





A Severe Bout Of Islanditis

Mike Trippitt heads across the Solent in his VW T6 campervan 'George', thirty years after first setting foot on the Isle of Wight and meets a cool Splitly... in a bar

  Mike Trippitt

When I came to the island twenty years ago, I was going to set it on fire," said the barman at The George Hotel in Yarmouth back in 1989. Of course, he meant by his enthusiasm and his dynamic zest for life, rather than because of some pyromaniacal tendency. "But," he added. "I caught Islanditis, and now Newport, which is twelve miles, is a day trip away."

Islanditis, unless you fight it with all your might, debilitates like the most glorious gin and is as infectious as the laughter of toddlers. It causes slowness of movement and thought, and leaves the sufferer aching to remain on the island. There is no known cure. The latest attack struck me shortly after 6.45pm on Good Friday in unseasonably warm, amber

sunshine. We arrived in Yarmouth from Lymington seven hours later than planned. We'd missed our crossing due to hold ups on the M3 and the next available slot had not been until 6.00pm.

In the west towards Hurst Castle the late spring sun laid a blanket of gold on the Solent's peaceful waters. The Wightlink ferry butted easily into Yarmouth harbour, where sailors and other holidaymakers were already in the swing of a long weekend. The frustrations and disappointment of a wasted day on the wrong side of the water melted away along The Downs Road, the easterly route from Newport to our destination. Islanditis was already taking hold. My right foot gave up fighting the accelerator's resistance and George (our VW T6 campervan) slowed to a saunter, whilst we savoured

sublime views over the Downs and across The Solent to our left and the English Channel to our right. By the time we reached Nodes Point Holiday Park at Bembridge on the island's far east, where we met friends who had travelled across earlier, the anxieties and tensions of the mainland had simply vanished.

By the next morning, it seemed that Islanditis was affecting Clare as well. I diagnosed it when I asked her what she wanted to do that day. "I don't really want to move George at all today," she said. "Let's just go down to the beach and then walk to Seaview for lunch." Hardly energetic stuff. So with nothing more than a camera and our Clumber spaniel Farley, we ambled the short distance across the site to the beach. The view here is outstanding. Beyond the lush grass carpet peppered with motorhomes, pop-tops and cavernous tents a fringe of green trees gives way to the azure of Bembridge harbour. Beyond, the lifeboat station stretches out into the eastern approaches,



The wedding party



'George' and 'Dragon'



A cool Splitty



Sunbeam at Seaview



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silhouetted against the horizon through a shimmering haze.

Along the walk to the delightful and fashionable town of Seaview, over yellow sand, through pebbles and across seashells crunching under our footsteps we passed families strolling the coastal path, youngsters in brightly coloured swimsuits gambolling in the crisp white surf. Beyond the bubbling foam, where the rich turquoise waters fade through blue to a pale grey, motorboats bobbing lazily, gently tugging at their anchor lines as if pleading to be let loose to play.

We found a seat outside The Old Fort pub overlooking the Solent and the nineteenth-century Palmerston sea forts towards Portsmouth. Enjoying a cool beer and an unhurried lunch in this glorious idyll was a perfect way to

spend a campervanning Saturday.

It's not a bad place to get married either. A group of suited young men, buoyant and expectant, arrived and enjoyed a quick drink before a ceremony forty-five minutes later. They chatted and joked, though the groom seemed less relaxed than his best man and groomsmen. They stood out among the casually dressed diners and drinkers, so it wasn't long before someone asks about the wedding. "The service is at St Peter's," said the groom to the enquirer. "The reception is in a marquee in my fiancé's parents' garden." Wow! I thought. What a day and place for a wedding. How lucky to be getting hitched on the Isle of Wight. As we set off up the main street an open-topped, 1966 two-seater Sunbeam sports



Nodes Point at low tide

car drove slowly past towards the seafront. And that's how to travel on the island on a day like this, I thought somewhat jealously. Next morning, we parted George from the drive-away awning and travelled west to Cowes. It's a pleasant drive through rolling meadows to Newport, where the only stretch of dual carriageway on the island extends for a meagre half-mile. There's no denying that the island is different. Roads are narrower, speed limits lower, cars are smaller and traffic lighter. That short stretch of water and a ferry crossing gives the island its identity and its *raison d'être*.

