

The Wight stuff

As England's Year of the Coast 2023 nears its end, Yolanda Zappaterra takes a walking trip to the Isle of Wight

Forget any photos you may have seen. Nothing, but nothing, prepares you for the sight of the Isle of Wight's fabulous Needles. This isn't the first time I'm seeing the iconic chalk stacks that rise so startlingly from the blue waters off the island's west coast, but it's been a few years since I last caught a glimpse of them. As before, I'm blown away by the view.

The Needles provides a fitting finale to a week spent on an island that has revealed fresh food to rival anything on the mainland, winding roads virtually free of traffic, accommodation to suit all tastes and budgets, and dozens of atmospheric drinking holes in idyllic surroundings – many specialising in island brews.

From the apples grown, pressed and bottled for local Grazed Knee Cider to herbs and coastal plants such as rock samphire that infuse the island-produced, nationally beloved Mermaid Gin and the newly launched Mermaid Spiced Rum (both produced by

the Isle of Wight Distillery), the mild climate is perfect for all kinds of edible and drinkable treats.

EASY ACCESS

We arrive on the island after a 40-minute ferry ride – one spent not stressing about passport control, baggage reclaim, car hire queues and everything that comes with air travel, but looking forward to just rolling off the boat. We do just that, immediately heading to Adgestone Vineyard, just a 10-minute drive away, for a self-guided tour of rolling vineyards. Fun fact: Adgestone produces the UK's only blue sparkling wine.

Then, there's a night glamping in a field where the only noise is that of farmyard animals and the only light emanating from seemingly infinite stars. It's the first of seven restful nights we experience after days spent swimming in cool and calm waters, climbing up and down cliffs like Shanklin Chine gorge – where bright rainbow colours illuminate ribbon-like

The Needles

RETURN: Visit Isle of Wight

DESTINATIONS

UK & IRELAND | ISLE OF WIGHT



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Steephill Cove; Compton Bay; St Catherine's Oratory PICTURES: Visit Isle of Wight

fast fact

The Albion Hotel, located on Freshwater Bay – one of the Isle of Wight's loveliest beaches – is due to reopen in spring 2024

waterfalls on the cliffs – and walking as many of the island's 68 miles of coastal path as we can fit in.

2023 marks the Year of the Coast, celebrating the creation of the King Charles III England Coastal Path, an epic track that covers the entirety of England's coastline. The Isle of Wight prides itself, rightly, on being a walkers' paradise. Each year, thousands of locals and visitors take part in group hikes such as the 26.5-mile Walk the Wight; the guide-led Isle of Wight Spring and

Autumn Walking Festivals, which offer a wide range of bookable routes for all abilities; and the Isle of Wight Challenge (with options from 10km to 100+km).

WALKING WONDERS

Keen to do our own thing, my group finds that the Visit Isle of Wight website highlights a fantastic range of walks. Thanks to the island's diminutive size (just 23 miles by 13 miles), the routes make it easy to slot in stops for lunch at attractions such as Garlic Farm and beachfront pit stops like Ventnor's Smoking Lobster, Colwell Bay's Captain's Cabin and Totland Bay's Waterfront.

Over the course of the week, we discover other island charms, such as the eccentric Blackgang Chine theme park (the UK's oldest). The animatronics of the *Jurassic Park*-style plastic dinosaur enclosure elicit some fantastic jump moments and shrieks, but the new attractions (including a giant water-filled pillow and the Isle of Wight's first pendulum ride) are set to be big draws for families in the summer holidays.

We shoehorn in the excellent Carisbrooke Castle but sadly not Osborne House, the former summer home of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert. We'll save that for our next visit, along with the zipwires of Tapnell Farm Park, the 22 acres of the Ventnor Botanic Garden and the many pubs, cafes and attractions that make up a destination where time seems to stand still. When we return, I'm sure the sight of the Needles will be just as mind-blowing as it was this time, and the first time. **TW**

Where TO STAY

Luccombe Hall and Luccombe Manor

These two neighbouring hotels share a large, heated pool, expansive gardens and a prime location on the cliffs of Shanklin affording glorious sea views from most of the rooms. For clients with dogs, The Manor has lots of dog-friendly features, including a dedicated dining room and dog-friendly walk maps. Doubles from £65. luccombehall.co.uk luccombemanor.co.uk

Sentry Mead

In a summer villa built in 1891 and once owned by Edwin Fox (owner of the Newport to Freshwater railway), the individually decorated rooms are less than a five-minute walk to the sea. Doubles from £145. sentrymead.co.uk

Retro Staycations

For a stay with a difference, suggest these beautifully restored vintage Airstream caravans named and designed after iconic American stars such as Humphrey Bogart and Walt Disney, also bragging BBQs, fire pits and a 24-hour farm shop selling local produce. Caravans from £98 per night. retrostaycations.co.uk

THREE OF THE BEST WALKS

Steephill Cove

A short but calf-stretchingly strenuous hike from Ventnor Beach leads to this appropriately named cove, where a hole-in-the-wall cafe and Beach Shack restaurant offer waterside drinking and dining in a beautiful spot.

St Catherine's Oratory

Close to Blackgang Chine, the 14th-century octagonal tower of St Catherine's Oratory – built by a local as penance for stealing monastic wine from a shipwreck – has stunning views from one of the highest parts of the island.

Freshwater Bay to the Needles circular hike

Almost eight miles of spectacular coastal path across the rolling hills of the Tennyson Downs emerge on the southwest coast near the jagged rocks of the Needles.

BOOK IT

Premier Holidays offers four-night packages at Luccombe Manor from £748 per person, based on two sharing, on a B&B basis, for stays between March 29 and May 24, 2024. Includes return ferry from Portsmouth to Ryde (as foot passengers) or from Lymington to Yarmouth (with car). premierholidays.co.uk