

Mid Wales



Generations of visitors have traditionally viewed Mid Wales as a staging post en route to elsewhere. Stuck between the splendour of Snowdonia in the north and the golden coast of Pembrokeshire in the south, this vast swath of Welsh countryside has become used to playing third fiddle. But to overlook the country's heart is to miss some classically British wonders. The Brecon Beacons National Park is the smooth, pastel-hued contrast to north Wales' serrated peaks, and is an atmospheric introduction to what lies in store. This is an area of rolling hills, patchwork fields and tiny villages that comprise rural Wales, where more than half the population speaks the mother tongue.

Coastal Aberystwyth is the biggest town and is home to a buzzing university. Inland, solid little Machynlleth was the 'ancient capital of Wales', more famous today for the sustainable living project at the nearby Centre for Alternative Technology, which promotes a green way of life. Towards the English border, charming Hay-on-Wye is the secondhand book capital of the world, Welshpool boasts impressive Powis Castle and Abergavenny plays home to the Green Man Festival, Wales' number one music festival. The long-distance walking trail Offa's Dyke Path roughly follows the border and gives a glimpse of how these parts have merged. And wherever you go in this fertile region, you're never far from a plate of superb locally produced food.

Wales wouldn't be Wales without trains, so hop aboard the narrow-gauge Vale of Rheidol Steam Railway or, for the country's most scenic commuter ride, grab a window seat on the renowned Heart of Wales line.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Exploring the rolling landscapes of the **Brecon Beacons** (p693)
- Riding the rails on the scenic **Heart of Wales line** (p694)
- Getting literary at book-mad **Hay-on-Wye** (p703)
- Becoming bogged down in silly sports at loopy **Llanwrtyd Wells** (p705)
- Soaking up the vibe at the **Green Man Festival** (see boxed text, p701) near Abergavenny
- Discovering the sustainable hippy dream of the **Centre for Alternative Technology** (see boxed text, p709)



■ POPULATION: 201,728

■ AREA: 2696 SQ MILES

Orientation & Information

The Mid Wales region stretches west from the Welsh–English border to Cardigan Bay on the coast, encompassing the Brecon Beacons in the south and parts of Snowdonia in the north.

It includes just two counties: Powys and Ceredigion. The former was created in 1974 when Brecknockshire, Radnorshire and Montgomeryshire were combined during local-government reorganisations. Ceredigion maintained its boundaries but reverted to its ancient name, Ceredigion.

Activities

Walking in the Brecon Beacons might be the focus of outdoor life, but Mid Wales is chock-full of other lung-bursting activities.

With plenty of challenging hills, road cycling and mountain biking are popular, while several farms operate pony trekking in the mountains. The fine peaks and reliable thermals offer good hang-gliding and paragliding, and mountainboarding is growing in popularity.

The Rivers Wye and Usk are renowned for excellent fishing, or just paddle along the placid Wye for ideal canoeing.

See the sections on Brecon Beacons National Park, Powys and Ceredigion in this chapter for full details. Tourist offices stock comprehensive details of all local activities.

Getting Around

In an age of high-speed motorways, Mid Wales seems stuck in a time warp. The A470

is the closest thing to a highway between the Brecon Beacons and Snowdonia, and with progress frequently slowed by tractors and lumbering trucks you have no choice but to relax and enjoy the view.

Public transport is reliable and all tourist offices stock detailed timetables – check details with **Traveline Cymru** (☎ 0870 608 2 608; www.traveline-cymru.org.uk). An extensive bus network is in operation, but Sunday services are usually limited (especially in more-remote areas).

Trains are less regular; for details contact **National Rail Enquiries** (☎ 08457 48 49 50; www.nationalrail.co.uk). The Cambrian Main Line runs between Shrewsbury and Aberystwyth via Machynlleth. The hours pass quickly riding the scenic **Heart of Wales line** (see the boxed text, p694), skirting the Brecon Beacons and crossing lush Mid Wales diagonally.

The multiday North & Mid Wales Rover (www.walesflexipass.co.uk; £30) offers three days' bus and train travel in seven days, and the North & Mid Wales Day Ranger (www.nationalrail.co.uk; £20) covers one day's travel for trains (other than the Heart of Wales line). Buy these passes from **Arriva Trains** (☎ 0870 9000 777), on the websites listed, or at most railway stations.

For travel in Powys, see p705, and for Ceredigion, see p710.

BRECON BEACONS

BRECON BEACONS NATIONAL PARK (PARC CENEDLAETHOL BANNAU BRYCHEINIOG)

Soaring majestically in a wave of dappled pastel tones, the Brecon Beacons roll in a sea of greens, blues, reds and browns across a large slice of Mid Wales. Three distinct regions border the park: the industrial valleys to the south, the central farming heartland to the north and the English border to the east. Swaddled with grassy moors and uplands, the Beacons provide a striking contrast to rock-strewn Snowdonia in the north, but offer comparable thrills and excitement.

Walking is a major activity here. Two long-distance paths traverse the park: Offa's Dyke Path, along the eastern border, and the Taff Trail, which heads south from Brecon.

For adventure-seekers, the park offers top opportunities for rock climbing, hang-gliding, paragliding, mountainboarding, horse riding,

caving and mountain biking, while touring cyclists can pedal the national pan-Wales route, the Lôn Las Cymru (see the boxed text, p651).

For a little aquatic fun, take to the water on the Monmouthshire & Brecon Canal, or splash away on the placid River Wye.

Feeling hungry? Most people have heard horror stories about British grub – that it's fatty, flaccid and flavourless – but this is a fantastic region to dispel such food-based falsehoods. Some of Wales' most succulent lamb frolics here, and farmers produce magnificent organic vegetables.

The park runs a mere 15 miles north to south and 45 miles west to east, but embraces four mountain ranges. The name derives from the central and highest range of the quartet, the Brecon Beacons themselves, the high point of which is Pen-y-Fan (886m). South is Fforest Fawr (Great Forest), whose tumbling streams join the River Neath to empty into Swansea Bay. To the west, the quieter Black Mountain range peaks at Fan Brycheiniog (802m), and to the east (don't get confused) are the popular Black Mountains (plural) and Waun Fach (811m).

Brecon, Abergavenny and Hay-on-Wye make good base towns, each with a wide range of accommodation and dining options. The closest train stations are Abergavenny and Merthyr Tydfil. The Monmouthshire & Brecon Canal follows the valley of the River Usk from Brecon via Abergavenny down to the coast.

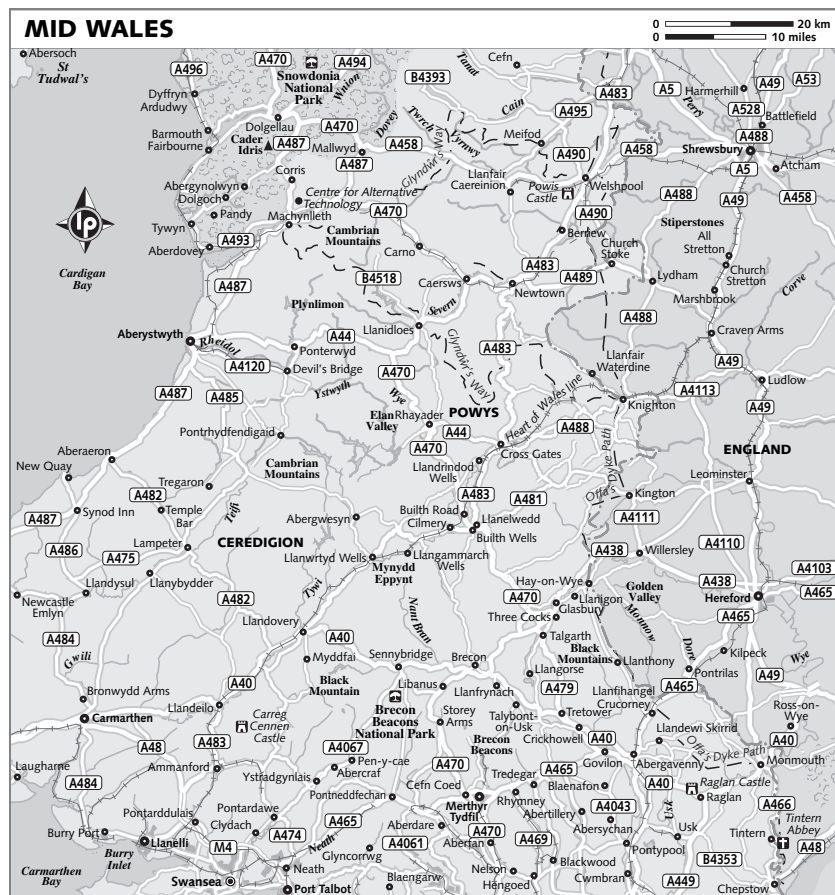
Lying 30 miles from the M4 Severn Bridge near Bristol, the park is easily reached from southern England, and as a result is a popular destination on weekends and public holidays.

Information

The park website is www.breconbeacons.org. The **National Park Visitor Centre** (☎ 01874-623366; Mountain Centre, Libanus; ☽ 9.30am–5pm Mar, Apr, Sep & Oct, to 5.30pm May & Jun, to 6pm Jul & Aug, to 4.30pm Nov–Feb) is in open countryside near the village of Libanus, 5 miles southwest of Brecon off the A470. Trails from the centre, an award-winning tearoom and fine views of Corn Du (873m) make it a much-visited place.

There are three other dedicated park information centres:

Abergavenny (☎ 01873-853254; ☽ 10am–5.30pm Easter–Oct) South of the Black Mountains, sharing space with the town tourist office.



Craig-y-Nos Country Park Forest Centre (☎ 01639-730395; 🕒 10am-5pm Mon-Fri, 10am-6pm Sat & Sun Mar, Apr, Sep & Oct, 10am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-7pm Sat & Sun May, 10am-6pm Mon-Thu, 10am-7pm Fri-Sun Jun-Aug, 10am-4pm Mon-Fri, 10am-4.30pm Sat & Sun Nov-Feb) Beautiful forest and valley setting between Black Mountain and Fforest Fawr.

Llandovery (☎ 01550-720693; 🕒 10am-1pm & 1.45-5.30pm Easter-Oct, 10am-1pm & 1.45-4pm Mon-Sat, 2-4pm Sun Oct-Easter) North of Black Mountain.

Brecon Beacons National Park Welcome! is a useful free booklet of activities, sights and accommodation. Pick it up at any information centre.

Activities

ACTIVITY CENTRES

You can enliven yourself with these outdoor specialists:

Black Mountain Activities (☎ 01497-847897; www.blackmountain.co.uk; Three Cocks; courses £37.50-89)

White-water kayaking, caving, climbing, biking, orienteering and abseiling. Also arranges accommodation.

Llangorse Multi Activity Centre (☎ 01874-658272; www.activityuk.com; Gilfach Farm, Llangorse; per 2-hr session £15-31) Gorge-scrabbling, horse riding, indoor climbing wall and a 2km-long zip-wire, the 'SkyTrek', which whooshes around the trees. Also bunk, B&B and camp site accommodation.

CANAL CRUISING

The 33-mile Monmouthshire & Brecon Canal was built to transport coal and iron to the sea. Take a narrowboat from Brecon down

the valley of the River Usk to Abergavenny, continuing to Pontypool. There are six locks on the canal, and one 22-mile section that is lock-free.

