This corner of the country, between the valleys of Glamorgan and the rocky shores of Pembrokeshire, will forever be associated with Dylan Thomas. The wild boy of Welsh poetry was born in Swansea, Wales’ city by the bay, a town busy pulling itself up by the bootstraps as it reinvents itself for the 21st century. By turns pretty and gritty, it offers an intriguing blend of seaside setting and big-city sophistication, with the new National Waterfront Museum as the jewel in its crown.

Swansea is the gateway to the Gower Peninsula, a compact compendium of coastal delights, from the golden-sand expanses of scenic Three Cliffs Bay to the pounding surf and wind-blown ridge-walking at Rhossili. Gower is the region’s outdoor playground, offering easy coastal hiking, safe summer swimming, and some of the best surfing in the UK.

Carmarthenshire is too often passed by in the headlong rush towards the delights of neighbouring Pembrokeshire, but it’s worth slowing down for a look. The county promotes itself as the ‘Garden of Wales’, and there are gardens aplenty to visit – from the formal walled gardens of Aberglasney to the magnificent National Botanic Garden with its spectacular, Norman Foster–designed glasshouse dome.

The rural hinterland of eastern Carmarthenshire brushes against the upland fringes of the Brecon Beacons National Park, where the craggy splendour of Carreg Cennen Castle rises above a jigsaw of limestone valleys, while down on the coast you can wander along the ‘heron-priested shore’ of the Taf estuary and visit the Boathouse, where Dylan Thomas wrote some of his finest work.

**HIGHLIGHTS**

- Learning about Swansea’s fascinating history at the superb National Waterfront Museum (p143)
- Enjoying the best of Welsh seafood in the restaurants (p147) of Swansea and the Mumbles
- Watching the surf break on the majestic sweep of Rhossili Bay (p154) at the tip of the Gower Peninsula
- Gazing at the views that inspired Dylan Thomas at Laugharne (p160)
- Taking in the expansive views from the hilltop site of Carreg Cennen Castle (p157)
ACTIVITIES
The extensive coast and rolling inland valleys in this region provide an ideal environment for all sorts of outdoor fun. Sea kayaking, surfing, walking, horse riding, bird-watching and boating are just some of the pursuits available.

GETTING AROUND
The region’s major bus operators are First Cymru (01792-572255; www.firstcymru.co.uk), Roy Brown’s Coaches (01982-552597; www.roybrownscoaches.co.uk), Pullman Coaches (01792-851569; www.pullman-coaches.co.uk) and Silcox Coaches (01646-683143; www.silcoxcoaches.co.uk). For timetable information, call Traveline (0870 608 2 608; www.traveline-cymru.org.uk).

The West Wales Rover Ticket (adult/child £6/4) allows unlimited travel for one day on regional buses and on a few services to/from Swansea and Mid-Wales (but not Silcox, Postbus or National Express services, nor the No 100 Cardiff–Swansea shuttle).

Two railway lines run from Swansea – one through Mid-Wales skirting the Brecon Beacons (the Heart of Wales line) and the other via Carmarthen to Pembroke Dock, Haverfordwest and Fishguard. For route maps and timetables, see www.arrivatrainswales.co.uk.

SWANSEA (ABERTAWE)
01792 / pop 223,300
Dylan Thomas called Swansea an ‘ugly, lovely town’, and that remains a fair description today. Wales’ second-largest city enjoys a stunning setting on the 5-mile sweep of Swansea Bay, but suffers from a less than stunning town centre, the result of unimaginative rebuilding after WWII bombing. But Swansea makes up for its visual shortcomings with a visceral charm that, if not able to out-dazzle more handsome places, can at least out-stare them.

In the National Waterfront Museum the city has one of the most exciting museum developments in Britain; it also has a superb Dylan Thomas Centre, a long seafront stretching down to the picturesque suburb of the Mumbles, and the glorious Gower Peninsula on its doorstep.

HISTORY
Swansea’s Welsh name, Abertawe, describes its location at the mouth of the Tawe, where the river empties into Swansea Bay. The Vikings named the area Sveins Ey (Swein’s Island), probably referring to the sandbank in the mouth of the River Tawe.

The Normans built a castle here, but Swansea didn’t really get into its stride until the Industrial Revolution, when it developed into an important copper-smelting centre. Ore was first shipped in from Cornwall, across the Bristol Channel, but by the 19th century it was arriving from Chile, Cuba and the USA, in return for Welsh coal.

By the 20th century, however, the city’s industrial base had declined, although Swansea’s oil refinery and smaller factories were still judged a worthy target by the Luftwaffe, which devastated the city centre in 1941. The insensitive rebuilding of the city’s heart did not do much for its recovery, but in recent years, with the opening of the new National Waterfront Museum, a sparkling marina, and a thriving restaurant and bar scene, Swansea’s future is looking more lovely than ugly.

ORIENTATION
The compact city centre clusters around Castle Sq and pedestrianised Oxford St on the west bank of the River Tawe, with the redeveloped docklands of the Maritime Quarter to its southeast. The bus station and neighbouring tourist office are on the western edge of the city centre, next to the Quadrant shopping centre. The train station is 600m north of Castle Sq along Castle St and High St.

The suburb of Uplands, where many of the city’s guesthouses are found, is a mile west of the city centre, along Mansel St and Walter Rd. From the southern edge of the city centre, Oystermouth Rd runs for 5 miles west and then south along the broad sweep of Swansea Bay to the seaside resort of the Mumbles.

INFORMATION
Bookshops
Dylan’s Books (463 980; www.dylan-thomas-books.com; Dylan Thomas Centre, Somerset Pl; 10am-4.30pm) All of Thomas’ works, plus biographies, CDs of Under Milk Wood etc.

Dylans Book Store (655255; 23 King Edward Rd) Antiquarian and secondhand books; Thomas 1st editions, collectors items.

Siop Ty Tawe (460906; 9 Christina St) Welsh-language books.

Waterstone’s (463567; 17 Oxford St; 9.30am-5.30pm Mon-Sat, 10.30am-4.30pm Sun) Good selection of local interest books, maps and guides.