Cowes is the heart of the island's sailing community. The Medina river flows into the Solent creating a natural harbour that is home to marinas, marine industries, and a ferry terminal. A chain ferry links East and West Cowes. Waterfront properties abound and the town's desirability inevitably attracts second-home owners and the wealthy. Property prices are high, but it's a charming place, combining an extensive waterfront, cafés and bars, a plethora of leisure clothing stores and expansive views. Walking through the main street amid all things boaty,

Getting There

There are 104 daily crossings to the Isle of Wight; 77 by ferry and 27 by Hovercraft. Red Funnel operate a ferry service from Southampton to East Cowes, Wightlink ferries run between Portsmouth and Fishbourne, Portsmouth and Ryde, and Lymington and Yarmouth. Hover Travel's hovercrafts (foot passengers only) cross between Southsea and Ryde. The quickest car ferry is the 40 minute crossing from Lymington to Yarmouth.



Homeward bound



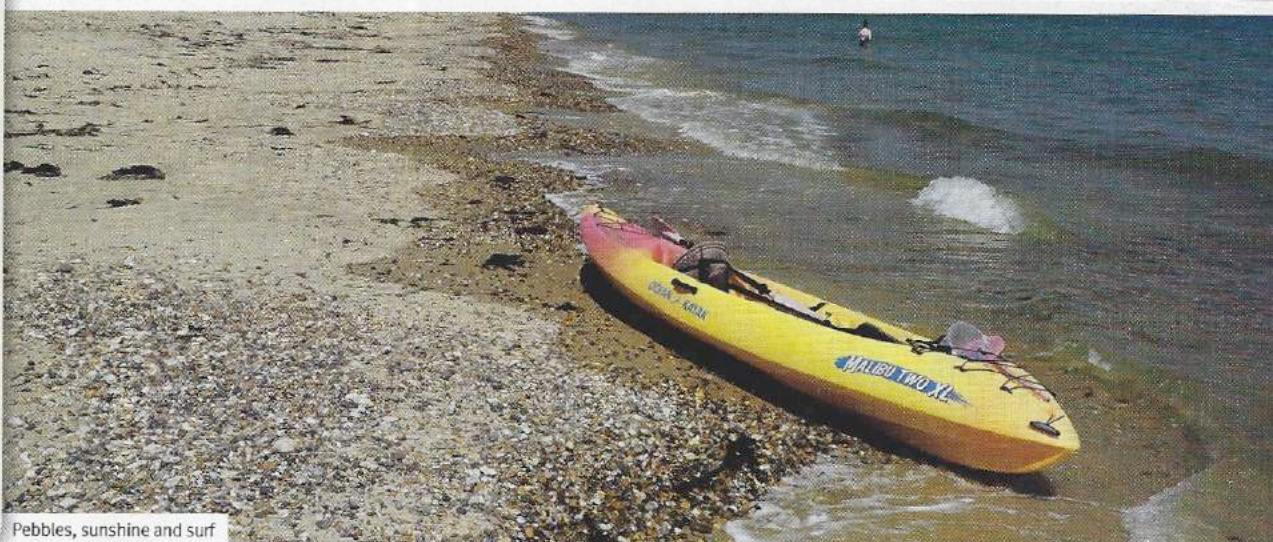
The Needles chairlift



George at Cowes



Wightlink ferry at Yarmouth



Pebbles, sunshine and surf



Alum Bay

Roads are narrower, speed limits lower, cars are smaller and traffic lighter

I was surprised to find a very cool Splitty, not at the roadside, not in a car park, but in a bar!

‘That 60s Place’ is like no other. Conceived by owner Steve Tewkesbury, during his quest for the perfect baguette, the retro-themed restaurant, café and bar has what looks like a converted VW Split Screen as its centrepiece. I wanted to learn more, so asked manager Alice Watney the obvious question: “Is it real?”

“It’s a 1966 Split Screen,” she said, adding that it had been sourced in Brazil on their behalf. “It was originally a taxi in Sao Paulo, and we had it shipped over to the mainland. Then it was brought down to the island and a company did the conversion for us. It has the original Sao Paulo number plates on and the keys in the ignition.” It’s an intriguing story. The Split Screen was actually driven into the building before any of the conversion work began. Alice explained more. “The

engine was removed, half the side of the camper was removed and replaced with a barista machine and a full bar.” She laughed and added: “Space-wise, you think where is everything going to fit.” Alice knows that some die-hard VW fans think it’s sacrilege to have done what they’ve done, but she also gets great feedback: “The vehicle is an enormous draw. Today, we have been open since nine o’clock. The sun is shining; we have the bi-fold doors wide open. It’s probably been photographed by every other person who has walked along the High Street. People come in and want to have their photograph taken with it.”

