

Mike Ward gets away from it all on the laid-back island of Guernsey

Hang on, does that say kayak? It does, you know. Good Lord, they're seriously expecting to squeeze us into one of those canoe-type things then take us out on the sea?

"We've arranged for you to meet up," it says in the weekend agenda kindly drawn up for us by the Visit Guernsey tourism people, "with Ant Ford Parker, proprietor of Outdoor Guernsey, for a water-based exploration of part of Guernsey's unique coastline – either by kayak, or (oh good grief, there's more) perhaps you may wish to try coasteering."

What, energetically clambering up rocks – scrambling, jumping, diving into the sea? Hmm, perhaps we wouldn't.

So, kayaking it is. But guess what? It turns out to be tremendous fun. The sun has crept out, the sea at beautiful Cobo Bay, on the island's west coast, could hardly be calmer, and Ant ensures we feel safe and relaxed. Julie and I share a two-seater (Julie is my wife, I should explain, I don't share my kayak with any old stranger), and we get the hang of it surprisingly quickly. Paddle a bit, rest a lot, savour the scenery, paddle a bit more. It's quite a workout, but it's not as if we're heading the 27-odd miles to Jersey. We're sauntering out as far as what's informally known as Flag Rock, where on May 9 each year a Guernsey flag is raised to mark the anniversary of the island's liberation from the Nazis.

Even seven decades on, the Nazi occupation of 1940-45 remains a part of Channel Island history you can't ignore. Travelling around Guernsey's 24 square miles, you'll frequently stumble upon sobering reminders. Pleinmont Tower at Torteval is a coastal observation point – ugly as hell, but with a fascinating history – while the German Military Underground Hospital in St Andrew is an eerie subterranean maze dug from solid rock by slave workers.

Obviously, military history isn't everyone's cup of tea (it isn't mine), but a visit to the German Occupation Museum offers a reminder of the conflict's human side. There's weaponry aplenty, but there are also personal effects – letters, diaries, clothing, recipes, even preserved wartime food – that leave you feeling a real connection with the islanders forced to live through those dark days.

There are features to Guernsey's stunning coastline which, I believe, served a specific



CHANNEL HOPPING



Above: Yachts in St Peter Port, Guernsey's capital

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strategic purpose from the Nazis' point of view. But don't ask me to go into detail. I just like the stunning bit.

And up on the cliffs at Le Gouffre, where we're taken by tour guide Gill Girard, we're confronted by stunning with a capital S. Although the morning sunshine undoubtedly enhances it, this is one of those fabulously unspoilt, rugged coastal settings whose natural beauty overwhelms you whatever the weather.

It's not surprising the great French poet and novelist Victor Hugo, exiled to the island from 1855, chose to stay longer than he needed to, living at Hauteville House in the capital, St Peter Port. It was here he wrote *Les Misérables*, albeit forgetting to include the songs.

A leisurely walk around Saumarez Park in the parish of Castel also deserves a place on your to-do list, particularly if you conclude with a visit to the Victorian Walled Kitchen Garden. From a neglected wilderness, this has been transformed by volunteers into something of a horticultural miracle, producing an array of fruit and vegetables. The sunflower maze next door is also rather wonderful.

Fresh vegetables are a Guernsey highlight. ▶



Guernsey's coastline is spectacular, with sweeping bays and 28.5 miles of cliff-top walks

a long while.

There are many other things to love about Guernsey – its flowers, its festivals, its fascinating Norman heritage, the fact that you never seem

The traditional tomato-growing industry may have hit hard times, but pootle along the country lanes and narrow “ruettes tranquilles” (steadily, mind, as the speed limit is 15mph) and you’ll find no end of “hedge veg” stalls.

Alternatively, there are plenty of fine restaurants, particularly in St Peter Port. You’ll never struggle to find fabulous fish and seafood, as we found at local eateries Pier 17 and Mora. Even the most modest snack outlet will whip up a superbly-fresh crab sandwich.

We stayed on the outskirts of St Peter Port at the Fermain Valley Hotel – the most beautiful setting, spectacular south-coast views, first-class facilities, delicious food and the friendliest hotel staff I’ve encountered in

to have to pay to park (hurrah!) – that a weekend barely skims the surface of it.

If it’s a little escapism you’re after, but without the hassle that can come with a full-blown getaway, I can think of nowhere better. Just 75 miles from mainland Britain, it’s friendly, beautiful and blissfully unhurried.

WAY TO GO

Flights from London Gatwick to Guernsey with Aurigny (www.aurigny.com) start at £70 return. Overnight stays at the Fermain Valley Hotel (www.fermainvalley.com) start at £100 in low season and £145 in high season. See www.visitguernsey.com.

Ten things you must do in Guernsey

- 1** Mind your head inside the Little Chapel in St Andrew.
- 2** Venture into the German Underground Military Hospital at St Andrew, honed from rock by Second World War slave workers.
- 3** Enjoy a ferry trip to the neighbouring, traffic-free islands of Sark or Herm.
- 4** Admire the labour of love that has revitalised the Victorian Walled Kitchen
- 5** Try kayaking, coasteering or archery with Outdoor Guernsey (www.outdoorguernsey.co.uk).
- 6** Witness the ceremonial Noonday Gun ceremony at 13th-century
- 7** Climb the cliff tops at Le Gouffre and breathe in lungfuls of fresh air.
- 8** Explore the German Occupation Museum in the parish of Forest.
- 9** Visit the Folk & Costume Museum, Castel.
- 10** Sip one of Katherine and Stephen Paine’s Haut Maison liqueurs their horseradish vodka (www.hautmaison.com).