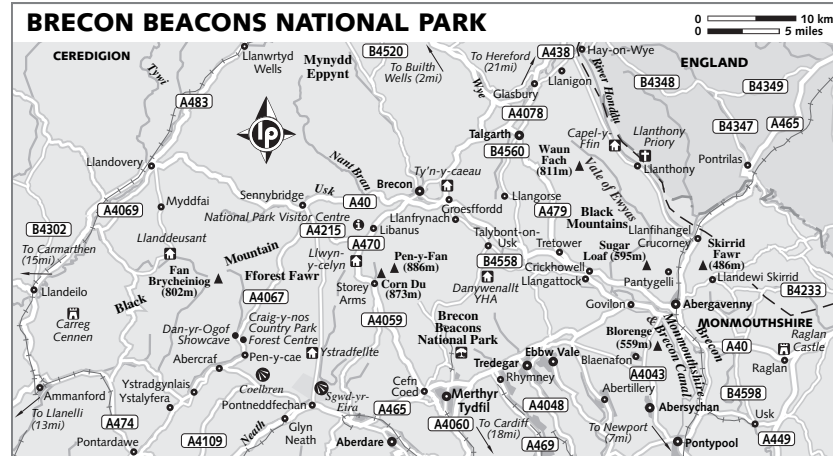
Try a 2½-hour pleasure trip from Brecon (starting outside the Theatr Brycheiniog) with **Dragonfly Cruises** (☎ 07831-685222; www.dragonfly-cruises.co.uk; cruise £6), which runs one or two cruises two to five days per week from March to September and one cruise two days per week in October – call for daily sailings; or pick up a motorboat from **Brecon Boats** (☎ 01874-676401; Travellers Rest Inn, Talybont-on-Usk; boat hire per 2/4/6hr £20/30/50).

For a longer visit, self-pilot a narrowboat from **Cambrian Cruisers** (☎ 01874-665315; www.cambriancruisers.co.uk; Ty Newydd, Pencelli; boats from £496 for 3 nights) or **Beacon Park Boats** (☎ 01873-858277; www.beaconparkboats.com; The Boathouse, Llanfoist; boats from £390 for 3 nights).

CAVING & SHOWCAVES

Hidden beneath the Beacons are some of Britain's longest and deepest cave systems, lying mainly to the south in the Upper Swansea Valley and in the Llangattock hillside above Crickhowell. Tourist offices stock information, but unless you are an experienced spelunker you should stick to an organised trip with an activity centre (see left).

Discovered in 1912, superb **Dan-yr-Ogof** (☎ 01639-730284; www.showcaves.co.uk; adult/child £10/6.50; 🕒 10am-3pm Easter-Oct) features three separate caverns; kids love the flashy light show, together with the dinosaur park and



shire horses. Dan-yr-Ogof lies 16 miles south of Brecon, off the A4067 north of Abercrarf.

CLIMBING

Climbing in the park focuses on Llangattock, Craig-y-dinas (Dinas Rock) near Pontneddfechan, and Morlais Quarry, near Merthyr Tydfil.

For an introduction to climbing or simply a bit of aerial fun, you can climb, abseil and zip through the sky on high wires at **Llangorse Multi Activity Centre** (☎ 01874-658272; www.activityuk.com; Gilfach Farm, Llangorse).

CYCLING

The 77-mile Taff Trail runs between Cardiff and Brecon. The mountain section, from Merthyr Tydfil to Talybont-on-Usk, crosses the heart of the park, climbing to 450m.

Great mountain biking is possible throughout the park, with 15 easy and hard routes compiled on map leaflets (£7) produced by the national park. Guided routes in the southern Beacons can be organised through **Hobo Backpackers Mountain Biking** (☎ 01495-718422; www.hobo-backpackers.com), which operates from its hostel in Tredegar.

Bike hire in and around Brecon:

Bicycle Beano (☎ 01982-560471; www.bicycle-beano.co.uk) Leads guided tours in and around the Brecon Beacons and Wye Valley. Trips are irregular, so book well in advance.

Bikes & Hikes (☎ 01874-610071; www.bikesandhikes.co.uk; 10 The Street, Brecon; per half-/full day £14/18) Rentals, sales, routes and tours.

Bi-Ped Cycles (☎ 01874-622296; www.bipedcycles.co.uk; 10 Ship St, Brecon; per half-/full day £13/16) Another mountain-bike rental crowd in Brecon.

Touring cyclists enjoy the Welsh national cycle route, the **Lôn Las Cymru** (see the boxed text, p651).

For more detailed information, see www.cyclebreconbeacons.com and www.mtbbreconbeacons.com.

From late May to mid-September, on Sunday and Bank Holidays, the national park runs the Beacons Bus, including a 'Bike Bus' (p697).

FISHING

The waters of the Rivers Wye and Usk spawn fine sport for anglers; fish for prime Atlantic salmon, pike, carp or trout.

For tuition from an old hand with 30 years' experience, try Builth Wells-based **Rods and Reels** (☎ 01982-551706; www.rods-n-reelonline.co.uk; Kings Head Lane, Broad St; tuition from £20 per person).

For more information see www.fishing.visitwales.com and www.wyeuskfoundation.org.

GLIDING & PARAGLIDING

Great ridge- and wave-soaring make the park a destination for aerial-sports fans.

Black Mountains Gliding Club (☎ 01874-711463; www.talgarthgc.co.uk), near Talgarth, offers trial lessons as well as intensive courses.

For paragliding, **Axis Paragliding & Paramotoring** (☎ 01873 850111; www.paraglide.co.uk; 35 Mount St, Abergavenny) will give you tuition or take you on a tandem flight from its base in Abergavenny.

RAIL THROUGH THE HEART

The **Heart of Wales line** (☎ 01597-822053; www.heart-of-wales.co.uk) is one of Wales' most scenic stretches of railway. Like many other British rural lines, its existence was threatened by governmental policy in the 1960s, but the joint efforts of locals and train buffs saved the service.

The single-carriage shunter, described fondly by Bill Bryson as the 'little train', travels through beautiful river valleys and green-bathed hills as it cuts diagonally across central Wales, en route from Swansea on the south coast to Shrewsbury in the English borderlands. Stately Victorian spa towns are a feature of the line, as are the six tunnels and seven bridges that burrow and span the hills and valleys.

The highlight of the line lies between Llandeilo and Llandrindod Wells, where the train pulls up the Sugar Loaf mountain and rolls across the graceful Cyngordy Viaduct through prime red kite country. The full 121-mile, 3¾-hour trip breaks down easily into shorter sections, such as Swansea-Llandrindod Wells (return £12.70, 2¼ hours), Llandeilo-Llandrindod Wells (return £7.40, 1¼ hours) and Llandovery-Knighton (return £8.90, 1½ hours). A 48-hour rover ticket offering unlimited travel on the line costs £20. There are four trains Monday to Saturday, two on summer Sundays and one on Sunday in winter. The walking guide *Great Walks from the Heart of Wales Railway* is available from tourist offices and details 15 circular routes from stations on the line.

MOUNTAINBOARDING

Big boards, chunky wheels and a steep hill are all you need to practise this relatively new sport, a cross between skateboarding and snowboarding. Slalom, jump or speed along at the **Greenman Mountainboard Centre** (☎ 01874-636202; www.greenman-mountainboard.co.uk; per hr £6; ☹ Sat & Sun Easter-Oct), 4 miles west of Brecon.

PONY TREKKING & HORSE RIDING

The Brecon Beacons have a vast choice of riding options:

Cantref Riding Centre (☎ 01874-665223; www.cantref.com; Upper Cantref Farm, Cantref; per hr £13, per half-/full day £20/40) Mountain, farm or forest trails near Brecon.

Grange Pony Trekking (☎ 01873-890215; www.grangetrekking.co.uk; Capel-y-Ffin, Abergavenny; per hr £12, per half-/full day £20/32) In the heart of the Black Mountains, at pretty Capel-y-Ffin.

Llanthony Riding & Trekking (☎ 01873-890359; www.llanthony.co.uk; Court Farm, Llanthony; per half-/full day £18/36) Gentle treks and demanding mountain rides, stopping at the pub for lunch.

Tregoyd Mountain Riders (☎ 01497-847351; www.tregoydriding.co.uk; Three Cocks; per hr £14, per half-/full day £22/40) Mountain-riding outfit that also offers B&B, bunkhouse and camp-site accommodation, 4 miles southwest of Hay-on-Wye.

Visit www.horseridingbreconbeacons.com for more information.

WALKING

You could walk all summer in the park without repeating a route, such is the range of choice. From demanding mountain trails to afternoon canal-side strolls, many walks are detailed in leaflets available from park information centres and tourist offices. Guided walks are also available.

Before setting out on a mountain hike check the weather forecast – call **Weathercall** (☎ 0891 500414) or see www.metoffice.gov.uk/louddoor/mountainsafety/brecon.html. Take waterproof clothing even if it's sunny and warm when you start. Carry food but don't share it with sheep and ponies – they become attracted to cars on the roads, which can cause accidents.

For information on Beacons Bus services around the park see opposite.

Pen-y-Fan & Corn Du

The park's classic and heavily overused summit walk is to the ridgeline peaks of Pen-y-Fan or Corn Du, dubbed 'the motorway' by

wardens due to its high volume of traffic. The walk starts at the car park at the Storey Arms (no longer a pub) on the A470 Merthyr Tydfil–Brecon road, but routes such as the return trip from the Llwyn-y-celyn YHA hostel (three hours) or Brecon (five to six hours) may be more enjoyable.

Due north of Corn Du is the wonderfully named Llyn Cwm Llwhch (pronounced khlin coom khlooch), a little lake within a glacial amphitheatre that offers more gentle alternatives to the mountain trails.

Taff Trail

Running from Cardiff to Brecon, largely along canal towpaths and disused railway lines, the most scenic section of this 77-mile route lies in the national park.

Canal Walks

The park's most straightforward walks follow the towpath of the Monmouthshire & Brecon Canal along the valley of the River Usk. The 20-mile Abergavenny–Brecon section is popular, or tackle the full 33-mile length from Brecon to Pontypool.

Around Abergavenny

Some fine hills rise in the park's southeast near Abergavenny, including Sugar Loaf (595m), Blorenge (559m) and Skirrid Fawr (486m).

Black Mountains

Offa's Dyke Path affords stunning views. Some of the best are on the exposed 17-mile ridge of the Black Mountains (the park's eastern region) between Pandy and Hay-on-Wye, above the Vale of Ewys (Llanthony Valley; p702).

Follow the valley bottom along the River Honddu (hon-thee) from Llanfihangel Cruorney in the south of the mountains for a less demanding alternative.

Fforest Fawr & Waterfall Walks

Famous for the lush, steep-sided gorges of the Rivers Hepste, Mellte and Nedd Fechan, the southern part of this region has several fine waterfalls. The best is 8m-high **Sgwd-yr-Eira** (Waterfall of the Snow) on the Hepste, where you can actually walk behind the torrent. This walk and others are relatively close together on a stretch between Ystradfellte and Pontneddfechan.

In the north, the terrain is more akin to the bleak, open fells of the Brecon Beacons.

Black Mountain

Wilder and less frequented than other areas of the park, Black Mountain lies in the extreme west of the Brecon Beacons, near the border with Carmarthenshire. The highest point, Fan Brycheiniog, can be reached via a path leading from the roadside just north of the Dan-yr-Ogof showcave (p694).

Sleeping

Plenty of accommodation is available in and around the national park. While B&Bs are usually the best bet, there are some fine guest-houses in Abergavenny and Hay-on-Wye, at either end of the Black Mountains.

There are five YHA hostels within the national park:

Brecon (Ty'n-y-caeau; ☎ 0870 770 5718; brecon@yha.org.uk; Groesffordd; dm £14; ☹ daily by advance booking) Large former country house, 2.5 miles east of Brecon. Self-catering facilities, small shop and catering available.

