

An hour's drive to the perfect holiday

One family's trip to North Wales



travelogue - home ...

by Tim Saunders

Llandudno is a popular Victorian seaside town in North Wales, known as 'Flandidno' to the locals. Travelling here is like going abroad; road signage is in Welsh as well as English. Motorists are often advised to 'Araf' = 'Slow'.

The town has wide boulevards for the trams that once ran through it, art deco metalwork and ornate roofs similar to France and Romania. In fact, Queen Elisabeth of Romania stayed here in 1890.

Llandudno seafront is lined with pastel coloured hotels, the choice of palette the requirement of the landlords, the Mostyn estate. We take the Great Orme Tour in a wonderful vintage 1958 Leyland Tiger Cub coach with an extremely knowledgeable driver. He explains that in 1848, Owen Williams, an architect and surveyor, presented Lord Mostyn with plans to develop the marshlands behind Llandudno Bay as a holiday resort. Over the next 20 years or so it developed into what we see today.

We stay for four nights and five days at the three-star Somerset Hotel, two rating and a car park for self-drivers. Daish's, which owns it, is also a coach operator and the majority of guests, who tend to be over 50, arrive by coach. It is a substantial property with 86 ensuite bedrooms, some with sea views, bar and dance floor and a games room

that the children love. Guests stay on a half board basis, which means they only have to think about what to do for lunch each day. Brilliant.

There is a wonderful holiday feel. Guests chatter away to each other and new friends are quickly made. After checking into our family room complete with more than enough beds for us all, we go down to dinner. It is served at 6.30pm and we have the same table each night. What a luxury to indulge in a three course meal. There are options for meat eaters while vegetarians can choose a variety of salads. We enjoy the vegetable soup of the day and the desserts such as bread and butter pudding and spotted dick are delicious, too. It is a mammoth task to cater for 140 guests each day and our waiter tells us that the hotel is at full occupancy throughout the year. Not a surprise at all.

After a brief evening stroll along the seafront we return to the hotel to see the entertainment. What fun; we all take to the dance floor and there are covers of George Ezra's Shotgun and Pharrell Williams' Happy. Harriett's confidence grows throughout the week thanks to various guests dancing with her. It's a great way to meet people and to socialise. Blearly eyed we go to

bed for a restful night's sleep. There's a nice touch in the room: the housekeeper has left a note to say if you require anything just ask.

Breakfast is at 8.30am. The children particularly like helping themselves to cereal and local Welsh yoghurt while the cooked food is brought from the kitchen. There's a choice of full English breakfast through to scrambled egg or poached. It sets us up for the day.

We take the red hop on hop off bus tour and as the weather is nice, sit on the top. There's an audio guide where we learn that there are 160 wind turbines 10 miles off the shore that provide electricity for up to 400,000 homes. On a clear day these can be seen. The name Llandudno derives from 'llan' meaning church or parish and Saint Tudno who brought Christianity to the area. During our travels we come across some foreign tourists but mainly visitors are from the Midlands, Lancashire and Yorkshire. So there are a lot of different accents to listen to, which always makes the children sit up and pay attention, as they are intrigued.

We learn that Llandudno is in the fairly sizeable county of Conwy. There are a number of stops on the bus tour but the two key ones are at West Shore and Conwy itself. Taking the bus allows us to leave the car at the hotel and mooch about at leisure.

At West Shore there is the beach as well as a popular play area - where the children make new friends. There's also the miniature railway. We all love our visit here. Run by volunteers, tiny trains carrying passengers around the track all day. It's remarkable how something so small can stand the weight of us but it does, and it's great fun.

We really enjoy acquainting ourselves with the fabulous walled market town of Conwy, its castle and suspension bridge. It is also home to England's smallest house where the owner does brisk trade thanks to a never-ending

queue of visitors. Here, there is also a fantastic vintage toy shop and the Royal Cambrian Academy gallery exhibiting some of its members' high-quality work. There's a pottery gallery, too. Back in Llandudno modern art can be found at Mostyn Cymru.

Returning to Llandudno we watch Punch & Judy; the stuff of all our childhoods and Henry (3), Heidi (6) and Harriett (8) are suitably mesmerised. This very act has been entertaining visitors to the happy valley since the town was established. The original puppets are used to this day. That's the way to do it.

Llandudno enjoys a plethora of independent shops, which makes shopping a real treat. So I agree to take the children back to the hotel for a rest while Caroline assaults the credit card. I'm almost able to finish reading an Inspector Rebus novel this holiday.

When we sadly leave The Somerset Hotel and say our goodbyes we head for Bodnant Garden, only about 25 minutes away by car. Eighty acres of superb gardens certainly keep us amused and there's pond dipping where we find Phantom Midge Larvae, otherwise known as baby mosquitoes. Breathtaking landscapes here include waterfalls, lakes, lily ponds and views of Snowdonia in the background. A list of recommendations to carry out before you reach 11 ¾ includes rolling down a hill. We duly do this; the children love it and repeat it time and again. Caroline and I do it once and are happy to leave it at that. Butterfly and dragonfly spotting complete our enjoyment here. We have to head home. But we can't leave without seeing more of Snowdonia so we drive round it, through some quaint little villages with their stone cottages, down low and then up to points at high as 1,300ft. More eye-catching views of Wales' largest mountain, which is a staggering 3,560ft high. Perhaps one day we'll return to climb it, but for the moment we're quite content with our discoveries in North Wales.

Facts at a glance

Four nights at The Somerset Hotel, Llandudno: **£319** per adult. All children aged five and under stay **FREE** when sharing a room with two paying adults. For children aged six to 12 the first one stays free while the second and third pay 50 per cent of the adult price.