open fires, and serves real ales and excellent pub grub. The hotel bedrooms are attractively decorated in shades of cream and burgundy, and there's

a romantic 18th-century cottage too (self-catering or B&B).

CARMARTHENSHIRE

Castle-dotted Carmarthenshire has gentle valleys, deep-green woods and a sandy, sweeping coast. Playing second fiddle to its dramatic western neighbour, Pembrokeshire, it remains much quieter and less explored.

CARMARTHEN (CAERFYRDDIN)

☎ 01267 / pop 14,600

Carmarthenshire's handsome county town is where legend locates the birthplace of Merlin, the famous wizard of the Arthurian legends. An oak tree planted in 1660 for Charles II's coronation came to be called 'Merlin's Tree' and was linked to a prophecy that its death would mean curtains for the town. But the tree died peacefully in the 1970s and the town still thrives. Pieces of the tree are kept under glass at the Carmarthenshire County Museum.

The town centre is on the northern bank of the River Tywi (often anglicised to Towy). The **tourist office** (☎ 231557; 113 Llammas St; h 10am-5.30pm Mon-Sat Apr-Sep, 10am-4.30pm Mon-Sat Oct-Mar) is on the main street, a block west of the main bus stop on Blue St. The train station is 300m south, across the river.

Sights

The hulking **county hall**, above the River Tywi bridge, was designed in the 18th century – apparently as a jail – by John Nash, better known for Buckingham Palace. It's on the site of Carmarthen's Norman Castle (destroyed in the Civil War, though there are a few remnants just west of the County Hall).

Housed in a former art college, **Oriel Myrddin** (Merlin Gallery; ☎ 222775; Church Lane; admission free; h 10am-5pm Mon-Sat) stages changing exhibitions of contemporary arts and crafts. Opposite is the **King Street Gallery** (☎ 267652; King St; h 10am-4pm Mon-Sat), which has a selection of works by local artists.

Sleeping & Eating

Y Dderwen Fach (☎ 234193; 98 Priory St; s/d from £20/39) Set in an interesting old town house northeast of the centre, this is a basic, no-frills B&B but is centrally located, welcoming and good value.

Boar's Head (☎ 222789; www.boarsheadhotel.com; 120 Llammas St; s/d £45/55; p) This fine old coaching

inn offers family-friendly B&B accommodation, with highchairs, cots and baby monitors available. There's also a special master bedroom with a four-poster bed (£75).

Falcon Hotel (☎ 237152; www.falconcarmarthen.co.uk; Llammas St; s/d from £45/55) A small, family-run hotel, the Falcon has a traditional, old-fashioned feel and a convenient location on the main street.

Café at No 4 Queen St (☎ 220461; 4 Queen St; mains £3.50-7; h 9am-5pm Mon-Sat) This chic little corner café right in the middle of Carmarthen brews the best coffee in town and serves fantastic home-made cakes and scones as well as soups, salads, sandwiches and daily specials.

Quayside Brasserie (☎ 223000; the Quay; 2-course lunch £9, mains £10-15; h closed Sun) A popular restaurant with an outdoor terrace overlooking the river, the Quayside has a farmhouse look indoors, and an inventive menu with the accent on seafood – grilled sea bass with sweet potato and coriander mash, or *paupiettes* (thin rolls) of plaice with Gower cockles.

Getting There & Away

First bus X11 runs from Carmarthen to Swansea (£5, 1½ hours, every 30 minutes Monday to Saturday), and the 460 goes to Cardigan (£4, 1½ hours, eight daily Monday to Saturday). Silcox bus 322 runs from Haverfordwest (£5, one hour, three daily Monday to Saturday). There are no Sunday services on these routes.

The Traws-Cambria bus service X40 (Cardiff to Aberystwyth) passes through daily, as does National Express service 508/528 (Haverfordwest-Swansea-London).

The Beacons Bus (see p125) route B10 links Carmarthen with Brecon.

Trains run between Carmarthen and Cardiff (£12, two hours, six daily) and also west to Fishguard, Tenby, Pembroke, Haverfordwest and Milford Haven.

