

Rugged, quaint Cornwall a step back into history



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On the rocky peninsula at the southwest tip of England is a gorgeous slice of Britain: Cornwall. Harboring an endangered Celtic culture (Cornish), quaint coastal villages, a gaggle of visit-worthy sights and a thought-provoking stone circle, it's one of England's most popular vacation regions, especially among the English.

Last summer, perched on a seaside cliff in an open-air theater, I enjoyed a pasty (traditional pastry stuffed with stew) and bottle of local elderflower presse as I watched dolphins and seabirds diving for their lunch. My dramatically situated lunch spot at Minack Theatre in Porthcurno on the English Channel captures the highlights of Cornwall: historic charm wedged in the striking English landscape. Every night during theater season, about 700 people gather here on seats carved into the rocky cliff hundreds of feet over the sea to enjoy live drama: Imagine watching "The Tempest" with only the sunset and crashing waves for a background, brushed by the winds of the past. You can visit the theater just to see it and take in the view.

The rugged scenery and wild, uncultivated appeal of Cornwall evoke the feeling of approaching the end of the world (and many natives would say it's exactly that). The last native speaker of the Cornish language probably died in the late 1700s, but local pride is still strong. The welcome sign at the county border is in that old Celtic language people used to speak around here (as well as English). And, locals claim, had the Scots said yes to



CAMERON HEWITT/RICK STEVES' EUROPE

The open-air Minack Theatre in Porthcurno in Cornwall on the southwest tip of England faces out to the English Channel.

their recent referendum for independence, there would have been rumbling for greater autonomy here in this proud corner of Britain.

Cornwall is chock-full of history, claiming to have more prehistoric megaliths than any other region of England. Finding a remnant of lost civilizations that is older than the oldest Egyptian pyramid makes you want to just sit there in silence for a while and marvel. Also dotting the landscape are crumbling tin mines, the only remains of the region's tin-mining industry, which collapsed in the 1980s. These abandoned mines are reminders that, even in ancient times, Greek and Roman traders came to Cornwall for tin.

Older Cornish natives can still remember being in their houses decades ago and hearing the miners working underground.

One of my favorite spots in Cornwall is the little fishing port of Mousehole, actually named for the tiny, mouse hole-like entry into its tough little harbor. There's a 25-foot tide here, so the boats lie beached in the harbor at each low tide. The arrival of the train made this distant part of England accessible to holidaygoers in the 19th century; a rock pool where the daily tide strands a world of fun little creatures is one of the little niceties built here to entertain Victorian aristocrats.

In the bay across from Mousehole and the hub of

the shipping port of Penzance is the rock island St. Michael's Mount. I like to think of it as the little brother of France's Mont St-Michel, just across the English Channel. Inhabited for about 1,500 years and originally a Benedictine monastery, St. Michael's Mount is a fun excursion today. After a short boat ride across the bay and a hike up steep and rocky paths to the castle entrance, I take in the grand views and feel as though I've trekked back in time to the Middle Ages.

Visitors flock here for another reason: Cornwall's climate is unusually mild. The Gulf Stream brings warm, almost tropical weather, making it perfect for walking, basking on the

beach and generally enjoying life. Fishing ports thrive with mackerel, lobster and crab, and farmers appreciate the bounty of arable fields. Among these fields are Cornwall's iconic and fearsome hedgerows. For a thousand years, the hardy Cornish people have been picking the rocks off their rugged fields and stacking them along their lanes. A stone framework filled with earth and made vibrant with a tangle of vegetation, hedgerows also function as wildlife corridors that originated 800 years ago. Built for horse and cart rather than cars, these hedges create a virtual tunnel through the rolling countryside.

At the far southwest tip of Cornwall, tourists gather

If you visit

Sleeping: In Penzance, the most practical home base for exploring the Cornish coast, Glencree House offers rooms in a beautiful granite Victorian townhouse with antique furniture (moderate, www.glencreehouse.co.uk). Closer to the center of town and a block off the seashore, the relaxed and modern Camilla House rents eight sunny, comfy rooms with luxurious touches throughout (splurge, www.camillahouse.co.uk).

