

All Wight *now*

Feeling free! Our travel editor makes her escape to the island where spectacular vistas, starry starry nights and the hottest gardens have her singing its praises

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Walkers on the coastal path at Brighstone Bay

ME AND MY 'VAN



Helen Werin...

is MMM's Travel Editor and always looking for a great escape, as long as it is not to somewhere flat!



2002 Roller Team Auto-Roller 41 on a Fiat 2.3-litre diesel engine. Roly's cosy layout, with overcab double bed, Pullman dinette and generous locker space suits our family perfectly

There's no doubt that we made the Wight choice (if you'll pardon my pun). As 'great' distancers, brought about from living in a touristy area overrun with too many carefree (rather, careless) visitors for our liking, we really need an 'escape'.

We yearn for what we usually seek on our tours: being able to see for miles from hill or mountaintops, bracing coastal paths, quirky castles and quaint villages and to sit outside and watch the stars sparkling in the clearest skies. Most of all we need space. On the Isle of Wight we certainly get that, with miles of golden sands, outstanding sunsets and dinosaur footprints, too...

Our hour-long Red Funnel ferry crossing is a breeze. Actually, it's calm and the sun deck lives up to its name. With passenger numbers limited, a one-way system in place, well-spaced outside seating (there are interior lounges, too) and staggered disembarkation, it's a relaxing start.

I admit to a slight twinge of melancholy as a Brittany Ferries vessel skims across the horizon, but am recompensed with the thought that, whilst we won't be walking the rest of the GR34 path around the coast of northern France as we'd planned, we can get those Channel views from the 'other side' on parts of Wight's coastal path. As we sail smoothly across the Solent, I flip through all the walks we've earmarked (see panel).

And - ta da! - we're going to be meeting up with one of our children whom we've not seen for over eight months. This daughter should have been on safari, but she's happy that she can see at least see some lions after all, albeit at the Isle of Wight Zoo at Yaverland. It's beneath the cliffs where we've been fossil-hunting with her sister on a previous visit.

With our younger daughter, our trips are always 'go, go, go'. This time we're taking it

far easier, encouraged by the Slow Wight ethos (see panel) to linger longer over all the scenic beauty.

Living as far inland as we do, I love to be by the sea. Palm trees dot the esplanade at Ryde, where we leave Roly, our motorhome, in an almost-empty seafront car park. A couple of hardy swimmers are taking a dip (I'm assured that Ryde has some of the warmest waters in the UK).

Leafy Appley Park forms our landward border. Seawards, we squint across at Portsmouth's soaring Spinnaker Tower, which we're to spot from many different perspectives throughout our trip.

It's just minutes from our pitch at Nodes Point Holiday Park down to Priory Bay and a seamark tower, all that's left of the twelfth century St Helen's Church. As the designated footpath through Priory Woods looks a bit slippery, we stay on the coastal path towards Ryde and arrive at Seagrove Bay where the glistening Spinnaker dominates our view again.

Like all the campsites we are to stay on, Nodes Point is surprisingly quiet. With a couple of facility blocks to choose from, we don't encounter anyone else; though, in the mornings, the clip-clop of horses' hooves from nearby stables accompanies our leisurely breakfasts.

