

The isle where time stood still

Derek Clements was delighted to find an island where some of the best things haven't changed – and the scenery is glorious...

Mention the Isle of Wight and images of yachts crashing through waves probably come to mind.

And while the island is rightly proud of its sailing heritage, for me, its chief attraction is the way life seems to have stood still. Three cars represent a traffic jam.

But visit Cowes and there is no mistaking its sailing heritage. Shops, pubs and restaurants all have a nautical feel.

Ryde is the most traditional of seaside towns, complete with promenade, pier and theatre, as well as a golf course and seafront bowling green. On the day we visited, the pub where we had lunch couldn't take payment by a new-fangled debit card.

The powers-that-be have turned The Needles into something of a mini theme park, where you buy supersaver tickets that entitle you to a ride on the chair-lift and assorted fairground rides. If you do nothing

else, you must take the chair-lift, which provides spectacular views. Young children will love the fairground attractions. There are also plenty of places to eat.

Osborne House is visited by more people than any other attraction and it's not difficult to understand why.

It was built between 1845 and 1851 for Queen Victoria and Prince Albert as a summer home and they spent a lot of time there. Prince Albert designed it in the style of an Italian Renaissance palazzo. It was built by Thomas Cubitt, a London architect and builder whose company built the main façade of Buckingham Palace for the royal couple in 1847.

Queen Victoria died at Osborne House in January 1901. Following her death, it was given to the state with a few rooms retained as a private royal museum dedicated to Queen Victoria. From 1903 until 1921 it was used as a junior officer training college for the Royal Navy.

Today, Osborne House is under the care of English Heritage. The former Naval College's cricket pavilion was converted into a holiday cottage in 2004 and can be booked by members of the public. Guests at the cottage can use the Estate's private beach.

At Swiss Cottage, the inside story of life as a Victorian royal child is revealed. Vivid new displays, a garden trail and a new play area enable families to experience how the children of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert played and learnt here.

Visitors can discover the interests and personalities of each of Queen Victoria's nine children in the 'Childhood at Osborne' exhibition.

Incredibly, Thomas Banyard Dowsing, the great-great-uncle of Paul Nixon who took the photographs for this article worked for Queen Victoria, spending 13 years here as lodge keeper from 1869.

He retired in 1892 and died two years later. Paul said: "It was a moving experience to visit Osborne House and see where a member of my family worked all those years ago."

Osborne House is open daily from 10am until 6pm and tickets cost £13.90 for adults and £8.30 for children aged five to 15. A family ticket (two adults and three children) costs £36.10, terrific value.

Dimbola Lodge was the Isle of Wight home of Victorian photographer Julia Margaret Cameron from 1860 until 1875. Cameron bought two adjacent properties and linked them with a stunning Gothic tower. Dimbola Lodge was her home and her studio where the greatest of her photographs were produced. Dimbola Museum and Galleries is now open to the public.

In 2006, a sculptural tribute to Jimi Hendrix was erected – Hendrix, of course, gave an unforgettable performance at the Isle of Wight Festival in 1968. It really is another must-see for first-time visitors.

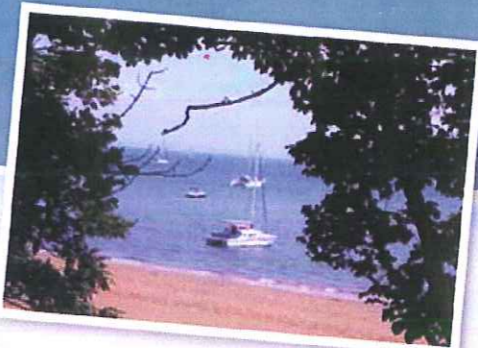
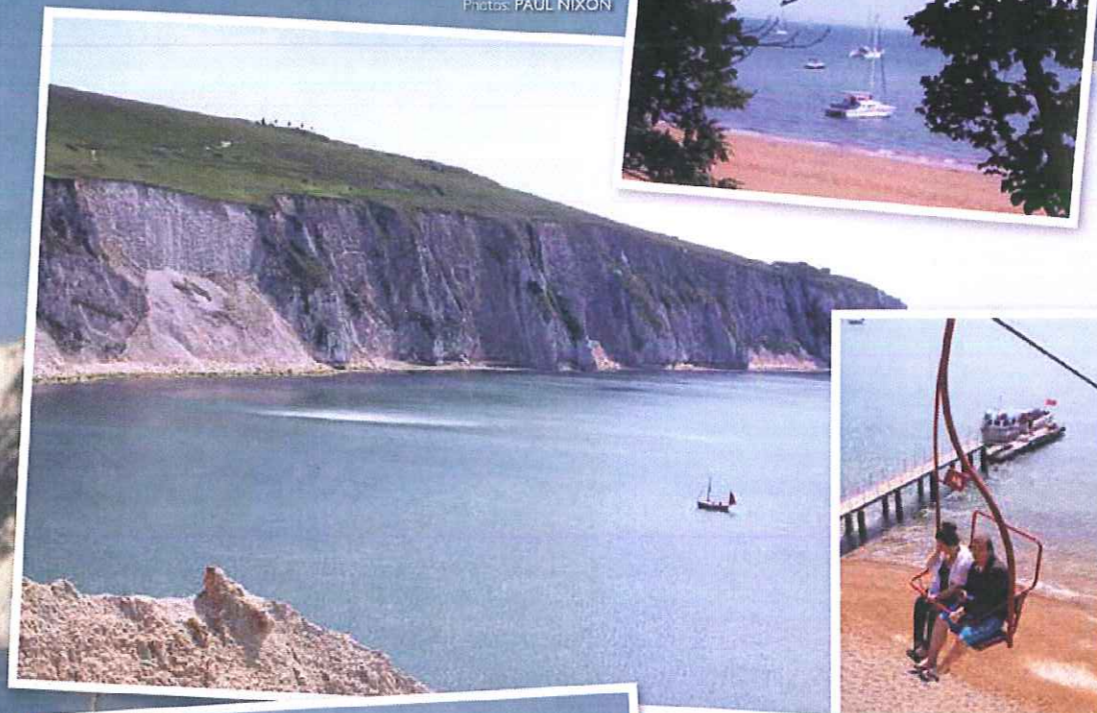
No self-respecting foodie can leave without visiting The Garlic Farm. The owners have been growing garlic on the island for more 50 years and are the UK's largest specialist garlic grower. Check out <http://www.thegarlicfarm.co.uk/> where you will also find some super recipes.

