

Beauty in the English Channel

Seventy years after the end of German occupation, the Channel Islands of Guernsey and Sark are fascinating spots to explore

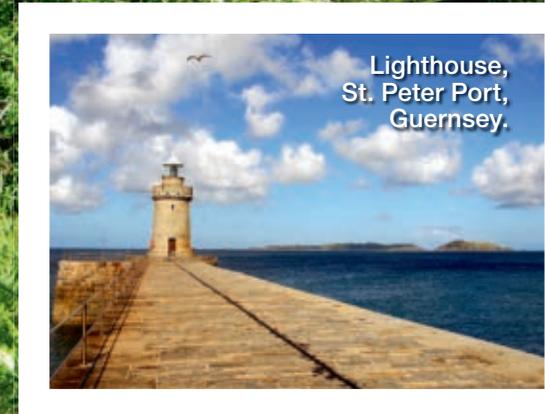
By Wendy and Rob Lindsay



Sark's Maseline harbour.



St. Peter Port marina.



Lighthouse, St. Peter Port, Guernsey.

We discovered the Channel Islands of Guernsey and Sark via *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society*, the popular novel set during and after the islands' occupation by the Germans during the Second World War. Learning about the first Channel Islands Heritage Festival, held this past May to celebrate the 70th anniversary of the end of that occupation, gave rise to a desire to explore the islands for ourselves to discover what they are like today.

Guernsey is the second-largest of the seven inhabited Channel Islands (the largest is Jersey), which are located in the English Channel just off the coast of Normandy—a short one-hour flight from England's Gatwick Airport on Aurigny Air Services. From the air, Guernsey looks much larger than its relatively small 78 square kilometres (30 square miles).

April, May, and June are lovely months to visit, when the gardens, lanes, and hillsides are glorious with spring flowers. However, the warm Gulf Stream moderates the climate

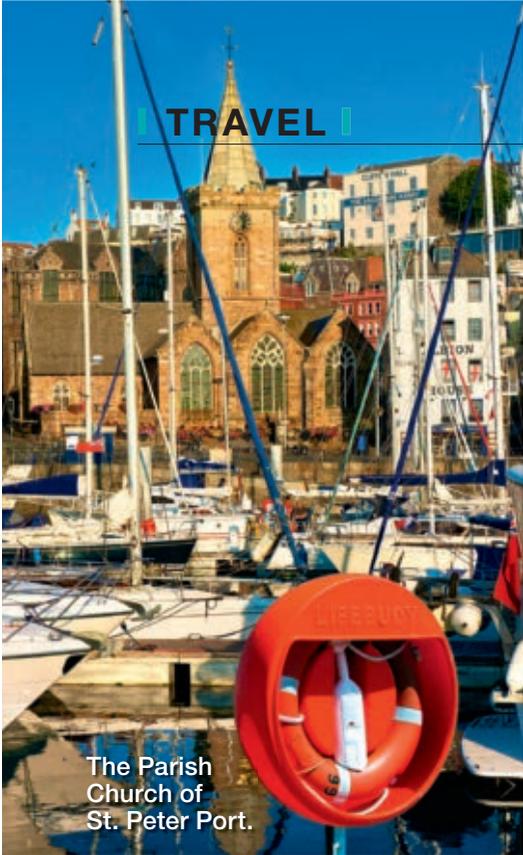


and makes the islands a holiday favourite right through October. The beaches are lovely, the scenery is stunning, and Guernsey enjoys more clear, sunny skies than England does. Plants

Photos: Visit Guernsey (marina); Lindsay Editorial (cows).



Photos: Sark Tourism (Sark); iStock/Pleasasmiles (lighthouse).



The Parish Church of St. Peter Port.



Pea Stacks, Jerbourg Point.



Original town boundary marker. Right: Millennium Tapestry.



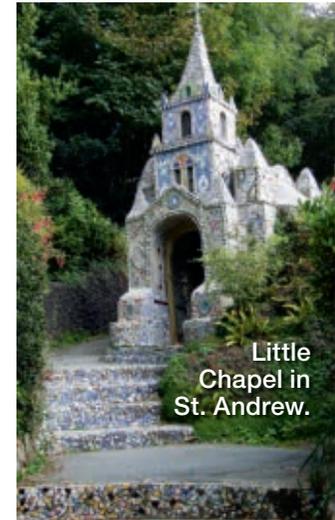
Moulin Huet Bay.



