

## Time travel in the Channel

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A friend who knows Guernsey well told me that visiting the island was a much akin to travelling 25 years back in time. He was right in principle, but I can't help feeling his suggested date was out by a factor of four decades. While the general pace of life and the much-needed refurbishment of St Peter Port's M&S store may have suggested 1980, some of the clocks on the island seem to be firmly set at 1940. What other territory occupied by the Nazis during the Second World War is actually renovating German gun emplacements as tourist attractions? And where else would you find museums with lifesize dummies of uniformed Wehrmacht soldiers loading artillery shells?

Perhaps the intense relationship with the past is due to a peculiar quirk of history. It wasn't until Berlin fell in 1945 that the Channel Islanders were actually rescued from occupation. For about a year, the German commanders were cabling coded messages from their outpost back to the Fatherland, knowing that their comrades had been driven back by the allies in France. The local history sections of bookshops on the island are full of first-hand accounts of the war and I even chanced upon one book that dealt with the effect of occupation on Boots the Chemist. (Apparently the staff kept provisions under the counter and confounded the attempts of the Nazis to deprive the islanders of medicines. All the Shapers sandwiches had presumably been confiscated.)

My own mission started on the tarmac at Gatwick Airport. Unseasonal spring fog had descended in Sussex, leaving my squadron of Woodfords grounded for some hours. We played cards, read books and listened to Vera Lynn on the wireless until the order to scramble eventually came. Clambering aboard one of the propeller-driven fleet of Guernsey-based Aurigny airlines, we all wondered whether we'd ever see Blighty again.

As it happened, we didn't have to wait long. We were back at Gatwick within an hour and a half, as our pilot had declared the planned descent into the islands to be too risky. We'd circled for fully 25 minutes near the coast of France, hoping that a window might open up. Aurigny blamed the fog, but I suspect the anti-aircraft fire may have been just too intense. We waited an hour and a half to be refuelled in England before heading out once more, and a mention in dispatches must go to the passengers and crew, who were sustained only by bottled mineral water, Alpen bars and packets of Jacob's Thai Crackers. A delay of eight and a half hours to a territory that notionally has something to do with the UK is pretty hard to take. Particularly when that territory isn't Belize or the Falklands. But we took it on the chin and simply knocked a day off our week's holiday. Apparently fog and the Channel Islands are old friends.

There's no doubt that you can have a great family break in these parts. There are some fine beaches and – provided you don't mind bathing next to concrete anti-tank defences – sun, sea and sand are there for the taking. It's just that April probably isn't the best time to go. The nicest thing about Guernsey is that everything's within easy reach of everything else. From the modern airport in the south, it's a short drive to the main town of St Peter Port, which is actually a little bigger than you might imagine and undoubtedly picturesque with its multi-coloured properties cascading down a hill towards the harbour. My wife observed that all the houses we encountered on the island were well maintained and, given the number of programmes she watches on the telly on this theme, I'd trust her judgement.

With Island FM on the hire-car radio and a tank full of petrol, we checked out a number of attractions including Castle Cornet, the fortress that guards the entrance to St Peter Port. There's certainly a lot of history to the Castle. One of the leading roundhead commanders from the English Civil War was exiled there, for instance, and there's a small garden maintained in his memory in the grounds. The Queen had visited in the 1950s and

was due to fly in once again as part of the festivities to celebrate the end of World War II. Let's hope she didn't book with Aurigny.

Family entertainment is fairly limited by big-city standards. There is one large leisure centre in St Peter Port and a couple of attractions dotted around the place, including Oatlands Village with its play areas, trampolines, toy racing cars and the like. Another site is dominated by a character called Aubrey the Strawberry and I think a single visit would probably suffice for most out-of-towners. The Dolls House Museum is probably only suitable for the serious collector, but the highly unusual Sculpture Park at Sausmarez Manor definitely contains something for everybody.

I suppose that from an adult perspective, one of the most positive aspects of a holiday on the island is simply driving around. Once you get over the peculiar speed limits (25 and 35 mph), ludicrous lack of signposts and dominance of French place names, you feel right at home and start admiring the scenery. At times, you can turn a corner and really imagine you're in Normandy. For the true British chauvinist, it's France made easy. Everyone speaks English and drives on the left. It's worth bearing in mind, however, that the roads are incredibly narrow and the bus drivers think nothing of climbing the pavement in St Peter Port to avoid oncoming traffic.

One of the most pleasant days of our short trip was spent on Herm, a neighbouring island that seems to have been privately owned for much of its history. You can reach it in a twenty-minute boat hop. I'd be surprised if this place is more than about a mile wide by a mile-and-a-half long, so it's perfectly feasible to circumnavigate it and there's a particularly idyllic and unspoiled stretch of sand that boasts unusual and colourful shells. The boats don't run that often and can only take a relatively small number of people across from St Peter Port, so there's never a danger of the beaches becoming overcrowded. If you're considering actually staying on the island though, I'd sound a note of caution. A waiter on 'mainland' Guernsey told me that he often has to go two weeks without seeing a newspaper when the fog sets in. In this respect, Herm would be Guernsey with knobs on, although in truth I don't think it's actually possible to get stranded on the smaller island out of season.

Back in St Peter Port, we looked for postcards and found ourselves in kitsch heaven. A group of teddy bears had been transported around the island and photographed at key tourist attractions. Mr and Mrs Bear at the airport. The Bear children digging sandcastles on the beach. Soldier Bear helping to fire the cannon in 'Town'. I sent a couple of cards back to work, but couldn't find the one of Herr Bear at the German machine-gun nest. Perhaps that particular shoot is still being planned.