

Travel & Outdoors

WISH YOU WERE HERE



Letters from heaven

The beautiful Channel Island of Guernsey has a fascinating history, as a new film set there during the Second World War will reveal, writes **Laura Millar**

The taste, I have to admit, isn't half bad; a mouthful of hot, fluffy mash, flavoured with sweet red beetroot, followed by the satisfying chew of the topping and base, formed by the humble spud's baked peelings. I'm biting into a modern-day version of a potato peel pie, created specially by the chef at the Ship and Crown pub, which sits by the waterfront of St Peter Port, Guernsey's picturesque, harbour-side capital.

Both the pub, and the dish, have a direct association with one of the most infamous periods in this little island's history: the Second World War, which indirectly led to the writing of a lively, evocative and life-affirming novel, *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society*, which has, to date, sold over five million copies worldwide.

I'm here because the fictional tale of how London-based writer, Juliet Ashton, ends up discovering a diverse group of islanders who formed a reading club during the war, has just been made into a film.

It's told through a series of letters

– between Juliet and her publisher, Sidney Stark; between Juliet and Dawsey Adams, a farmer who stumbles across her name and starts a correspondence; and between Juliet and Dawsey's friends, who set up the Literary and Potato Peel Society as a way of passing the dark days, and even darker nights, of the German Occupation.

The book was written by American author, Mary Ann Shaffer, who was inspired after becoming stranded by fog in Guernsey airport during a visit. Stuck with nothing to read, her interest was caught by one of the many factual books for sale about the period, and after years of extensive research, her novel was published in 2008, just after she sadly died of cancer.

Ten years on, the film has been directed by *Four Weddings and a Funeral's* Mike Newell, and stars Lily James, Matthew Goode, and Penelope Wilton.

Much of the reality of it all is brought home at the Occupation Museum



Moulin Huet Bay on Guernsey, main; a scene from the new film *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society*, above

I am somewhat surprised, however, when I meet up with local tour guide Gill Girard, who helped the filmmakers with their research, to find out that nothing was actually shot here.

"Unfortunately," explains Gill, "not enough of the locations, such as the harbour, look enough now like they did back then." As a result, most of it was shot in Devon, and the more I see of the island, divided into ten parishes linked by lush, rolling fields, stretches of golden sandy beach, and delicately scented bluebell woods, the more I really hope Devon has done it justice.

Hitler had had his eye on Guernsey for a while. Due to its position as the most westerly of the eight inhabited Channel Islands, he saw it as part of the "Atlantic Wall" which ran along

the northern European coast from where he could defend Nazi-occupied territory from the United Kingdom.

Mindful of this, along with the sights – and the sounds – of the smoke, bombs and warfare being waged less than 30 miles across the water from them in Normandy, in late June, 1940, Guernsey's residents came to the decision to evacuate the island's children to Britain.

In all, 17,000 young people and their teachers left, almost halving the population of 42,000, and bereft parents would not see, or hear from, their offspring again for five years.

But it was timely; on 28 June, believing the lorries parked along the pier were ammunition trucks, a German air raid bombed the harbour, killing over 30 people. Realising Guernsey was demilitarised, it paved the way for German forces to flood in, two days later, by air and sea.

The Ship and Crown (then the Crown Hotel), where I sample my potato peel pie, was used as the German Harbour Office, and other businesses, houses and buildings were swiftly requisitioned as lodgings or storage for the army. Locals were made to drive on the other side of the road, communication with the outside world was banned, curfews were imposed, and so was rationing. You were punished for breaking any

of these rules; hence why, in the novel, the character of Elizabeth McKenna, on creeping home after curfew invents an absorbing book club as the reason for being out so late.

Guernsey's staggeringly beautiful coastline was soon blighted by the backbreaking construction – by thousands of prisoners of war brought over by the army – of ugly, concrete fortifications, sticking out like carbuncles all over the island. Hundreds of acres of tunnels were dug underground, too, for keeping ammunition and accommodating soldiers. Today, it's jarring to drive from one pretty, pebbly beach, like Cobo Bay, to another, only to see a large gun rearing up above a cliff, or a Brutalist-looking direction-finding tower silhouetted sinisterly against the powder-blue sky.

Much of the reality of it all is brought home at the island's compelling Occupation Museum (germanoccupationmuseum.co.uk), a vast, sprawling collection of artefacts from the war, which started as a hobby by local man Richard Heaume.

After their eventual surrender here on 9 May 1945, now celebrated annually as Liberation Day, the Germans scarpered, leaving almost everything behind, from machine guns to uniforms. But it's the mementoes of ordinary life trying to go on as before which are the most poignant: recipes for how to make coffee out of parsnips, tea from bramble leaves, or, indeed, pie out of potato peelings; flyers for theatre shows, aimed at boosting morale; replacement bicycle tyres made from thick rope threaded through hosepipe, or a tractor made entirely from parts of other machines.

