

A winter's tale

Cornwall out of season is cool, calm and collected. Perfect for a Christmastime campervan holiday, reckons Mike...

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A rich, earthy aroma disguises subtle fragrances of herbs and citrus. Olive groves, and orange trees rise up in the temperate Mediterranean air. I close my eyes and, imagining the sound of cicadas, all other thoughts slip away. George, my campervan, is just 300m away. This is, I think, what it's like to camp in the Greek islands.

An inquisitive female blackbird lands close by, transforming me back to reality; the tricks played on my mind are over. Here I am, on a damp mid-December morning in southwest England, where outside the Eden Project's Mediterranean Biome, it is distinctly cold. Winter is here.

George and I have come to Cornwall without a beach towel or a surfboard to find out what's on offer in winter, and to do something I've wanted to do for years. But first, the Eden Project, where I walked down into the former china clay pit with the Eden Project's Chief Executive, Gordon Seabright. Gordon says Eden is so much more than a botanical garden.

ABOVE
Fowey harbour

BELOW
A blackbird at the
Eden Project



"The point of Eden is to connect people with each other and the living world. Here in Cornwall we do that through the medium of plants. We seek to make sure that people will have a bunch of fun, and perhaps learn something." Gordon says the Eden Project has shown the power of transformation by taking a "ruined, destroyed place wrecked by industry" and turning it into something "amazing, and wonderful, and beautiful."

Eden is open all year round, and as well as the biomes and its permanent features, it hosts Santa's grotto and an ice rink in the festive season. As part of a winter break to Cornwall, Eden will entertain, even when the weather is a little disappointing.

I do like to be beside the seaside

We had arrived in Cornwall yesterday, stopping first at Looe on the south coast. The quayside and harbour were empty, but the faint sound of carol singing permeated across the river from West Looe. Within minutes I had sensed how different Cornwall was at this time of year.



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OWNED SINCE 2016**LAYOUT** RIB bed and side kitchen**TRAVEL SEATS/BERTHS** 4/3**WHAT I LOVE ABOUT IT** Although it has the technology and environmental credentials of the modern age, the two-tone orange and white body and retro orange side kitchen give George the soul of the 1960s!

The peace and quiet, and the crisp, clean air of a wintery late afternoon, were a far cry from the humdrum and bustle of summer. But some things don't change. On my walk down the harbour towards the river mouth I had been accompanied by the seagulls' distinctive, plaintive calls. They are what make the seaside.

By late afternoon, with the last vestiges of winter light upon us, we had found our first campsite, Tencreek Holiday Park on the Polperro Road. Cornwall has sites in abundance and, with websites galore to search, it is easy to choose, and see exactly where each is, and the facilities it has. But the vast majority of sites close at the end of November, so organising four different stop-offs had proved something of a task. Should I embark on another winter tour, I would let the availability of campsites dictate my itinerary, rather than have any fixed ideas beforehand of where, and in what order, I wanted to travel!

Next morning, before going to the Eden Project, we were away early to catch the light at Talland Bay, a delightful rocky inlet and beach.

Polperro, just up the road, is also a much-loved tourist destination. Its narrow main street meanders down from the car park past shops, cafés and houses. Fishermen's cottages huddle around the picture-postcard harbour, protected and cocooned by weathered seawalls.

Campers have a choice of how they journey further southwest from Polperro: travel north to the A390 and cross the River Fowey by bridge at Lostwithiel, or keep to Cornwall's twisting, and often single-track, lanes to cross the river by ferry at Bodinnick. I opted for the ferry, for there is something soothing about a short ferry crossing. Haste and stress disappear on a gentle hop across water.

At Bodinnick, 'Ferryside', the former home of author, Daphne du Maurier, peeps across the river, whilst on the opposite side of the ferry landing The Old Ferry Inn has an expansive outlook from its balcony towards the sea. The pub is an ideal watering hole on the way around the Hall Walk, a four-mile circular route around the river, too.

**ABOVE TOP TO BOTTOM**

Beach huts at Talland Bay; George on the Bodinnick Ferry; Oranges at the Eden Project

Fowey is quintessentially Cornish. The fourteenth century town found wealth from privateering, though the strategic importance of its deep-water estuary led to it being the victim of several attacks by the French; a castle at St Catherine's Point and blockhouses at Fowey and Polruan guarded the port against invasion well into the seventeenth century. Fowey is certainly a place to spend time, and I was lured into Pinky Murphy's Café. The funky coffee shop oozes colour, charm and fun, and a surfboard-shaped sign states the house rules: "We do children. We do dogs. We do elders. We don't do grumpies." Um... I wondered. Am I excluded?

I was in good spirits when I'd left Fowey heading for the Eden Project, and by the time I leave the Mediterranean and the little blackbird behind, I have a better understanding of Eden, of how we can make the planet better, and of how we can transform the way we use the Earth's resources.

