

THE BIG COUNTRY

There can be few more dramatic boating experiences than Wales, and few places where the future for sports boats looks so vibrant. In the first of a two-part series, Craig Barnett investigates the glorious boating country of North Wales.

As the winter snows begin to melt, draw the family around the fire and tell them of your plans for a voyage to an ancient and mystical land.

Tell of a country of legend, where wizards and dragons roam - a place where the natives speak a strange and foreign tongue. Tell stories of men who ventured underground, burrowing deep beneath the hills where kings and princes fought, to haul out the treasures buried below.

Tell them of Wales, a beautiful land where verdant cloud-wreathed mountains provide the backdrop as you cruise under the towering walls of fearful medieval castles.

Inspire the kids with stories of how colourful birds inhabit the craggy cliffs and strange sea creatures wallow on the rocks of secret islands.

In short, tell them whatever you like, but convince them to accompany you on a trek west because Wales is an awesome place to go boating.

White horses off Anglesey make you thankful you're tucked away in the sheltered haven at Amlwch



RIDING THE WAVE

For much of its history, Wales has had a rollercoaster ride. Through medieval times the nation seasawed between independence and occupation as a succession of invading kings and native princes vied for power. The balance of power shifted often as for centuries the native inhabitants fought Germanic pagan invaders, the predatory Vikings, the Norman forces and the oppressive Marcher lords.

Despite of (or arguably because of) its tumultuous political and economic history, Wales is today blessed with a rich heritage of monuments to its past. Castles dominate nearly every vantage point and headland, and ruins and ancient stone circles, plus earthworks and post-industrial residue are scattered over what is probably the principality's richest and most dramatic quality – its landscape.

With 750 miles of breathtaking coastline (nearly ten per cent of the UK's total) the majority of Wales' natural treasures and historical sites are accessible by water. Areas of outstanding natural beauty litter the Welsh coast and more than half of the entire coastline is designated as National Park. The good news for sports boaters is that a major marine tourism programme is currently underway, ensuring that the country's secluded coves, rich cruising grounds and 43 Blue Flag Beaches are available and well serviced for leisure users.

In fact, the Welsh Tourism Board (fully aware of how a strong marine sector fuels economic growth) launched an initiative at the 2005 Southampton Boat Show entitled 'Catching the Wave'. The initiative is designed to not only develop the marine industry in Wales, but also to improve the infrastructure for watersports enthusiasts like us.

Andrew Davies, Minister for Economic Development and Transport for the Welsh Assembly Government explained: "The Welsh Assembly Government's strategic agenda recognises that Wales' natural and man-made environment is exceptionally rich and diverse, providing fantastic opportunities for tourism and activity based recreation. Wales has international recognition as a sports related tourist destination but perhaps, one of our under-utilised assets is the spectacular 750 miles of coastline, a unique network of canals and rivers, as well as some of the finest lakes within the UK."

Fleshing out the plans for what boaters in Wales can expect both now and in the future Philip Evans, Chairman, Wales Tourist Board, said: "It is an ambition of mine to see the fantastic coastline of Wales bustling with activity, the coastal



It might be good to watch, but if you find yourself caught up in a traditional dance like this one in Beaumaris, feign gastric turmoil and make your escape

villages and towns of Wales hosting events and races and treating visitors to a spectacular Welsh experience." Now there's an attitude some of the English authorities would do well to adopt.

With watersports tourism spending projected to exceed £200m by 2010, double the projected value of golf following the Ryder Cup in Newport, it is obvious that Wales is taking its commitment to watersport enthusiasts seriously. So what does North Wales in 2007 have to offer?

ANGLESEY

Starting at the head of Wales, the island of Ynys Mon (Anglesey) is known locally as Môn Mam Cymru (the Mother of Wales) and it's a real sports boater's paradise. Just a quick trip down the North Wales Expressway from the urban sprawl of England's north west, it also has a well-developed tourism infrastructure. Whilst the popular sandy beaches of Llanddwyn, Red Wharf Bay, Benllech and Cemaes may be crowded in the summer, you'll always be able to cruise around to a quieter secluded cove like Porth Swtan, Moelfre, Cable Bay or Porth Cwfan in a sports boat.

