



# Lavishness amid the lonely splendour of the Welsh coast

Rhodri Karim finds himself in reflective mood on a visit to a landmark hotel on the beautiful South Wales shoreline

**S**OUTH Wales is home to a duality like nowhere else in the British Isles. It's a land of timeless verdancy, endless summers and persistent rain. It's a land torn apart by poverty, and before that the machinery of heavy industry. It is also my favourite place on earth.

On the train eastwards from Swansea, this tension between nature and industry is visible. On one side, the mile-long steelworks at Port Talbot, belching sulphuric clouds out into Swansea Bay. On the other, hillsides ravaged by the sea breeze and acid rain, the scrub and lichen rendering them a toxic yellow.

But beyond these scars of past industry lies a landscape bursting with life, all green, scrubby and soggy in the March fog. In summer the clouds hang tangibly in the blue sky, the sun dappled through oaks and cypress onto roads winding through the hills and down to the coast.

It's a raw land where nature is a constant presence, whether it's in the sweeping views from every hilltop or the stucco-clad Seventies eyesores that nestle on crags and in hillside crannies. Wales, of course, is chock full of hills. It's this drama of altitude that makes driving or cycling your way through the heartland of Carmarthenshire so thrilling.

Cardiff seems downright European compared to the overgrown countryside. Sheer hill faces give way to orderly hedgerows and terraced houses as the train rolls alongside the River Taff and the Millennium Stadium. The city centre is a fascinating mix of Victorian arcades, trattorias (Wales boasts a large Italian contingent) and glistening new EU-funded malls and libraries.

We trundle through suburbs, salubrious new developments and decrepit industry. All of this sandwiched between hills and forests, the coast and the land. Arriving in Penarth I realise I can't smell the sea, though the gulls guide me along the mock-Tudor high street and down through allies to the seaside.

## PENARTH

The crumbling pier at Penarth is over-run with families, tourists and the local youth, even as the steward attempts to enforce closing time. The Bristol Channel seems to go on forever in the March evening murk, as adults and children alike stumble all over the pebble beach. In the distance, a refinery of some kind peeks around the cliff faces surrounding the bay.

Penarth was renowned as a seaside resort by those over-egging Victorians, who built sprawling seaside mansions which have mostly fallen into disrepair. Now, the revitalising sea air is breathed in mostly by Cardiff commuters and the retired, making up a quarter of the population. As I make my way up Marine Parade towards the hotel I pass hospices and care homes.

I almost miss the unassuming Holm House, with its tasteful gravel driveway and the requisite Audi TT parked outside. I'm met in the wood-panelled entrance hall, and shown upstairs to my room. Each is individually named and designed and mine,



Left, a view of the South Wales coastline. Picture: ALAMY

Below left, the exterior of Holm House, Penarth. Below middle and right, interiors at Holm House.



Min-Y-Don, is full of neutral tones and clean lines. The bed is big, and comfy. The windows look out onto a magnolia tree, the coastal path and the Channel (or would, if it wasn't quite so foggy). There's a bath alongside the window, which I resolve to make use of later.

I have a look around the rest of the hotel, finding a serene slate-walled pool and a modest gym. Some bedrooms have balconies, others private gardens. It's a veritable pile of a house, with twisting corridors and plenty of wooden panelling. By accident I stumble into another room, in a newer section of the hotel, dressed in pristine white and flooded with natural light.

There is a sense of the bespoke, though executed somewhat haphazardly. The taps in my room are unlabelled, and turn in strange directions. An eerie array of magazines have been placed on the table, next to the plastic flowers and coffee creamer. They feature headlines like "349 Reasons to Smile" and "Things You Can Stop Worrying About RIGHT NOW".

I read up on the history of the building, built by a shipping magnate in the 1920s when Marine Parade was known as "Millionaire's Row". I am amused to find that it was, for a while, a nursing home.

## DINNER AT HOLM

At dinner time, I head down to the bar to prepare to eat at the Hotel's restaur-

## Everything at Holm House is about comfort, from the rich food and low lighting to its soft beds and sea views, which stretch to the islands off Flatholm

ant, Neale's. It's a brooding room full of leather and wrought iron, big seats and circular sofas. I order a whisky, and I'm furnished with a bowl of crisps and olives. Looking over a menu, I notice a caveat: "the game is local, and may contain lead shot."

Out of the blue comes the first of many amuses-bouches: a chicken liver parfait with Bloody Mary jelly. It's full of iron and sweetness, delicious. I immediately regret not ordering a cocktail, the "Neale's" featuring ruby port and cognac.