The island covers 150 square miles, with more than half designated as an area of outstanding beauty. It is home to red squirrels, bats, pyramidal orchid, a protected species of dormouse and the Glanville Fritillary butterfly, which thrives on the crumbling cliffs.

There are glorious beaches and for the more adventurous, pony trekking or forest walks. And only one small stretch of dual carriageway.

You can't fail to fall under its spell.

It's time to take another look at the Isle of Wight. Photos: PAUL NIXON



Getting there

From Portsmouth, it's a 40-minute ferry ride, and you can also travel from Southampton and Lymington. You can make the crossing with Red Funnel, Wightlink Ferries or Isle of Wight Ferries.

Our trip was organised by the Isle of Wight Tourist Board - you can contact them at www.visitisoleofwight.co.uk

Where to stay

If you stay at the Priory Bay Hotel in Seaview, you may feel you have died and gone to heaven. It is a stunning country house hotel, set in 60 beautiful acres, with fabulous gardens and woodland running down to the nearby beach and bay. It also boasts an outdoor swimming pool, tennis courts, croquet, petanque and its own six-hole golf course.

It's the sort of place where you would want to hold a fairytale wedding, and it is becoming increasingly popular for that very purpose so get in quick.

We stayed in the Tithe Barn, which comes with a thatched roof, three bedrooms and two bathrooms,

one ensuite and includes his and hers sinks and a jacuzzi.

Priory Bay is the Isle of Wight's leading country house hotel. Set within a 60-acre estate, its period buildings have spectacular views out to sea. The hotel says that the gardens and woods inspire their chefs to use the finest seasonal ingredients. "Whether foraged, farmed or fished we are passionate about local produce," it says.

And I can vouch for that. I guarantee that the most treasured memory you will take away will be of the outstanding quality of the food. Even thinking about it now has my mouth watering.

The experience I will never forget is the tasting menu prepared by Darren Williams, the operations manager who has worked as a chef at several top restaurants, including Le Gavroche.

It was a feast fit for a king, and I loved every last morsel. Not only did it all taste fabulous, but the presentation was wondrous.

The Priory Bay wants a Michelin Star. The only surprise for me is that they don't already have one. I cannot believe you will find better food than this is any of London's top eateries.

The hotel says: "We are just two-and-a-half hours from London, and our aim is to spoil you." They did.

The golf

The island is just 25 miles long and 13 miles wide at its broadest part, but it still boasts eight golf courses and some are crackers. You could argue until the cows come home (or should that be 'until the Cows come home?'), about which is the best, but the indisputable truth is that this is a wonderful place for a golf break.

My favourite is Freshwater Bay, one of only two 18-hole courses on the island. Measuring just 5,725 yards, it proves that golf courses doesn't need to measure in excess of 7,000 yards to provide a great test.

It is on Afton Down and offers glorious panoramic views of the Solent and the English Channel.

Neolithic and Bronze Age Burial mounds form "natural" hazards on most holes, the site is owned by the National Trust and is a Site of Special Scientific Interest and a European Special Area of Conservation, home to many rare and endangered forms of fauna and wildlife.

On a windy day you will struggle to remain on your feet. Fortunately, I played on a glorious summer day and had the good fortune to play really well, playing the par 69 in 72 strokes after coming home in a one-under-par 34. I can say without fear of contradiction that the greens here are among the best you will find anywhere; fast and true.