Capel-y-Ffin (☎ 0870 770 5748; capelyffin@yha.org.uk; dm £11; ☹ daily by advance booking) Remote former hill farm, 8 miles south of Hay-on-Wye amid the Black Mountains. Ideally placed for Offa's Dyke Path and national cycle trails. Self-catering facilities and meals available.

Danywenallt (☎ 0870 770 6136; danywenallt@yha.org.uk; dm £17.50; ☹ daily by advance booking) This ex-farmhouse has a lovely location in countryside near Talybont-on-Usk, 8 miles south of Brecon. Self-catering facilities and meals available.

Llanddeusant (☎ 0870 770 5930; llanddeusant@yha.org.uk; dm £11; ☹ with 48hr notice Easter-Oct) A real get-away-from-it-all hostel, below the western Black Mountain. Self-catering only; nearest shop 7 miles away.

Llwyn-y-celyn (☎ 0870 770 5936; llwynycelyn@yha.org.uk; dm £14; ☹ with 48hr notice Easter-Oct) Self-catering facilities and meals available at this old farmhouse directly below the central Beacons, by the A470 Merthyr Tydfil–Brecon road.

There are also more than 20 independent bunkhouses and hostels in the area, but as many cater primarily for groups it is best to book in advance. Contact tourist offices for a full list or visit www.hostelswales.com.

With the permission of the farmer or land-owner, it may be possible to camp almost anywhere in the park, but not on National Trust (NT) land. Tourist offices list camping grounds in the leaflet *Camping on Farms* (25p).

Getting There & Around

It takes three to four hours to drive to the Brecon Beacons from London, via Newport and the A4042 to Abergavenny.

Regular bus services to the national park towns are good, but few run on Sunday.

Buses X3 and X4 (1½ hours, at least hourly) travel from Cardiff to Abergavenny (the X4 via Merthyr Tydfil). Bus 39 (55 minutes, seven daily Monday to Saturday) runs between Hay-on-Wye and Brecon; and bus 63 (£6.10, 1½ hours, three daily Monday to Saturday) travels between Swansea and Brecon. For more information on bus services contact **Traveline Cymru** (☎ 0870 608 2608; www.traveline-cymru.org.uk).

From late May to mid-September, on Sunday and Bank Holidays, the **Beacons Bus** (☎ 01873-853254; www.breconbeacons.org) operates several routes in and around the park. With a central hub in Brecon, the most popular services are the B1 from Cardiff and Merthyr Tydfil (also known as the 'Bike Bus'; this has a trailer for cycles); B2 from Swansea; B5 shuttle from Brecon to the National Park Visitor Centre (Mountain Centre) and back; B8 from Abergavenny and B10 from Carmarthen. The services are subsidised and, as such, routes and timetables can change significantly from one year to the next. Call or visit the website for the latest details.

The leaflet *Discover the Beacons – Take the Beacons Bus* has full timetables.

The only train services available are Cardiff–Merthyr Tydfil (one hour, hourly Monday to Saturday, every two hours Sunday) and Newport–Abergavenny (25 minutes, at least hourly Monday to Saturday, every two hours Sunday).

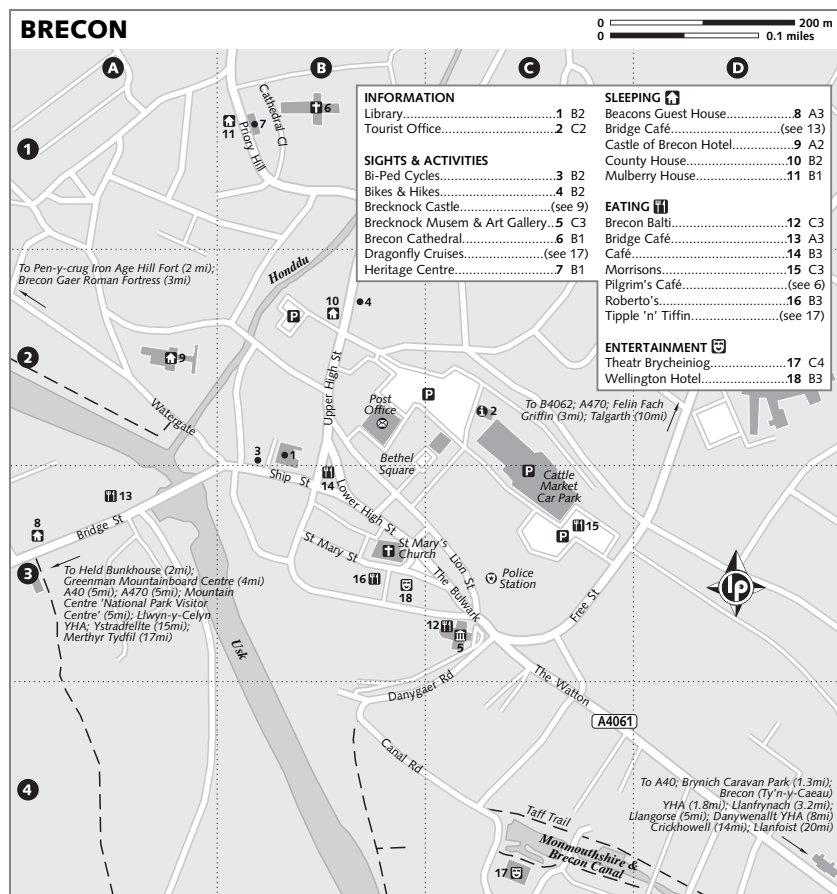
BRECON (ABERHONDDU)

☎ 01874 / pop 7901

Muscular-looking stone buildings, winding streets and a languid river may mark Brecon as traditionally Welsh, but it's the town's location at the hub of the national park that draws visitors. With a good range of accommodation and visitor facilities, it has an energetic buzz and is busy year-round.

The main attractions in town are the sedate cathedral and renowned Brecknock Museum & Art Gallery. Brecon also hosts an internationally famous jazz festival, and has a clutch of intriguing craft shops and galleries.

Northwest of town, the remains of an Iron Age hill fort lie atop Pen-y-crug, while those



of Brecon Gaer Roman Fort can be found 3 miles west. In Norman times, the local Welsh chieftain was overthrown by a Norman lord, Bernard de Newmarch, who built the town's castle and church (which later became the cathedral).

Orientation & Information

Everything in Brecon is within easy walking distance.

The **tourist office** (☎ 622485; brecon@powys.gov.uk, ☎ 9.30am-5.30pm Apr-Sep, 9am-5pm Oct-Mar) is in the Cattle Market car park near Morrisons supermarket.

Log on for free at the **library** (☎ 623346; Ship St; ☎ 9.30am-5pm Mon & Wed-Fri, 9.30am-7pm Tue, 9.30am-1pm Sat); booking recommended.

Sights

BRECON CATHEDRAL

Founded in 1093 as part of a Benedictine monastery, the **cathedral** (☎ 623857; admission free) exudes tranquillity, and is worth visiting also for the **Heritage Centre** (☎ 625222; admission free; ☎ 10.30am-4pm Mon-Sat, noon-3pm Sun) and tasty Pilgrims Café (p700).

Parts of the cathedral nave are Norman. The tower, choir and transepts date from the 13th and 14th centuries, and in the mid-1860s the church was restored by Sir Gilbert Scott (architect of St Pancras Station in London). At the western end of the nave is the only stone cresset (an ancient lighting device) left in Wales; its 30 cups held oil for the cathedral's lamps.

BRECKNOCK MUSEUM & ART GALLERY

Housed inside the town's former Shire Hall, this **museum and gallery** (☎ 624121; Captain's Walk; adult/child £1/free; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Fri, 10am-1pm & 2-5pm Sat, noon-5pm Sun Apr-Sep, closed Sun Oct-Mar) is surprisingly interesting. Exhibits include an AD 800 dugout log canoe retrieved from Llangorse Lake and a collection of hand-carved Welsh lovespoons. The art gallery has changing exhibitions.

Activities

WALKING & CYCLING

The 77-mile **Taff Trail** walking and cycling route and 33-mile **Monmouthshire & Brecon Canal** both start in Brecon. The tourist office has details on these, and on all manner of walks in and around the Beacons. See also Canal Walks, p696.

Brecon lies at the northern end of the Taff Trail cycle route, which continues as the Lôn Las Cymru (see the boxed text, p651) north via Builth Wells. There is also excellent national park mountain biking nearby (p695).

Festivals & Events

Brecon is transformed for one weekend in mid-August when the world's foremost jazz players come to town. In a blaze of colour (and brass), the renowned annual **Brecon Jazz Festival** swings the town to its boots. Past headline acts have included stars such as Courtney Pine and US tenor-sax legend Chico Freeman. Contact the festival office at the **Theatr Brycheiniog** (☎ 611622; www.breconjazz.co.uk; Canal Rd) for more details.

Sleeping

BUDGET

Brynich Caravan Park (☎ 623325; www.brynich.co.uk; Brynich; 2-person tent sites low/mid-/high season from £8/9/10) Located 1.5 miles east of Brecon, this site has excellent facilities including a well-stocked shop and heated shower blocks. Take bus X43.

Held (☎ 624646; www.heldbunkhouse.co.uk; Cantref; dm £10.50) Two miles southeast of Brecon, surrounded by beautiful and classically British scenery, the Held is a clean and tidy converted barn with a well-equipped self-catering kitchen.

Brecon YHA hostel (Ty'n-y-caeau; ☎ 0870 770 5718; brecon@yha.org.uk; Groesffordd; dm £14; ☎ daily by advance booking) Former country house, 2 miles east of Brecon. Take bus X43 to the Llanfrynach turn-

ing, and go north for a mile through Groesffordd. Or walk from Brecon via the pleasant canal-side path (about 40 minutes).

During the jazz festival, open areas in the town become makeshift camping grounds.

MIDRANGE & TOP END

Bridge Café (☎ 622024; www.bridgecafe.co.uk; 7 Bridge St; s/d from £20/40; ☎) A revelation in the Brecon café scene, the Bridge also provides wonderful B&B accommodation. Spacious rooms have heavenly beds (feather pillows and Egyptian cotton sheets) and rustic colour schemes. Room 1 is the pick, with its own sofa and private bathroom.

County House (☎ 625844; 100 The Struet; s/d from £40/60; ☎) In a Grade II-listed Georgian town house below the cathedral, this old judge's residence features original oak and flagstone floors, with the emphasis on preserving the period elegance of the property.

Beacons (☎ 623339; www.beacons.brecon.co.uk; 16 Bridge St; s/d £40/52, without bathroom £35/40) Slightly faded, faintly floral and with an over-the-top four-poster room, this guesthouse isn't pushing contemporary style, but the welcome is heartfelt and rooms are more than comfortable.

Castle of Brecon Hotel (☎ 624611; www.breconcastle.co.uk; Castle Sq; s £50-74, d £60-85) Constructed on the remains of Brecknock Castle and favoured by older folk looking to indulge, this is the top hotel in town. Best described as flouncy, Beacon View rooms have the best outlook, while Castle Lodge rooms are kinder on the wallet (no bathtub or satellite TV). Check the website for special deals.

Felin Fach Griffin (☎ 620111; www.eatdrinksleep.ltd.uk; d from £97.50) Three miles north of Brecon, off the A470, this pub is a darling of the syrupy British style media, who swoon over its lush accommodation and food (lunch mains £5 to £10, dinner mains £14.50 to £17.). 'The service is beyond impeccable and the helpings are princely', gushed the *Daily Telegraph*. Such fawning is warranted; it is well worth a visit for dinner or an overnight treat.