Despite the hardships, however, locals were generally well-treated. They could still gather to gossip and shop, ration-books permitting, and I follow in their footsteps around the winding lanes of St Peter Port's commercial Arcade, across the cobbled Market Square, through the covered Market building and onto Fountain Street. Today these streets are lined with high street stores, independent boutiques, cafes, bars and restaurants. The town also commemorates two very famous visitors; one who just spent

a day, and one who lived here for 15 years. Firstly, on the harbourfront is a statue of Prince Albert; his wife, Queen Victoria is similarly sculpted in bronze, in the beautiful Candie Gardens, a public park covered in colourful camellias, rhododendrons and azaleas. Towering over them is the tall, thin Victoria Tower; these all celebrate the occasion when the couple stopped off at the island in 1846, the first time a reigning monarch had graced Guernsey with their presence. The second is French author, Victor Hugo; banished from his homeland for opposing Napoleon III, he sailed to Guernsey, which he called 'a rock of hospitality and freedom' and made his home in Hauteville House, perched high above the harbour. It was here he finished his masterpiece, *Les Misérables*.

Huge inspiration to creatives such as Hugo, and the painter Auguste Renoir, who spent a month here, captivated by peaceful Moulin Huet Bay, is the island's coast.

Circumvented by both cliff-high, and sea-level paths, they are the best way to take in Guernsey's outstanding natural beauty. On my last morning I set off from sheltered Fermain Bay to St Peter Port – a walk described in Shaffer's novel, and known to be popular with Hugo – and follow the lanes etched into the earth as they skim the very edge of the island, lined with trees through which I can gaze down onto the startling turquoise of the gently lapping sea below. No longer are enemy planes flying overhead, or gunships anchored in the port; but Guernsey will never forget its traumatic past – nor the many moments of light which kept its plucky residents going. ■

Logan Air flies direct to Guernsey from Glasgow between 26 May and 15 September 2018, loganair.co.uk. Alternatively, fly from Gatwick with aurigny.co.uk from £49.99 one way. Doubles at the Bella Luce hotel start from £138 per night, www.bellalucehotel.com. Island tours are available via gillgirardtourguide.com. The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Society is released on Friday. For more information, see www.visitguernsey.com



The Occupation Museum has a vast collection of artefacts from the war

GASTRO GETAWAY



Food glorious food

Michelin star meals are in abundance at this annual gastronomic experience set in one of Portugal's finest hotels, finds Rosalind Erskine

If sun, sea and a serious amount of good food is your idea of a perfect holiday then the Conrad Algarve's Culinary Extravaganza is definitely worth booking. Hosted by one of the world's leading chefs, Heinz Beck, this three-day event brings together the pick of the crop of Hilton's chefs, many of whom boast a Michelin star or two.

A total of 15 chefs served up lavish dinners, laid-back lunches and a sunny barbecue brunch in various locations within this five-star resort during my stay.

After landing in Faro, I joined my group at the opening night of the Culinary Extravaganza. Held in the lobby of the beautiful Conrad Algarve – which has been designed to resemble a Portuguese Neo-Classical Palace from the 18th century – this was by far the largest and most extravagant dinner of the three days. A temporary kitchen had been set up in the lobby lounge, and this is where chefs Heinz Beck, Ricardo Costa, Maurizio Serva and Jacob Jan Boerma prepared their dishes. These included basil tortellini with lyophilised (freeze-dried) mozzarella and tomato salad water and artichoke egg with topinambur, mint drops and white truffles. Entertainment such

as dancing, singing and acrobatics were performed between courses. Specially curated welcome cocktails were mixed and served at the tables, with sommelier-paired wines accompanying each course with each meal at every event.

With the event ending around 1am, I finally had some time to enjoy my King Deluxe room, which included a huge king bed, desk area, balcony with pool views and marble clad en suite with bath and separate rain shower. Guests attending the Culinary Extravaganza can look forward to little extras in their room such as a bottle of Espumante Bruto sparkling wine.

Day two was kicked off with a laid-back, sunny barbecue held in the hotel's gardens. A buffet selection of dishes from Joe Barza from the Conrad Cairo, Franco Luise from the Hilton Prague and Osvalde Silva were the perfect start to another day.

The evening of day two was the ultimate Michelin star dining experience, with seven courses being served throughout the night. Held in Heinz Beck's Gusto Restaurant, chefs Jacob Jan Boerma, Juan Amador and Heinz himself showcased their award-winning fare in dishes that included duck tortellini with

pumpkin purée, Grana Padano fondue and white truffle and calf sweetbread served with lemon and yuzu, texture of carrots and jus of lemongrass.