AROUND CARMARTHEN

Gwili Steam Railway

The standard-gauge **Gwili Steam Railway** (☎ 01267-230666; www.gwili-railway.co.uk; adult/child £5.50/3) runs along the lovely Gwili valley, departing from Bronwydd Arms, 3 miles north of Carmarthen on the A484. It runs daily in August, on Wednesday and Sunday in June and July, and on holidays at other times of the year – check the website or Carmarthen tourist office for further details.

Carmarthenshire County Museum

Located in the country-house setting of the former bishop's palace, the **Carmarthenshire County Museum** (☎ 228696; Abergwili; admission free; h 10am-4.30pm Mon-Sat) is a musty emporium of archaeology, Egyptology, pottery and paintings, with re-creations of a Victorian schoolroom and an 18th-century kitchen and parlour.

The museum is 2 miles east of Carmarthen on the A40. Take First bus 280 or 281 (12 minutes, six daily Monday to Saturday) and get off at the Abergwili Church stop.

National Botanic Garden of Wales

Concealed in the rolling Tywi valley countryside to the east of Carmarthen, the lavish **National Botanic Garden of Wales** (☎ 01558-667148; www.gardenofwales.org.uk; Llanarthne; adult/under 5yr/5-16yr £7.50/free/2.50; h 10am-6pm Apr-Oct, 10am-4.30pm Nov-Mar) are twice the size of London's Kew Gardens. Formerly an aristocratic estate, the garden has a wide range of plant habitats, from lakes and bogs to woodland and heath, with lots of decorative areas too – there's a walled garden, a Japanese garden and an apothecaries' garden – and educational exhibits on plant medicine and organic farming. The centrepiece is the **Great Glasshouse**, a huge glass dome designed by Norman Foster, which houses a display of endangered plants from all over the world.

Opened in 2000, the garden is still a work in progress, with new features being added every year. The latest addition is a tropical glasshouse in the walled garden for the display of plants from warmer climates.

The garden is 8 miles east of Carmarthen; take the A48 out of town (signposted Swansea and the M4) and after 8 miles take the B4310 on the left (signposted Nantgaredig), then follow the signs to the garden.

LLANDEILO

☎ 01558 / pop 3000

Llandeilo is a small, quiet town with grand Victorian and Georgian buildings lining a couple of narrow, hilly streets centred on the parish church of St Teilo. The surrounding region was once dominated by large country estates and, though they have long gone, the deer, parkland trees and agricultural character of the landscape are their legacy.

A good place to stay or eat at is the **Cawdor Arms** (☎ 823500; www.thecawdor.com; Rhosmaen St; d £65-200; p), a grand, spacious 18th-century

inn. It has old-fashioned rooms, some of which are finished off with chaise longues, and does formal food (mains £13 to £17), with good two- or three-course Sunday lunches.

Also serving good food, with various theme nights, is the **Capel Bach Bistro** (☎ 822765; 62 Rhosmaen St; mains £11-17; h closed Sun), with a menu of fresh fish, vegetarian and vegan dishes.

Llandeilo is on the Heart of Wales railway line. Bus 280 between Carmarthen and Llandeilo stops here.

AROUND LLANDEILO

Dinefwr Park

National Trust-run **Dinefwr Park** (☎ 01558-824512; Llandeilo; park only adult/child £3/1.50, park & house £5/2.50; h 11am-5pm Thu-Mon Apr-Oct) is an 18th-century landscaped estate to the west of Llandeilo, home to fallow deer and a herd of rare White Park cattle. At the centre of the estate is the great 17th-century manor of **Newton House**, made over with a Victorian façade in the 19th century. It is still in the process of being restored – the plan is to show what life was like for both masters and servants. In the meantime there are various exhibitions in the main house, including one on Newton's incarnation as a WWII hospital.

Striking **Dinefwr Castle** is set on a hilltop in the southern corner of the estate and has fantastic views across the Tywi to the foothills of the Black Mountain. It dates from the 13th century, and in the 17th century it was converted into a picturesque feature. There are several marked walking routes around the grounds, a number of which are accessible to disabled visitors.

Bus 280 that runs between Carmarthen and Llandeilo stops here.