Remnants of the German occupation.



Liberation monument obelisk.



Little Chapel in St. Andrew.

Duke of Normandy and the red Cross of St. George against a field of white. The Guernsey flag is most evident

flying from the official buildings in the capital city of St. Peter Port. Like many old cities, it's best explored on foot. In



the Old Quarter of town and along the picturesque waterfront, you can still find quaint cobblestone streets. A close look will reveal that many of the shops along the waterfront, which dates back to the time of sailing ships, were once tall, narrow warehouses. However, the miles of beautifully flowering window boxes give the waterfront a unified look and, combined with terraces of lovely old buildings, have led to St. Peter Port being called “one of Europe’s prettiest harbour towns.”

A few steps from the waterfront is the Parish Church of St. Peter, referred to locally as The Town Church and well worth a visit. There has been a church on this site since 1135, although the current building dates to a major renovation in 1822. Inside we discovered a historic surprise—a plaque in the memory of a local boy who became a hero: Maj.-Gen. Sir Isaac Brock, “who saved Canada and fell at Queenstown [sic] Heights in 1812.”

Brock was born in the building on High Street that now houses the Boots drugstore that, too, bears a plaque to his memory that credits him with “saving Canada for the Empire.”

High Street is always busy, filled with good-quality shops, and very popular with tourists, as Guernsey is a Duty Free Port. A short walk from High Street, in the St. James Concert and Assembly Hall, is the magnificent Bailiwick of Guernsey Millennium Tapestry. The 10 panels hand-stitched by local residents summarize 1,000 years of island history in a beautiful art form. The tapestry is housed in a special climate-controlled room with an audio guide in three languages.

Back on the waterfront, a short walk from the Tourist Office, stands the monument erected to mark the 50th anniversary of Guernsey’s liberation. Inspired by prehistoric monoliths, Guernsey artist Eric Snell designed a five-metre-high (16.4 feet) obelisk of Guernsey granite that was placed precisely using electronic-age technology so that the tip of the shadow of the obelisk touches a curved stone seat throughout the day, marking the path of the sun on Liberation Day—May 9, 1945—and on every May 9 thereafter.

However, many remnants of the German occupation still haunt the island. It seemed Hitler planned to turn Guernsey into an impregnable fort and brought to the island more than 5,000 slave workers plucked from German-occupied countries. Many perished from starvation and harsh working conditions. These wartime slaves constructed many ominous concrete gun-emplacement bunkers that still exist along the coastal hiking trails. They dug miles of immense tunnels along the island to house German command centres and even a German hospital (now a museum).

We took a break to visit the Little Chapel in St. Andrew. Built in 1914 (and then rebuilt twice) by Brother Déodat as a replica of the grotto and basilica in Lourdes, it measures 16-by-9 feet, can accommodate roughly eight people, and is believed to be the world’s smallest consecrated church. It’s decorated with shells, pebbles, and sparkling shards of broken china.

Just outside of St. Peter Port, near the La Valette Bathing Pools, another network of tunnels was turned into a military museum that gives a glimpse of the wartime rules, regulations, and hardships. Among the Liberation displays is a Red Cross relief box from Canada.

It was very difficult to reconcile the

grandmother and five children were evacuated to England early on, along with 17,000 others, reducing the island population by almost half.

The effect of the children’s evacuation was profound in many ways. For five long years, there was no communication with England or the evacuees. Prior to the war, the local language of Guernsey was a patois-based French. Most of the children were sheltered for five years in Scotland, Lancashire, and Yorkshire—all areas with strong local accents. Thus, when the evacuees returned to Guernsey, communication was a major problem. However, English gradually became the main language, and, in the 1970s, it replaced French in official government documents.