Eating & Drinking

Bridge Café (☎ 622024; www.bridgecafe.co.uk; 7 Bridge St; dishes £1.25-6.50; ☎ 11am-6pm Wed-Sat, 11am-6pm Sun during Bank Holiday weekends & school holidays) Beautifully prepared organic food using local ingredients. Snacks from sandwiches to cakes, or try a full cooked breakfast or veggie special. The main salad bowls with organic bread are

delicious, especially as you sink into the sofa with a coffee and newspaper.

Pilgrim's Café (☎ 610610; dishes £2-7; ☺ 10am-5pm) In the cathedral close, quaint Pilgrim's does a range of scones, cakes, sandwiches and salads, as well as warm main dishes. The three-course Sunday lunch (£11.50) is good value, but booking is recommended.

Café (☎ 611191; 39 High St; snacks £3.40-5; ☺ 10am-5pm Fri-Sun) Light, bright, spacious and airy, this is a great place to refuel. Scoff naughty cakes and tempting snacks, surrounded by fine local art.

Brecon Balti (☎ 624653; Glamorgan St; mains £4.15-11; ☺ 6pm-midnight) If you're craving curry, get your fill of Indian treats at this subcontinental place, which also provides a takeaway service.

Tipple 'n' Tiffin (☎ 611866; Theatr Brycheiniog; mains £6-8; ☺ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) Brecon doesn't have a huge luvvy crowd, but theatre-goers hanging out here dine on delights such as char-grilled organic salmon or ragout of Mediterranean vegetables and organic pasta. Encore!

Roberto's (☎ 611880; mains £8-18; ☺ 5.30-10pm Mon-Thu & Sun, 5.30-10.30pm Sat) Tiny Roberto's is the place to grab an Italian meal. Pizza, pasta and regional meat dishes are served up in the cosy interior and out on the decked terrace area.

Morrisons supermarket is next to the tourist office.

Entertainment

Canal-side **Theatr Brycheiniog** (☎ 611622; www.theatrbrycheiniog.co.uk; Canal Rd) is the town's drama and music venue, with an exhibition centre and the Tipple 'n' Tiffin restaurant. The bar at the Wellington Hotel (The Bulwark) hosts live music some evenings.

Getting There & Away

Bus services are good: the X43 stops en route from Abergavenny (50 minutes, every two hours Monday to Saturday, none on Sunday) to Cardiff (1½ hours, one on Sunday); buses 39 and 40 serve Hereford via Hay-on-Wye (55 minutes, seven daily Monday to Saturday, two on Sunday); and bus 63 serves Swansea (£6.10, 1½ hours, three daily, none on Sunday).

National Express (☎ 0870 580 8080) runs buses to London (£22.50, six hours, one daily), with a change at Cardiff (1¼ hours).

Most **Beacons Bus** (☎ 01873-853254) and Bike Bus services stop in Brecon (see p697).

CRICKHOWELL (GRUG HYWEL)

☎ 01873 / pop 2000

Located on the A40 between Brecon and Abergavenny, this well-to-do little town glows amid pastel-hued houses and a burst of hanging flower baskets. Overlooked by Crug Hywel (Table Mountain) and with excellent food and accommodation, this makes a good base. The **tourist office** (☎ 812105; Beaufort St; ☺ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat, 10am-1pm Sun Easter-Oct) is on the main road.

The **Bear Hotel** (☎ 810408; www.bearhotel.co.uk; Beaufort St; mains £8-18.50) has a reputation that reaches far and wide, and rightly so. Dining here is an experience not to be missed – whether you choose oak-smoked salmon, local lamb or char-grilled pork, dishes are prepared to the highest standards using the freshest ingredients. The bedrooms (singles/doubles £58 to £77) aren't as great – very flowery and outdated – but for eating it's fantastic.

Two worthwhile B&Bs are the gorgeous 18th-century John Nash-designed house **Tŷ Gwyn** (☎ 811625; d from £50), with three double rooms, and the straightforward **Greenhill Villas** (☎ 811177; 2 Greenhill Villas, Beaufort St; d from £40), comfortably furnished but lacking en suite facilities.

At the pleasant **Riverside Caravan Park** (☎ 810397; New Rd; 2-person tent sites £12) you can camp by the town bridge.

ABERGAVENTNY (Y FENNI)

☎ 01873 / pop 14,055

Although just outside the Brecon Beacons National Park, bustling Abergavenny makes a good base for exploring the surrounding hills (all *within* the park) and has a couple of its own attractions worth visiting.

Any tourist approaching through the wooded hills from the east will notice that Abergavenny is much more Welsh than Anglicised Monmouth. The town's history dates back 400 years, but today Abergavenny is best known for its position at the heart of Wales' lauded cuisine scene, which celebrates the best in fresh and organic produce.

Lying in the Vale of Usk, the town is a good base for walking and outdoor pursuits. The Blaenafon World Heritage site (p666) is within easy striking distance, 8 miles southwest, up over the head of the valley.

Abergavenny is the only town in the north of the national park that has a railway station.

FINEST FESTIVAL

If you're fed up with the corporate music scene then the **Green Man Festival** (www.thegreenmanfestival.co.uk) could be for you.

Set in the rolling beauty of the Brecon Beacons National Park, the Green Man sits proudly at the forefront of the summer festival circuit. Launched in 2003 by Brecon-based duo It's Jo and Danny, the shindig celebrates the best of the alternative folk scene, pulling in bigger names each year as word of mouth spreads. Some 250 punters showed up for the first bash, but around 5000 rolled in to Glanusk Park near Crickhowell for the 2006 event.

Past line-ups read like a stellar who's who of the alternative scene: US alt-country kings Bonnie 'Prince' Billy, Silver Jews and Calexico, Swedish-Argentinean songwriter José González, beguiling solo harpist Joanna Newsom, psychedelic British-Americans the Earlies, Scotland's finest modern folkers King Creosote and James Yorkston, old-timers Donovan and the Incredible String Band, Super Furry Animals front man Gruff Rhys and the loop-driven electronica of Four Tet and Tunnng. Diverse just isn't the word.

Throw in some top-notch DJ action, theatre, cinema and creative kids' workshops and you've got the perfect festival ingredients. Go on, what are you waiting for?

Information

The **tourist office** (☎ 857588; Swan Meadow, Monmouth Rd; ☺ 10am-5.30pm Easter-Oct, 10am-4pm Nov-Easter) shares a building with the **National Park Visitor Centre** (☎ 853254; ☺ 9.30am-5.30pm Easter-Oct).

The main post office is on Castle St. Go online for free at the **library** (☎ 735980; Victoria St; ☺ closed Wed & Sun).

Sights

Modest-looking **St Mary's Church** is worth a stop even on a sunny day for its exceptional treasury of oak, stone and alabaster tombs, and carved Jesse tree, which shows the family lineage of Jesus. There's a free brochure, and a volunteer warden can answer questions. Make a donation if you can.

Abergavenny Castle overlooks the River Usk meadows and was the scene of Norman treachery in 1175 when William de Braose invited the local Welsh prince, Seisyll ap Dyfnwal, and his knights to dinner – and slaughtered them. In 1645 after several sieges, Royalist forces destroyed the castle beyond use. However, the keep was restored by the Victorians and now houses the small **Abergavenny Museum** (☎ 854282; admission free; ☺ 11am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Sat, 2-5pm Sun Mar-Oct, 11am-4pm Mon-Sat Nov-Feb), which features curios such as a replica set of medieval armour.

Activities

Abergavenny has plenty of canal and hill walks, mountain sports and cycle touring.

Fine views can be experienced with **walks** up Sugar Loaf, Bloreng and Skirrid Fawr, all

close to Abergavenny. Details are available from the tourist office.

The **Monmouthshire & Brecon Canal** passes just near Llanfoist, southwest of town. Walk the towpath, or take an extended longboat break with **Beacon Park Boats** (☎ 01873-858277; www.beaconparkboats.com; The Boathouse, Llanfoist; boats from £390 for 3 nights).

This is a good area for **cycling** and **mountain biking**. Ride the gentle canal towpath 20 miles to Brecon, follow the disused railway line or take the hilly, road-based 32-mile **Four Castles** route (free leaflet from the tourist office). Mountain bikers can head for the Black Mountains.

Festivals & Events

The biggest celebration in Abergavenny's calendar is the **Food Festival** (www.abergavennyfoodfestival.com), held over a weekend in mid-September. Local producers and notable (British) celebrities come together to celebrate the best in regional grub, through a series of masterclasses, demonstrations, tastings, talks and guided walks.

Sleeping

BUDGET

Pyscodlyn Farm Caravan & Camping Site (☎ 853271; www.pyscodlyn caravan park.com; Llanwenarth Citra; 2-person tent sites £10-12) Well maintained, with lush grass and generous tree coverage. Two miles west of town, off the A40.

Blacksheep Backpackers (☎ 859125; www.blacksheepbackpackers.co.uk; 24 Station Rd; dm £13.50, private r with bathroom per person £15, both incl breakfast; ☑) Although

a bit rough around the edges, this laid-back hostel scores well with travellers, who rate its friendly welcome and comfy atmosphere.

The nearest YHA hostel is at Capel-y-Ffin (right), 15 miles north up the Vale of Ewyas.

MIDRANGE & TOP END

Aeon House (☎ 858708; www.aeonhouse.co.uk; 34 Peny-y-pound Rd; s/d from £25/50; ☒) With 200 years of history and happy hosts, Aeon House feels like a true home from home and, while rooms don't have en suite, you won't mind skipping across to the (usually) private bathroom before tucking in to a hearty home-cooked brekky.

Highfield House (☎ 852371; www.highfieldabergavenny.co.uk; 6 Belmont Rd; s/d £36/58) With extensive gardens, Highfield sits above town in a tasteful Victorian villa, providing views across to Sugar Loaf mountain. The three en suite rooms, named after local castles (Grosmont is the biggest and smartest), are welcoming, and you get the usual kettle and TV setup.

Angel Hotel (☎ 857121; www.angelhotelabergavenny.com; 15 Cross St; s/d from £60/85; ☒) The traditional town inn was given a long-overdue face-lift a couple of years back. Now the rooms range from basic singles to swanky 'deluxe' suites with flat-screen TV, DVD player and luxury designer bathrooms. It's the swishest place in town, and comes with recommended dining as well (see below).

Eating

The Vale of Usk is renowned for the finest lamb, beef, venison, cheese, honey and wine in Wales, and Abergavenny and the surrounding villages have some fine dining.

Angel Hotel (☎ 857121; www.angelhotelabergavenny.com; 15 Cross St; bar & courtyard dishes £6-16, à la carte mains £11-17; ☒ noon-2.30pm, 3-5pm & 7-10pm) This stylish bar and restaurant oozes calm throughout. If you can see past the Angel's tempting starters then main treats include roast lamb rump, wild sea bass or a sandwich of grilled vegetables, goat's cheese and pesto served on toasted beer bread. Afterwards, you might need to collapse into one of the Angel's comfy beds (see above).

Walnut Tree Inn (☎ 852797; mains £7.25-19.50; ☒ lunch & dinner Tue-Sat, lunch Sun) When original owner Franco Taruschio hung up his restaurateur gloves in 2001 after 35 years at the helm, this award-winning Italian place took a spectacular nose dive. Following se-

vere reorganisation and a brutal dissection at the hands of potty-mouthed celebrity chef Gordon Ramsay, it's now once again serving prime dishes. Expect the best, and if you don't get it, tell 'em f@&'lin' Gordon sent you!

Malthouse (☎ 859960; Lion St; mains £8; ☒ noon-9.30pm Tue-Sat) Hello, what's this? A rustic, wooden-floored bistro dishing up Mediterranean-inspired meat and fish dishes? Why yes, and it's pretty good as well, with a contemporary twist that's evident in dishes such as bacon-and-spinach pancake with tomato and parmesan sauce.