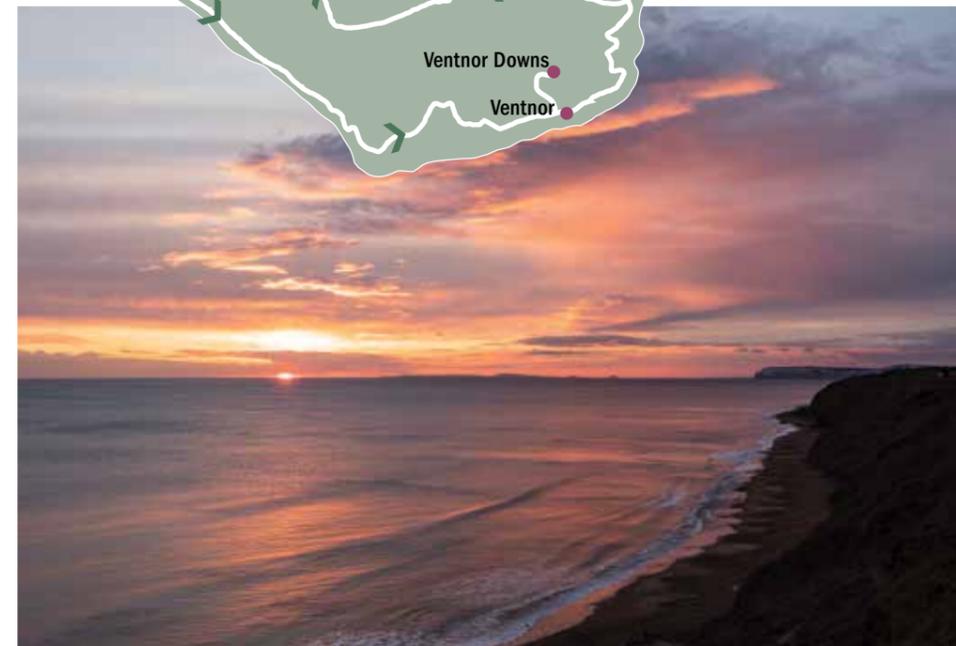
There's a notice near the site entrance urging us to look out for pipistrelle bats. They elude us, but we do spot our first red squirrel of the trip nearby (the island is an important stronghold for this fast-disappearing native species).

Heading to Havenstreet next morning, where we're going to board the Isle of Wight Steam Railway, the speed signs depict red squirrels dressed as lollipop ladies or pointing speed cameras; amusing, but they do carry a serious message. >



RIGHT Sunset at Brighthone Bay; Godshell

BELOW RIGHT The pretty village of Godshell



INFORMATION

- TRAVEL
- visitisleofwight.co.uk
English Heritage has five properties on the island
- english-heritage.org.uk
- 12 locations to choose from
- nationaltrust.org.uk
- For accessibility information if you have mobility difficulties
- euansguide.com
- EATING OUT
- The Edulis restaurant in Ventnor Botanic Garden serves food as fresh as it gets. Here, food is measured in food metres, not miles
- botanic.co.uk/eat-drink
- You're spoilt for choice with incredible flavours, including our daughter's favourite garlic mayo from The Garlic Farm at Newchurch...
- thegarlicfarm.co.uk
- ...and deliciously moreish cheese curds from the Brixton and Badger Creamery...
- brixtonandbadger.co.uk
- ...to Tippy Wight liqueurs with flavours sourced from the island (sold at the English Heritage sites)
- Brighthone Village Shop, near Grange Farm, sells a good variety of local produce, including meats, sausages and bakery items
- brighthonevillage-shop.co.uk

BELOW Yaverland Beach and Culver Cliff, Sandown

THE JOURNEY

In October, we took a return Red Funnel crossing from Southampton to East Cowes to spend 10 nights on the island. Our costs include the ferry and fuel and attractions on the island only

THE COSTS

Fuel Average 30mpg.....	£53.85
Ferry Red Funnel - Southampton-East Cowes.....	£134.54
Site fees.....	£154
Attractions Two adults: Isle of Wight Steam Railway and Ventnor Botanic Garden.....	£46
Parking Ryde, Bonchurch Landslip, Compton Bay, Sandown, The Needles.....	£17
As English Heritage members we got free entry into Osborne House and Carisbrooke Castle	
Total costs.....	£405.39



266 miles

TOP TIPS

For 'vans up to 6m long and 2.699m high, Red Funnel offers touring packages from £99 (for three nights with electric) at one of four sites, including crossing. Ferries run all year, about every hour March – October and every 1½ hours November – February

redfunnel.co.uk

The Isle of Wight council publishes a list of car parks suitable for motorhomes

iow.gov.uk/azservices/documents/1905-22.11.18-Motorhome-Parking-v1.pdf

Although dogs aren't allowed on the main resort beaches from 1 May – 31 October, there are small coves and shorelines that do allow dogs all year. Dogs are free on all Red Funnel ferries and have a designated lounge with water and complimentary dog biscuits. Dogs do not need to be pre-booked or have a ticket. Buses and trains also allow dogs, free of charge

visitisleofwight.co.uk/explore/holidays/dog-friendly-ideas

Guests at Lower Hyde Holiday Park can also use all the facilities at its close-by sister park, Landguard

BELOW LEFT Princess Beatrice Garden inside Carisbrooke Castle

BELOW RIGHT Isle of Wight Steam Railway

The soothing clickety-clack of the train takes the strain of the last few months away. If ever a tourist attraction was designed for social distancing, this heritage railway is it.