My next port of call takes me back centuries. The original village and tiny port of West Polmear on the outskirts of St Austell changed its name to Charlestown in 1799, after local entrepreneur, Charles Rashleigh, completed the current harbour. Around it, the Shipwreck and Heritage Centre (an exhibition and a collection of artefacts from over 150 shipwrecks), a bar, bistro and café, a seafood and steak restaurant, gift shop, gallery and a coffee shop specialising in artisan coffees, offer enough to keep visitors here for a couple of hours. Three square-

**BELOW
CLOCKWISE**
The current Penlee Lifeboat in Newlyn Harbour; Newlyn Harbour; Curious resident at Gweek Seal Sanctuary

rigged sailing ships nestle in the inner harbour. A cannon stands on the quayside above them, a line of wooden sheds with wooden barrels outside sit at the waterside. Above, a row of cottages peer down from the road. It's like looking back 200 years.

Windswept and interesting

After a gusty night at Treloan campsite outside Portscatho where 65mph winds had been forecast, my journey continues along Cornwall's English Channel coast down the Roseland Peninsula. I intended to cross the River Fal by the King Harry Ferry, but the inclement weather has stopped the service. On our arrival I can see it in mid-stream being buffeted by the wind and waves. I have no choice but to make a detour through Truro.

I stop off at Falmouth, which has much to offer visitors whatever the weather. Views over the Fal Estuary and Carrick Roads, waterfront bars and restaurants, a marina and dockyard, two beaches, a medieval castle, ample shopping and a maritime museum define the town: a tourist destination, yet a thriving working port.

First, I visit Pendennis Castle, sitting high on the headland, but no trip to Falmouth would be complete without a visit to the National Maritime Museum at the fashionable Discovery Quay. Its impressive, balconied, main hall houses a collection of wooden boats both on the ground and suspended from its lofty ceiling, whilst its observation tower has views over the harbour.



TRELOAN COASTAL HOLIDAYS
Treloan Lane, Gerrans, Near Portscatho, Roseland Peninsula TR2 5EF coastalfarmholidays.co.uk

TREVAYLOR CARAVAN AND CAMPING PARK Botallack, St Just, Penzance TR19 7PU cornishcamping.co.uk

COSAWES PARK Perran-ar-worthal, Truro TR3 7QS cosawes.co.uk

TENCREEK HOLIDAY PARK Polperro Road, Looe PL13 2JR dolphinholidays.co.uk

GLOBE VALE Sinns Common, Redruth TR16 4BH globevale.co.uk



Though my final destination would be Mousehole, I had time beforehand to visit the Cornish Seal Sanctuary at Gweek, another place open all year round that the weather cannot spoil. High up the River Fal, the sanctuary hides inconspicuously amid the village, but its lack of high-visibility trappings does not reflect its importance.

Each season, the sanctuary rescues and rehabilitates over 60 seal pups from around the Cornish coastline. It also provides a home for resident animals who live permanently at the sanctuary, although most return to the sea. There are lots of seals to see at Gweek, and its conservation work is showcased well, but my abiding memory will be of watching the endearing expressions on the sea lions' whiskered faces as they glide effortlessly through the water in their glass-sided pool.

Lifeboat legends

When George and I arrived in Mousehole it was early morning, and the sunrise over Mount's Bay has been spectacular. Sure, the weather has been changeable during our trip, but for December, it is milder than I expected. I'm not complaining!

Later, I will spend the evening in Mousehole, enjoying the village's famous Christmas lights. The shops and cafés stay open late when the Christmas lights are on, so I may even enjoy my first pasty. It would be rude to leave Cornwall without having had at least one. But now, I'm walking out of the village, back towards Newlyn. I am



The shops and cafés stay open late when the Christmas lights are on

ABOVE TOP TO BOTTOM The main hall, National Maritime Museum; Mousehole Christmas lights

BELOW Festive treat of Looe

strangely nervous. Nervous about what I will see, and about how I will feel.

I reach Penlee Point and descend the steps into the old Lifeboat Station; steps that eight men ran down, never to return. It is a solemn moment. I have come here on the anniversary of the Penlee lifeboat disaster.

On Saturday 19 December 1981 the RNLI lifeboat, *Solomon Browne*, launched from the very boathouse in which I am standing. Its crew of eight, all from Mousehole, headed out in treacherous seas to assist the coaster *Union Star* that had suffered engine failure and was being driven towards the Cornish coast.

After recovering four from the stricken vessel just metres from the rocky shore, the *Solomon Browne* was lost. *Union Star* was also wrecked on rocks close to Tater Du lighthouse, and 16 people (eight lifeboat crew and eight from the *Union Star*) perished. It was the worst lifeboat disaster in Penlee lifeboat's history and one of the worst the RNLI has ever suffered.

The old lifeboat station, though closed to the public, is open today for two hours. There is no lifeboat in here, and the view down the old slipway over a calm and bright Mount's Bay is a world away from the raging, boiling sea of that fateful night.

Poignantly, the hammer used to strike the release mechanism sending *Solomon Browne* and her crew on their final voyage sits where it was left, and the boathouse doors are open, as though still awaiting the lifeboat's return.

It is a deeply moving, humbling place and somewhere I've wanted to come all my adult life. I am privileged to spend a few moments here, remembering the selfless bravery of those eight sons of Mousehole.