Llanwenarth Riverside Restaurant (☎ 810550; Brecon Rd; mains £9.25-14; ☒ lunch & dinner) Attached to the Llanwenarth hotel, the elegant cream-and-brown styled dining room looks down over the river. Enjoy the restaurant's personal take on meat and fish dishes, such as pork tenderloin with a tart of black pudding and fig, served with rosemary sauce. Find it 3 miles northwest of Abergavenny on the A40.

Getting There & Away

Bus services from Monday to Saturday include the X3 to Cardiff (£6.30, 1½ hours, at least hourly), via Merthyr Tydfil (1½ hours); the X43 to Brecon (50 minutes, every two hours); and the 83 to Monmouth (one hour, four daily) via Raglan (35 minutes).

From late May to mid-September the Sunday-service Beacons Bus (p697) serves Abergavenny.

The train station is a 10-minute walk from the bus station and tourist office. Trains run about every hour (less often on Sunday) from Cardiff (£8.20, 45 minutes) via Newport (£5.40, 25 minutes).

AROUND ABERGAVENNY Vale of Ewyas (Llanthony Valley)

Offa's Dyke Path runs atop the windblown eastern ridge of this lovely isolated vale. Down below, beside the babbling River Honddu, are the ruins of the 13th-century Augustinian priory church and the monastic buildings of **Llanthony Priory** (Cadw). A superb walk climbs from the car park to the bare ridge above.

Romantic **Abbey Hotel** (☎ 890487; d Sun-Thu £65, Fri & Sat £145) is built into the surviving abbey buildings, and offers five snug rooms in 12th-century surroundings.

Capel-y-Ffin YHA hostel (☎ 0870 770 5748; capelyffin@yha.org.uk; dm £11; ☒ daily by advance booking), one mile north of Capel-y-Ffin village, is

a basic hostel that suits walkers on Offa's Dyke Path. If you don't want to do the whole route, try the 8-mile section to Hay-on-Wye, or go riding at the adjacent **Grange Pony Trekking** (☎ 01873-890215; www.grangetrekking.co.uk; Capel-y-Ffin, Abergavenny; per hr £12, per half-/full day £20/32).

On summer Sundays Beacons Bus B7 runs between Hay-on-Wye and Llanthony Priory.

HAY-ON-WYE (Y GELLI)

☎ 01497 / pop 1400

If you're the type that never picks up a book (other than a travel guide, of course) then happy Hay-on-Wye could tip you over the edge, for this pretty little town by the River Wye is stuffed full with secondhand volumes. In more than 40 shops, hundreds of thousands of tomes are stacked floor to ceiling, covering every subject from bloody murder to decorative needlecraft, with a number of highly cherished rare and first editions.

Hay is also famous for book people. Richard Booth, the colourful chap whose vision turned the town into the used-book capital of the world, opened his own shop in the

1960s – Booths Books, stocked with cast-off libraries from various national institutions and country houses. The effect snowballed, others followed suit and since 1988 the town has hosted an influential Festival of Literature every May/June.

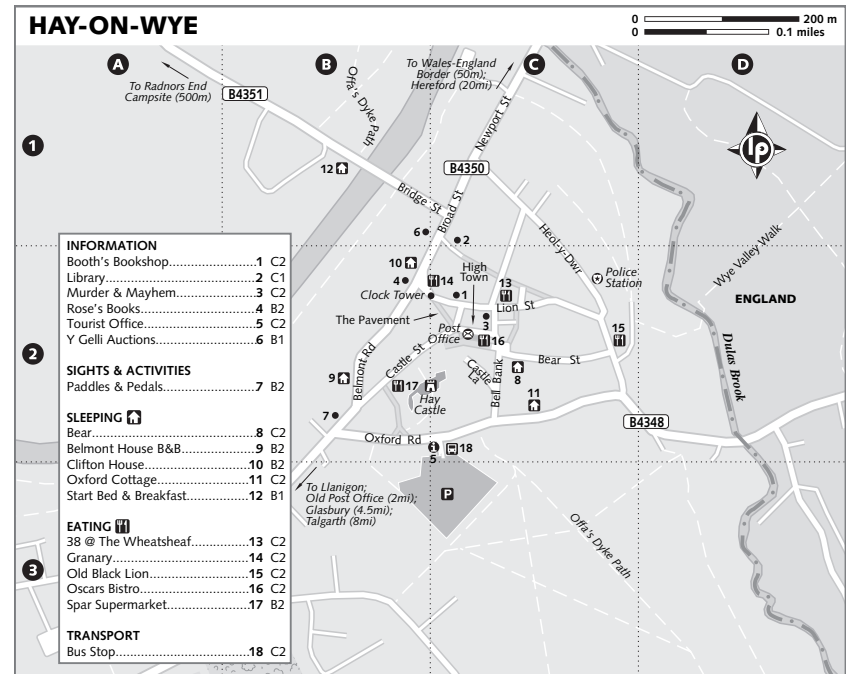
Situated below the Black Mountains, Hay also makes an excellent base for country pursuits. Canoe on the lovely River Wye, or walk Offa's Dyke Path and the Wye Valley Walk. Evenings are quiet, but there are some good places to eat.

Although packed with English folk, Hay is settled in Wales – the border runs 300m northeast of town.

Orientation & Information

Higgledy-piggledy Hay centres on a spider's web of confusing, crooked lanes. Most places of interest are central.

The **tourist office** (☎ 820144; Oxford Rd; ☒ 10am-5pm Easter-Oct, 11am-1pm & 2-4pm Nov-Easter) is beside the main car park and bus stop. There's free internet access at the **library** (Chancery Lane; ☒ 10am-1pm, 2-4.30pm & 5-7pm Mon, 10am-1pm & 2-5pm Thu & Fri, 9.30am-1pm Sat).



Bookshops

Need something to read? Chances are you can get it in Hay. Here's a sneak preview:

Booth's Bookshop (☎ 820322; 44 Lion St) 400,000 tomes covering all subjects.

Murder & Mayhem (☎ 821613; 5 Lion St) Detective fiction, crime and horror.

Rose's Books (☎ 820013; 14 Broad St) Rare children's and illustrated books.

There are also regular sales at **Y Gelli Auctions** (☎ 821179; Broad St).

Ask at the tourist office if you have a special interest; there's probably a shop just for you.

Activities

Walking includes the historic town route, local countryside circuits and hikes through the Black Mountains. The tourist office stocks route literature.

For **canoeing** down the River Wye, hire craft and get a lift back from **Paddles & Pedals** (☎ 820604; Castle St; kayaks per half/full day £15/20, 2-seater canoes per half/full day £22.50/35), or from **Wye Valley Canoe Centre** (☎ 847213; www.wyvalleycanoes.co.uk; Glasbury; per half/full day £12.50/20), whose boat-house lies four miles southwest of Hay.

Black Mountain Activities (☎ 847897; www.blackmountain.co.uk; Three Cocks) is 1 mile past Glasbury.

Festivals & Events

The week-long **Hay Festival of Literature** (☎ box office 821299; www.hayfestival.com; 25 Lion St) is Britain's leading literary get-together and swamps the town with more than 80,000 visitors.

Dozens of readings, lectures, concerts and workshops attract a diverse, artistic crowd. If you don't book accommodation well in advance, forget about staying anywhere close by.

In 2006, star names included poet Seamus Heaney, BBC correspondent Frank Gardner (wheelchair-bound after being shot by al-Qaeda) and the mysterious and elusive Lemony Snicket, author of the immensely popular *Series of Unfortunate Events*.

Such has been the impact of the festival that spin-offs have been held in Italy, Brazil and Colombia in recent years, while the children's festival, **Hay Fever**, runs simultaneously for two-year-olds and up.

Sleeping

Radnors End Campsite (☎ 820780; sites per person £5) Simple but smart camping site with rudimentary facilities, 500m across Hay Bridge.

Oxford Cottage (☎ 820008; www.oxfordcottage.co.uk; Oxford Rd; d without bathroom £44; ☒) The owners of this B&B don't actually live in-house, so this feels more like an upmarket hostel than a home. The three rooms are full of character – sloping, squeaky floors – but don't have en suite, although there are two bathrooms. If you don't mind making your own breakfast, this is a great option.

Belmont House B&B (☎ 820718; Belmont Rd; d £50, s/d without bathroom £25/45) Good value, but then not as swish as some others. A trip to Belmont House might feel like a visit to grandma's, such is the dated design of the interior.

Old Post Office (☎ 820008; www.oldpost-office.co.uk; Llanigon; d from £50; ☒) Owned by the folks from Oxford Cottage, this beautifully rustic place is 2 miles southwest of town near Offa's Dyke Path.

Clifton House (☎ 821618; www.cliftonhousehay.co.uk; Belmont Rd; s/d £35/55; ☒) Beneath the gaze of Hay's castle, Clifton House is a striking Georgian town house with airy, en suite rooms and a commendable policy of organic and environmentally friendly products.

Start Bed & Breakfast (☎ 821391; www.the-start.net; s/d £35/60; ☒) Peacefully set on the fringes of town, this beautiful 18th-century house is a five-minute walk across Hay Bridge. The rooms are a touch floral, but all have en suite, TV and kettle, and the setting is wonderful.

Bear (☎ 821302; www.thebearhay.co.uk; Bear St; d from £60, s/d without bathroom £26/52; ☒) Probably still Hay's finest, the Bear goes the extra mile. Crisp white sheets set against exposed stone walls and original beams, with a liberal sprinkling of books, make this former coaching inn a top-notch choice that also excels with organic, Fairtrade breakfasts.

The nearest YHA hostel is Capel-y-Ffin (p702), 8 miles south.

Eating

Granary (☎ 820790; Broad St; dishes £1.50-8; ☒) 10am-5.30pm year-round, 8am-9pm school holidays & festival) Old-world café-diner, specialising in wholefoods and serving possibly the biggest and best-value cakes ever. Veggie dishes are recommended and, with a huge upstairs gallery, you're likely to find a seat even when the rain's pouring.

38 @ The Wheatsheaf (☎ 820186; Lion St; mains £5.50-11; ☒) lunch & dinner) Another wannabe gastropub with neutral décor. The food here is above average (if unsensational) and in-

cludes staples such as fish, curry, meat pies and pasta. The 38 Grill special should carry a health warning though: gammon, steak, black pudding, lamp chop, sausage, onion rings, tomato, chips, peas and a fried egg – you can just hear those arteries clogging.

Oscars Bistro (☎ 821193; High Town; mains £8-8.50; ☒) 10.30am-4.30pm) With generous sandwiches, vegetarian options and tasty local meat and fish dishes, Oscars has always been a popular option for a quick bite or something a little more leisurely.

One worthwhile pub is the **Old Black Lion** (☎ 820841; Lion St; mains £10.50-17.50), with interesting food such as Moroccan-lamb couscous with apricot and fig compote.

Spar supermarket is on Castle St.

Getting There & Away

Bus 39 stops en route between Hereford (£6.10, 55 minutes, about every two hours Monday to Friday, none on Sunday) and Brecon (40 minutes).

The summertime-Sundays Beacons Bus (p697) serves Hay from Hereford.

POWYS

Comprising two-thirds of Wales' scenic rural heartland, Powys is a region dominated by hills and valleys in a thousand shades of green. It is also the focus of the Welsh red kite community.

The region has very deep nationalistic roots. In medieval times it successfully fought off Norman invasion, and later formed part of the larger Pura Wallia ('under Welsh rule') area.

Today the county's verdant, peaceful undulations make it atmospheric walking and cycling country, through little towns blessed with character and otherworldly charm. Among a small grab of significant attractions, don't miss grand Powis Castle near Welshpool or the stimulating Centre for Alternative Technology near Machynlleth.