Every carriage has individual compartments, strictly for only one household group, and I can't resist telling you how chuffed I am that we're here on this delightful island as we unwind on the 10-mile round trip.

We drive to Sandown to wander along the prom. The late afternoon light shines like a torch beam on the white face of Culver Cliff.

We try, but fail, to spot fossils on Yaverland Beach (it's helpful to go with an expert from nearby Dinosaur Isle as we did on our last visit). No worries, we're confident of success later in our holiday. This is the 'dinosaur isle' after all.

Parking next to our daughter on Bembridge and Culver Downs, we jump away when she gets out of her car.

Walking on the downs (well apart) is even more uplifting than ever because of her much-missed company. I love being able to see for miles and, with even more of these high, expansive, beauty spots on our horizons I'm in my element. From way above Culver Cliff we look down to Yaverland, Sandown, Shanklin and beyond, then north across Bembridge Harbour to Nodes Point and that Spinnaker Tower again.

I'm intrigued by the mounds under the grassy ridge that mark a network of storage bunkers for Culver Battery, one of the island's WWI and II defences. Nodes Point Holiday Park is built on the site of another such battery.

As we return to the Sandown Road, we stop to circuit the large Bembridge Fort, originally built to counter the threat of French invasion. My curiosity is aroused.

Usually the National Trust offers tours; unfortunately, not at present.

The island has a good bus service, a rail line down the east side and such a dense network of footpaths and cycle routes that you could explore almost every inch of it by bike, on foot or using public transport. In current circumstances, we prefer to use our own 'hotel on wheels' so have booked two other sites from which to explore.

The touring area at Lower Hyde, with its rural outlook, is raised above the rest of the holiday park so feels separate and it has its own reception and facilities. It's about 15 minutes' walk to the much-photographed thatched cottages in Shanklin Old Village.

We're headed for more history at Carisbrooke Castle 20 minutes' drive away. Yet again, because of restricted visitor numbers and an online booking system, we even feel confidently spaced enough to walk atop its 750-year-old walls.

As I peer over the castle interior and the chapel of St Nicholas – with its seventeenth century organ and wooden pews made from one of the last wooden warships – the unmistakable bray of a donkey breaks my reverie. Donkeys have been here since 1696, working the treadwheel in a little 1580s stone building to draw buckets from the water supply below (the donkeys still work, but only for a few minutes a day raising an empty bucket).

Exploring Carisbrooke Castle and, on another day, the extensive parkland and gardens of Queen Victoria's grand Italianate private getaway, Osborne House, lifts our spirits. We can see places of interest without getting wound up about the proximity of others. Quarr Abbey (free) is a particular joy, the woodland so pretty and peaceful with red squirrels darting about (it's >



A couple enjoying the sunset at Ventnor



Ventnor Downs

WALK THIS WAY

There are more than 500 miles of rights of way, permissive paths and bridleways. We enjoyed picking up parts of the 68-mile-long coastal path. A 'donate a gate' has replaced many stiles (over 200 at the last count).

An easy stroll is through the tranquil woods of Mottistone Estate (from the free National Trust car park) to The Long Stone, the remains of a 6,000-year-old Neolithic burial place, or you can combine it with the Warrior Trail, a six-mile round walk that follows much of the exercise route of WWI 'hero', Warrior, aka the 'horse the Germans could not kill'. You can walk parts – or all 19 miles – of The Yar River Trail.

Walks on Culver Down, Bembridge Down and St Boniface Down, with their spectacular views, were particular favourites. At Egypt Point, the focus is on the Solent, which has the most concentrated number of historic coastal defences in the UK.

Download a variety of walks, including each section of the coastal path visitisleofwight.co.uk/things-to-do/walking

TAKE IT EASY

The Slow Wight Travel Guide has eight routes showing lesser-known places of interest, all with fascinating stories to tell and encouraging visitors to 'get under the skin' of the island.

slowwighttravelguide.co.uk

BESIDE THE SEASIDE

Ryde beaches have the warmest bathing waters. Freshwater Bay is one of the most picturesque and Sandown Bay has miles of soft sand and a pier with views across Totland Bay's turquoise waters to the mainland. Colwell Bay, with its beach huts and cafés, looks to Hurst Castle.

