



Classic UK Paddling Destination
 IN ASSOCIATION WITH SEA KAYAK GUIDES (WWW.SEAKAYAKGUIDES.CO.UK)

Pembrokeshire

The 'world's best' is a much-used expression, but needless to say we have paddled in a few places around the world and Pembrokeshire is where we choose to live and play. The geography of the coastline provides the sea kayaker with a wide range of environments and paddling conditions, from sheltered coves to offshore islands, classic surf to fierce tidal races and stunning cliffs to sandy beaches, not to mention the wildlife. The nature of the coastline and the fact it is split into two peninsulas enables the paddler to choose sections to suit their abilities and desires, given a variety of weather forecasts and sea conditions.

Effectively, Pembrokeshire's peninsulas stick out into the tidal river of the Irish Sea and the tide is then further squeezed by the islands and headlands. By looking at the coastline with a river head it is possible to gauge what the tide may do and the conditions it will create. As far as tidal streams go, if you are unsure stay away from the bits that stick out and remember: *the time of HW bears no relation to the time of slack water*. But don't be put off! With planning it is possible to choose where to go and where to avoid, progressing from simple trips through to more adventurous journeys. Always get an up-to-date weather and swell forecast as the simplest trip can become very difficult in poor conditions.

We have tried not to be too prescriptive in describing the following trips. Instead, we have tried to paint a picture of some of our favourite sections of the Pembrokeshire coast, pointing out the highlights and places of interest. We feel it is important that you do some of the planning work yourself: an essential aspect of paddling on the sea. With a tide table, tidal stream atlas and weather/swell forecast you can ensure that you have that vital understanding of tidal and sea conditions.

Pembrokeshire is a haven for wildlife with increasing numbers of visitors coming specifically for the offshore cetacean-watching boat trips and the abundant birdlife on the RSPB nature reserves of Ramsey and Skomer islands. To your average sea kayaker, experiencing the fantastic wildlife can be done much closer to the mainland and without negotiating open water and tidal streams. Although a lot of the wildlife is seasonal and at times elusive, there are amazing encounters to be had on a daily basis. Wildlife highlights in Pembrokeshire include Atlantic grey seals, harbour porpoises, dolphins, peregrine falcons and otters, which can all be seen year round. Add to these seasonal visitors such as puffins, Manx shearwaters, razorbills and guillemots in their thousands and the occasional sunfish, whale, shark or turtle and you have a world-class wildlife-watching destination! Travelling by sea kayak will give you access to the more remote stretches of the Pembrokeshire coast and maximise your chances of a memorable wildlife encounter.

The Marine Code

Most of the Pembrokeshire coastline is privately owned and designated for its landscape and wildlife importance. The Pembrokeshire Marine Code encourages users to show respect and consideration for the marine environment, land owners, wildlife and other users when out exploring the coast and offshore areas of Pembrokeshire. It was developed by local user groups and other organisations working closely with the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority and the RSPB. These organisations are all concerned with the long-term management of the area and the development of high standards of practice. They recognise that sustainable use must be a key theme in marine recreational activities and education. All local boat operators (including sea kayak schools) have signed up to the Code of Practice. This and more information about Pembrokeshire's wildlife can be found on their website at www.pembrokeshiremarinecode.org.uk

As a visiting sea kayaker it is worth studying the Marine Code maps as these highlight agreed seasonal access restrictions, set up mainly to prevent disturbance to breeding birds and seals.

Suggested trips

We have classed the following trips as one of the following:

- Sheltered:** little or no tidal influence and regular landing opportunities,
- Moderate:** some exposure to tidal streams and longer periods without access/egress points or

Advanced: complex tidal streams, tideraces and overfalls, difficult landings, open crossings and long distances without the possibility of landings.

It is essential to remember that all of the following trips are exposed to Atlantic swell and weather systems and, as such, even the most straightforward on paper can become a serious undertaking once on the water.