Orientation & Information

Powys is the heart of Wales. Centrally located, it extends from the undulating English border west to Ceredigion, and from the Brecon Beacons north to the border with Snowdonia.

The county was created in 1974 by combining southern Brecknockshire, central Rad-

norshire and northern Montgomeryshire. The northern part is often still referred to as Montgomeryshire.

Activities

CYCLING

Several towns make good bases for mountain biking, including Llanwrtyd Wells and Machynlleth (p708), both with easy and hard local routes. Route maps are available at tourist offices.

WALKING

Powys is crossed by two national long-distance trails: Offa's Dyke Path (see p663) and Glyndŵr's Way.

Glyndŵr's Way is a 135-mile, eight- to 10-day path contained within Powys and based on sites related to Owain Glyndŵr, Wales' warrior-statesman famed for rebelling against English rule in the early 15th century. The trail draws a great chevron through beautiful countryside between Knighton and Welshpool in the east (both towns also lie on Offa's Dyke Path) via Machynlleth in the west.

For details on both walks, contact the **Offa's Dyke Centre** (☎ 01547-528753; www.offasdyke.demon.co.uk/odc.htm) in Knighton.

The most comprehensive information on these paths can be found on the website of the association of **National Trails** (www.nationaltrail.co.uk), including details on access, variation in landscape and route highlights.

Getting There & Around

Public transport is less prolific here than in other parts of Wales, so plan ahead. Tourist offices stock detailed timetables, or consult **Traveline Cymru** (☎ 0870 608 2 608; www.traveline-cymru.org.uk).

On the trains, what you gain in scenery you lose in frequency. Routes include the Cambrian Main Line (Shrewsbury–Aberystwyth), connecting with the Cambrian Coaster at Machynlleth and continuing on to Pwllheli. The Heart of Wales line (Shrewsbury–Swansea; see boxed text, p694) runs across Powys and Mid Wales.

LLANWRTYD WELLS (LLANWRTYD)

☎ 01591 / pop 601

Bonkers Llanwrtyd (khlan-oor-tid) Wells is the daftest place in Mid Wales, with a series of events designed to keep it in the media spotlight.

KITE COMEBACK

In recent years a determined effort has been made to reintroduce the red kite to British skies. Once you've learned to identify its distinctive chestnut body and 2m wingspan, you can spot its aerial acrobatics all across remote Mid Wales.

Once the most common bird of prey throughout Britain, the kite found itself a victim of 16th-century agricultural expansion that led to it being ruthlessly hunted as vermin. By the 19th century it was flirting with extinction, lost to England and Scotland and reduced to a few pairs in the Tywi and Cothi Valleys of Wales.

Eventually, action was taken. Over one hundred years ago a community group formed its own protection programme, which went on to become the world's longest-running preservation campaign for any bird. The Welsh skies now support a healthy population of kites; hundreds of breeding pairs are thriving, supported by a burgeoning ecotourism scheme that provides dedicated bird hides and opportunities to join feeding sessions.

The town of Rhayader is the main focus for the kites; **Gigrin Farm** (☎ 01597-810243; www.gigrin.co.uk; adult/child £3/1; ♿ feedings 3pm Easter-Oct, 2pm Nov-Easter) is the main feeding centre. Feeding also takes place at Nant yr Arian Forest Visitor Centre, east of Aberystwyth, and Llanddeusan Red Kite Feeding Station near Llandovery (both with the same times as Gigrin Farm). Sightings are virtually guaranteed at the following centres: the Elan Valley Visitor Centre, near Rhayader; Gilfach Farm, north of Rhayader; and the Ynyshir RSPB Reserve, near Machynlleth.

For more information contact the **Rhayader tourist office** (☎ 01597-810591).

The little spa resort made the *Guinness Book of Records* as Britain's smallest town (an archaic award it has tried desperately to retain) and has long been famous for crazy sporting events that are invariably fuelled by local grog (see the boxed text, opposite).

There are no sights to speak of, but Llanwrtyd's **tourist office** (☎ 610666; tic@celt.ruralwales.org; Ty Barcud, The Square; ♿ 10am-4pm Mon & Wed, 10am-6pm Thu, 10am-8pm Fri & Sat) is open year-round to support the zany activities, and has a café with homemade cakes, local crafts and internet access (£1 per 20 minutes, £2.50 per hour).

With the Cambrian Mountains to the northwest and Mynydd Eppynt to the southeast, the town is in the heart of red kite country (see boxed text, above). Llanwrtyd is also a stop on the handsome Heart of Wales line (see the boxed text, p694).

Cyclists can rent bikes from **Cycles Irfon** (☎ 610668; Ffos Rd; per half-/full day £10/15). For mountain-biking options contact the **Red Kite Mountain Bike Centre** (☎ 610236) at the slightly shabby **Neuadd Arms** (☎ 610236; www.neuaddarms.hotel.co.uk; The Square; s/d £32/55), the town hotel that is often the focus for the nutty events.

Fresh fish features heavily at **Drovers Rest** (☎ 610264; The Square; mains £14-16) – try salmon with chillies, honey and herbs – but you can also enjoy glazed pan-fried lamb or a simple afternoon tea in this Egon Ronay-recommended place that also has cottage-style

bedrooms (singles/doubles £25/45). The hosts also arrange activities such as mountain biking, horse riding and fishing.

Stonecroft Hostel (☎ 610327; www.stonecroft.co.uk; Dol-y-coed Rd; 1-6-bed r per person £16.50) is a decent independent place, affiliated with the **Stonecroft Inn** (☎ 610332; mains £2.80-6.50), which serves tasty, well-priced food, such as curry, fish and chips and jacket spuds.

LLANDRINDOD WELLS (LLANDRINDOD)

☎ 01597 / pop 5024

This Victorian spa town struck gold by touting its 'special' waters to the well-to-do gentry who rolled in for rest and recuperation. The grand architecture of the era remains, but today the town is mostly popular with geriatric holidaymakers.

You can still take a drink directly from the **chalybeate spring** ('chalybeate' refers to the iron salts) in historic Rock Park, or promenade around the slightly staid lake, a five-minute walk from the tourist office. Every August the townsfolk wind back the clock for the week-long **Victorian Festival**.

The **tourist office** (☎ 822600; www.visit-llandrindod.co.uk; Temple St; ♿ 9.30am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9.30am-4pm Sat) shares its home in an Art Nouveau motorcar showroom with the **National Cycle Exhibition** (☎ 825531; www.cyclemuseum.org.uk; adult/child £3/1; ♿ 10am-4pm Easter-Oct, call for hrs Nov-Feb), which tells

the fascinating story of push-bikes through the ages.

Llandrindod lies on the wonderful Heart of Wales line (see the boxed text, p694).

KNIGHTON (TREF-Y-CLAWDD)

☎ 01547 / pop 2743

Knighton (Tref-y-Clawdd) is a bubbly little town so close to England that the train station actually lies across the border. The main attraction for visitors is walking – Offa's Dyke Path passes by, and this is also the terminus of Glyndŵr's Way.

Near the town's central clock tower, the **tourist office** shares the same premises as the **Offa's Dyke Centre** (☎ 528753; oda@offasdyke.demon.co.uk; West St; ♿ 9am-5.30pm Easter-Oct, 9am-5pm Mon-Fri Nov-Apr).

Two miles southeast of town, the hilltop **Spaceguard Centre** (☎ 01547-520247; www.spaceguard.uk.com; Llanshay Lane; adult/child £5/2.50), in the former Powys Observatory, is home to an asteroid and comet research centre. You can peer down the telescopes on a guided tour – who knows, you might make a unique discovery.

No, you haven't stepped back to the 1970s, **Fleece House** (☎ 520168; Market St; s/d £35/50; ♿) is

just a little dated. Looks aren't everything though, and you can expect a friendly welcome and comfortable stay here.

Knighton lies on the scenic Heart of Wales line (see the boxed text, p694).

WELSPHOL (Y TRALLWNG)

☎ 01938 / pop 5539

Another 'charming', 'bustling' valley town, but not really worth visiting unless you plan to see some of the outlying sights.

The **tourist office** (☎ 552043; ♿ 9.30am-5pm Easter-Oct, 9.30am-6pm Nov-Easter) is by the Spar supermarket: head along Church St from the main traffic lights in the old town centre.

Sights

One mile south of town, **Powis Castle & Garden** (NT; ☎ 551929; castle & garden £9.60, garden only £6.60; ♿ castle 1-4pm Thu-Mon Mar & Oct, 1-5pm Thu-Mon Apr-Sep, garden 11am-6pm Thu-Mon Mar & Oct, Thu-Mon Apr-Sep) are world-famous for the steeply terraced garden of yew trees and rare plants. The red-sandstone fortress dates from 1200, but was furnished and adapted by generations of Herberts and Clives. The elaborate state bedroom has undergone recent restoration work and is

LLANWRTYD LUNACY

In the late 1970s a group of Llanwrtyd locals devised a plan to try to extend the tourist season. Several years (or beers?) later, what started as a wheeze turned in to a bulging calendar of silliness.

- **New Year Walk-In** (New Year's Eve) Village walk where participants light flaming torches, sing merry songs and ceremonially parade with an old horse's skull.
- **Saturnalia Beer Festival** (January) Roman-themed festival including traditional food such as *Lumbuli Assi Ita Ficent* (stuffed testicles) and a 'best-dressed slave' competition.
- **Man vs Horse Marathon** (May-June) Competition is surprisingly close in this gruelling 22-mile cross-country race. Runner Huw Lobb made history (and bagged £25,000) in 2004 by being the first non-equine winner, an accolade he still holds.
- **World Mountain Bike Bog Snorkelling Championships** (July) Donning wetsuits and snorkels, competitors cycle underwater through two lengths of a 55m trench dug in a nearby bog, surfacing twice to navigate. Richard Holmes was the 2006 winner, coming home in under a minute while dressed as James Bond.
- **World Bog Snorkelling Championships** (August Bank Holiday) As above but this time the swimmers take to the murky waters.
- **Real Ale Wobble & Ramble** (November) In conjunction with the Mid Wales Beer Festival, riders and walkers sup free ale at every checkpoint. To avoid the long arm of the law, none of the routes uses public roads.

Schedules are subject to revision, so confirm with the tourist office or **Green Events Ltd** (☎ 01591-610666; www.green-events.co.uk).

FINE FARMING FILLY

Every year in late July the cream of the Welsh farming community converges on Builth Wells for the **Royal Welsh Show** (www.rwas.co.uk), the country's premier agriculture and livestock festival. The four-day meeting sees an influx of wax jackets and rubber wellies as punters flock to see boastful bulls, handsome horses and pedigree porkers. Other attractions include the King's Troop Royal Horse Artillery and lashings of the freshest, finest food.

If it all sounds a bit stuffy, think again. Unprecedented scandal erupted in 2006 when a local supplier threw a party celebrating a major contract, during which one female reveller performed a full striptease and impromptu pole dance before 150 open-mouthed spectators. So great was the shock that the Welsh Black Cattle Society called an extraordinary general meeting and one local news headline screamed 'Cattle Shed Naked Dance Inquiry', which conjured an altogether different but equally marvellous image.

From Llandrindod Wells take the scenic Heart of Wales railway line to Builth Road (10 minutes) or drive south on the A470.

now on public display. Indian treasures are on display in the integral **Clive Museum**.

The vintage **Welshpool & Llanfair Railway** (☎ 810441; www.wllr.org.uk; return trip £10.50; 🚗 most days Jun-Aug, most Sat & Sun Mar-Apr, Sep-Oct & Dec) opened for business in 1902, closed in 1956 and was reopened by enthusiasts in 1960. It chuffs for 8 charming miles to Llanfair Caerinion. Phone for detailed schedules.

