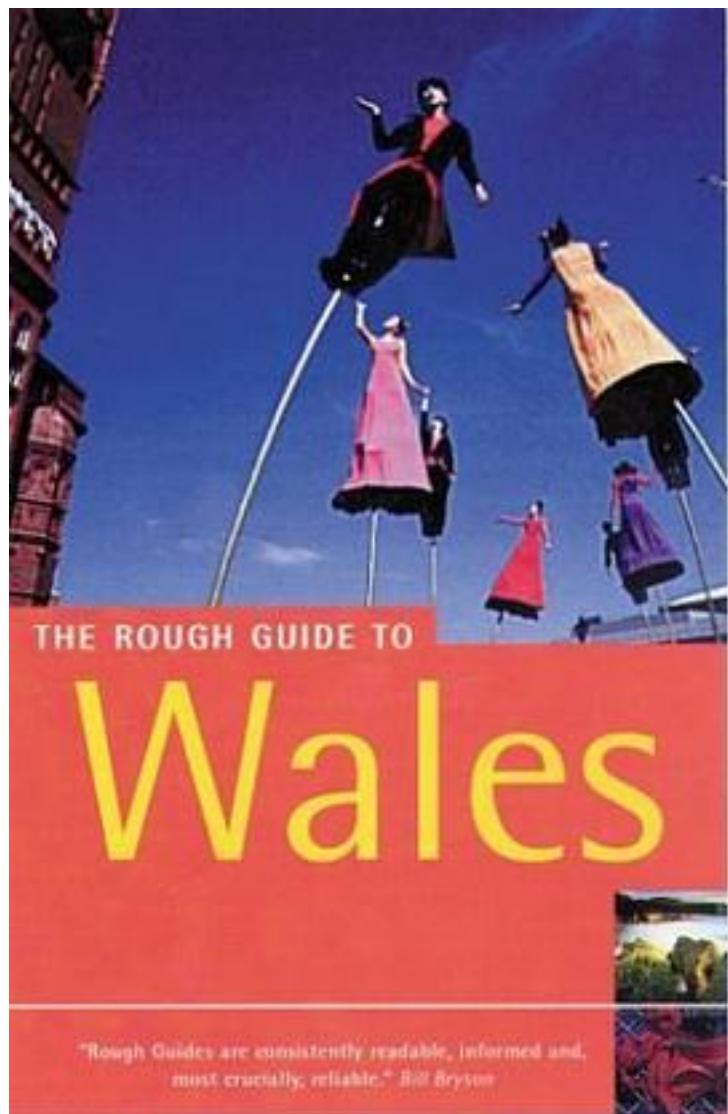


The Rough Guide to Wales



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INTRODUCTION

Perched on the rocky fringe of western Europe, Wales often gets short shrift in comparison to its Celtic cousins of Ireland and Scotland. Neither so internationally renowned nor so romantically perceived, the country is usually defined - if it is known at all - by its male voice choirs and tightly-packed pit villages. But there's far more to the place than the hackneyed stereotypes, and at its best, Wales is the most beguiling part of the British Isles. Even its comparative anonymity serves it well: where the tourist dollar has swept away some of the more gritty aspects of local life in parts of Ireland and Scotland, reducing ancient cultures to misty Celtic pastiche, Wales remains brittle and brutal enough to be real, and diverse enough to remain endlessly interesting.

Within its small mass of land, Wales boasts some stunning physical attributes. Its mountain ranges, ragged coastline, lush valleys and old-fashioned market towns all invite long and repeated visits. The culture, too, is compelling, whether in its Welsh- or English-language manifestations, its Celtic or its industrial traditions, its ancient cornerstones of belief or its contemporary chutzpah. Recent years have seen a huge and dizzying upsurge in Welsh self-confidence, a commodity no longer so dependent upon comparison with its big and powerful neighbour of England. Popular culture - especially music and film - has contributed much to this revival, as has the arrival of a National Assembly in 1999, the first all-Wales tier of government for six hundred years. After centuries of enforced subjugation, the national spirit is undergoing a remarkable renaissance. The ancient symbol of the country, y ddraig goch or the red dragon, seen fluttering on flags everywhere in Wales, is waking up from what seems like a very long slumber.

Once you've crossed the border from England into Wales, the differences in appearance, attitude and culture between the two countries are immediately obvious. Wales shares many physical and emotional similarities with the other Celtic lands - Scotland, Ireland, Cornwall, Brittany and even Asturias and Galicia in northwest Spain. A rocky and mountainous landscape, whose colours are predominantly grey and green, a thinly scattered, largely rural population, a culture rooted deeply in folklore and legend and the survival of a distinct, ancient language are all hallmarks of Wales and its sister countries. To the visitor, it is perhaps the Welsh language, the strongest survivor of the Celtic tongues, that most obviously marks out the country.

Tongue-twisting village names and vast bilingual signposts point to a glorious tale of endurance against the odds, slap next to the heartland of English language and culture, the most expansionist in history. Everyone in Wales speaks English, but a quarter of the population also speak Welsh: TV and radio stations broadcast in it, all children learn it at school and visitors too are encouraged to try speaking at least a fragment of the rich, earthy tones of one of Europe's oldest living languages.

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