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Walking Around Wales

The country's Coast Path leads to views of cliffs, castles, mountains and beaches.

By Katherine Rodeghier



Wooden signposts mark the route of the Wales Coast Path.
Wales Coast Path

The wind whipped over Holyhead Mountain as walkers descended the path, pausing to gaze at the Irish Sea stretching to the horizon. Their destination—South Stack Lighthouse, a gleaming white sentinel on a rocky spit of land—lay straight down. Waves churned along the face of the cliff below while seabirds soared and squawked overhead.

The coast of Wales is among the most varied on Earth. It can be wild and rugged then level out to placid beaches where families dance in the surf. Walking trails along it pass through tiny fishing villages and grand Victorian resorts and skirt 13th-century castles and Iron Age

forts. The Wales Coast Path stitched them together, making Wales the first country in the world to establish a marked footpath along its entire shoreline. When it was dedicated in 2012, Lonely Planet put Coastal Wales first in its ranking of the year's top 10 regions.

Easy Walks, Invigorating Hikes

From the mouth of the River Dee in the north to the market town of Chepstow in the south, the Wales Coast Path meanders 870 miles, sometimes jogging inland where the ground is unstable or where landowners refused to grant access. Wooden signposts mark the route.

Walkers pick a portion of the path to explore, often using public buses and trains to return to their starting point, or diverting onto local walking paths to circle back. Some walk just an hour or two along easy stretches of coast. Others strap on backpacks loaded with gear for multiday hikes over tough terrain. The most ambitious tack on Offa's Dyke Path, an inland trail near the English border, and hike almost the entire circumference of the country, a distance of 1,030 miles.



Wild ponies graze on the grasses on Llanddwyn Island.
Wales Coast Path

The idea of establishing a national coastal path stemmed from the success of regional paths in bringing visitors to Wales. One of them, the Anglesey Coastal Path, opened in 2006 and remains an important link in the Wales Coast Path. Its 125-mile route circles Anglesey Island, designated by the Welsh government as one of three Areas of Outstanding National Beauty along the national path.

Circumambulating

At RSPB South Stack Nature Reserve on the Isle of Anglesey in north Wales, hikers picked their way through expanses of heath and headed to the visitor center for a cup of tea and a chat with Mark Baldwin, membership development officer for the RSPB Cymru. The reserve has 11 breeding pairs of choughs, the rarest member of the crow family, which are noticeable by their red beaks and red legs, said Baldwin. The coastal cliffs provide nesting sites for 9,000 seabirds. In spring and early summer, birders can enjoy the comical antics of puffins from the viewing points on the cliffs. Visitors can also see guillemots and razorbills between March and July, when they come onto the land to breed.

Farther down the Anglesey path, walkers entered the woods and sand dunes of Newborough Warren Nature Reserve. A broad sandy beach, one of 43 Blue Flag Beaches on the Wales Coast Path, led them to Llanddwyn Island. Named for the Welsh patron saint of lovers, the secluded spot is accessible on foot only at low tide. Wooden boardwalks snake across fields where wild ponies graze. Behind them, the mountains of Snowdonia National Park rise in the distance.



Pembrokeshire Coast National Park is Britain's only coastal national park.
Wales Coast Path

At Beaumaris, walkers took the Anglesey path to the largest and last castle built by English King Edward I in his conquest of Wales. They crossed the drawbridge, listening as a guide pointed to the murder holes where the king's men poured hot oil onto his enemies in the 13th century. Three miles farther on, they passed Penmon Priory on the grounds of a sixth-century monastery, stopping to view two Celtic crosses that survived plunder by Vikings in 971.

Eight Regions

The Wales Coast Path is divided into eight sections, each offering a different experience. In the north, it curves around the Great Orme, a limestone headland that took its name from the

Old Norse word for sea serpent, which some say it resembles. Sheep graze across its rocky pastures near where copper mines supplied tools in the Bronze Age. From its summit, the Great Orme Tramway rattles down tracks to the Victorian seaside resort of Llandudno, holiday home of the girl who inspired Lewis Carroll to write *Alice in Wonderland*. The path crosses in front of a statue of one of its characters, the White Rabbit.

Hikers approaching Conwy Castle may imagine they are in a fairy tale. It's another of King Edward's 13th-century fortresses, part of the walled town of Conwy. With 22 towers still standing, it's one of the best-preserved medieval fortified towns in Britain.

In western Wales, walkers may spot dolphins and seals along the great sweep of Cardigan Bay. In the southwest, the coastal path joins the Pembrokeshire Coast Path to wander 186 miles around Pembrokeshire Coast National Park. Britain's only coastal national park, and one of two national parks on the Wales Coast Path, has long drawn serious hikers to its rugged cliffs jutting into the Atlantic. Along the way, they may encounter birds from one of the world's largest gannet colonies. In the city of St. David's, a 13th-century cathedral waits to be explored.

In the south, the path travels through the busy seaside resort of Swansea and the golden beaches of the Gower Peninsula frequented by Welsh families on weekends and holidays. Along the Glamorgan Heritage Coast Path, one of 14 Heritage Coasts the path crosses, history buffs stop to look at Norman castles and Iron Age hill forts. Nature lovers search for rare species of flora while others are content to gaze upon multilayered cliffs and some of the highest sand dunes in Britain.



History buffs are often drawn to the Glamorgan Heritage Coast Path.
Wales Coast Path

The beauty of the Welsh landscape unfolds for walkers almost at every turn of the path. As poet Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote:

*"Lovely the woods, waters, meadows, combes, vales,
All the air things wear that build this world of Wales."*

Planning Your Trip

Sturdy walking shoes or boots are a must on much of the Wales Coast Path as are trekking poles in the steepest sections. Rain gear comes in handy for the unpredictable weather along the coast.

Find information on the Wales Coast Path at www.walescoastpath.gov.uk. General travel information can be had at www.visitwales.com. For rail travel to coastal communities, visit www.arrivatrainswales.co.uk. For help planning a vacation to Wales, contact your AAA Travel agent or visit AAA.com/travel.

Click for an [Eating on the Run story about the Bodnant Welsh Food Center](#).

KATHERINE RODEGHIER is a freelance writer based in Western Springs, Ill.

Published: Aug 01, 2014

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