No Cars, No Lights

The tiny island of Sark (actually two islands connected by an isthmus) is part of the heraldic Bailiwick of Guernsey and lies enticingly only 10 kilometres (6.2 miles) offshore. One sunny morning, we caught a ferry from the dock in St. Peter Port to explore this last feudal entity in Europe.

It was a beautiful one-hour trip, and it was easy to see why Sark is such a popular day-trip destination or weekend getaway for folks from Guernsey and Jersey.

Photos: Alamy/Eyebite (church); Visit Guernsey (Pea Stacks); Lindsay Editorial (marker and plaque); Guernsey Millennium Tapestry.

Photos: Lindsay Editorial (German remnants and chapel); Visit Guernsey (day); Wikipedia/Mat Vri (obelisk).



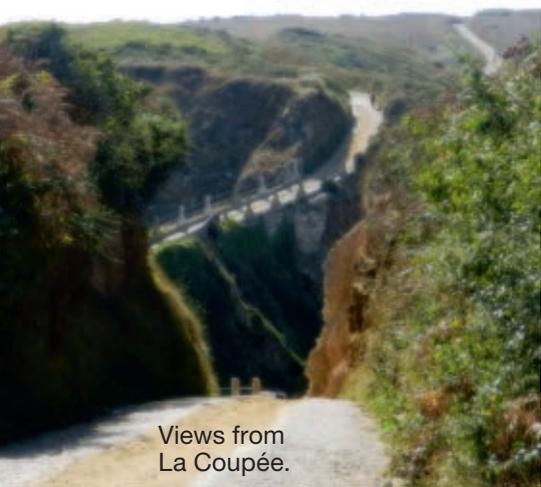
Les Autelets, Sark.



Maseline Harbour, Sark.



Sark flag.



Views from La Coupée.



Sark is unique in many ways. The only type of motorized vehicle allowed on this island of 600 inhabitants is the farm tractor. As our little ferry neared the island and the sheer cliffs rose above



Sark exit arch.



us, we worried about a steep climb with our suitcases. However, a waiting tractor that pulled a farm wagon outfitted with benches (referred to locally as the toast rack) solved the problem. Meanwhile, other tractors with wagons delivered everyone's luggage to their hotel or B & B. The atmosphere aboard the toast rack on the ride to the top was like that of an old-fashioned hayride and a fun introduction to the island.

There are three ways to explore the island: walk, cycle, or hire a horse carriage. We did all three.

We climbed aboard a carriage pulled by a white cob named Alfie and headed across the island to see what the locals call La Coupée—a narrow neck of land



connecting Little Sark to Greater Sark. Alfie's leisurely pace seemed appropriate for the sunny afternoon. Our driver told us that many vacationers come to Sark just to experience this laid-back, slowed-down pace. The view from La Coupée was spectacular, with the deep blue ocean far below either side of the narrow roadway.

Signs warned cyclists to dismount when crossing. In 1900, stone guardrails were added along La Coupée; before that, schoolchildren crawled across on their hands and knees so they wouldn't get blown off in bad weather. True to the hardy Sark attitude, it was unacceptable to miss school for such a trifle.

Only one carriage company is licensed to cross La Coupée; unknowingly, we hadn't picked it.

Back in the village, we cycled to investigate the unusual sound of revving motors and discovered the annual lawnmower challenge. Local males of all ages were gleefully tweaking engines in the

Photos: Sark Tourism (harbour and Lea Autelets); Lindsay Editorial (horse, bicycle, arch, La Coupée, and garden).



Four views of La Seigneurie Gardens.



pit, adjusting safety helmets, and getting ready for their heat—a real novelty on this island of horses and bikes. To the growl of engines, crowds of spectators encouraged the speeding ride-on mowers when they weren't checking out the charity food concessions. Obviously a great time was being had by all. However, a local couple confided they thought the island's very popular sheep racing was much more in keeping with Sark tradition. Apparently there is great spectator participation when stuffed-toy jockeys ride young lambs in this hilarious annual July event.

Next we cycled off to enjoy a tran-

quil few hours walking in La Seigneurie Gardens. Six gardeners have worked to restore each area to its for-

mer grandeur—including an orchard, a maze, a vegetable garden, a sensory garden, and an elegant Victorian glass