Aberglasney House & Gardens

Wandering through the formal walled gardens of **Aberglasney House** (☎ 01558-668998; www.aberglasney.org; Llangathen; adult/child £6/3; h 10am-6pm Apr-Sep, 10.30am-4pm Oct-Mar) feels a bit like walking into a Jane Austen novel. They date back to the 17th century and contain the only example of a cloister built solely as a garden decoration. There's also a pool garden, a 250-year-old yew tunnel and a 'wild' garden in the bluebell woods to the west. Several derelict rooms in the central courtyard of the house have been converted into a glass-roofed atrium garden full of subtropical plants such as orchids, palms and cycads.

Aberglasney is in the village of Llangathen, 3 miles west of Llandeilo. Bus 280 between

Carmarthen and Llandeilo stops on the main A40 road, 500m north of the village.

Carreg Cennen Castle

Perched atop a steep limestone crag high above the River Cennen, **Carreg Cennen Castle** (Cadw; % 01558-822291; Tir y Castell Farm, Trapp; adult/child £3.50/3; 11 9.30am-6.30pm Apr-Oct, 9.30am-4pm Nov-Mar) is one of the most spectacularly situated fortresses in Wales, visible for miles in every direction.

So remote that it never played much of a military role, Carreg Cennen nevertheless fulfilled its role as a symbol of the power and pride of the Welsh princes. There was probably a stronghold here in the time of Rhys ap Gruffydd, ruler of the kingdom of Deheubarth, who in the 12th century reversed many of the territorial gains of the Normans. This castle, and others at Lord Rhys' royal seat of Dinefwr and at Dryslwyn, would have faced down the Tywi valley towards the Norman castle at Carmarthen. The castle you see today, however, was built at the end of the 13th century in the course of Edward I's conquest of Wales. It was not wrecked in battle, but dismantled in 1462 by Yorkists during the Wars of the Roses.

The steep uphill walk from the car park to the castle is rewarded with inspirational views over endless waves of rippling green hills. The inner ward, defended by two drawbridges and three gate-towers, is lined with the remains of water cisterns, kitchens and a great hall. The most unusual feature is the **Cliff Gallery**, a stone-vaulted passage running along the top of the sheer southern cliff, which leads down to a long, narrow, natural cave whose entrance was used as a dovecote. The cave goes a long way back, so bring a torch, or hire one from the ticket office, if you want to explore.

The castle is 4 miles southeast of Llandeilo. Take the A483 south across the river, and turn left in the village of Ffairrach, then fork right after you pass under the railway; 3 miles further on, turn left just before the bridge over the River Cennen.

LLANDOVERY (LLANYMDDYFRI)

% 01550 / pop 2870

Llandovery is an attractive market town that makes a good base for exploring the western fringes of the Brecon Beacons National Park (p123). The name means 'the church among the waters', and the town is indeed surrounded by rivers, sitting at the meeting place of three valleys: the Tywi, the Bran and the Gwydderig.

Once an important assembly point for drovers taking their cattle towards the border and English markets, the Bank of the Black Ox – one of the first independent Welsh banks – was established here by a wealthy cattle merchant.

Orientation & Information

The **tourist office** (% 720693; Kings Rd; 11 10am-1pm & 1.45-5.30pm Easter-Oct, 10am-1pm & 1.45-4pm Mon-Sat, 2-4pm Sun Nov-Easter) is beside the castle car park, a block west of the bus stop, and about 600m southeast of the train station.

Sights

Above the tourist office is the excellent **Heritage Centre** (% 720693; Kings Rd; admission free; 11 same as tourist office), which has interesting displays on drovers and the Black Ox bank, local legends, the Heart of Wales Railway and the history of the town.

Across the car park rises the shattered stump of the motte-and-bailey **Llandovery Castle**, built in 1116. It changed hands many times between the Normans and Welsh, and between one Welsh prince and another, taking a severe beating in the process; it was finally left to decay after Owain Glyndŵr had a go at it in 1403. It's now home to a stainless-steel statue commemorating Llywelyn ap Gruffydd Fychan, who refused to take Henry IV to Owain Glyndŵr's base and paid with his life.

The town's Victorian market hall now houses **Dinefwr Craft Centre**, which has a couple of shops selling local handicrafts, oak furniture and Welsh lovespoons.

