

The Med? No, it's the

ISLE of WIGHT...

With sunny weather and stunning scenery, this UK gem has the allure of a far-flung holiday close to home

Where in the world?

I couldn't resist heading straight for Ventnor, a suntrap on the south of the island, which enjoys its own balmy microclimate. Tumbling scenery and Victorian villas creeping up the hillside immediately brought Italy's Sorrento to mind, but a wander among spiky palms and colourful subtropical plants of Ventnor's magnificent Botanic Garden (botanic.co.uk) transported me even further afield, to South Africa, New Zealand and the Orient.

Secrets of the sand

Making the short walk coastward to Steephill Cove, I came across this magical haven, only accessible on foot. It became my favourite beach of the trip and is especially popular among seafood lovers for the fresh catch served on the terrace of The Crab Shed in summer. Families may prefer the long, open sandy beaches of the north-east with their shallow, crystal-clear waters for paddling and swimming. Appley Beach, just a short walk from the ferry port at Ryde, also boasts the wonderful Three Buoys (threebuoys.co.uk), a chic restaurant. Ask anyone to

name the best place to eat on the island, however, and they'll tell you to try The Hambrough in Ventnor. The food is sublime (£45 for three courses – see thehambrough.com). Sipping a Singapore sling in the bar and eating in the intimate candlelit dining room where turquoise sea views fill the windows was an experience I felt sure even the Med couldn't match.



Ventnor's Botanic Gardens

Picture an exotic, sun-soaked island retreat and you're unlikely to imagine thatched cottages, wisteria-covered tearooms and traditional pubs. But the Isle of Wight is a very special fusion of home comforts and the sizzling temperatures, latte-coloured sands and glittering, sapphire seas you might expect in Italy or Greece.

A 20-minute catamaran trip across the Solent brought me to this idyll, which has a reputation as one of the UK's sunniest spots, and so I was fast-tracked to fun.

Historic hideaway

The Isle of Wight has long been a fashionable holiday destination for the great and the good, from Charles Dickens to Queen Victoria. In fact, I spent one blissful afternoon dipping my toes in the sea at Osborne House, Queen Victoria's private beach and holiday home, now open to the public. But as opulent and impressive as that is, it doesn't beat Carisbrooke Castle in the island's centre. If you're travelling with youngsters then be sure to head there for tales of imprisonment, French sieges and

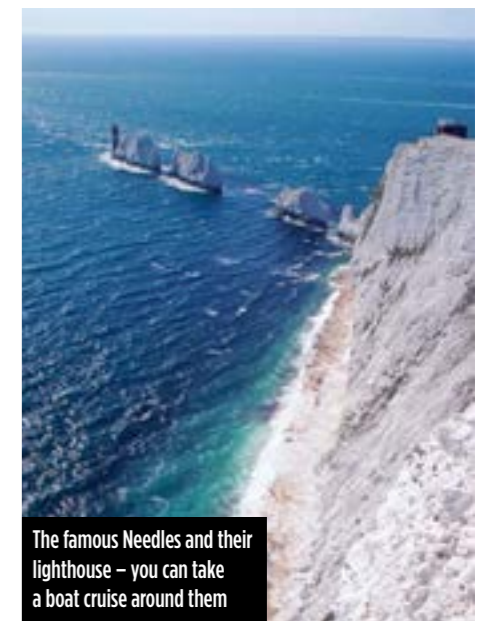
Spanish invasion (see www.english-heritage.org.uk for more details).

Wild west

Unspoiled countryside awaits on the west side, where those seeking an active, outdoorsy holiday often head. I took an invigorating walk along Tennyson Down, the island's most popular walking route, which passes the multicoloured sands of Alum Bay. As the island is a boating and a bicycling hotspot I decided to try both here in west Wight. I hopped on a 20-minute boat cruise around the dramatic Needles rocks and lighthouse (adults, £5.50, children, £3.50 – www.needlespleasurecruises.co.uk). Then I joined friendly cyclist John, of Wight Cycle Hire in Yarmouth, for a guided tour of seaside trails from the saddle (half-day bike hire £10 for adults, £8 for children – wightcyclehire.co.uk).

Where to stay

I stayed in one of the only two guest bedrooms in the vast, five-star Arreton Manor, once owned by Henry VIII (from £115 per night – arretonmanor.co.uk). I enjoyed very attentive service from host Julia and knockout breakfasts. Between June and September guests can also stay in a yurt and log cabin in the elegant grounds (£80 per night, self-catering). Rosemary Cottage in the beautifully unspoiled countryside of Newchurch offers pure relaxation too (double rooms from £75 per night – see rosemarycottagebreaks.co.uk). ☺



The famous Needles and their lighthouse – you can take a boat cruise around them

GET ME THERE!

The Isle of Wight sits off the Hampshire coast and is reached by taking a ferry across the Solent. Regular rail services run to Portsmouth Harbour station, where foot passengers can take the Catamaran to Ryde Pier Head (single fares from £11.80 for adults and £5.90 for children).

If taking a car, ferry services run between Lymington and Yarmouth, or Portsmouth and Fishbourne from around £60 per vehicle for a return trip, visit wightlink.co.uk

For ideas about activities, events, places to visit, stay and eat, visit visitisleofwight.co.uk



Carisbrooke Castle, an atmospheric family day out in the centre of the island

WORDS: WENDY JOHNSON
PHOTOS: ALAMY