Sheltered

Fishguard to Pwllgwaelod (7km)

Most people know Fishguard either as a ferry port or as the sleepy old-fashioned town depicted in the comedy series *Barry Welsh is Coming*. It is in fact a pretty coastal market town with a good selection of shops, cafes and accommodation, fascinating history and, more importantly for the sea paddler, a beautiful historic harbour giving easy access to some of the best sea kayaking in Wales! The harbour is situated to the east of the town and, like most Pembrokeshire harbours, it dries at low water. There are two slipways, but it is best to launch from the upper one as there is more parking available. Launching should be possible even at low water as the river Gwaun flows out to sea through the harbour. Toilets are situated half-way between the two slipways.

If you look to the left as you leave Lower Town you will see the ferry port, beyond which is the beautiful but committing paddle around Strumble Head (this trip is described below). To the right is an equally beautiful but considerably more sheltered trip to Pwllgwaelod set in the back of Fishguard Bay. On the right day, this is the perfect introduction to the delights of Pembrokeshire sea kayaking.

This stretch of coast consists of a series of jagged slate headlands interspersed with deep-cut bays, many of which back onto inaccessible quartz-rich pebble beaches. The high cliffs offer shelter from southerly and easterly winds, but it can become surprisingly rough when the wind is in the north or west. Being in the back of Fishguard Bay, there is little or no tidal movement to worry about.

As you leave the outer harbour you'll paddle under the remains of the 18th century fort at Castle Point. This was built to protect the town from pirates which terrorised the North Pembrokeshire coast at that time. Round the point and you'll quickly get a taste of the trip with high cliffs, small caves and channels to explore. Soon you'll reach Needle Rock sea stack where you can thread (paddle through) the needle and, in the spring, enjoy the aerial displays of the nesting razorbills, guillemots, shags and cormorants which nest on the ledges above. Just before the stack is a natural arch which can also be paddled through. From here you'll pass the pretty bays of Aber Grugog and Aber Hywel, popular haunts of peregrine falcons and pupping seals in the autumn. At Aber Grugog you'll see the old steps and red-painted handrails making their way up to the caravan park above; this is not a recommended egress point (especially with a sea kayak on your shoulder!) The next bay (Hesgwm) does give access to the road via a narrow lane with no parking (only a viable option if things are not going to plan). On the east side of Hesgwm you'll pass the remains of an old slate quarry before rounding the headland for the final stretch to Pwll Gwaelod. Don't miss the man-made tunnel through the last headland before the beach and look out for the miniature house as you exit it.

Pwllgwaelod is a pretty bay with a sandy beach, slipway, carpark, toilets and pub. The coastal bus ►

"The thin blade edges is something special, something that you simply couldn't do in wood"
- Greg Stamer



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stops here and is a good option as a shuttle back to Fishguard. More experienced paddlers may choose to continue on around Dinas Head to Cwm-yr-Eglwys or Newport. Dinas Head is exposed to strong tidal streams and overfalls can form off some of the points. For those with the experience and knowledge, it is a stunning paddle. If you still have energy but are unsure about the Dinas Head section, you can always turn around and paddle back to Fishguard and finish your day with a pint or two in The Ship Inn. Leaving the pub can be the most dangerous part of the trip, as the door opens directly onto the A487!

Porthclais to Solva (7km)

This trip along the south-facing coast of the peninsula is a classic for those who enjoy rock-hopping and exploring and could be described as North Pembrokeshire's outdoor playground. It's relative accessibility and rugged sandstone cliffs make it popular with coasteering groups and climbers as well as kayakers. It is well sheltered from northerly winds but exposed to the prevailing southwest swell and can become quite 'sporty' when a solid swell is running.

Porth Clais harbour serves the UK's smallest City of St Davids and, as such, is well used by fishermen, divers and pleasure boaters. This all adds up to make it busy by Pembrokeshire's standards; that said, once away from the harbour it is unusual to see more than a handful of people on the water between Porth Clais and Solva. The harbour is owned by the National Trust and managed by the local boat owners; there are two car parks, toilets and a small café (summer only). There is a charge (currently £1 per kayak) for launching, which should be paid at the harbour master's shed.