Sleeping & Eating

Cwmgwyn Farm (% 720410; www.cwmgwyn-holidays.co.uk; Llangadog Rd; s/d £30/50; P) A working 17th-century farm 2 miles southwest of Llandovery, Cwmgwyn has a lovely location high above the River Tywi. The three bedrooms are big and bright, with polished mahogany and exposed roof beams, and there's an oak-beamed lounge with leather sofa and open fire.

Drovers B&B (% 721115; 9 Market Sq; s/d from £35/50; P) This attractive Georgian house, on the town's main square, creates a comfortably old-fashioned feel with its ancient stone hearth, antique furniture and rose-patterned bedrooms. There's a licensed bar and you can take breakfast in front of a roaring fire in winter.

Kings Head Inn (% 720393; 1 Market Sq; s/d from £55/75) An ancient coaching inn with blazing log fires and sagging oak-beamed ceilings, the Kings Head has four comfortable en suite rooms and serves a predictable but tasty menu of pub grub (mains £6 to £16), from chicken pie to scampi to grilled steak. The bar also pours a decent pint of Old Speckled Hen real ale.

Red Lion (% 720813; Market Sq) This real-ale pub has remained pretty much unchanged for the 100 years it's been in the family – spartan, eccentric and resolutely traditional. There's no bar; the elderly landlord serves beer from a jug, filled from the barrels in the kitchen. Opening hours depend on the landlord's whim – usually 5.30pm to 8.30pm on Friday and noon to 8.30pm on Saturday.

Getting There & Away

Roy Brown bus 714 goes to Llandovery from Brecon (£4, 40 minutes, six daily Monday to Saturday), while First bus 280 and 281 comes from Carmarthen (1¼ hours, six daily Monday to Saturday). Coming from Swansea, change at Llandeilo. The Beacons Bus (see p125) route B10 also serves Llandovery.

Llandovery is on the Heart of Wales railway line, serviced by at least three trains daily (there are fewer on Sunday). Links include Llanwrtyd Wells (£2.10, 30 minutes),

Llandrindod Wells (£5.50, one hour) and Swansea (£8.10, 1½ hours).

AROUND LLANDOVERY Dolaucothi Gold Mines

Set in a beautiful wooded estate, the **Dolaucothi Gold Mines** (NT; % 01558-650177; Pumsaint, Llanwrda; adult/child £3.40/1.70; 11 10am-5pm Apr-Oct) are on the site of the only known Roman gold mine in the UK. The Romans left around AD 120, but the locals carried on for a couple of hundred more years. Mining recommenced with the Victorians, and by the time the mine was finally closed down in 1938 the works employed more than 200 men.

The exhibition and the mining machinery above ground are interesting, but the main attraction is the chance to go underground on a guided tour of the old mine workings (adult/child £3.80/1.90 extra). Back at the surface, there's a sediment-filled water trough where you can try your hand at panning for gold – don't get your hopes up though!

The mines are 5 miles northwest of Llandovery on the A482.

CARMARTHENSHIRE COAST National Wetlands Centre

Set on the northern shore of the Burry Inlet, across from the Gower Peninsula, the **National Wetlands Centre** (% 01554-741087;

THE PHYSICIANS OF MYDDFAI

About 8 miles southeast of Llandovery, nestled beneath the high escarpment of the Black Mountain, is a tiny lake called **Llyn y Fan Fach** (Lake of the Little Peak), said to be haunted by fairies. In the mid-13th century, a young man grazing his cattle beside the lake saw a woman, the loveliest he had ever seen, sitting on the surface of the water, combing her hair. He fell madly in love with her, coaxed her to shore with some bread and begged her to marry him. Her fairy father agreed, on the condition that if the young man struck her as many as three times she would return to the fairy world. As dowry she brought a herd of magic cows and for years the couple lived happily near Myddfai, raising three healthy sons.

Naturally the three-strikes-and-you're-out story ends badly. After three slaps – for making them late to a christening, for weeping at a wedding and laughing at a funeral, she and her cattle returned forever to the lake.

Her sons often returned to the lake and one day their mother appeared. She handed the eldest, Rhiwallon, a leather bag containing the secrets of the lake's medicinal wild plants, and informed him that he should heal the sick.

From this point, legend merges with fact. Historical records confirm that Rhiwallon and his sons Cadwgan, Gruffydd and Einion were well-known 13th-century physicians, and their descendants continued the tradition. The last of the line to practise was Rhys Williams in the 18th century.

