

In the Realm of Legends

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Nestled along the rugged western coast of Great Britain, Wales is a country unlike any other

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With a business trip to London for the Business Travel Show the last week of February, and another conference in Berlin the following week – and a free weekend in between – it was the perfect occasion for a little downtime. Since I'd been to

London frequently, this set up a textbook scenario for a bleisure trip to nearby Wales to check off another bucket list destination.

My three-day, two-night road trip was to take me to Pembrokeshire, in the far southwest of Wales. Bursting with beautiful countryside, old castles, scenic vistas of the coast and plenty of unique cultural sites, this would be a great opportunity to experience the legendary history of Wales and the hospitality of the fun-loving Welsh people.

From London city center, I caught an early morning cab to Heathrow and jumped into my National Car rental and off I was, heading west on the M3 to A303 for my first stop at Stonehenge. This was a no-brainer as it's on the way to Wales, and only 75 minutes from the airport.

Of course, I'd seen the iconic photographs of Stonehenge, so this was another bonus for my bucket list. I arrived just as they were opening and was able to hop on the first bus. For late February, it was a gorgeous, sunny day with a stiff breeze flowing across the landscape. Seeing Stonehenge in person – with the giant monoliths towering over us and the early morning sun casting long shadows and amplifying the grandeur and mystery of this ancient site – is, to put it quite simply, amazing.

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Back to the visitor center, I took in the museum and a brief tutorial on the construction, the cultural meaning and the determined people from so many centuries ago who built it. How they moved these huge stones from many miles away, across land and over water, was an amazing engineering feat in itself. The museum also had full size models of the mud and thatch huts these people lived in. Two hours later, I'm back on the road to Wales.

PAST MEETS PRESENT

The trip from Heathrow to Pembrokeshire clocked in at 229 miles, an estimated drive time of three hours and 55 minutes with most of the trip on the M4. With the early start and great weather (and a bit of a heavy foot on my part) I made really good time. The last hour of the trip was on local A48 which wove its way past rolling hills, small towns, farmland, pasture fields and scenic views of the ocean.

Next stop, St. Davids Cathedral and Bishops Palace. This ancient ruin, which had been the site of earlier churches, is reputed to be where St. David, the patron saint of Wales, built the first monastic settlement in the 6th century. This "new" cathedral was built starting in 1181. The outstanding features of the building are the magnificent ceilings – oak in the nave, painted in the quire and presbytery – and the sloping floor. My visit just happened to fall on March 1, St. David's Day, a popular holiday in Wales.

Now to my hotel for an evening of refreshment. I checked in to Tyr Y Felin Hotel, Wales' first contemporary art hotel, featuring over 100 stunning original artworks. The collection includes Welsh, British and international artists, twelve of which were specially commissioned to create works inspired by the spectacular landscape of the St. David's Peninsula and the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park.

The Tyr Y Felin (the words mean "windmill" in Welsh) Hotel was built around an old windmill which has been repurposed as a suite and elevated observation deck serving up sweeping vistas of rolling hills, pastures, the sea →

DESTINATIONS





PREVIOUS PAGE: Roch Castle built in 1195
THIS PAGE: Pembroke Castle, birthplace of Henry VII; The magnificent ceiling in St. Davids Cathedral; St. Davids Cathedral which was built starting 1811; Pentre Ifan burial chamber in Pembrokeshire

as Stonehenge, yet remarkable for its construction and the ability of its builders to lift a 16-ton stone onto its tripod-like stone support – around 3,000 BC! It’s out in the middle of nowhere, driving on some one-lane local farm roads. You can walk right up and touch it. As the Irish say, “If stones could speak...” I was bewitched to consider those ancient people and the herculean efforts they made to honor their leaders and culture.