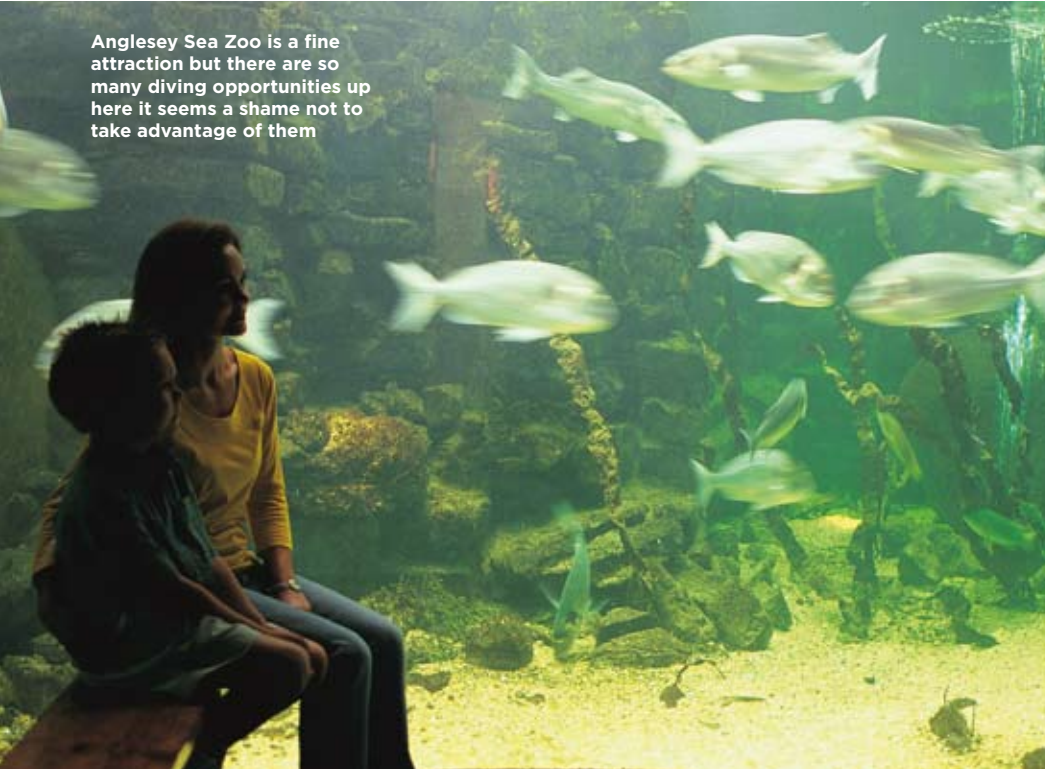
The 100 or so wrecks that litter the coast of Anglesey offer some great diving opportunities. Those who like to 'dangle

their worm' will also be interested to note that the fishing around these sunken vessels regularly produces pollack, cod and coalfish well into double figures. Additionally many of the wrecks contain lucrative catches of ling and conger. When not on the wrecks, the local boats turn to many of the banks and reefs that surround the Island. Catches then include many types of ray, big tope, spurdog, smoothound, bass, dab, whiting, dogfish and black bream.

Sports like waterskiing, jet skiing, kayaking and sailing are all well catered for in the area. Surfers from around the UK flock to Rhosneigr when good regular swells feed their adrenaline habit, and Beaumaris and Holyhead are also popular with the windsurfing and kitesurfing set.

In order to regulate use of the coast, Anglesey Council implemented a scheme in April 2006 whereby anyone wishing to launch a powered craft is required to register their craft before using the authorised slipways or access points. The annual charge for registration was set at £13 direct from the council offices or £20 at the authorised slipways or access points. Whilst this they may seem to be another example of the authorities stealth taxing us into penury, most boaters on Anglesey are willing to shell out that little extra to ensure they can enjoy

Anglesey Sea Zoo is a fine attraction but there are so many diving opportunities up here it seems a shame not to take advantage of them



their sport without the lunatic fringe interfering.