The Pant-y-Meddygon, or 'Physicians' Valley', on Mynydd Myddfai is still rich in bog plants, herbs and lichens, and is well worth visiting for the scenery alone; ask at Llandovery tourist office for details of walks.

DYLAN THOMAS

Dylan Thomas is a towering figure in the Welsh literary landscape, one of those poets who seemed to embody what a poet should be – chaotic, dramatic, drunk, tragic and comic, with a life as full-blown as his revelry in language. Unfashionable since his death, he is yet an overwhelming presence, much loved, and the author of extraordinary poetry. His work, although written in English, is of the bardic tradition – written to be read aloud, thunderous, often humorous, with a lyrical sense of music that echoes the sound of the Welsh voice.

Like the other great 20th-century Welsh poet RS Thomas (see p42), much of his work is about Wales, inspired by places where he wrote and lived. Although Thomas travelled in New York and Iran, and also lived in London and Oxford, he wrote only when at home in Wales; his writings are an endless source of quotations on the country that seduced, amused and repelled him. He wrote, 'the land of my forefathers, they can keep it' (from a letter in the Dylan Thomas Centre, Swansea).

Born in Swansea in 1914, he lived an itinerant life, shifting from town to town in search of cheap accommodation and to escape debt. He married Caitlin Macnamara (a former dancer, and lover of Augustus John) in 1936 but had numerous, infamous affairs. Margaret Thomas, who was married to the historian AJP Taylor, was one of his admirers and paid his Boathouse rent (mysteriously enough, AJP detested him). His actorish inclinations sat well with drama: during a stay in New Quay (also one of the models for Llareggub in *Under Milk Wood*) between 1944 and 1945, he was shot at by a jealous local captain.

Thomas was also a promiscuous pub-goer, honing the habit that eventually killed him in an astonishing number of Welsh locals. By 1946 he had become an immense commercial success, making regular book tours to America, but his marriage was suffering. In December 1952 his father died – his failing health had inspired one of Thomas' most resonant poems.

Less than a year later, a period of depression while in New York ended in a heavy drinking spell, and he died shortly after his 39th birthday. His widow, Caitlin, died in 1994. The two are buried in Laugharne.

risers above a narrow waterway dotted with gliding swans. It was founded in 1106, but most of the system of towers and curtain walls was built by the Normans in the 13th century in reaction to Welsh uprisings.

Laugharne (Lacharn)

☎ 01994 / pop 2940

This sleepy little village (pronounced 'larn') – Dylan Thomas described it as a 'timeless, mild, beguiling island of a town' – sits above the glittering, tide-washed shores of the Taf Estuary, overlooked by the dramatic ruins of a Norman castle.

Thomas lived here for the last four years of his life, during which time he produced some of his most inspired work, including *Under Milk Wood*; the town is one of the inspirations for the play's fictional village of Llareggub (which spells 'bugger all' backwards). On Thomas' first visit he described it as the 'strangest town in Wales', but returned repeatedly throughout his restless life. Many Dylan fans make a pilgrimage here to see the Boathouse where he lived, Brown's Hotel where he drank (he used to give the pub telephone number

as his contact number) and the churchyard where he's buried.

You can get tourist information at **Corran Books** (☎ 427444; King St).

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

The waterfront car park in the centre of town is overlooked by the ruins of **Laugharne Castle** (Cadw: ☎ 427906; adult/child £2.90/2.50; ⌚ 10am-5pm Apr-Sep), which was converted into a Tudor mansion in the 16th century. It was landscaped with lawns and gardens in Victorian times, and the adjoining Castle House was leased by Richard Hughes, author of *High Wind in Jamaica*. Hughes was a friend of Dylan Thomas, who sometimes wrote in the little gazebo looking out over the estuary.

Except at high tide, you can follow a path around the castle and along the shoreline, then up some stairs to a lane that leads to the **Dylan Thomas Boathouse** (☎ 427420; www.dylanthomasboat-house.com; Dylan's Walk; adult/child £3.50/1.75; ⌚ 10am-5.30pm May-Oct, 10.30am-3.30pm Nov-Apr), where the poet lived from 1949 to 1953 with his wife Caitlin and their three children. It's a beautiful setting, looking out over the estuary with its 'heron-priested shore', silent except for the long, liquid call of the curlew and the urgent 'pleep pleep pleep' of the oystercatcher, birds which appear in Thomas' poetry of that time.