Ventnor is very noticeably the warmest place on the island. Sitting near the Winter Gardens' Art Deco pavilion, above the Cascade Gardens and tiny harbour, is another great sunset spot.

I CAN SEE FOR MILES

Above Alum Bay (park at The Needles) we could see across the west of the island and to Lymington, with the Tennyson monument ahead of us in the other direction. From the headland's tip, above the Needles Old Battery and New Battery, we had a great view of the chalk stacks.



Alum Bay





WE STAYED AT

Nodes Point Holiday Park, Eddington Road, St Helens, Ryde PO33 1YA

☎ 03301 234850 🌐 parkdeanresorts.co.uk/location/isle-of-wight/nodes-point

📅 19 March – 31 October

£ Two adults, pitch and electric: From £8.28 (depending upon number of nights)

Lower Hyde Holiday Park, Landguard Road, Shanklin PO37 7LL

☎ 03301 234850 🌐 parkdeanresorts.co.uk/location/isle-of-wight/lower-hyde

📅 19 March – 1 November

£ Two adults, pitch and electric: From £9 (depending upon number of nights)

Grange Farm, Brighstone Bay, Military Road, Brighstone PO30 4DA

☎ 01983 740296 🌐 grangefarmcamping.co.uk

📅 1 March – 1 November

£ Two adults, pitch and electric: From £23



known as one of the best places to see them).

Chocolate-box scenes of thatched cottages with roses around their doors abound: Godshill, Calbourne and Old Shanklin being the most famous places.

As we arrive at our third site, Grange Farm, right above sandy Brighstone Bay, we're treated to the most brilliant sunset, a wonder that's repeated evening after evening, along with the starriest of night skies (there is very little light pollution on much of the island).

In the morning we wake to sparkling light highlighting the chalk cliffs of Freshwater Bay further west. Grange Farm is such a great site, with one main facility block, plus two small toilets-only blocks, lots of water points and loads of space, making it easy for us to avoid anyone else.

Remains of fence posts that once bordered the adjacent coastal path, now teeter on the cliff edge, making us very aware of erosion.

The force of nature really hits home during our quest for dinosaur footprints at Compton Bay. Once a helpful local shows photographer, Robin, what to look for, I find about 10 fossilised prints of what look like giant chicken feet. I have one wary eye on the cliff and another looking out for fossils. Minutes later, Robin yells as a hail of rocks plunges onto the sand. It's frightening to see the size of the fallen boulders where we, and others, had been standing.

ABOVE Osborne House; Helen finds a dinosaur footprint fossil at Compton Bay

At Bonchurch Landslip, tiny paths and narrow fissures through rock (which we bypass) and steps in places twist this way and that through a lovely, heavily wooded area. On a couple of occasions I have my face squashed against bushes in my efforts to avoid other walkers, though we see more red squirrels than people.

That's the reason why I enjoy being high above the coast or up on the downs: for the pure, exhilarating, sense of freedom it brings. St Boniface Down may be the highest point on the island in the factual sense – and with sensational views – but every one of the downs has upped my mood.

The walking has been superb, the campsites perfect and I haven't had to leap off pavements to avoid thoughtless cyclists, joggers or groups of tourists.

Our daughter has gone home happy and refreshed, too. What a great decision we made by coming here.

Fittingly, our last day is one of the best. Closing my eyes and breathing in the scent of the thousands of sub-tropical plants at Ventnor Botanic Garden, with the comforting warmth of bright sunshine on my face, is sublime. The gardens are those of a former Victorian chest and respiratory disease hospital where patients would come to be treated and recuperate in the oh-so-pleasant coastal climate. We've certainly been 'treated' by the Isle of Wight; it's been just the cure for my Covid blues. [mmm](http://www.mmm)

This feature was written between coronavirus lockdowns. We are publishing it for your enjoyment and to help you plan future trips. Readers must follow the latest government advice before leaving their homes 🌐 gov.uk/coronavirus