

# There's water, water everywhere

**A** FRIEND told me recently of a university housemate's traumatised response to the news that his parents had sold a cherished childhood home in order to retire to the Isle of Wight. "He burst into tears," she recalled. "And retreated to his bed wailing about 'the Isle of Shite'."

To be fair, this was more than 20 years ago, before gentrification had worked its way stealthily south-westwards from the capital and across the Solent. Today the Isle of Wight is hopping with Hamptons-styled beachside rentals, pampering hotels, glamping (and also camping) possibilities, passionate chef-restaurateurs working wonders with glorious local produce and destination events such as the Ventnor Fringe and Bestival.

Benedict Cumberbatch getting married in Mottistone on Valentine's Day may have sealed the Isle of Wight's reputation as a modern destination. Yet it was the Victorians who first made the island fashionable – and their legacy that gives it such an enduring appeal. Like us, they were drawn by the sea air (Victoria's poet laureate, Lord Tennyson, described it as "worth sixpence a pint"); accessible sandy beaches; rolling countryside and, at points such as the Needles rocks, dramatic coastal scenery.

Getting there is part of the fun. There is always something magical about a ferry journey to an island: some trick of perception that allows your stresses to recede along with the mainland, as you transition smoothly into holiday mode. Crossing the Solent can be one of the world's most expensive boat routes but look around you on the ferry and you'll see people grinning expectantly, their shoulders relaxing, their brows unknitting.

In our case the relaxation continued at Sturdy, a stylishly kitted-out, four-bedroom houseboat moored in

The sea is the focus for **Patricia Nicol** and her family as they bed down on a harbourside houseboat on the Isle of Wight

Bembridge Harbour, on the east coast. Having never set foot on a houseboat before, we approached our stay with trepidation – my husband claimed to have packed DVDs of Jaws, The Poseidon Adventure and Titanic.

There were nine of us – five adults and four kids, the absolute maximum the houseboat sleeps; six is recommended – and there was some anxiety that we would all be on top of one another. Yet afterwards we agreed it was the most relaxing of the four holidays our party have enjoyed together. This was in no small part due to the forethought with which the owners Georgina and James – whose principal home is a houseboat on The Thames's Taggs Island – have equipped the 72ft, double-decker Sturdy. I cannot recall when I last slept better than on the sumptuous kingsize Loaf bed, with crisp white linen bedding, in the Master ensuite.

The Upper Deck open-plan kitchen and living area has everything you

would want from a holiday rental: from games such as Backgammon and Twister and an impressively wide-ranging DVD collection to a well-equipped kitchen with a Rangemaster cooker and a big American-style fridge-freezer, with an ice dispenser, should you wish to take a G&T out to the rooftop sundeck. Full-length windows fold out to reach the foredeck with uninterrupted views across the harbour and the Solent beyond it. A telescope has been set up in front of the central window for stargazing, or sofa beachcombing.

The working Bembridge Harbour makes a memorable Isle of Wight base. Within minutes, there are fine, deserted beaches, the characterful Pilot Boat Inn, a crab shack and the Brading Marshes nature reserve. Bembridge village proper, a steep 10-minute walk up from the harbour, is a pretty hub with an excellent greengrocers, fishmonger and butcher, eateries and shops.

Our happy handful

of days fell into an easy rhythm of beach visits, tourism and long, lazy meals. There is almost too much to do on the Isle of Wight. History lovers can tour Osborne House. Science nerds can seek fossils on beaches that may have inspired Darwin – he commenced the Origin of Species here. Lovers of literature can follow paths Tennyson roamed, or bathe where the poet Swinburne – a wild swimmer before anyone knew there were tamer kinds – used to pit himself against the waves. Children's activities range from sailing and kayaking courses to the old-fashioned fun of beachside crazy golf and the Blackgang Chine adventure park.

We ate memorably. Dan's Kitchen in neighbouring St Helens is reached on foot – if you time it properly – across the harbour, along a beach and then up through woods to a picturesque village green. The food was high-end but the welcoming homely. The kids were asked to order what they fancied, while we feasted on exquisitely fresh lemon sole and crab risotto and an impressively experimental pudding menu that

included carrot cake, beetroot purée and avocado ice cream; or bourbon biscuit, salted caramel and peanut butter ice cream. The Three Buoys overlooking the golden swathe of Appley Bay, Ryde, was simpler in its ambitions – moules frites, pasta marinara – but also excellent, with a lovely beach to run off the excess afterwards. On our next visit, we look forward to Thompson's. Just opened, this is the first eponymous venture of chef Robert Thompson, who, after becoming the youngest British recipient of a Michelin star in 2007, did much to put the Isle of Wight on the gastronomic map through his cooking at the Hambrough hotel in Ventnor, then the George in Yarmouth.

When we ask our children where they would like to holiday again, they always say Sturdy. We feel the same way. Our five days there felt longer. The most restful moments were spent just watching the sea whoosh into the harbour and then feeling the sandbanked houseboat lilt then yield to the sea.

We left on a beautiful clear Saturday morning, at high tide. Our views of the sea's ebb and flow had been uninterrupted through the week but suddenly squadrons of children, being instructed how to sail dinghies, were darting across Sturdy's bows. The windows were thrown open to the foredeck, which our four-year-old traversed shouting, "Hello boats, helloooo," then eventually, "Bye-bye boats, see you soon." If only.

## Details: Isle of Wight

Sturdy houseboat (theharbourhouseboat.co.uk). From £198 per night.

- Pilot Boat Inn: [thepilotboatinn.com](http://thepilotboatinn.com)
  - Osborne House: [english-heritage.org.uk](http://english-heritage.org.uk)
  - Blackgang Chine: [blackgangchine.com](http://blackgangchine.com)
  - Dan's Kitchen: [danskitcheniow.com](http://danskitcheniow.com)
  - The Three Buoys: [threebuoys.co.uk](http://threebuoys.co.uk)
  - Thompson's: [robertthompson.co.uk](http://robertthompson.co.uk)
- [visitisleofwight.co.uk](http://visitisleofwight.co.uk)



All aboard: the bright and airy interior, above, of the 72ft houseboat Sturdy, above right; surveying the horizon, inset