In addition to being registered with the county council all powered craft launched in Anglesey must have valid insurance. A launching fee for all power-driven craft is now required at the following slipways and access points: Traeth Bychan, Beaumaris, Trearddur Bay, Rhoscolyn, Rhosneigr, Menai Bridge (Porth y Wrach), and Bull Bay. This can be on a daily, monthly or seasonal basis. For further information on the fees and to download the application forms log on to www.anglesey.gov.uk.

As a popular tourist destination Anglesey has a wide range of accommodation available to visitors. Those intending to take their craft will find they are well catered for with parks such as the Bagnol and Tyn Towyn Caravan Parks, situated in Trearddur Bay on Holy Island near Holyhead, offering secure storage facilities where clients and non-residents can leave their fishing/ski boats on a yearly or short term basis (www.caravan-park-anglesey.co.uk).

USEFUL WEBSITES

www.visitanglesey.com
www.anglesey.gov.uk
www.north-wales-events.co.uk
www.boatfestival.co.uk
www.angleseyseazoo.co.uk
www.islandofchoice.com
www.goanglesey.com
www.ynysribs.fsnet.co.uk
www.angleseyheritage.org

DIVING

The marine wildlife off Anglesey's shores includes several species of crab, lobster and octopus. Rich plant life with a variety of seaweeds in green, red and brown create an almost garden-like appearance to some sites. The majority of sites around Anglesey are very tidal, so it's vital to seek local knowledge if you are new to the area. Neap tides usually offer the best situations for diving because slack water periods are longer, currents are weaker, and seabed disturbance is less, improving visibility.

The complex shape of the reefs and headlands creates many tidal hazards including rough water overfalls and back-eddies. There are plenty of wrecks in deep water for the more adventurous diver to tackle, but dive times will tend to be limited by the duration of slack water. The longest slacks tend to be found off the Anglesey north coast where they can last over an hour.

Above: **The endless sandy beaches of North Wales are great for lazy barbecues in the summer**

In contrast to the tidal nature of the island, many of the shore dive sites are actually well protected from the currents and riptides. Most shore diving is best conducted in the two hours either side of high water thus avoiding difficult shoreline terrain.

For information and assistance on diving off Anglesey you'd do well to contact Anglesey Divers in Holyhead. In addition to offering RYA Powerboat Training from Level 1 through to Advanced, they are also able to offer a specialist safety course for those involved in race marshalling and event co-ordination. Add to that Five Star Certification and awards for Centre of Excellence as a PADI dive training school, a well-stocked shop and a wealth of local knowledge and you it's the perfect place to go for your info. www.diveanglesey.co.uk



Don't jump! Wales has so much more to offer than you think . . .