Getting There & Away

Bus 75 comes from Shrewsbury (45 minutes, about every two hours Monday to Saturday), as does National Express coach 420 (£5, 35 minutes, daily) en route from London (£24.50, 5½ hours) via Birmingham (£7.80, 2¼ hours), continuing to Aberystwyth (£11.20, 1¼ hours).

Welshpool is on the Cambrian Main Line between Shrewsbury (20 minutes) and Aberystwyth (£8.70, 1½ hours), with services about every two hours (fewer on Sunday).

MACHYNLLETH

☎ 01654 / pop 2147

Machynlleth (ma-hun-khleh) is a peculiar mix of staunch Welsh heritage and far-out hippy living. The town is known as the 'ancient capital of Wales', as it is here that nationalist hero Owain Glyndŵr is thought to have established the country's first parliament in 1404. In the 21st century, however, you're more likely to trip over a tie-dyed druid or spiritual healer than a blood-curdling warrior.

That's because of the nearby Centre for Alternative Technology (CAT), where greenies have spent more than 30 years creating methods for sustainable living. Do not leave

the area without checking out their work (see the boxed text, opposite). In keeping with the unusual vibe, the town clock resembles an archaic, stone-built space rocket.

Machynlleth is also a good walking base, set amid hills near the head of the Dovey (Dyfi) Valley. To the north the mountain massif of Cader Idris (893m) looms large, located in the south of Snowdonia National Park (p733).

The **tourist office** (☎ 702401; mactic@powys.gov.uk; Maengwyn St; 🕒 9.30am-5pm Mon-Sat, 9.30am-4pm Sun Apr-Sep) is next to the Owain Glyndŵr Parliament House. Across the road, internet is free at the **library** (☎ 702322; Maengwyn St).

Sights

The late-medieval slate **Owain Glyndŵr Parliament House** (☎ 702827; adult £1; 🕒 11am-3pm Mon-Tue & Thu-Sat, 10am-4pm Wed Easter-Sep), in the main street, actually post-dates Glyndŵr's original venue, but probably resembles it closely. The displays are rather listless given Glyndŵr's contribution to Welsh history.

A combined art gallery and converted chapel have developed into the **Museum of Modern Art for Wales** (MOMA; ☎ 703355; www.moma.wales.org.uk; Heol Penrallt; admission free; 🕒 10am-4pm Mon-Sat). The whitewashed art space displays permanent and changing exhibitions of Welsh work (some for sale), while the handsome, galleried **Tabernacle chapel** is now a 400-seat auditorium that boasts recording-standard acoustics. It is the scene of August's impressive week-long **Gŵyl Machynlleth Festival** of classical music.

Activities

With such close proximity to mountain and valley landscapes, this region provides both

challenging **hikes** and gentle strolls. Cader Idris is the main mountain; the nearest (and strenuous) summit track starts from Minfordd, a 7-mile bus ride to the north. The tourist office can provide details of 15 kinder, shorter routes.

The area is also a centre for **mountain biking**. For route information and rentals, go to **Holey Trail** (☎ 700411; www.theholeytrail.com; per half-/full day £14/18) or outdoor specialists **Greenstiles** (☎ 703543; per half-/full day £12/16), both on Maengwyn St. For cycle touring, the cross-Wales Lôn Las Cymru (p651) route passes through town and over the striking Millennium Bridge across the River Dyfi en route to the CAT.

Sleeping

Corris Hostel (☎ 761686; www.canolfancorris.com; dm £13, incl breakfast £16) Sitting in the beautiful mountain village of Corris, 5 miles up the valley north of Machynlleth, this former schoolhouse in an ex-YHA hostel is now back in private hands. Accommodation is clean and the centre has won awards for its ecological philosophies.

Plas Llwyngwern (☎ 703970; Pantperthog; s without bathroom £20, d with/without bathroom £45/40; 🚻) Space is the thing you get most of at this sprawling old country house, popular with visitors to the CAT – it's just 250m away. Nestling amid leafy tranquillity, rooms here are jumbos, although only two have en suite. If the weath-

er's fine, relaxing in the huge gardens is well recommended.

Maenllwyd (☎ 702928; Newtown Rd; s/d/t £35/55/70) If period charm is more your bag, this pastel-pink Victorian has bucket-loads. The eight rooms offer flexible accommodation, all with en suite and some atmospherically up in the rafters. There's a dedicated guest lounge, where you can tinkle on the piano, and substantial gardens.

Eryl House (☎ 703591; www.erylhouse.co.uk; Newtown Rd; s/d from £35/57) This modern place has crisp twin rooms and a breakfast room that wouldn't be out of place in a Scandinavian furniture shop. It's five minutes' walk east down the high street, away from the clock and tourist office.

For camping, **Gwerniago Farm** (☎ 791227; Penal; 2-person tent sites £9) is a tent-only area, 3 miles west on the A493. **Llwyngwern Farm** (☎ 702492; Corris; 2-person tent sites £10) is convenient for the CAT.

Eating & Drinking

Quarry Wholefood Café (☎ 702624; Maengwyn St; dishes £2-6) Vegetarian and organic place run by the folks from the CAT, with a big emphasis on Fairtrade. It's not the hippest place but it sticks to what it knows, with good results.

Wynnstay Hotel (☎ 702941; Maengwyn St; mains £10; 🍳 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Old coaching inn commended in the national press for top-notch dining in stylish surrounds. Try local game

GREEN IN THE HILLS

In achingly beautiful wooded valleys near Machynlleth, a small but dedicated band of people has spent 30 years practising sustainability at the thought-provoking **Centre for Alternative Technology** (CAT; ☎ 01654-705950; www.cat.org.uk; adult/child £8/4; 🕒 10am-5.30pm Easter-mid-Jul, Sep & Oct, 9.30am-6pm mid-Jul-Aug, 10am-dusk Oct-Easter).

If you've never thought of installing a composting toilet (straw-bale urinal, anyone?) or insulating your house with sheep's wool, you certainly will after a visit here. The CAT is a virtually self-sufficient cooperative where more than 50 exhibits demonstrate how wind, water and solar power provide food, heating and telecommunications.

The visit starts with a ride up the side of an old quarry in an ingenious water-balanced cable car. A drum beneath the top car fills with stored rainwater, and is then drawn down while the bottom car is hauled up. Other resourceful exhibits include a solar-powered telephone and large-scale community turbine. Kids love the interactive displays and adventure playground, and there's a great licensed organic-wholefood restaurant. The site had become a bit shabby – maybe too much hippy living? – but seems to be getting its act together again.

The CAT lies 3 miles north of Machynlleth on the A487 road to Dolgellau. Hourly buses (four on Sunday) run from the clock tower in Machynlleth; bus 34 stops directly at the visitor centre, while buses 32, X32 and 35 drop off in Pantperthog, 10 minutes' walk away. Arrive by bus or bike for a £1 discount.

(some shot by the landlord), fresh seafood, air-cured beef or a wood-fired pizza. Here's a challenge for fisherfolk: bring your catch and the Wynnstay will cook it for you. There are decent rooms (singles/doubles from £55/80) as well if you want to stay over.

Machynlleth is overrun with takeaways – **Dick's Diner** (☎ 703346; Maengwyn St; fish & chips £3.50) fries up decent fish and chips.

Getting There & Away

Machynlleth is on the Cambrian Main Line railway. Services run from Shrewsbury (£11.90, 1¼ hours, every two hours, five on Sunday) and Aberystwyth (30 minutes, every two hours, six on Sunday).

Bus X32 passes through Machynlleth. Northbound it serves Bangor (£5, 2¼ hours), Caernarfon (£5, 1¾ hours) and Dolgellau (30 minutes). Southbound it serves Aberystwyth (45 minutes). Services run about every two hours Monday to Friday (two on Sunday).

CEREDIGION

Up and down the coast of County Ceredigion, Wales' heart beats strong. This is a steadfastly nationalist area, with a spirit forged through the 11th-century Norman resistance. Here, far from the English border, Welsh remains the first language of three out of every five inhabitants.

Aberystwyth is the county capital, an old seaside town of traditional values fused with modern university verve. For steam buffs, it's also the place to ride one of the country's best railways.

Getting Around

In addition to the useful nationwide *Wales Bus, Rail and Tourist Map & Guide*, a public transport map and guide for Ceredigion is available from tourist offices or **Ceredigion County Council** (☎ 01970-633555). For further information, consult **Traveline Cymru** (☎ 0870 608 2608; www.traveline-cymru.org.uk).

The main-line railway service runs to Aberystwyth, via Welshpool and Machynlleth, from Shrewsbury (connecting at Machynlleth with the Cambrian Coaster for stations to Pwllheli).

Ceredigion is covered by the North & Mid WalesRover and Day Ranger value tickets (see p693).

ABERYSTWYTH

☎ 01970 / pop 15,935

A faded Georgian seaside resort might seem an improbable location for a large university, but Aberystwyth is lucky to have several thousand students who bring a much-needed contemporary touch to an otherwise drab town. Buzzing during term-time, the town has an alternative feel that pervades through the decent cafés and lively arts scene.

The town was founded by Edward I, whose 13th-century fortress was captured by Owain Glyndŵr in 1404 and finally destroyed by Oliver Cromwell in 1649. The castle remains are now atmospherically illuminated at night.

In 1864 the railways arrived and transformed Aberystwyth into a suddenly fashionable seaside destination. In 1872 it was chosen as the site of the first college of the University of Wales, and in 1907 the town became the home of the National Library of Wales.

The informative **tourist office** (☎ 612125; Terrace Rd; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat Sep-Jun, 10am-6pm daily Jun-early Sep) shares a building with the county museum.

Free internet is available at the **library** (☎ 617464; Corporation St). **Maes-y-Môr Laundrette** (Bath St) is near the tourist office.

