Glorious Guernsey

Richard Webber explores the coast of the second-largest island in the Channel Islands.

The Candie Gardens date back to the 19th century.

Fort Grey is a Martello Tower.

St Peter Port is a captivating town.

F you want a bird's eye view of St Peter Port, climb to the top of Victoria Tower," John, a friendly local who spotted me thumbing through my guide book, suggested.

Finishing my coffee at a café in Guernsey's main town, I decided his idea had some merit.

I headed up to the information desk at Candie Gardens, where I was handed a key – yes, I would have exclusive access to the tower for 30 minutes!

The Victoria Tower was built in 1848.

The view from Victoria Tower is marvellous.

Just around the corner, the 100-foot high red granite monument – built in 1848 to commemorate Queen Victoria's visit, the first by a reigning monarch – stood ahead of me.

Unlocking the door, I climbed the narrow, winding staircase, its 99 steps taking me to the viewing platform.

John was right. From the highest tower in St Peter Port, I had a sublime view over not just the town but a great deal of the island, too.

That's not surprisingly, really. Despite being the second largest Channel Island, its size – just 30 square miles – means nowhere is too far.

Nestled cosily in the bay of St Malo, close to the Normandy coast, Guernsey is just 70 miles from mainland Britain and a true delight.

This peaceful, unrushed island offers simple pleasures like seaside strolls, clifftop walks, exploring historic sites

and wandering around pretty villages.

I could have stayed atop the tower for longer, but my 30-minute viewing slot was nearly over.

Plus, I had much more to explore, including Candie Gardens itself.

Opened to the public in 1894, it's not just the flowers which are of interest but the specimen trees, such as the beautiful maidenhair with its delicate fan-shaped leaves.

Then there are the two statues – of Queen Victoria, built in 1900 – and Victor Hugo.

The French poet and novelist was exiled in Guernsey between 1855 and 1870, and it's where he wrote "Les Misérables".

After taking a slew of photos, I dropped down to the waterfront and strolled along, passing the jam-packed marina and on to the breakwater leading out to Castle Cornet.

Guernsey's coastline is dotted with many military fortifications, none more impressive than Castle Cornet, which has been guarding the mouth of the town's harbour for more than 800 years.

The island's military past is spotlighted at various sites around the island, including La Vallette Underground Military Museum, German Occupation Museum and the Underground Hospital.

First opened to the public in 1954, it's the largest structural reminder of the German occupation existing in the Channel Islands.

When visiting an island, I always like to explore the

THIS WEEK'S COVER feature

beaches and coastline.

With around 27 beaches to choose from, there are plenty to go round.

On the west coast, they're generally long, sandy and easily accessible.

On the south, expect more dramatic examples, often at the foot of a high cliff and involving some walking from the nearest car park.

Among my favourites is Cobo Bay. It's one of Guernsey's most popular beaches and it's easy to see why.

The long stretch of white sand washed by crystal clear water is among the most photogenic.

Then again, there is Pembroke Bay in the north of the island. Let's just say that I had many favourites!

Guernsey's coastline – and interior, of course – offer many walking routes.

Coinciding with my short break was the launch of VisitGuernsey's self-guided walking app.

Keen to test it out, I downloaded the app, donned my walking boots

and set off for a wander around Pleinmont, a headland in the southwest, before the route continued along L'Eree Bay.

Along the way, I stopped at Fort Grey.

Nicknamed the "Cup and Saucer", this Martello Tower houses a very interesting shipwreck museum.

With such a rocky coastline and rugged reefs close to the shore, it's easy to understand why so many ships have come a cropper in this part of the world.

VisitGuernsey's new app

is extremely useful.

Not only is there a wide selection of walks to choose from, but each contains useful tools such as photos showing the waymarks en route, audio commentary and – so long as you have mobile data – GPS tracking so you know where you are at any point.

I reached the extent of my walk at Lihou headland.

Being low tide, I was able to cross the cobbled causeway to reach tiny Lihou Island, Guernsey's first RAMSAR wetland site ▶

Factfile

• Guernsey has one of the world's largest tidal ranges (33 feet).

• Around 8,000 years ago, the island was attached to mainland Europe, until rising sea levels caused its separation.

• The world's first underwater arrest happened in Guernsey waters, when a scuba-diving officer caught a man illegally harvesting a popular shellfish.

• Some houses in the west of the island have a piece of granite protruding from their walls. Known as "witches' seats", residents built them so witches, who were widely believed in, could rest rather than create havoc.

• As a Crown Dependency, Guernsey has its own parliament and is self-governing, which means it makes its own rules.

Pembroke Beach is one of 27 in Guernsey.

Moulin Huet Bay.

The Little Chapel.

Renoir frame, Moulin Huet Bay.

Getting there

BY BOAT: Brittany Ferries (formerly Condor Ferries) who operate regular high speed sailings to Guernsey from Poole, Dorset. Journey time is around three hours. The company also operates a conventional ferry from Portsmouth. Using Brittany Ferries allow you to bring your own vehicle rather than hiring a car.

BY AIR: Several airlines fly to Guernsey from regional and international airports across the UK, including Bristol, Southampton and Manchester. Flight time is around 40 minutes.

and marine reserve.

It's home to more than 200 species of seaweed and 150 species of birds.

The app proved just as valuable when choosing other walks, but make sure your mobile phone provider offers free roaming in Guernsey.

Mine didn't so I had to get a pay-as-you-go SIM from one of the island's companies.

On the way back to my accommodation upon finishing my walk, I detoured to Little Chapel.

Arguably the smallest in Europe, work started on the original version in 1914 by Brother Déodat, who wanted to create a miniature version of the famous grotto and basilica at Lourdes in France.

The one standing today is the third version.

Beautifully decorated with colourful pieces of broken china, shells and pebbles, it's a must-see on the island.

In fact, Guernsey has lots of must-sees, as I discovered!

But at the end of each day, it was a pleasure to return to the four-star Fermain Valley Hotel, situated in a tranquil setting overlooking a steep tree-covered valley leading down to the sea.

Located in the southeast, a few miles from St Peter Port, it's close to several tiny coves worth visiting, especially Moulin Huet Bay, which has historical significance.

French painter Pierre-Auguste Renoir spent just over a month on the island in 1883, working on 15 paintings during his stay, most depicting views of Moulin Huet.

If you wander around this area, you'll notice five metal frames which have been installed by charitable initiative Art for Guernsey.

Each is positioned in exactly the same place that Renoir would have stood.

Moulin Huet is a quiet, tucked away cove – just one of many around the island.

Before leaving this quiet spot, I popped into the appropriately-named Renoir Tea Garden for a coffee.

Looking out to sea with the sun rays glistening off the water, it seemed the ideal place to reflect on what had been a great trip.

Despite its diminutive size, Guernsey has much to offer and I promised myself it wouldn't be too long before I'd return. PF