

WEEKEND IN... BABBACOMBE

Beautiful views, an array of watersports and a thriving food scene make a mini-break in Devon's 'jewel in the crown' ideal





With its reputation as a secluded and romantic holiday destination Babbacombe is the 'jewel in the crown' of the English Riviera, a beautiful 63 sq km stretch of coastline in South Devon, including Torquay and Brixham. In 2007 the English Riviera was designated a Global Geopark and is one of just eight sites in the UK and Ireland to hold this special status.

Snuggling to the east of bustling Torquay, Babbacombe is in contrast a laid-back petite resort, popular since Victorian times. In 1852 Prince Albert, passing in the royal yacht, much admired the scenery and so chose to land at Babbacombe Beach. The village of Babbacombe itself is at the top of the slopes and with stunning views across the coast it boasts the highest promenade in England.

The construction of the funicular Babbacombe cliff railway in 1926 enabled hundreds of thousands of visitors a novel and much easier way to get to

the picturesque Oddicombe Beach and Babbacombe Bay. As well as easy-to-access sheltered beaches – an ideal place to learn sailing or scuba diving – Babbacombe also has a great local food scene, a popular theatre, and some quirky wet-day attractions, such as the Model Village or Bygones, a museum of Victorian nostalgia.

FRIDAY PM



A SNUG RETREAT

We descend in darkness down an alarmingly steep and twisty hill and brace ourselves to be pitched from the taxi into the sea. Instead we find ourselves lurching into the warm and welcoming Cary Arms, a 19th-century boutique hotel perched on the water's edge and sprawling up the slopes. The hotel also has four fishermen's cottages, including 'The Beach House', which is to be our home for the weekend. We're delighted to find the warm aga in the kitchen, the fire laid in the living room and the table set



ABOVE **Susie Moss** spent a weekend enjoying the sights in Babbacombe

with local Plymouth sloe gin, nuts and nibbles. We could happily stay in but the quick dash out to the restaurant is worth it when my perfectly cooked scallops arrive. Harvested from right outside the window in the Babbacombe Bay, they couldn't be fresher. Tonight the bay is in inky darkness with just the lights of Exmouth winking on the other side. After dinner, we retire to the 'salon', snuggle around the fire and choose a digestive from the well-stocked bar. The place feels so homely; we kick off our shoes and play a game of billiards. On returning to our cottage, we find an aran knit-covered hot water bottle warming the bed and we slip into crisp clean sheets with no sound but waves to disturb us.



SATURDAY AM



UP FOR FORAGING

Excited to see the views revealed in daylight, I'm up early, padding around the warm kitchen with the duck egg vista of bay and sky. Though sunny and bright in the summer months this soft greyness has a beauty and pleasure of its own. After breakfast, we set off with David Beazley, local chef and expert forager. First we look at sea beet and samphire growing on the rocks of the hotel's own tiny cove, then continue along the coast path picking all sorts of wild edibles with which to make a tasty salad. We walk through steeply sloping woodland to Babbacombe Down – rather than opting for the cliff railway

CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT Babbacombe Model Village; dinner at the Cary Arms; sunset over Oddicombe Beach; boats on the River Dart; Sharpham Vineyard and Cheese Dairy makes a great outing; a selection of wines from this vineyard; Babbacombe cliff railway

– to hunt for mushrooms, hips or interesting leaves. We gather under the Victorian shelter to enjoy our salad with hawthorn berry dressing looking out to sea, from 300ft above it. Book David Beazley through the Cary Arms or davidbeazley861@btinternet.com.