Eating: Poolside Indulgence offers a spectacular waterfront setting and a serious respect for food (Wharf Road, telephone: 0777-999-8590). The oldest pub in Penzance, The Turks Head, is a dark, low-beamed gem serving tasty food and local ales. It's a popular spot; arrive early (49 Chapel Street, telephone: 01736/363-093).

Getting around: To pack a lot into each day, you'll need a car. It's slow but possible to get around by bus. www.visitcornwall.com.

at the aptly named Land's End. Though overwhelmed with shutterbugs lining up for a picture with the famous milepost, it's a fun place to cry "Land Ho!" A short walk away from the commotion of tourist shops leads you to the real land's end. Within a few minutes, it's just you and nature.

Whether you join in on the tourist action or seek tranquility in this "Garden of England," it's easy to get immersed in the rich history and remarkable scenery of Britain's rural Cornwall.

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News to use

By PHIL MARTY
Chicago Tribune

Here are some of the more interesting deals, websites and other travel tidbits that came across our desk recently:

- Athens at its Best is a six-night package from Go-Today.com that lets you explore the capital of Greece on your own. It's priced from \$1,099 per person double occupancy, which includes round-trip air from New York and lodging. City taxes are extra. 800-227-3235, tinyurl.com/hjgpoa6
- Driftwood Irish Journeys of Discovery offers a six-day/five-night tour of Northern Ireland priced from \$1,433 per person double occupancy. The trip is capped at 16 people trav-



DIMITAR DILKOFF/GETTY-AFP

Explore the Acropolis on your own as part of the Athens at its Best six-night package.

eling by sightseeing van. Price includes lodging, breakfasts and a tour guide. Some entrance fees are extra, as is international airfare. 870-474-0055, tinyurl.com/z39wsn4

- Gate 1 Travel offers a

five-day/four-night tour of Panama that's priced from \$989 per person double occupancy, including round-trip air from Miami. Lodging is at the Crowne Plaza Panama in Panama City, and among the tours

are the Miraflores Locks of the Panama Canal. An optional tour is available for a partial transit of the canal. 800-682-3333, tinyurl.com/jpvrband

- Goway.com will give you spectacular views of Ecua-

dor's Andes with a four-day train and bus trip from Guayaquil to Quito that's priced from \$1,493 per person double occupancy. A highlight of the train ride is the Devil's Nose, a 7-mile stretch of track that climbs 1,800 feet. Price includes transit, lodging in hotels, most meals and a variety of tours. 800-557-2841, tinyurl.com/zxvoho3

- At Olympic Park in Park City, Utah, you can try extreme tubing or ride with a professional pilot on the bobsled run from the 2002 Winter Olympics. www.utaholympiclegacy.org/park
- Purim celebrations of the Jewish holiday will be held around Tel Aviv, Israel, March 24 and 25. tinyurl.com/jgc8lmj
- The 25th anniversary Saint Lucia Jazz and Arts Festival will be April 29-May 8 in the Caribbean nation. www.stlucijazz.org
- St. Augustine, Fla., hosts the 21st annual Rhythm and Ribs Festival from April

1-3. www.rhythmandribs.net

- German tourism folks have compiled a listing of more than 100 interesting natural sites, including 16 national parks, at tinyurl.com/zvvd5pq
- Looking ahead to summer, Colorado tourism lists 10 notable mountain bike trails in the Gunnison and Crested Butte area at tinyurl.com/gvkpar4.

Prices include taxes and fees unless otherwise noted. Deals and websites listed here have been checked for availability as of press time, but the listings are not an endorsement.

Phil Marty is a freelance reporter.

GEOQUIZ ANSWER

Massachusetts. The name has been around since the state's early days because of its proximity to several large bays.

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