

## Hill joys

First it was hotels, then B&Bs, now Welsh holiday homes are getting a stylish makeover. Niall Griffiths visits the best farmhouse in the land

**Niall Griffiths**

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Cefnmeurig cottage ... dinner is served at a long table, mead hall-style

Self-catering accommodation in Wales used to consist of little more than a cot and a stove in a crumbling cottage. Activities were the attraction, it was felt, and a tumbledown, leaking hovel was shelter enough. Such rough-and-ready lodgings can still be found, but if your tastes or needs tend towards something a little more luxurious, you now have a choice.

Cefnmeurig cottage in west Carmarthenshire won a National Tourism Award for best self-catering accommodation on Thursday. Deservedly so. It is five-star graded, beautifully renovated, sleeps seven and is set in 98 acres of grassland and bluebell woodland, with streams winding through.

Situated about three miles from the A40, it is within easy reach of Carmarthen town and the bigger coastal conurbations of south Wales, but it feels extremely remote, especially if you approach it as we did from the north, on the B4299 through the tiny town of Newcastle Emlyn.

The roads increasingly thin as the bordering hedgerows grow wilder until you're driving on little more than a dirt track, twigs clawing at your doors, buzzards on fence posts watching with silent yellow eyes. Mobile phone reception and traffic noise vanishes.

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Anne Owen-Taylor, Cefnmeurig's owner, met us at the cottage gates. She lives in Cardiff now, but the house - painted a pleasing salmon pink, huddled in a hollow, invisible from the track - has been in her family for many generations, since at least 1747.

It had been standing empty for 14 years, when, in 2005, more than £150,000 was spent on its renovation. Anne owns a townhouse in Tenby, too, and both properties offer a "seriously soft" self-catering package, which is where the luxury comes in.

The standard "soft" welcome hamper is exceptional and goes way beyond the basic necessities, containing Llanboidy and Perl Wen cheese, bread, butter, fruit and vegetables, Welshcakes and bara brith, everything sourced locally (even the soap comes from the Celtic Herbal Company), but the "seriously soft" option is true comfort: toiletries and towels, and a tremendous three-course meal, with wine and beer. There's bacon and sausages and eggs for breakfast, too, which a trained chef will cook, if you wish, on the premises.

A maid service is also available, as are birdwatching and walking guides and a chauffeur service.

There are pear and apple trees in the garden, blackberries and damsons and sloes in the tangle of bracken. The house is stocked with a CD rack (containing some good old blues), a small library and, intriguingly, a harmonica that once belonged to the legendary Larry Adler.

The bedrooms are themed, which for me was tiptoeing a tad towards the twee, but that shouldn't detract from their swaddling comfort.

Outside the house, Dylan Thomas's "loud hills" beckon. I and the three ladies I was with (my partner and two of her oldest friends) got booted up and climbed up on to the facing ridge where, with curious cows, we took in the great green duvet of the landscape; crest after crest, farms in the troughs, some straggling swifts swooping and shrieking high above it all.

These hills create their own wet weathers and, if it's not actually raining up here, then the air itself is sodden, but look at what this gives you: a thousand shades of seething green, colours to soothe the eye and heart. We clambered over barbed wire-topped fences and gates, splashed through streams and mud and mire, got hands and faces scratched and scraped and insect-bit and loved every second of it.

Back at the house, we showered and sat with much wine in front of the X Factor as the smells of cooking billowed. We ate at a long table, mead hall-style, separated from each other by several feet of burnished oak, shouting, sliding condiments across the polished wood. It was great.

Laugharne is a short drive away, with all its Dylan Thomas-themed enticements: the Boat House, now a museum to the poet's life and work, several good restaurants and some great pubs. The town's second literary festival will take place next March; the first, held this year, was superb.

Tiny lanes will take you to Whitland, where a centre commemorates Hywel Dda ("Hywel the Good"), who, in AD930, inaugurated the first all-Wales assembly to codify common laws for the entire country. These laws were astonishingly egalitarian, giving bastard illegitimate children the same rights as legitimate issue and forbidding bailiffs from removing a debtor's harp or cooking-pot (thereby awarding spiritual sustenance the same import as the more physical sort).

Brighter lights can be found in Carmarthen, probably the oldest town in Wales. Or you could explore the Landsker Line, an invisible, but very real, border between Celtic Wales and Viking/Anglo Wales, dotted with castle tumps and ancient settlements.

"Loud hills" indeed. I made them a little bit louder for a brief moment

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when, in the early hours, I took Larry Adler's gob-iron out into the garden to serenade the night with a rendition of Joe Strummer's Tennessee Rain. A barn owl in a nearby tree screamed and flew off, an irate ghost. An understandable reaction, really.

- Cefnmeurig in Carmarthenshire costs from £660 to £1,300 per week (sleeps seven), or from £496 for a three-night weekend or four-night midweek break. "Seriously soft" packages are quoted individually. Visit [visitwestwales.com](http://visitwestwales.com) or call 029 2089 9280.

- Niall Griffiths' latest book, Runt, is published by Jonathan Cape, £11.99.

#### Four more Welsh winners

#### Major event: Brecon Jazz Festival

Brecon celebrates its 25th international jazz festival next year. Just down the road from Hay-on-Wye, the town stages over 80 gigs including the likes of acclaimed tenor sax Joe Lavano, pianists Jessica Williams, Jason Rebello and Hiromi, and household favourites, Humphrey Lyttelton, Curtis Stigers, Mica Paris and Jools Holland. August 8-10 2008, [breconjazz.co.uk](http://breconjazz.co.uk).

#### Community event: Conwy Feast

An experience for the eyes as well as the taste buds, Gwledd Conwy Feast's attractions are drizzled around the quayside and centre of the splendid North Wales coastal town. The country's largest food festival has over 100 stalls offering everything from organic lamb burgers and local sausages, to Indian and Malaysian cuisine, alongside its real ale tent - a nice counterbalance to the nearby National Trust Temperance Exhibition. Oct 27 & 28, [gwleddconwyfeast.co.uk](http://gwleddconwyfeast.co.uk).

#### Real alternative: Eco Retreats

Does life get any greener than this? Four locally made tepees - no imported American nonsense here - in the middle of lush Powys countryside near Machynlleth, organic welcome hampers, zero mobile reception and reiki or spiritual healing chucked into the price. Two nights for two people including healing, hampers and meditation from £295. [ecoretreats.co.uk](http://ecoretreats.co.uk).

#### Gold star B&B: The Old Vicarage

The Old Vicarage welcomes you into its hearty Victorian gothic embrace, all period half tester brass beds, antique marble sinks and blue sandstone fireplaces. Conveniently, it comes supplied with miles of great walking country between Ludlow and Hay and great nosh. Doubles from £94, 01544 260038, [oldvicarage-nortonrads.co.uk](http://oldvicarage-nortonrads.co.uk).

- The National Tourism Awards for Wales were announced on Thursday. Full list of winners at [walesonshow.co.uk](http://walesonshow.co.uk).

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