The final day wound down with the "Suite Celebration" lunch, held in the award-winning Roof Garden Suite with its infinity pool, retractable rooftop, private terrace (accessed via a private lift) and a personal host. This more intimate event included savoury, seafood-led dishes from the Conrad's own Osvalde Silva, Chris Jefferson from the Hilton London and picture perfect sweet treats from Idan Hadad from the Hilton Tel Aviv.

And the final meal of the event (and trust me, you won't want to

If all the eating takes it out of you, the hotel facilities will not disappoint

eat too many meals for a while after such indulgence) was once again held in Gusto. Chefs on this night included Chris Galvin from Edinburgh's Waldorf Astoria, Heinz Beck, Joo Won and Sidney Schutte from the beautiful Waldorf Astoria in Amsterdam. Dishes had an autumnal vibe and included seasonal ingredients such as lamb, beetroot, pigeon and blue lobster.

If all this eating takes it out of you then the hotel's facilities will not



Clockwise from main: the roof garden at the Conrad Algarve; Gusto Restaurant; chef Chris Galvin's dish

disappoint. An indoor pool – which was deserted in the morning and ideal for a peaceful dip – is perfect for cooler days, but there is also a spacious outdoor pool. The award-winning spa also has a small infinity indoor/outdoor pool, as well as sauna, steam room and Jacuzzi. Treatments range from the traditional – massages and facials – to the innovative.

Guests who stay on in the hotel before or after the Culinary Extravaganza should take advantage of the local experiences that are available to book. These include clam picking in the Ria Formosa with Oysters and Champagne degustation and a visit to the local market with the executive chefs. Keen golfers will appreciate the hotel's close proximity to some of the leading European golf courses of Quinta do Lago and Vale do Lobo. If the promise of amazing food and a luxurious location sounds like your ideal mini break, then look out for this year's event. ■

EasyJet (www.easyjet.com) fly from Glasgow to Faro with flights from around £75 one way. Room rates for the Conrad Algarve (www.conradalgarve.com) start around €230 per night with tickets for culinary events starting at around €150. Contact the hotel for details of the next culinary event.

48 HOURS IN

Los Cristianos, Tenerife

Friday, midday
Check into the Marylanza (doubles from £95, www.marylanza.com), a luxurious all suite resort hotel with a heated outdoor swimming pool. Book a room with a terrace and a view to Mount Teide.

12.30pm
Unlike the other big resorts in the south of Tenerife, Los Cristianos still retains a slice of its authentic fishing village vibe with a working harbour. Join the local fishermen for lunch at their co-operative restaurant, the Cofradia (tel: 600-562-249).

2pm
It's beach time. Playa de Los Cristianos overlooks the ferries coming and going to the outer isles. Adjacent Playa de las Vistas sports an accessible section designed for those with limited mobility or wheelchairs.

5pm
Head to one of the sprinkling of café bars behind the beach to enjoy an ice cold Dorada, the excellent local beer, as a sundowner.

8pm
Dine in at the Orijama, the hotel's teppanyaki restaurant, which infuses Japanese cooking with a dash of Canarian flavour.

Saturday, 10am
Europe's best water park is handily nearby, so head for a day at Siam Park (www.siampark.net). Book either their plush villa (with its own hot tub) or a Balinese bed in their new Champagne Club.

1pm
Enjoy a Thai green curry by the beach at Siam Park watching the waves that are good enough to host surf competitions.

BARGAIN BREAKS

Crete on a budget

EasyJet Holidays is offering seven nights at the four star Malia Central hotel in Crete on a self-catering basis from £255pp including flights from Edinburgh on 1 May. **Call 020 3499 5232 or see www.easyjet.com/holidays**

Renaissance Florence

Prices start from £201pp for seven nights in Florence with Travel Republic. This includes B&B accommodation at the three star Meridiana Hotel and return flights from Edinburgh departing on 28 April.



4pm
Finish off your aquatic revels with a glass of bubbly at the Champagne Club and a view of the Atlantic.

7pm
Enjoy a delicious pre-dinner snack of bellota ham at Al Corte (3 Calle Espigon del Benchijigua) and take some home vacuum packed too.

8pm
Savour dinner down in town at El Rincon del Marinero (tel: 922-793 553), an excellent no frills seafood restaurant. Order a bottle of dry Tenerife white wine to go with the fresh catch of the day.

Sunday, 9am
Relax in the Marylanza's spa with a treatment and a session in their thermal circuit.

Robin McKelvie

easyJet (www.easyjet.com) fly to Tenerife South from Edinburgh with returns from £104.03. Holiday Autos (www.holidayautos.com) offer car hire at Tenerife South