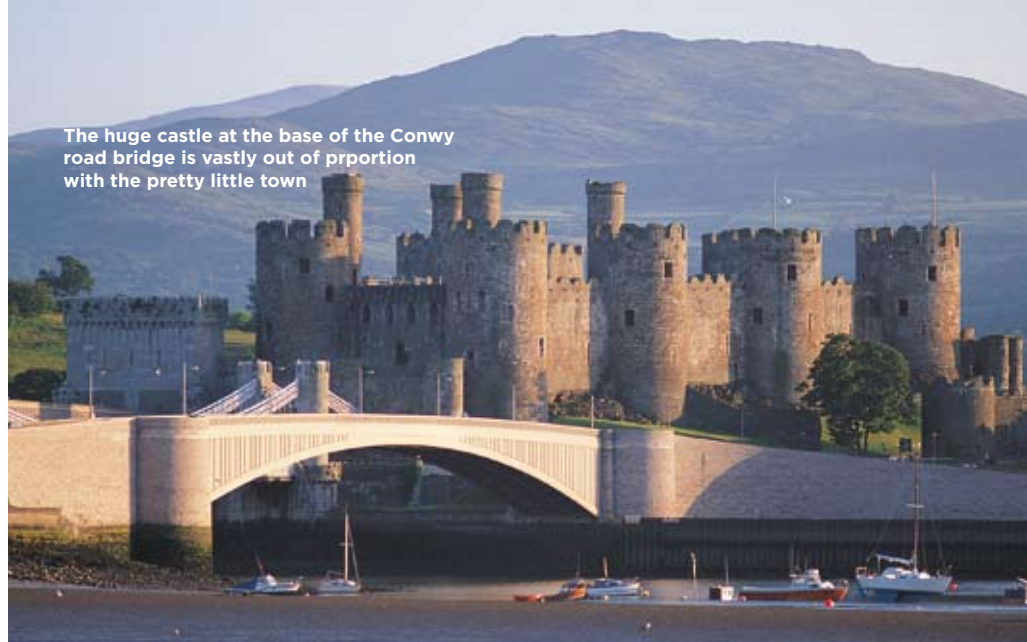
SNOWDONIA COAST

No boating trip to North Wales is complete without a run through the Menai Straits that separate Anglesey with mainland Wales. It runs under both the Britannia and Menai suspension bridges and although the scenery is idyllic, a strong tidal rip and numerous sandbars combine to create strange eddies and whirlpools. Care and research is necessary before undertaking the passage as the waters are amongst the most treacherous in the UK. The Beaumaris lifeboat website (www.beaumarislifeboat.com) contains a detailed passage plan for the Menai Straits and is a good place to start.

TREACHERY

In 1785, a boat carrying 55 people ran aground on one of the sandbars near the Menai Straits. High winds, the onset of darkness and the fear of the rescuers running aground meant that rescue was impossible. Night fell, the tide rose and those stranded were swept away. Only one soul survived. Be warned!

Back on the mainland, the North Wales coast offers some of the most interesting cruising waters and finest watersports beaches in the country. Those wishing to cruise the 'Castle Coast' should consider launching in Colwyn Bay, making the trip around the headland at Llandudno and arriving at both Conwy and Caernarfon by water.



The huge castle at the base of the Conwy road bridge is vastly out of proportion with the pretty little town



There are plenty of sightseeing boats selling plastic beakers of gin to help enliven their river tours



Watersports are big business in North Wales, so you regularly see zones given over to a particular activity

Fortified as part of King Edward 'Iron Ring' of castles during the Welsh Wars of Independence, the walled town of Conwy proudly displays its medieval history. The town that houses the castle is shielded by a wall that measures three-quarters of a mile long and is fortified by 22 towers, making it one of the most imposing towns in the world. In addition to its fascinating history and awe-inspiring battlements, Conwy also has a great deal to offer in terms of boating.

Sheltered by part of the Snowdonia mountain range from the prevailing south-westerlies the bay enjoys its own microclimate and the river, navigable a couple of hours either side of high water, offers flat water for wakeboarders and waterskiers. Conwy Marina, just outside the castle walls offers 500 fully serviced berths with water and electricity available to many pontoons. Facilities such as toilets, showers, and laundry are available in the main marina building and both petrol and diesel are available from the fuel pontoon.

After your stop in Conwy and with one eye on the tide-table it's time to make

a dash down to the equally impressive castle at Caernarfon. Possibly the most famous of all Welsh castles, the mighty fortress at Caernarfon was built not only as a military establishment, but also as a seat of government and royal palace. Modelled on the Western Roman Empire's Constantinople, Caernarfon has lost none of its majesty through the centuries and played its part in modern history when it was thrust into the limelight during the investiture of Prince Charles as the Prince of Wales.

If you're looking for evidence that Caernarfon has something to offer boating enthusiasts then consider that this is the location chosen for The National Watersports Centre for Wales - Plas Menai. A watchtower for training excellence throughout the marine industry, Plas Menai offers a whole range of watersports activities and courses under the watchful eye of extremely experienced and qualified instructors.

If you want to moor up and take a wander around Caernarfon, head for the Victoria Dock Marina. Originally built in the 1870s to transport the slate quarried

in Snowdonia, the harbour has received a facelift in recent times and the new marina offers 30 visitors' moorings as well as showers and toilets.

If you consider history a bit old hat, head straight for the high-octane watersports venues on the Llyn Peninsular. Home to Wakestock, one of Europe's largest wakeboarding events, Abersoch and Pwllheli are now firm favourites with the younger elements of the sports boat fraternity.

