



David McGuffin's
EXPLORING EUROPE

NORTH WALES

DESTINATION GUIDE



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WALES INTRODUCTION

As a country, Wales gets its beginning in 1536 with Henry VIII's Act of Union, but its history stretches much farther back.

Many believe that the area was inhabited as early as 250,000 BC. Celtic tribes from Europe came to the British Isles between 500 and 100 BC, settling alongside the original Iron Age population. Their Celtic language would eventually evolve into Welsh. The original Britons were pushed into what is now Wales by the Roman and Saxon invasions where they became the Welsh people.

The first written histories of Wales date to the arrival of the Romans, around 48 AD. In 784, the king of Mercia (Wales' neighbor, as there was no Britain yet) built a dyke from the Irish Sea to the Bristol Channel, establishing the first permanent boundary for Wales.

When William the Conqueror invaded England in 1066, Wales revolted and drove the Normans out. But it didn't last long.

In the 1280s, Edward I began building castles across Wales to keep the Welsh people in line.

In 1400, the national hero *Owain Glyndwr* started a rebellion to establish an independent Wales. Four years later he crowned himself Prince of Wales, but was defeated shortly afterwards.

In 1536, Wales united politically with England and came under English law.

In 1916, David Lloyd George, who led Britain to victory in World War I, became the first Welsh Prime Minister and the only one to speak English as a second language.

In 1997, the Welsh people voted in favor of establishing a national assembly for Wales, allowing it to become a distinct constitutional entity within the UK.

Though a part of England, the Welsh people wanted their language and culture to flourish. In 1885 the first Welsh language society was founded to protect the language, one of the oldest in Europe, and to promote its use in education. Much progress was made during the 20th century; the first Welsh radio station and tv channel were broadcast. It is a

constant struggle to keep their language alive. Today, Welsh is spoken by around 20% of the population.

Over the course of the 19th century, industry boomed in Wales, especially copper, coal, steel and slate. By the turn of the 20th century, people were coming to Wales to work in the new industries. Many cities rapidly expanded during this time. Cardiff ballooned to seven times its size in less than 50 years. However, by the end of the century manufacturing and other industries had declined and people began to move away. Today, tourism and public services are the main employers.

The origin of the word “Wales” is a bit strange. It is a variation on an Anglo-Saxon term that meant foreigner or outsider. The word for Wales in Welsh is ***Cymru***, which means friend or companion. The today the origins of the word are long forgotten and the Welsh are equally proud of both names.

Conwy

For a little town, there sure is plenty to see. Conwy has it all: a well-preserved castle, a quaint quay, mountainous backdrops, beautiful surrounding countryside, narrow cobblestone streets and well-preserved houses. Explore



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the mountains or the shores, or just relax with some good food and wine and enjoy the scene.

Conwy Castle

The castle (pictured at the beginning of this article) was built between 1283 and 1289, during King Edward I's second campaign in North Wales. It was one of the key fortresses in his "iron ring" because of its easily defensible position. The castle gets its elongated shape from the narrow rocky outcrop upon which it sits. The imposing sight was meant to keep the Welsh in line. It is one of the best-surviving medieval fortifications in Britain and it is easy to imagine how it would have dominated the sky back then.

Climb to the top of one of the castle's eight towers for sweeping panoramas of the town and Snowdonia National Park in the distance. The outer ward contains a great hall, chambers and the kitchen, while the inner wards hold the private chambers and a royal chapel.

Castle Walls

Take a stroll along the castle walls. There are 21 towers along the walls that enclose Conwy town. These walls, too, are some of the best-preserved in Britain. The residents took great care over the centuries to build around the walls.

Conwy Suspension Bridge and Toll-keeper's House

You can walk across the bridge, which now serves only pedestrian traffic. See how trade and travel brought the town to life and learn about the couple who ran the bridge and kept it open every day of the year, no matter the weather. It was constructed between 1822 and 1826 and was built to match the castle just beside it.



The Quay

Take a stroll down to the Conwy Marina and Quay and check out the boats or just sit and watch the people go by and take in the views.

Smallest House in Britain

Also known as the Quay House. This little red house measures 10 feet by 6 feet. It was lived in until 1900. Its last owner, a fisherman named Robert Jones, was over 6 feet tall and couldn't even stand up straight inside. For a small price, you can step in and see what it would be like to live there. Located on Lower Gate Street.

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Mussel Museum

Conwy was once one of the most important pearl fisheries in the country. In the early 19th century the town shipped over 8 pounds of pearls found in mussels to jewelers in London each week. Musseling is still carried out in the traditional way. Visit the museum and learn about the history of pearl fishing from Roman times and how mussels are harvested today. Located on Lower Gate Street.

Plas Mawr, Elizabethan home

This house was built between 1576 and 1585 by the famous merchant, Robert Wynn. He was fond of grandeur and color and the house today has been restored to all of its former glory. Located on High Street.

Aberconwy House

Built in the 14th century, this is the only medieval merchant's house to have survived the six centuries of the walled town's history. Each furnished room, along with the audiovisual presentation, shows what daily life was like in a different period in the house's history. Located on Castle Street.