WINE & CHEESE

Sharpham Vineyard and Cheese Dairy sits on the banks of the River Dart right outside the picturesque town of Totnes. Just 30 minutes away by taxi this is the perfect outing for wine-lovers. Twelve thousand vines mature in sheltered southern slopes, contributing to Sharpham's ever-growing tally of awards. Sharpham offer reasonably priced 'trek and taste' tours that must be gorgeous in the summer. We are wrapped in blankets and receive a warm welcome from Elka, the sales manager. She talks us through Sharpham's history and wine-making while we sample the wares. The cheese, made from their own herd of Jersey cows, complements all their wines. We move through elegant dry whites, to a whole berry rosé and on to vibrant reds

as the rain falls outside (01803 732203, sharpham.com).

SATURDAY PM



A TASTE OF TORQUAY

Our next stop is just 10 minutes' drive from the hotel into Torquay. Where Totnes is the hippie cousin, renowned for its alternative thinking and unique shopping, Torquay is the big brash sister, famous for its waterside bistros and lively night-life. We lunch at The Elephant restaurant where Chef Proprietor Simon Hulstone offers a fine-dining Michelin-starred experience upstairs and a less-formal brasserie downstairs. Their aim to use local, sustainably sourced produce is made easy to achieve with the nearby harbour and their own farm close by in Brixham. We enjoy local River Yealm oysters, marinated beetroot salad, exceptional roast plaice with clams and an indulgent sticky toffee pudding (01803 200044, elephantrestaurant.com).



FISH 'N' CHIPS

After so much eating we return for rainy coast walks and more cosy time around the fire. On warmer days



the hotel has many activities on offer. You can try your hand at fishing off the breakwater or arrange a boat trip, learn scuba diving or waterskiing or simply laze on the beach. But today we walk out in the fading winter light and meet some local fishermen catching eels before returning for the best fish and chips, tasty with a crispy Otter Ale batter. Appropriate after a day of sea air and fishing boats vistas.

SUNDAY AM



LAZY SUNDAY

Ouch! The water is so cold it's almost burning but this quick jump in the sea is so invigorating that it 'justifies' the cooked breakfast ahead. I scramble back to the hotel and smugly enjoy my Eggs Benedict, coffee and newspaper before my final indulgence of an excellent back and shoulder massage. The hotel has a Yon-Ka spa treatment room offering a range of massages and facials, and a soon-to-be-completed spa with plunge pool, decks, steam room and gym.



HARBOURSIDE LUNCH

For our last meal by the sea we head to Rockfish in Brixham, one of four of Mitch



Tonks' fish restaurants in the South West. With their fab slogan of 'tomorrow's fish is still in the sea' the freshness of the fish is guaranteed. Rockfish Brixham sits above the fish market overlooking the boats as they land their catch. We love the décor, the attention to detail, the friendly-yet-slick waiting staff, and the innovative menu with the latest catch prices written on the table cloth. I had amazing crispy 'fritto misto' served with tartar sauce and unlimited hand-cut chips. This offer, so small amounts of chips are enjoyed hot and fresh, really impressed us but we fail to meet the challenge of ordering more after such an indulgent foodie weekend.

We return to the train with a happy glow, full, in every sense of the word; good food, sea air, and cosy memories (01803 850872, therockfish.co.uk).

TOP A final stop in Brixham (pictured), where Susie tried the crispy 'fritto misto' at Mitch Tonks' Rockfish (ABOVE)

NEED to KNOW



STAY AT...



THE CARY ARMS

The Cary Arms has teamed up with Mitch Tonks' restaurant Rockfish and local Michelin-starred The Elephant, to bring you their Gastro Getaway, from £495 per double room. This offer includes two nights of luxury sea-view accommodation, breakfast, a two-course dinner at the Cary Arms, a glass of champagne, a three-course dinner at either Rockfish or The Elephant and transport to both. The Elephant is closed on Sunday and Monday. To book visit caryarms.co.uk or call 01803 327110.



HOW TO GET THERE

Regular trains run to either Newton Abbot or Torquay, both a short taxi ride to Babbacombe. Torquay also has regular buses linking the two-mile distance to Babbacombe. For more information go to visitdevon.co.uk/areas-to-visit/english-riviera.