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For a small country, Wales is hugely diverse. Brush up on its geology, fauna and flora and its burgeoning green awareness.

Wales Today

Wales stormed into the new millennium with a renewed sense of optimism, buoyed by its freshly minted National Assembly, with its newly devolved powers, and the major rejuvenation of its capital city. The world has changed considerably since then, and Wales hasn't been immune to financial meltdowns and other global catastrophes. The optimism hasn't completely disappeared, but it has certainly taken a few knocks.

Best on Film

How Green Was My Valley (1941)

Acclaimed adaptation of Richard Llewellyn's novel.

Sleep Furiously (2008) Award-winning documentary about life in a Mid-Wales village.

Human Traffic (1999) An edgy romp through Cardiff's clubland.

Edge of Love (2008) Dylan Thomas biopic starring Sienna Miller, Keira Knightley and Matthew Rhys.

Under Milk Wood (1972) Thomas' play about life in a fictional Welsh fishing village, adapted into a film starring Wales' most iconic actor, Richard Burton.

Best in Print

How Green Was My Valley (Richard Llewellyn; 1939) Life in a Welsh mining community laid bare.

Collected Poems 1934-1953 (Dylan Thomas; 2003) Worth it for *Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night* alone.

Rape of the Fair Country (Alexander Cordell; 1959) Powerful family tale.

A History of Wales (John Davies; revised 2007) Comprehensive and fascinating.

Wales: Epic Views of a Small Country (Jan Morris, 1998) Lovingly written travelogue.

Cohesion Despite Difficulties

Though not as badly affected as other countries, the UK still suffered considerably with recession and increased unemployment over the last few years. And compared with the rest of the UK, Wales comes out at the bottom of most economic indicators, making the people on its margins particularly susceptible to downturns and government austerity moves.

In April 2013, 8.2% of the population (120,000 people) were out of work – a higher rate than the UK-wide figure of 7.6%. On top of that, average gross incomes are low: £521 per week, compared with £814 in London. Even the earnings in Wales' highest paid county, the Vale of Glamorgan, only just equals the Scottish average.

Yet when disaffected young people rioted across English cities in 2011, Welsh cities were almost completely unaffected. In fact, a 2013 report by the Institute of Economics & Peace ranked Cardiff and Swansea (combined) as the most peaceful major urban area in the UK. The same report placed Wales as by far the least violent part of the UK, with the lowest rates of homicide and violent crime, and an overall violence ranking less than half that of Scotland (which, by the way, is a fraction of that of the USA). Some commentators have suggested that despite high levels of poverty and deprivation, these figures speak favourably to the relative cohesion of Welsh society.

Welsh Language Woes

Although support for the Welsh language has strengthened in recent years and other minority cultures look to Wales as a shining example, in reality the threat to the language is acute. These days more people are learning Welsh as a second language and all school children are required to study Welsh up to the age of 16, but pressure on Welsh as a living first language remains.