Now to our second stop, Pembroke Castle, the birthplace of Henry VII, and the major stronghold that would protect Wales from the never-ending succession of foreign invaders for many centuries. This rocky outcrop, protected by water on three sides and a natural gulch on the other, with a large cavern below, provided shelter for cave-dwellers during the Ice Age, some 12,000 years ago. It became a hillfort around 5,000 years ago, then developed into a castle around 1071 and kept growing from there.



and Caerfai Bay, which definitely deserves the short walk down to the stony beach. The property has 20 rooms, suites and master suites, with space for business meetings and retreats.

Graffiti artist Charles Uzzell-Edwards, aka Pure Evil, is one of the featured artists, whose remarkable portraits of famous Welsh actors Catherine Zeta Jones and Richard Burton, as well as Frankenstein, are prominently displayed in the restaurant.

Dinner at the Blas (meaning “taste” in Welsh) Restaurant was an absolute delight. The menu is influenced by the season and locality, with dishes designed to reflect Wales and its produce. As a big fan of malt whisky, I was delighted to imbibe my first-ever single malt Welsh whisky, Penderyn Legend – so smooth. For starters, I chose the pigeon with black pudding, beetroot and pennywort. For the main course, I couldn’t resist the venison, served with celeriac, hazelnut, savoy and prune – out of this world scrumptious.

BEING THE BRIDGE

It’s Day 2 now, and after a hearty breakfast, I’m off for a full day of exploring. First stop, Pentre Ifan Burial Chamber, about a 40-minute drive north, with more rolling hills and seascapes. Not nearly as large and famous



My interest in seeing Pembroke had more to do with the “Greatest Knight,” William Marshal, who after a very successful career of jousting, chivalry and many a battle, became the trusted senior military advisor to three kings of England. He was also influential getting bad King John to sign the Magna Carta, establishing rule of law for the king as well as his subjects.

His life of adventure started at the age of six, when his father used him as a hostage (collateral) for a deal with a regional kingdom. When his father broke his word, it was “legal” for young William to be executed as a consequence. On one occasion, he had the hangman’s noose around his neck, but his captor just couldn’t muster the nerve to kill an innocent boy.

A year later, William’s captors were besieging his father’s castle to get restitution. As part of the bargaining, they put the young William in a catapult and threatened to return him to his father by launching him up and over the castle walls! Again, his father did not relent – after all, he had five other sons and losing the youngest was not a big deal.

Frustrated with the situation, and not able to “pull the trigger,” his captors released William without harm. Later, his father confided in young William that he was certain all along that no one could execute a 6-year-old boy – the ploy succeeded.

With my history itch satisfied, I head back to Tyr Y Felin for dinner. Tonight, it would be venison tartar for an appetizer, followed by the local sea bass. Everything was fresh, and delicious. After dinner it’s off to Tyr Y Felin’s sister property Roch Castle Hotel.

Just 20 minutes east of St. Davids, Roch Castle was built in 1195, part of a series of border strongholds. Restored in 2009 as an exclusive hotel, the property now features just six good size rooms and a large common area. The adjacent outdoor parapet, high above the surrounding land offers miles of broad vistas of countryside and sea. The property functions more as a B&B, but full-service catering is available for corporate events.

That night, as I enjoyed a whisky and a cigar out on the parapet, with 30-mile an hour winds swirling and whispering around the castle, giving off an eerie sense of the history and purpose of this place, transporting me to ancient times.

Interestingly, Roch Castle has a crest and motto, “Bid Ben, Bid Bont” meaning “Be a Leader, Be a bridge.” What great inspiration for an engaging, intimate and inspiring company retreat. I can’t wait to return with our staff at *Business Traveler*.

The next morning, it’s Day 3 and time to head back to Heathrow for my flight to Berlin. What a great experience it was to escape to Wales – an enriching personal use of three days and two nights, filled with new insights, wondrous landscapes, cultural and historic learning. And the people, all generous, welcoming, and helpful, always going the extra mile to show me hospitality and ensure my delight. ■



IMAGES: The Tyr Y Felin (the words mean “windmill” in Welsh) Hotel; Accomodations at Roch Castle; A three course dinner at Blas Restaurant, at Twr y Felin Hotel



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