The Albion Ale House

This pub dates to the 1920s and is run by four local breweries. Stop in and enjoy a pint of lager in this cozy relaxed atmosphere, named by The Guardian newspaper as one of the best pubs in the world. Located on Upper Gate Street.

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Conwy Mountain

This mountain lies about 1.5 miles west of the city's center. There is a good network of paths up and around the mountain. The summit offers stunning views and the remains of an Iron Age hillfort. In the summer, the mountain is purple with heather and home to a number of birds.



Bodnant Gardens

The gardens have been created over 150 years. Generations of the McLaren family have been collecting plants from all over the world that can thrive in the Welsh climate and soil, including China, North America, Europe and Japan.

The gardens are separated into two distinct parts. The upper garden surrounds Bodnant Hall and consists of five terraces designed in the Italian style with buttressed walls, brick paths and lily ponds. The lower part of the garden is the wild garden, known as the Dell. Shrubs grow along the banks of the River Hiraethyln in the shadows of the trees.

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Traveling by Steam Engine

Wales is crisscrossed by a network of scenic railways that stretch for miles through Snowdonia National Park. Passengers can experience the park's breathtaking scenery from the comfort of a steam engine carriage.

Some of the railways have been in business for over 150 years. The *Ffestiniog Railway*, which takes visitors to the slate quarry, is the world's oldest existing narrow-gauge railway and still operates three of its original locomotives with original carriages. Engineers from around the world came to study these trains to replicate the technology at home.

Trefriw Woolen Mills

This mill manufactures Welsh tapestry bedspreads, throws and cushions, tweeds, bags and purses and traveling rugs from raw wool. Check out the water-powered turbine that generates electricity for the mill and watch a demonstration. Depending on the day, you may be able to see products being woven on a power loom or catch a demonstration of some

of the machinery in the mill's museum (carding engines and spinning mules). There may also be a rug-making demonstration or a traditional hand spinning demonstration.

The Weaver's Garden hosts a collection of plants that provide fibers, natural dyes, soaps and textile tools for the mill. Before you leave, stop in the shop and take a look at (or purchase) some of the items woven on-site.



Llechwedd Slate Caverns of Blaenau Ffestiniog

This slate mine has been in operation since 1836, with only a short closure in 2015.

During the tour, you'll descend 500 feet underground on the steepest cable railway in Britain and explore the world of the Victorian slate minor. It is about 54°F in the caves.

You'll see the underground lake and hear stories about what slate miner's lives were like. Learn about the tools and methods of

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extracting slate and experience first-hand the sights and sounds of mining conditions in the 19th century.

Aboveground, you can visit the gift shop, grab a bite to eat at the café, check out the free exhibition on slate mining or stop in to the slate workshop for a demonstration.

Snowdonia National Park

The park's scenery ranges from mountains and glaciers to moors and beaches. Within its borders, there are 90 peaks and 100 lakes. Is the oldest and largest natural park in Wales, covering 838 square miles, half of which is made up of nine different mountain ranges. There are river gorges, waterfalls, valleys, forests and 23 miles of coastline. In Welsh, it's known as *Eryri*, the place of the eagles.

The park is home to Snowdon, the highest peak in Wales, at 3,560 feet. It has the highest major waterfall in Wales, *Pistyll Rhaeadr*, and largest natural lake, *Bala Lake*. It has one of the highest railway stations in Britain and one of the longest narrow-gauge steam railways in Europe. Do not be surprised to come across stone cottages and market towns. The park is home to over 26,000 people, more than half of whom speak Welsh. The park has plenty to offer: walking paths, cycling, fishing, water sports, golf and heritage sites.

Snowdon Mountain

Some of the mountain's features date back to the Ice Age. It is one of the most popular mountain hiking destination. The *Hafod Eryri* visitor center waits to greet hikers at the top.

But if you're not feeling intrepid, the Snowdon Mountain Railway also carries visitors to the summit on its steep climb up the mountain. It follows two major viaducts, past a waterfall and an ancient forest, past volcanic rock and the sea. Whichever way you choose to get there, you won't be disappointed with the views at the top.



Caernarfon

This city is best known for its castle, built in the 1280s by Edward I. It is the most expensive castle ever built by a king of England. Edward hired the greatest military architect of the age to design his castle. It featured many rare commodities, such as glass windows, bathrooms and running water.

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It was meant to strike fear into the hearts of those who looked upon it, and its imposing presence still dominates the town. The main King's Gate was defended by a drawbridge and six portcullises. The castle was also meant to serve as the seat of government and the royal palace in Wales. Edward named his son the first English Prince of Wales.

The castle houses several displays, including the Royal Welsh Fusiliers Museum and an exhibition tracing the history of the Princes of Wales.

But the city's history doesn't start with the castle. This region has been inhabited since Celtic times. The Romans arrived in the late 70s AD and the remains of their fort, Segontium, sit atop the hill to the east of the castle. The Roman fort was designed to hold thousands soldiers and was occupied for almost three centuries.





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