

A weekend in... Newquay, Cornwall

The evening sky is streaked with pink and gold as I look across the sand into the rolling sea. Chuck Berry's voice drifts from the record player in my room, and I snuggle deeper beneath the woollen blanket on my lounge. My mosaic-tiled balcony at The Colonial, a new hotel tucked in the cliff at Tolcarne Beach in Newquay, is proving the ideal spot for sunset watching. And right now, bar one bodyboarder shooting through the waves, there is no one to be seen.

Such solitude is perhaps not what you might associate with Newquay, once a magnet for stag and hen parties. However this town on Cornwall's wind-and-wave-whipped north coast is reinventing itself; a host of independent venues are replacing once grotty haunts, the beaches are clean and the surfing is still world class. If you know where to go, there is a great dining scene too, with everything from sushi to Mexican (try Kahuna for curry and noodles, and Gilmore's for tacos and tequila). Even Rick Stein has moved in, setting up his fish restaurant on Fistral Beach in 2015.

So it's just as well that the launch of a direct flight between Cornwall Airport Newquay and Heathrow has made it easier to reach. The new four-times-a-day service replaces the previous service between Newquay and London Gatwick.

It's a 15-minute taxi ride from the airport to the centre of town, though as you approach Newquay along the main seafront road, Narrowcliff, it's easy to miss The Colonial. Right on the family-owned Tolcarne Beach, you can't see its cream, wood-clad exterior until you climb down the steps (or drive down a narrow road) towards the sand.

Opened last year, the hotel has a Caribbean twist, from bespoke bamboo four-poster beds to stained-glass parrot chandeliers. Add a relaxed restaurant,



rock pools to explore at low tide and a surf school with a summer children's club, and you could happily spend your whole time down on this golden bay.

Step out you must, though, because Newquay has a fascinating history. Walk north along the South West Coast Path for 20 minutes and you'll reach Trevelgue Head, known locally as Porth Island, with its Bronze Age barrows and roundhouse remnants. An excavation in 1939 uncovered an Iron Age coastal settlement, and some of the tools and pottery are now at the small but informative Newquay Heritage Archive and Museum. The beach at Porth is family-friendly and usually quieter than Fistral, a surfing hotspot.

A 15-minute walk in the other direction from Tolcarne takes you to the harbour, central to Newquay's past. The town was well established as a fishing port by the 15th century when the "new quay" (which no longer exists) was built. The sea was the source of Newquay's growing wealth — expansion of its harbour during the 1830s led to a booming import and export trade in goods, including coal and minerals.

The harbour is still busy, with fishing boats motoring in and out. To glimpse it up close, I joined a two-hour heritage kayak tour with Newquay Activity Centre, an outfit that also offers surfing, bodyboarding, stand-up paddle-boarding and — for the truly hardcore — coastering.

After squeezing into a wetsuit, I coast through the water, past the harbour where I dodge a gig, rowed by an all-female crew. Gig-racing is a growing sport (the county championships take place in Newquay every September), but during the 19th century it was crucial to be the fastest on the water; when a trading ship approached the harbour, the smaller gigs would race to it — the winners would be paid a commission. The world's oldest gig, a cherry-red and white model from 1812 called *Newquay*, is still used and can be seen at the rowing club in the harbour.

I paddle farther into the clear water as kittiwakes wheel overhead. A grey seal pops his glistening head up just metres from me, before retreating beneath the ripples.

Sea kayaking allows you to experience the coast from a different perspective, paddling up to ancient rock faces that walkers and most tourists don't see. I trace the rippling line of cliffs pushing out into the Atlantic, and explore the Tea Caverns, vast caves where local smugglers hid their booty of tea, brandy and cotton. Then it's back, past the 14th-century Huer's Hut, a small stone building where the "huer" would watch for the telltale signs of pilchards; if he spotted them, he'd cry "heva heva" and the fishermen would race into the sea with their nets.

Fish is still very much on the menu.

Need to know

Ellie Ross was a guest of The Colonial (01637 851724, tolcarnebeach.co.uk), which has B&B doubles from £140 a night. Newquay Activity Centre (01637 877722, newquayactivitycentre.co.uk) has Heritage kayak tours from £55pp



Kayaking along the coast

At lunch, I refuel with squid and mussels at Barefoot, a new sea-view restaurant with smart interiors and dozens of gins, including local varieties. The Pavilion Bakery is good for a quick crab sandwich (£9.50), or for an upmarket-but-unfussy dinner, try Fish House (the Indian fish curry is exquisite, £17.95).

Ignore the arcades as you wander through town, and instead seek out the independent shops and cafés, such as the cosy Jam Jar Café, Box & Barber Coffeehouse (a perfect brunch hangout) and The Good Lyfe, a new plastic-free gift shop. Yes, there is still a Walkabout and a Wetherspoons, but they rub shoulders with Toast, a small wine bar, and 55 Yards with its live piano music and shelves stacked with board games. Jamie Garfield co-founded Tom Thumb, a speakeasy cocktail bar, in 2016 after realising there was nowhere in Newquay to go for a high-end drink. With its exposed walls, copper-top bar and staff with hipster beards, it could be straight out of Shoreditch in east London.

"The way people drink has changed — now they consume less, but want better products," Jamie says, handing me a negroni garnished with an orange slice (£8). "Newquay's nightlife is on an upward trajectory. Our rowdy reputation is disappearing. We're raising our game."

Ellie Ross

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