



Gower

Gower is glorious; the 14 by 5 mile peninsula is an exhilarating mix of limestone cliffs, varied seascapes, coves, bays, beaches galore, salt-marshes, tidal mudflats, sandy dunes, wooded valleys, rounded hills and a wildlife haven second to none. Not surprisingly Gower was the first in the U.K. to be designated an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

(You need tide times: ring the coastguard on 01792 366534; ask at the hotels; see the local papers; or the displays at the Rhossili NT Visitor Centre and Old Coastguard Station – see below.)

Day one

Start at a spectacular scenic splendour, the heart-stirring panorama from the 250ft-high clifftops at Rhossili. Ideally, visit the village three times: at both high and low tides, the latter essential if you explore Worms Head; and at dusk when the sunset is rated one of the world's best.

First look north: at the three-mile long sandy arc of Rhossili Bay with line-up-line of breakers flooding in with the tide; to the right the green shoulders of the 632ft-high Rhossili Down, its grassy slopes, atop old red sandstone, tumbling down to the beach. Below you is the ruined bow of the *Helvetia*; its timber cargo was salvaged and sold by the villagers in 1887.

Turn west: snaking away from the mainland is the undulating Worms Head promontory. The bumps resemble a Welsh dragon on guard (*wurm*: dragon); when viewed from Crabart rocks the worm has a sphinx-like outline.

To explore Worms Head walk south-west for 15 minutes to the Old Coastguard Lookout Visitor Centre (note the 999 coastguard phone, in case of problems). Examine the displays. Then descend to the rocky causeway; as you cross spot the 7ft anchor of *The Samuel*, a coal ship wrecked in 1902; its cargo was put to good use by the villagers. A vital caveat: the causeway is only passable for two hours on either side of low tide.

Crabart also provides rewarding rock-pool fishing, but only for fit, agile adults. My "fisherman" was Colin Pressdee, who knows Gower inside-out; he caught two lobsters and several crabs during a two-hour spell (one hour on either side of low tide) in pools close to the sea. Some musts: wear suitable footwear; watch the time; don't take children; take a pole and net; don't net crabs which are breeding pairs or less than 5" across their shells.

O.S. map 159 is a must. On the map Gower is a patchwork of red threads, footpaths seemingly everywhere. Some of the most rewarding walks are in the nature reserves on the limestone cliffs between Rhossili and Port-Eynon – but, please, keep to the paths!

One of the best is from Pitton (car park off the B4247) to Mewslade Bay; and those that climb up from the latter to the headlands overlooking the beach. Birds are plentiful; look out for peregrines. (The stone cottage opposite the car park is the home of Mark Button, a young photographer; he has a selection of Gower scenes for sale. 01792 390402.)

At Port-Eynon note signs of other occupations in times past, rather than fishing and farming: at the Salt House sea salt was extracted by evaporation; old limestone quarries are nearby; and the oyster “perches”, marked by stones, where Bristol Channel oysters were stored before shipment.

Day two

Soak up the pleasures of the utterly different north Gower coastline. Access to Whiteford National Nature Reserve is easiest from the car park north of Llanmadoc church. There’s a wealth of wildlife on the extensive sands, partly-wooded burrows (mounds) and salt-marshes.

Spare time for two nearby churches. Both are locked; no wonder as thefts from property and vehicles are commonplace (leave nothing of value visible in your car). Llanmadoc’s church has a 5th/6th-century gravestone, a 7th/9th-century boundary stone, a Celtic pillar cross and an altar carved by Revd David Davies (rector from 1860-1911). (Ask at the village shop where to find keyholder Sally.) Cheriton has more Davies carvings and a Norman font (key from cottage opposite church). Both have saddle-back towers.

Enjoy extensive views of the Llanrhidian salt-marsh and Loughor estuary from both Leason and the 14th-century ruined Weobley Castle, once a fortified manor house. Drive the unfenced road from Llanrhidian to Crofty, alongside the marsh. The latter is renowned for cockles.

Cockles are just one of many Gower’s culinary delicacies: others are laverbread (cooked seaweed; delicious with cockles and oatmeal), *sewin* (sea trout), mushrooms (ceps and blewits), salt-marsh lamb, gulls’ eggs, marsh samphire and shellfish (both hotels make good use of all of them).

Now to the 609ft-high viewpoint on Cefn Bryn, an old red sandstone ridge at Gower’s heart. Share the panorama with sheep, skylarks and wild horses; the latter are all over Gower. Finish with a walk to Arthur’s Stone, a burial chamber with a 25-ton boulder atop smaller slabs.

Day three

Select from these options, as time allows, before heading for home.

Oxwich Bay is an eye-pleasing treat, overlooked by a 16th-century castle, in reality a Tudor manor house. From the beach car park explore both parts of the National Nature Reserve (ask at the hut for a leaflet). One starts opposite the

hut: a rewarding mix of views, beach, dunes, burrows, freshwater and salt marshes, and hillside woods. The other is a woodland walk to Oxwich Point.

Next to the picnic site and observation table at the viewpoint above Penmaen. North Devon is on the horizon; below you are the three triangular crags at Threecliff Bay. Park and walk 1½ miles to the bay, using the stepping stones on the way.

Two further walks await. The first is easy, starting from the Gower Heritage Centre car park (A4118). Head north-west, through deciduous woods, to Park Wood; after one mile you’ll reach the Giant’s Grave, a 70ft-long prehistoric burial site. The second walk is much more demanding; take stout shoes. Park opposite Kittle Post Office (B4436). Walk south, left at the cottage, and descend on a steep path. The map shows that for half-a-mile a river disappears underground. Near the bottom, behind a fence on the right, is a deep “daw-pit”, where the stream below caused the ground to collapse. Follow the old river rock bed for 200 yards downstream; you’ll hear the “guzzle”, a cave to the right where the hidden river roars away.

Finish with a drive past picturesque Caswell and Langland bays to Mumbles, beside the impressively scenic Swansea Bay. Until 1914 Mumbles was an oyster fishing village. Make “Vincent’s” your last port of call – a *tapas* and wine bar much loved by locals. Vincent Moreno, a Spaniard, has Wales flowing through his veins; he makes great use of Gower and Welsh produce. Open 3-11 pm (phone ahead: 01792 368308).

Where to eat and stay

Fairyhill Hotel and Restaurant, Nr Reynoldston, Gower, Swansea SA3 1BS (01792 390139; fax 01792 391358). Cooking 2-3. An early Georgian house in 24 acres with its own stream (Burry Pill). Enterprising, involved owners; award-winning modern cooking. Andrew Hetherington, Paul Davies and Jane and Peter Camm are a formidable quartet: unobtrusive, but always prepared to offer advice and help. Great “Gower” and “Welsh” breakfasts. Super wine list (20 bottles under £20; and 70 halves). Lunch: 14.50-19.50. Dinner: 25-32. Rooms (8): 95-160 (inc’ bkft). Closed: 25-30 Dec. Cards: AE, MC, Visa.

King Arthur Hotel, Reynoldston, Gower, Swansea SA3 1AD (01792 391009 and 390775). Cooking 1-2. Gower’s best country inn. Character public rooms and an outdoor green for eating-out. Extensive choice with a seafood emphasis. Modern bedrooms. Bar food: £2 upwards. Restaurant: 10-18. Rooms (7): 35-60 (inc’ bkft). Closed: 25 Dec (evg). Cards: AE, MC, Visa.

Map OS Landranger 159.

Further information Tourist Information Centre, Swansea (01792 468321; fax 01792 464602) for details on accommodation and sights.