

# Channel good feelings

The natural beauty, coastal activities and friendly vibe is bringing a younger crowd to Guernsey, finds Kate Wickers

**H**ave you been here before?" asks the taxi driver, as we're driving from Guernsey airport. "Twenty-five years ago," I tell him. "Well, don't worry, nothing much has changed," he reassures me. It's obvious from the get-go that locals take pride in their island's steadfastness (while much of the world founders), illustrated just minutes later as my change from a tenner, ("Sorry love, I don't have a card reader!"), is presented as three unique Guernsey pound notes.

Brexit is what happened on the mainland as Guernsey never was in the European Union, and although it is part of the British Isles (as a dependency of the British Crown) it is self-governing (just like its big sister Jersey). Post-Covid, it's attracting a younger crowd (in particular, gaining popularity with 25 to 34-year-olds). They come here for wild swimming, canoe safaris and wildlife spotting trips, for craft beer and gin making, and to enjoy the island's independent cafe and restaurant scene, overseen by maverick young chefs that celebrate local produce (the lobster and crab is world-renowned).

One thing they didn't have on the island 25 years ago was tuk-tuks; a gimmicky but fun way of exploring that's proving very

popular. A fleet of five, each seating two, whizzes visitors to popular spots, and of the various tours, the two-hour Town Tour with West Coast Bay views and a stop at the extraordinary Little Chapel, is popular. The smallest church in the world (five metres in length), Little Chapel was built between 1923 and 1929 by a monk called Brother Deodat and encrusted with pebbles, broken pottery, coloured glass and shells.

I'm staying in a wood-clad treehouse room at The Fermain Valley Hotel, which comes with a yoga mat and invitation to relax and is tucked away surrounded by greenery (hotel facilities include an indoor pool, cinema room, and three restaurants). After checking in, I settle down on the hotel's sea-view terrace with a local rock samphire and grapefruit Wheadon's Gin (book into their distillery for a tasting), then wander down a winding path to Fermain Bay, which feels like a gorgeous secret (the crab sandwiches at its no-frills beach café are excellent).

Next day, I strike out to Moulin Huet Bay, where Pierre-Auguste Renoir painted 15 pieces during his stay on the island in 1883. You can do a self-guided 'Walking in Renoir's Footsteps' tour to five

viewpoints around the bay with information boards and a QR code to scan for commentary. The bay is a beauty, riddled with seaweed-licked black metamorphic rocks, and lapped by aquamarine waters, flanked by cliffs covered in Oxeye daisy and red campion. Nimble footing is required to reach the sands, empty save for a few families and groups of friends with picnics and plans for a lazy afternoon of swimming and sunbathing. Above the bay, with wonderful views, The Renoir Tea Garden, which dates from the 1920s, is made for lounging with a glass of rosé and enjoying a do-it-yourself sandwich. The red-roofed cottage next door was featured in Renoir's painting and is where French novelist Victor Hugo once borrowed silverware and glassware from for a picnic.

Next day, I take to the choppy sea on a wildlife spotting trip with Island Rib Voyages (a thrilling, bumpy ride through the surf, where one must be prepared to get wet) to the nearby island of Herm, famous for its dazzling white shell beach, pulverised to fragments by the waves, and the opportunity to spot seal, dolphin, and, from mid-March to July, puffin that come to raise one single chick each season.

In the capital of St Peter Port, tapas restaurant Tinto is worth a wait (it's so popular that no bookings are taken) to feast on sharing plates such as local crab empanada and seabass croqueta. For a night cap, Red Cocktail Bar proves lively.

"More young people are moving here for the outdoor life," Dom and his husband tell me, who both work within Guernsey's huge financial sector (low income tax, and lack of VAT make the island very attractive). "You can't beat the hiking and biking. You must take a dip in La Vallette." Clinking glasses, I promise that I will.

I keep my word, sharing lap space next day with a mixed-aged crowd in this saltwater Victorian-era swimming pool, built in 1865, with its views to 13th century Castle Cornet and the neighbouring islands. Then, I catch the ferry to the tiny island of Sark, where cars are prohibited, and bicycle is the best way to get around. With pedal power secured from Avenue Cycles, I head to La Coupee, a land bridge that links Big Sark to Little Sark, with dramatic drops of 80 metres either side, and views over red campion-covered cliffs to horseshoe pebble bays lapped by aquamarine water. Lunch of local scallops with ginger and lemongrass is enjoyed on the terrace of Hathaway's that nestles in a corner of La Seigneurie Estate, with its lovely

walled Victorian gardens.

As Guernsey lies just 24 miles off the north coast of France, the feel is British with a French accent, particularly along The Pollet in St Peter Port where a string of lovely boutiques sells handmade French soaps and chic summer clothes, and in Café Coco, where the coffee and patisserie are excellent (try the framboise tarte). Francophiles and literature lovers will not want to miss a visit to the home of 19th century French novelist Victor Hugo, who was exiled here for 15 years. Here, I join a group of earnest-looking French students in obvious awe of being in Monsieur Hugo's lavishly eccentric maison, where he finished his best-selling novel, *Les Misérables*.

Guernsey's charms lie with its abundance of natural beauty, and its ability to offer something reassuringly steady in an uncertain world. My taxi driver was right: nothing much has changed here (aside from a tuk-tuk or two) and in another 25 years' time, I'd bet a crisp red Guernsey pound that he'll be telling the same story.

**Double rooms at Fermain Valley Hotel from £170, [www.handpickedhotels.co.uk/fermainvalley](http://www.handpickedhotels.co.uk/fermainvalley). Fly direct to Guernsey from Edinburgh with Aurigny on selected dates through summer. Returns from £189.98, [www.aurigny.com](http://www.aurigny.com)**

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Travel



Castle Cornet at sunset



Lovely beaches and coastal paths are part of the charms of Guernsey, main and above