

# A Welsh holiday revival

**M**ALE voice choirs, rugby players, green valleys and rugged mountains, Tom Jones and tasty cheese on toast. That's the image most of us have of Wales.

But while the principality has long provided a warm welcome and a host of scenic wonders, it has offered rather slim pickings in the way of sophisticated holidays.

Now all that is beginning to change. With Prince Charles buying a Welsh home, actor Neil Morrissey opening a hotel and Hollywood star Ioan Gruffudd backing a new restaurant, the land of the red dragon is shaking off its stereotypes and is emerging as an exciting, easily-reached holiday destination — with some of the UK's best places to stay and eat.

In the last year a string of new and refurbished hotels have opened, creating an impressive selection of five-star spa retreats, cosy inns and smart boutique hotels across Wales.

And gourmet eateries are springing up, too, spearheaded by the trendy new Mimosa Kitchen & Bar in Cardiff



Rediscover the wonders of Wales: A boat trip along the Pembrokeshire coast

Bay — part-owned by Gruffudd, who was seen most recently on screen as William Wilberforce in *Amazing Grace*.

What all these new establishments share in common is a desire to celebrate those things that are intrinsically Welsh, from high quality local lamb and Caerphilly cheese served in the restaurants, to local materials such as slate and stone used in contemporary interior design.

Playing his own part in the Welsh revival, Prince Charles is buying a Carmarthenshire country estate, Llwynwormwood near Llandovery.

He and Camilla intend to stay at the 18th-century country park's Home Farm when in Wales and there is speculation they may let it out to holidaymakers in their absence.

Neil Morrissey — the original 'Man Behaving Badly' — is also boosting the image of Wales in his new role as the co-owner of Hurst House and New Three Mariners, a hotel and pub in Laugharne, South-West Wales.

In a spectacular location surrounded by marshland and sea, Hurst House Hotel reopens this month after a £5million refit, with a new gym, spa, swimming pool and cinema, as well as a Gordon Ramsay-trained chef.

Asked if people can expect to see Neil if they visit the hotel, he says: 'Oh God, yeah! When you own an establishment, you can't help but be Mr Hosty, and that's a role I've always enjoyed in life anyway. I'm here at least twice a month and for longer during the summer.'

Welsh joys are being rediscovered and celebrated in other new ways too. Fron's Male Voice Choir recently released the fastest selling classical album of all time.

And Welsh music generally goes from strength to strength. Bryn Terfel's star-studded Faenol Festival is due to take North Wales by storm again in August, while a striking new opera house and theatre, the Wales Millennium Centre, now takes pride of place in Cardiff's swanky new waterfront.

Most of Cardiff Bay has been transformed from down-at-heel docklands into Europe's largest waterfront development, with galleries, eateries, bars and other hip hang outs, making it the most happening location in Wales.

The principality is also becoming

## SANDY SOUTH OR SCENIC NORTH?

■ **WITH** sparkling beaches on Anglesey, the slate mines at Blaenau Ffestiniog, and Llandudno, the Welsh answer to Brighton, the North teems with fun things to see and do.

Take the railway that rumbles up Snowdon for a fabulous view of the Isle of Man on a clear day. Then there's formidable Caernarfon Castle, Shell Island near Harlech, and Portmeirion, the stunning Italianate village where *The Prisoner* and more recently some of *Cold Feet* was filmed.

■ **WEST** is best for award-winning beaches, surfing, rocky smugglers' coves, dolphin watching in Cardigan Bay and great cliff-top scenery backed by the Cambrian mountains.

■ **GARDENING** fans head for rolling Carmarthenshire and The National Botanic Garden of Wales and Aberglasney.

■ **AND** Pembrokeshire is a family-friendly corner of Wales offering castles, pretty resorts like Tenby and Saundersfoot, boat trips to see Caldey Island monks, cycle paths and clean, clean beaches, with Britain's biggest haul of Blue Flags.

popular as an adventure sports playground, with everything from coasteering, to mountain biking, zorbing and quad biking on offer, along with great golf and walking.

For a his and her break, how about a round of golf on the new world class Ryder Cup 2010 course opening from June at Celtic Manor Resort, Newport, while she chills out in the hotel spa? Or surfing for the lads, while the ladies explore The Mumbles — home to Catherine Zeta Jones? (Or the other way around, of course!)

From mountain to shore, you'll find that welcoming Wales has more to offer than ever before. And what's more, it's all on your doorstep.

■ *Find out more about visiting Wales at [www.visitwales.co.uk](http://www.visitwales.co.uk)*