The parlour of the Boathouse has been restored to its 1950s appearance, with recordings of the poet reading his own works in that distinctive, booming voice, and the desk that once belonged to Thomas' schoolmaster father. Upstairs are photographs, manuscripts, a short video about his life, and his death mask, which once belonged to Richard Burton, while downstairs is a coffee shop.

Along the lane from the Boathouse is a replica of the old shed where Thomas did most of his writing. It looks as if he has just popped out, with screwed-up pieces of paper littered around, a curiously prominent copy of *Lives of the Great Poisoners*, and the table facing out to sea where he sat and wrote *Under Milk Wood* and poems such as 'Over Sir John's Hill' (which describes the view) and 'Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night', which he wrote as his father was dying.

Thomas and his widow Caitlin are buried in a grave marked by a simple white, wooden

cross, in the churchyard of **St Martin's Church**, on the northern edge of the town.

Dylan's Walk is a scenic 2-mile loop that continues north along the shore beyond the Boathouse, then turns inland past a 17th-century farm and back via St Martin's Church. It's clearly signposted.

The week-long **Laugharne Festival** (☎ 427689) takes place every three years at the beginning of August, with plays, poetry readings, art exhibitions, a carnival and *Under Milk Wood* guided walks. The next one will be in 2009.

SLEEPING & EATING

Swan Cottage (☎ 472409; 20 Gosport St; s/d from £25/43; ⌚) Just the one spacious, en-suite double room in this attractive modern house, where you can enjoy breakfast served on the garden patio with a view of the castle.

Hurst House (☎ 427417; www.hurst-house.co.uk; East Marsh; d from £150) Having recently had a £5 million makeover, you would expect this converted Georgian farm on the salt-marsh flats south of Laugharne to be luxurious. And it is, but in a comfortable, laid-back, self-indulgent kind of way; rooms have big beds, bold colours and roll-top baths; there is massage therapy on tap, and a convivial, clubbish lounge bar with bare floorboards, leather armchairs, open fire and grand piano. The romantic, candle-lit restaurant (four-course dinner £39) specialises in all things Welsh, from laver bread to salt-marsh lamb.

New Three Mariners (☎ 427426; Victoria St; mains £5-9) Owned by the same proprietor as Hurst House, this place feels like a cross between a designer bar and an old-fashioned local, with slate floors, leather sofas and grey-painted woodwork, but also a jukebox, dartboard and poker machine. It serves posh pub grub, including fish and chips and chilli con carne.

Brown's Hotel (☎ 427320; King St) The old pub where Dylan Thomas was once a regular customer – barely changed since the 1950s – was up for sale at the time of writing. Fingers crossed that whoever buys it doesn't turn it into a theme pub.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

First Cymru bus 222 runs from Carmarthen to Laugharne (£3, 30 minutes, eight daily Monday to Saturday). From Swansea you'll have to change at either Carmarthen or St Clears.

www.www.org.uk; Llanelli Centre, Penclacwydd; adult/child £5.50/3.50; ⌚ 9.30am-5pm Apr-Sep, 9.30am-4.30pm Oct-May) is one of the most important feeding grounds in Wales for waders and waterfowl. The big attraction for bird watchers is the resident population of little egret, whose numbers have increased from a solitary pair in 1995 to around 400. Winter is the most spectacular season, when up to 60,000 birds converge on the salt marsh and mud flats; species include whooper swan, greylag goose, gadwall, wigeon, teal and black-tailed godwit. There are plenty of hides and observation points, and you can hire binoculars if you don't have your own. There's also a café and a kids play area.

The centre is a mile east of Llanelli and 5 miles northwest of Swansea.

Kidwelly Castle

The small town of Kidwelly, at the mouth of the River Gwendraeth Fach, is dominated by the impressive pigeon-inhabited remains of **Kidwelly Castle** (Cadw: ☎ 011554-890104; Castle St, Kidwelly; 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-Feb), a forbidding grey eminence that

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