In fact Abersoch is enjoying something of a renaissance as the Northern Welsh Riviera. Every summer weekend the tiny town is flooded with the affluent 'movers and shakers' from Cheshire, Manchester and Liverpool and with an established marine dealer like Abersoch Land and Sea on hand to kit people out, the boating scene is thriving.

Launching, storage and servicing

facilities can be found at Land and Sea or at Vic's Boatyard. But if you want to launch your boat yourself, your best bet is the Golf Road (Lon Golff) slipway, which provides access to the Main Beach. Payment is made at the entrance to the car park and details of charges are available from the Harbour Master's office in Pwllheli (01758 613131). The council signs at the slip provide details on the user zones in the bay.

Wakeboarding behind a 'phat' boat to the latest thrash punk soundtrack isn't everyone's brew of choice so it's just as well Abersoch is also well placed to offer alternative cruising opportunities. For wildlife watching and cultural interest there is Bardsey Island, just two miles off the coast. Measuring just a mile and a half wide and a mile long the island is a National Nature Reserve and Site of Scientific Interest.

If you're lucky you might catch sight of the dolphins, porpoises and seals. If not then just go ashore and discover a religious heritage that has made it a place of pilgrimage since the early days of Christianity.

Just along the coast from Abersoch is the harbour town of Pwllheli, and while it's not the most picturesque town in Wales it does boast several main dealers for various marine manufacturers and a thriving powerboat club.

For something altogether different, try Portmeirion. Built between 1925 and 1975 on a peninsular near Minffordd this architectural folly was designed and built by Clough Williams-Ellis to show how: "the development of a naturally beautiful site need not lead to its defilement". Used as a set for the TV show 'The Prisoner', Portmeirion is open to visitors all year round.

WAKESTOCK

With an entertainment line-up that would put many music festivals to shame Wakestock calls itself Europe's largest wakeboard event. Feeder, The Zutons, The Automatic, Carl Cox & Friends, Athlete, Kosheen, Soul II Soul, The Ordinary Boys and GLC have all trodden the boards at this party weekend. Whether it's a wakeboarding event with a monumental party or a music festival with some watersports thrown in is open to debate? Either way, it's a hell of an event. www.wakestock.co.uk

Portmeirion stands out like a Venetian pearl amongst the rugged grandeur of mid-Wales

CEREDIGION COAST

Stretching between the Dovey Estuary and the start of Ceredigion's craggy cliffs is the holiday resort of Borth. I happen to have spent my formative years here and memories vary. There's the windswept ghost town in the winter, where tumbleweed raced down the high street and then there's the buzzy watersports haven in the summer.

There's little of historical or cultural interest in Borth. In fact you'll be lucky to find a local accent amongst the clamour of 'Brummies' that pack the caravan parks to bursting point, but with three miles of golden sand it's a beach lovers paradise. For local boating advice and a free slipway head to the southern end of the village and find the local RNLI station.

To get the most out of the area you'd do well to fuel your tank, check the weather forecast and cruise south toward Aberystwyth. On your journey you'll pass in the shadow of tumbling cliffs and secluded bays before stumbling over the mysterious 'Wallog Wall'. It's a strange stone causeway that lies just feet below the surface and extends six miles out to



Porthmadog Harbour, like many in the region, is as well serviced as it is picturesque



New Quay beach (Wales, not Cornwall) is a big crowd pleaser for holidaying families

sea, so be wary. Stumble over that and your day will go downhill.

Local legend has it that the wall forms one side of an ancient 'Atlantis' like city. Apparently it was formed one night when, after enjoying more than his fill of ale (as is the want of most true Welshmen), the city gatekeeper fell asleep without closing the gates against the rising tide. In swept the cold waters of the Irish Sea and the inhabitants drowned in their beds. During low Spring tides the bells of the mythical town are still heard, ringing out on the ocean currents. Fact or fiction? You decide.