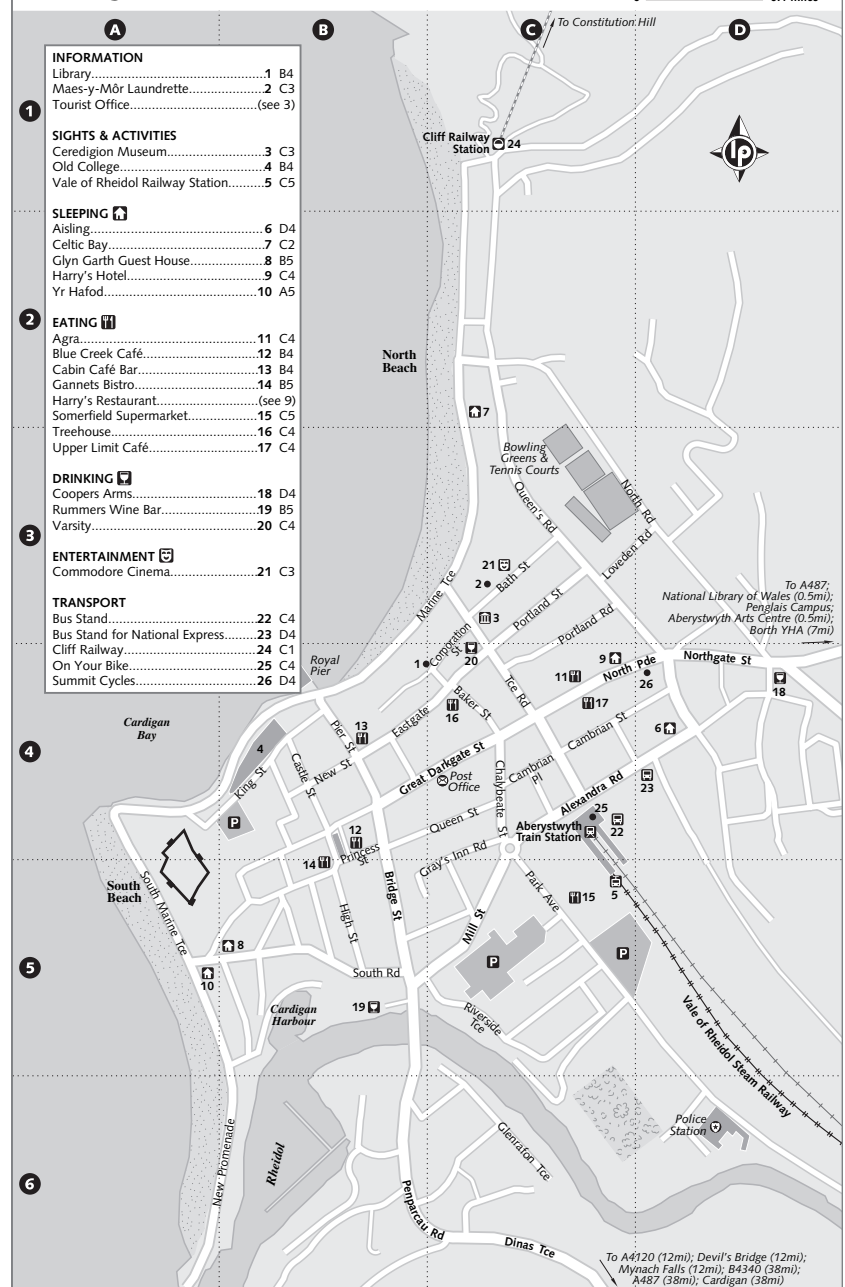
Sights

The best attraction in Aberystwyth is the one-hour ride on the restored **Vale of Rheidol Steam Railway** (☎ 625819; www.rheidolrailway.co.uk; adult/child return trip £12.50/3). This is one of the most attractive of Wales' restored railways, puffing 12 miles up the valley to Devil's Bridge (p713).

The line opened in 1902 to transport lead and timber, and the Great Western Railway engines date from 1923. The shortest full-line return trip is three hours; trains run at least twice daily (from next to the main-line station) from the end of May to the beginning of September, and fewer days at other times. Call for a full timetable.

A major Victorian attraction, the 100-year-old electric **Cliff Railway** (☎ 617642; www.aberystwythcliff railway.co.uk; return trip £1.75; ☎ 10am-5.30pm Easter-Oct, 10am-6.30pm Jul-Aug) grinds to the top of Constitution Hill (148m), with good views over the bay and north to Snowdonia. You can also experience the world's largest **camera obscura**, a simple optical instrument that projects images from the outside world onto a circular screen.

ABERYSTWYTH



MYTHS & LEGENDS

Wales is awash with sagas inspired by medieval ancestry, bloody conflict and untamed landscapes. From generation to generation, elaborate tales of enchantment and wizardry have been bequeathed like rich family legacies.

As early as the 9th century tales of mystery and heroism were compiled in the *Historia Britonum*. But the finest impressions come from the Mabinogion, a 14th-century tome containing occasionally terrifying tales of Celtic magic.

King Arthur is a recurrent character, especially in the Mabinogion. One of British legend's most romanticised heroes, he was believed to have been a 5th- or 6th-century cavalry leader who rallied British fighters against the marauding Saxon invaders. Time transformed Arthur in to a king of magic deeds, with wise magician Merlin by his side and a loyal band of followers in support. Arthur went on to slay Rita Gawr, a giant who butchered kings, in an epic battle on Mt Snowdon. Finally, Merlin delivered the dying hero to Avalon, which may well have been saintly Bardsey Island off the Llyn Peninsula.

Watery images also feature strongly, most famously in the tale of Cardigan Bay. It is said that Seithnyn, keeper of the dykes that held the sea at bay, forgot to close the sluice gates after an evening's drinking. Water submerged 16 cities across the land, and to this day it is alleged you can hear the muffled peal of sunken church bells.

The world of Welsh myths is richly imaginative. For more see Robin Gwyndaf's detailed bilingual *Chwedlau Gwerin Cymru: Welsh Folk Tales*.

Occupying the former Coliseum theatre and cinema, the **Ceredigion Museum** (☎ 633088; Terrace Rd; admission free; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat) has a sizable local-interest gallery, but in all honesty the exhibits of Aberystwyth's history are far from spellbinding.

Overlooking the town, the **National Library of Wales** (☎ 623800; www.llgc.org.uk; ☎ 9.30am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9.30am-5pm Sat) sits proudly on the hilltop and houses more than five million volumes, including some of Wales' most important literary treasures. The country's oldest text, the 12th-century *Black Book of Carmarthen*, is among its prized assets. The library also holds changing exhibitions of art and photography.

Opposite the shabby old pier on the seafont, the grand **Old College** was intended to be a hotel, but never received a single guest. Instead, the University of Wales was founded here in 1872.

Activities

For leisurely **cyding**, the quiet Rheidol Trail runs 11 miles from the seafont up the pretty Rheidol Valley – it's easy and low on cars. Ten miles east of Aberystwyth, dedicated **mountain-bike trails** crisscross the hills of Plynlimon at Nant yr Arian.

You can rent family and mountain bikes from **On Your Bike** (☎ 626532; Railway Station; per day £15).

Sleeping

Borth YHA Hostel (☎ 0870 770 5708; borth@yha.org.uk; dm £12; ☎ Easter-Oct by advance booking) You're just 20m from a large sandy beach at this old Edwardian house, 7 miles north of town.

Yr Hafod (☎ 617579; www.yrhafod.co.uk; 1 South Marine Tce; s/d without bathroom £24/50, d with bathroom £64) Minimal rooms, clean facilities, some great sea views, tidy guest lounge and full breakfast (veggie burger if you fancy) make this a good central option.

Aisling (☎ 626980; 21 Alexandra Rd; s/d without bathroom £26/48) It's business as usual at clean and cheerful Aisling, with flouncy decoration, friendly welcome and shared bathrooms.

Glyn Garth Guest House (☎ 615050; South Rd; s without bathroom from £26, d with bathroom from £58; ☎) Opposite Yr Hafod, this old, family-run place has slightly dated décor but a homely feel. Rooms are spotless and you can hear the sea lapping on the shore.

Celtic Bay (☎ 617788; 62 Marine Tce; s/d £30/50; ☎) Recently modernised, Celtic Bay makes a change from the faded guesthouses usually found in seaside towns. The Ritz it ain't, but it's a shade more up to date than most of its rivals (although none of the single rooms have en suite).

Harry's Hotel (☎ 612647; www.harrysaberystwyth.com; 40-46 North Pde; d from £65) Aberystwyth's smartest address. Rooms at Harry's are spacious and feature comfy beds, although

light sleepers might find the street noise a distraction. The restaurant (see below) is recommended.

Eating

Agra (☎ 636999; 36 North Pde; dishes £2-8) Recommended Indian affair where you can enjoy a flavoursome curry while quaffing your own booze.

Blue Creek Café (St James Sq) Blue really is the colour here – the exterior is a fantastic rich hue. Inside, enjoy fine coffee and cake (try banana), or tasty veggie dishes. Sofas, games and magazines mean you might be here a while.

Cabin Café Bar (☎ 617398; Pier St) This Aberystwyth institution is a great place to sip coffee and watch the world go by from your woody little booth. Walls are adorned with black-and-white stills from the golden age of Hollywood – when the rain's coming down it's an atmospheric place to hang out.

Treehouse (☎ 615791; 14 Baker St; meals £4-7; ☎ 9.30am-5.30pm Mon-Sat) Take a coffee, chomp a cake, go African with chicken couscous, Thai with a veggie green curry or stay local with dressed crab salad. Whatever you choose, it's all fresh, all organic and all delicious. The shop downstairs stocks all manner of healthy produce to take away.

Harry's Restaurant (☎ 612647; www.harrysaberystwyth.com; 40-46 North Pde; mains £7.50-14.50; ☎ Mon-Sat) At the hotel of the same name, this is a swanky but unpretentious option. From simple dishes such as open steak sandwiches to more contemporary offerings such as grilled salmon with asparagus and squid-ink pasta, the quality speaks volumes.

MONEY FOR NOTHING

On 19 June 2006 a group of lucky Aberystwythians hit the jackpot when a mysterious man shouted 'Who wants free money?' before launching a bundle of used notes into the air on Alexandra Rd. Passers-by scrambled around trying to pocket the fluttering fortune, estimated at between £5,000 and £20,000.

The benefactor was subsequently arrested by police and given 'medical treatment' and, while some wallets were padded, a sizable amount of the cash was handed in amid a general bonhomie of trustworthiness and old-fashioned British honesty.

Upper Limit Café (☎ 07814 786863; 27 North Pde; mains £8.50-13.50) How many different dishes can you think of that incorporate bacon, sausage, beans and egg? Chances are the folks at Upper Limit, a traditional British caff, will have thought of a *lot* more.

Gannets Bistro (☎ 617164; 7 St James Sq; mains £8.50-13.50) It looks like a butcher's shop with its red-and-white stripy canopy, but gannets have been flocking to cosy Gannets for years (since 1981) to sample the fish and meat staples.

The Somerfield supermarket is beside the train station.

Drinking & Entertainment

Aberystwyth has more pubs and bars than most towns of this size, thanks mainly to the students. Try some of these:

Aberystwyth Arts Centre (☎ 623232; www.aberystwythartscentre.co.uk; Penglais Rd) Based at the university, the town's main arts venue presents film, drama, dance and music programmes.

Commodore Cinema (☎ 612421; www.commodorecinema.co.uk; Bath St; admission £3.50) Check current films here.

Coopers Arms (☎ 624050; Northgate St) Popular Welsh venue with occasional live music.

Rummers Wine Bar (Bridge St) Near the sea. You can get DJs and live bands here.

Varsity (☎ 615234; Portland St) Big booze hall with little soul but plenty of punters.

Getting There & Away

The 420 National Express coach to London (£27, seven hours) runs daily. Other services include the X32 to Machynlleth (45 minutes, about two-hourly Monday to Saturday, two on Sunday), Dolgellau (1¼ hours), Porthmadog (£5, 2¼ hours), Carmarthen ((£5, three hours) and Bangor ((£5, 3½ hours), and the X50 to Cardigan (1¼ hours, four Monday to Saturday, none on Sunday).

Aberystwyth is the terminus of the Cambrian Main Line. Trains run from Shrewsbury (£15.90, 1¼ hours, every two hours, five on Sunday). For connections with the Cambrian Coaster line (northwards to Snowdonia: Barmouth, Porthmadog and Pwllheli), change at Machynlleth.

AROUND ABERYSTWYTH Devil's Bridge & Falls

For a good day trip, ride the Vale of Rheidol Steam Railway (p710) to the waterfalls at Devil's Bridge (Pontarfynach).

Below this hamlet, 12 miles inland, the Rivers Mynach and Rheidol tumble together off the Plynlimon (Pumlumon) Hills down a deep, wooded gorge. Just above the rivers' confluence the Rheidol drops 90m in a series of spectacular **waterfalls** viewed from a steep and narrow woodland path (adult £2.50). Spanning the Mynach, **Devil's Bridge** is itself a famous crossing point where three bridges are

stacked above each other. The lowest was supposedly built by the Knights Templar before 1188, the middle one in 1753 and the uppermost road-bridge in recent times. The viewing platform (adult £1) is a 10-minute round trip on foot; wear sensible footwear.

Unfortunately there's no way to avoid the charge; if you don't cough up, you won't see a sausage.