



Swansea, Gower & Carmarthenshire

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Why Go?

A smorgasbord of experiences is on offer in this corner of Wales, with physical proximity being the only thing linking its three main dishes, each with its own distinct flavour. Try a taste of each or gorge yourself on whatever you think sounds yummiest.

Swansea delivers something approaching big-city sophistication, with a glorious stretch of sand arcing between a slowly regenerating city centre and its beach suburb, attractive little Mumbles. On its doorstep are the craggy coastline and epic sandy beaches of the Gower Peninsula, which offer surfing, watersports of all sorts and undulating hikes. Inland, the fecund heartland of rural Carmarthenshire is little toured but a treat for the green-fingered traveller, with nationally significant parks and gardens scattered about.

If that's whetted your appetite, this area's regional specialities are some of the most famous in all of Wales: salt-marsh lamb, Penclawdd cockles, laver bread and Carmarthen ham. Tuck in.

When to Go

→ Beach lovers might want to brave July and August on the Gower to make the most of the best weather, though be aware that the narrow country roads – and the B&Bs and campgrounds – are likely to be crammed during this time.

→ Many hostels and campgrounds don't open till after Easter, and the winter period is pretty quiet. If you're hiking you might prefer to aim for May, June, September or October. Come prepared for rain showers whatever time of year you visit.

→ October sees both the classical-music-dominated Swansea International Festival (p124) and the Dylan Thomas Festival (p124) hit Swansea. Music and poetry fans might also like to plan around the Laugharne Weekend (p140) at the beginning of April.

SWANSEA (ABERTAWÉ)

POP 239,000

Dylan Thomas called Swansea an 'ugly, lovely town', and that remains a fair description of Wales' second-largest city today. It's currently in the grip of a Cardiff-esque bout of regeneration that's slowly transforming the drab, postwar city centre into something more worthy of its setting on the glorious 5-mile sweep of Swansea Bay.

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

Swansea makes up for some visual shortcomings with a visceral charm. A hefty student population takes to the city's bars with enthusiasm, and pockets of hipness have emerged in inner suburbs such as Sketty and Uplands, which is, conveniently, where all the best B&Bs are located.

History

The Normans built a castle here, but Swansea didn't hit 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 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. It was rebuilt as a rather drab retail development in the 1960s, '70s and '80s, but gradual regeneration is slowly imbuing it with more soul.

Sights


National Waterfront Museum MUSEUM

( 0300 111 2333; www.museumwales.ac.uk; South Dock Marina, Oystermouth Rd; ☉10am-5pm)


FREE Housed in a 1901 dockside warehouse with a striking glass and slate extension, this museum's 15 hands-on galleries explore Wales' industrial history and the impact of industrialisation on its people, making much use of interactive computer screens and audiovisual presentations. The effect can be a bit overwhelming but there is a lot of interesting stuff here, including displays on the Welsh music industry (artefacts in-

clude Bonnie Tyler's gold and Duffy's platinum discs) and a section on 'women's work'.

Swansea Museum MUSEUM

( 01792-653763; www.swanseamuseum.co.uk; Victoria Rd; ☉10am-5pm Tue-Sun) **FREE** Dylan Thomas referred to this august institution as 'the museum which should have been in a museum'. Founded in 1834, it remains charmingly low-tech, from the eccentric Cabinet of Curiosities to the glass cases of archaeological finds from Gower caves. Pride of place goes to the Mummy of Hor at the top of the stairs, which has been resting here since 1887 – a video in the display room explains the process of its repair and conservation.

Dylan Thomas Centre MUSEUM

( 01792-463980; www.dylanthomas.com; Somerset Pl; ☉10am-4.30pm) **FREE** Housed in the former guildhall, this unassuming museum contains absorbing displays on the Swansea-born poet's life and work. It pulls no punches in examining the propensity of Dylan Thomas for puffing up his own myth; he was eventually trapped in the legend of his excessive drinking. Aside from the collection of memorabilia, what really brings his work to life are the recordings of performances of his work.

The centre runs a high-powered calendar of talks, drama and workshops.

Glynn Vivian Art Gallery GALLERY

(www.swansea.gov.uk/glynnvivian; Alexandra Rd)

FREE The seemingly never-ending refurbishment of Swansea's main art gallery was still in progress when we last visited. By the time you read this, the elegant Italianate building will probably have reopened and the public will once again have access to its prestigious collection of Welsh art – Richard Wilson, Gwen John, Ceri Richards, Shani Rhys James – along with works by Claude Monet and Lucien Freud and a large ceramics collection.

Dylan Thomas Birthplace HOUSE

( 01792-472555; www.dylanthomasbirthplace.com;

5 Cwmndonkin Dr, Uplands; adult/child £8/6; ☉tours 11am, 1pm & 3pm) The bad boy of Welsh poetry was born in this unassuming Uplands house and it's here that he wrote two-thirds of his poetry. The house has been lovingly restored and furnished in period style, and can be visited on a guided tour (bookings advised). You can even stay the night if you're really keen (rooms £150).