I'm then shown into the restaurant and handed another amuse-bouche, this time a meaty king prawn served up in rich, lemon-scented garlic butter, teetering on a crunchy bundle of samphire.

This is followed by a starter of pork terrine served alongside a piquant garden of pickles and a paltry triangle of toast. It's got a fantastic rough-chopped texture, but doesn't taste of much. Then comes my main, a pan-fried duck breast, which turns out to be perfectly cooked, rich and covered in seared skin. It hasn't been interfered with at all, other than being sprinkled with tangy white

caviar, and is served with a pile of deliciously sauced cracked wheat and chicory.

Next I'm brought a creme egg parfait, airy layers of chocolate mousse and fondant a far cry from the sickly sweetness of the real thing.

Finally, I end with a rhubarb assiette, a high-concept tasting plate including a rhubarb consommé, a deconstructed crumble and rhubarb caviar. It's hit and miss, but light and refreshing, exactly what I needed after such a profound meal.

## HOLM HOUSE

Everything at Holm House is about comfort, from the rich food and low lighting, to its soft beds and sea views, which stretch to the islands off Flatholm, Steepholm and beyond. The bar too, features sunken leather armchairs and warm wooden furniture. Perhaps it's just the wine, but it feels like a real break from all worries, a great setting for a weekend away.

Revived after a strong coffee and some petit fours, the fairy lights strung across the garden lure me outside for a walk along the coastal path. I can see lighthouses along the Devon

coastline winking through the haze. A brisk wind comes off the bay and I find myself reflecting on the timeless quality of the coast, before heading to bed.

The next morning, I head down for a breakfast of porridge and whisky. Sitting next to the garden window, I watch seagulls wheel through the fog.

On the table is the standard Continental fare: fruits, cereal and toast. (The hotel that perfects breakfast will be the most successful hotel on Earth.)

On my way back to the train station, I take a detour through Alexandra Park, a sprawling garden on a hillside, its war memorial facing the Channel.

The sun has come out, and I get a strong sense of the Victorian grandeur that was the mark of Penarth's heyday. The seaside mansions loom above the pine, and I realise that what I've been hearing all day is birdsong.

## TRAVEL DETAILS

Rooms at Holm House start at £110, including breakfast. Holm House, Marine Parade, Penarth Vale of Glamorgan, Wales. CF64 3BG, Tel: +44 (0)29 2070 1572 [www.holmhouse.com](http://www.holmhouse.com)

CHABROT BISTRO D'AMIS REVIEWED IN TOMORROW'S PAPER



## TRAVEL NOTES | by Lucie Greene



### ALL ABOARD! EUROSTAR TO AVIGNON

Paris? So over. Well, not quite, but as France does hold a certain allure. Lucky then, that Eurostar has started offering direct weekly services to Avignon, pictured above, the beautiful town in the heart of Provence. From July 9th to September 10th this year, passengers will be able to zoom down south in less than six hours, enjoying magnificent views of the French countryside along the way. Needless to say, this will be a popular service, so Eurostar is recommending booking early to avoid disappointment. Direct tickets start: £109, for a standard return, £249 Standard Premier. See: [www.eurostar.com](http://www.eurostar.com)

### WIMBLEDON WONDER

Wimbledon tennis is soon to kick off and local hotel Cannizaro House has the perfect solution to that creaking District Line journey afterwards into town. The stately home/boutique hotel, set in the heart of Wimbledon Village (very near the All England Club) is offering a clutch of packages throughout the tournament, including stays with complimentary courtesy cars to the tennis, privileged ticket booking to Centre Court and Court 1 for guests, and pre-match lunches with fizz and courtesy transport to the game afterwards. Game, set, match. Rooms from £475 per room. [www.cannizarohouse.com](http://www.cannizarohouse.com)



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**THE IMPERIAL HOTEL 4\***  
Vaughan Street | Llandudno | LL30 1AP

A grand Victorian façade and fantastic sea-fronting position on Llandudno's promenade makes The Imperial Hotel a real seaside classic. Relax in the elegant surroundings, enjoy the stunning sea views and taste mouthwatering dishes in the AA Rosette awarded Chantrey's Restaurant, well known for its delicious food made with seasonal Welsh produce. Lovely.

**VILLAGE PREM SWANSEA 4\***  
Langdon Road | Swansea | SA1 8QY

As with all Village Hotels, the range of facilities at the Village PREM Swansea is fantastic. This cool and stylish hotel offers a great Health & Fitness club, a grill restaurant, a pub and even a Starbucks. Being a 'PREM' a high spec stay is on offer, and with so much going on there's a real buzzing atmosphere - perfectly complementing your stay in lively Swansea.

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