That afternoon I enjoyed a couple of hours karting at Ryde with our friends: “Good fun for big kids,” as one guest describes it. Be in no doubt, as well as its natural beauty, history, and its fair share of heritage sites and culture, the



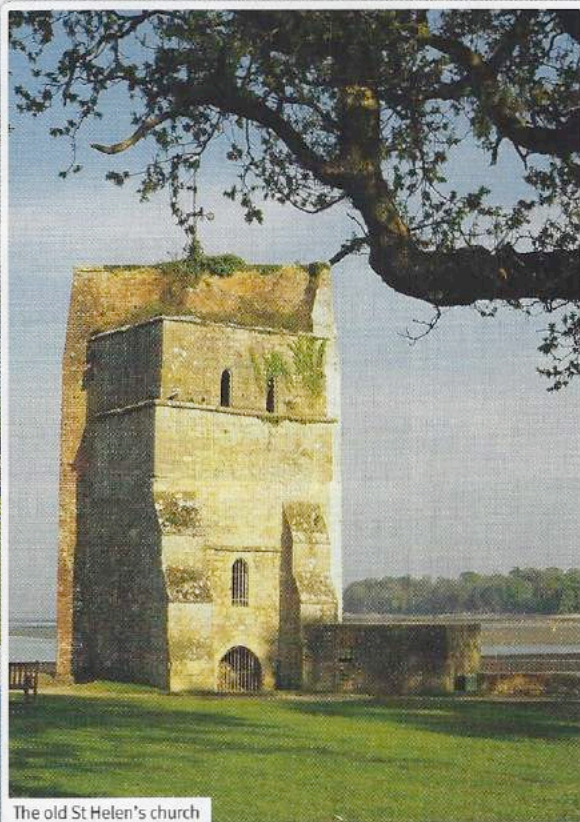
Yarmouth Pier



Nodes Point Holiday Park



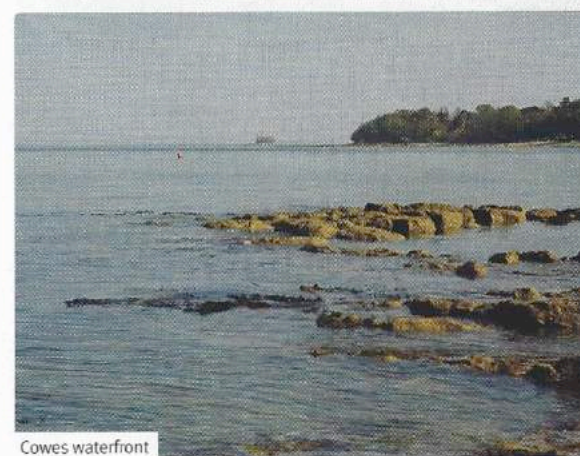
Starting guns at Cowes



The old St Helen's church



Bembridge Harbour



Cowes waterfront

The view into the bay, across to the mainland and over to The Needles is a good as any on the island

Isle of Wight has most things a holiday destination needs. Unlike so many of our coastal resorts the island's traditional seaside attractions continue to thrive. Nowhere more so than at our last stop before heading back across the water the next day.

From the east of the island the main road along the south coast links the resorts of Sandown, Shanklin and Ventnor before turning northwest through an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty on the island's south-western coast. This area contrasts sharply with the rolling downs of the east. The rugged hills, dotted with farm buildings and cottages, appear more like the Yorkshire moors than the Jurassic coast. There are less people and less commerce. This is the place to park in a quiet

spot and watch Atlantic breakers crashing onto deserted beaches.

The road west leads to The Needles and the famous Alum Bay. The red and white lighthouse at the foot of the chalk stacks, and the multi-coloured sand eroded from the imposing cliffs are quintessential Isle of Wight. Although I've been coming to the island for half my lifetime I climbed aboard the iconic chairlift for the short descent into the bay for the first time. I wasn't disappointed. The view into the bay, across to the mainland and over to The Needles is as good as any on the island. A splendid way to finish our tour.

The idea of campervanning on the Isle of Wight is hardly new; a campervan hire company has been operating on the island for years and countless vehicles head over each summer for

holidays and the popular music festival. And so they should. It's a wonderful place, made that extra bit special by the short hop over water. Our first campervan trip there was a pleasure, despite our suffering. If you're gripped by Islanditis, don't fight it. Go with it. You'll feel better for it. ☺