After safely negotiating the wall at

Wallog it's customary to drop anchor off the beach at Clarach Bay, and have a quick cup of tea at one of the cafés on the beachfront. With a shale beach and little else apart from holiday parks, it's best to take a swift breather before continuing around the cliff to historical and picturesque Aberystwyth.

Immediately recognisable by its vintage pier and Victorian façade, Aberystwyth is sometimes referred to as 'The Brighton of Wales'. If the weather is good and the sea calm, take the opportunity to drink in the view from the water, before heading ashore.



IN ABERYSTWYTH
BE SURE TO...

Drink – in Rummings Wine Bar. Nestling between the town's bridge and harbour wall this legendary drinking hole has an electric atmosphere, mainly due to a top live music program and some fantastic bar staff.

EAT – at the Kings Hall Carvery. It's an award winning restaurant where only the panoramic sunsets and the proprietor's quirky sense of humour compete with the home-cooked menu. (www.thecarvery.net)

TRAVEL – on the Devils Bridge steam railway. As if the scenic journey on the narrow gauge railway isn't enough, brace yourself for the spectacular 'Devils Bridge' waterfalls that greet your arrival.

(www.rheidolrailway.co.uk)

VISIT – the Ceredigion Museum. Housed in a restored Edwardian Theatre this local attraction not only provides a flavour of past glories but has also been described as: "one of the most beautiful museum interiors in Britain".

(www.aboutbritain.com)

Heading south out of Aberystwyth, and quite a jaunt down the coast, is the picture postcard town of Aberaeron. Brightly coloured buildings line the quay of the old harbour, which makes for great photo opportunities on the way in. After a spot of lunch and a natural honey ice cream from the honey bee exhibition on the harbour it's probably best to head on to New Quay, and find somewhere for an overnight stay.

With its magnificent beaches, New Quay is a picturesque and internationally renowned resort village which was once a flourishing shipbuilding centre and fishing port. Dylan Thomas lived here and it is thought the village features in his book 'Under Milkwood' as the "cliff-perched town at the far end of Wales" which he called Llareggub.



It's as hackneyed as hell but Punch on Aberystwyth promenade really works

To explore the town by foot, unload your passengers at the main harbour and marina just to the south of the town, beyond the castle ruins on the headland.

Those arriving for a cruising holiday will welcome the brand new multi-million pound development of Aberystwyth Marina, just a short step from the centre of town and offering a full range of services including launch, recovery and a re-fuelling pontoon.

With its restaurants, bars and amenities, Aberystwyth is probably the best base for a family sports boat



There's so much wildlife out here it's like sailing in a spicy Cantonese Chowder

adventure in Mid Wales. Nestling under the foothills of the Plymlimon Mountains and with Cardigan Bay sweeping North and South, Aberystwyth is one of Wales' favourite seaside resorts, particularly after a decade of concerted investment. In addition to wearing its 'Victorian Spa' gown for the tourists, 'Aber' is also strongly linked with the academic establishment. Overlooking the town is the impressive building that houses the National Library of Wales – the main centre for research into the history, literature and life of the nation



WELSH

Place names in Wales are very descriptive as the language has changed very little through the centuries. Many places share similar names and by understanding the main component of the name and having a basic understanding of the Welsh language it is possible to translate the place name. This is particularly useful when navigating.

For example there are over 430 places in Wales that start with 'Llan'. A 'Llan' was a piece of land enclosed by a wooden fence within which would be a church and a group of Christians. Each 'Llan' was established around the 6th century by a Celtic saint after whom the site was named (Llandovery, Llanelli and Llandridnod). Other prefixes include:

PREFIX	TRANSLATION	EXAMPLE
Aber	Mouth of the river...	Aberystwyth – Mouth of the river Ystwyth
Capel	Chapel	Capel Curig – The Chapel of St. Curig
Betws	Prayer House	Betws-y-Coed – Prayer House in the woods (coed)
Caer	Fort	Caernafon – Fort near Anglesey (Mon).
Tre	Town	Trecynon – Town on the river Cynon
Pwll	Pool	Pwllheli – Salt water (heli) pool.

Perhaps the most famous place name in Wales, after Llandewi Brefi, is Llanfair PG as the locals call it. Throughout the rest of the world though