Leaving Porth Clais and looking east (on a clear day) you will be able to see the islands of Green Scar and Black Scar in the distance. These mark the end of the trip and are situated roughly 1km south of Solva harbour. The coastline between these two harbours is rich in history as well as fun for the sea kayaker.

After about 1km you'll reach St Non's bay; legend states that St David (the patron saint of Wales) was born in the ruined chapel above the bay (St Non being his mother). There is a replica of the chapel in the grounds of St Non's Retreat, which is the big grey building on the cliff top. As you head east keep your eyes open for Cathedral Cave: a large and aptly named through cave in the back of the bay. Around

the next headland is Caerfai Bay; at low water this boasts a beautiful sandy beach which is accessed by a steep path from the car park and campsites on the cliff tops above.

Caerbwdy bay is next, which has a pebble beach and a path which gives access to a minor road. The old quarry behind the beach is where much of the stone used to build St Davids Cathedral was sourced back in the 14th century. To the east there is a spectacular fold in the rock producing a cylindrical structure which has been named Barrel Zawn; at high water you may see deepwater solo climbers here. A few hundred metres further and you'll reach North Pembrokeshire's premier climbing site of Carreg y Barcud. The smooth-looking sandstone slabs are home to some of the area's most difficult climbs.

Look carefully as you pass Ogof Mwn, as hidden in the cliffs are the remains of the smugglers' steps. They are pretty treacherous these days but were well used in the not-too-distant past. From Porth y Rhaw a path leads up to the main road at Nine Wells. There is a natural arch and waterfall at the back of the bay followed by some channels which provide great opportunities for exploring and rock-hopping. The next kilometre consists of shallower water and mixed sand and rock beaches at low water, it also provides some excellent rock-hopping (containing the wrecks of three tug boats). There are conflicting stories about how these wrecks came about. What is common to all versions is that they were sunk during a big storm in 1981 and that all crew survived, scrambling up the shale cliffs to safety. One of the wrecks remains almost complete, the entire hull visible (although broken in half) and the huge engine block fully exposed as the tide drops.

There is one more natural arch to paddle through as you round the last headland before heading into Solva harbour. The harbour is well hidden but the entrance is marked by Black Rock which, in a good swell, will provide a final opportunity for rock-hopping. If you arrive at low water there is a long carry (or drag up the stream) to the car park. Don't be tempted to stop at the first slipway as this is privately owned and you will be charged. The top slipway is free to use, although there is a charge for parking through the summer. Solva is a pretty village with a good selection of cafés, pubs, shops and restaurants. There is a regular bus service to St Davids (and Porth Clais).

If you want to extend this trip, Green Scar and Black

Scar are well worth a visit although exposed to wind and swell. Another option is to continue to Newgale, which provides more stunning paddling with some amazing caves to explore, two exposed headlands and the chance of a surf landing at Newgale beach – all combining to make an exciting trip.

Moderate

Abereiddy to Abercastle (9km)

This is a real Pembrokeshire gem. It combines everything a competent sea kayaker could wish for: a beautiful and remote-feeling stretch of coastline with interesting tidal features, stunning scenery and plenty of wildlife and history. The tidal stream flows past this part of the coast at 2.5 knots on spring tides, much faster where it is squeezed by headlands and shallower ledges. Its speed and course varies during the tidal cycle, creating ever-changing eddies and races. When exposed to strong winds or solid swell, parts of this trip can become very challenging.

Abereiddy is a popular bay on the north of the St Davids peninsula, with a grey sandy beach (covered at high water), free car park, toilets and a tea/ice-cream van during the summer. The beach can produce good waves at low water but once the tide is onto the shingle bank dumping surf can make launching and landing difficult. It is probably best known for the Blue Lagoon, a flooded slate quarry which is now one of Pembrokeshire's most popular coasteering and cliff-jumping venues. It is possible to paddle into the lagoon from mid to high water through a channel on its seaward side. A through-cave winds its way through the headland after the lagoon and is known locally as the wormhole; it can be paddled through but only on low spring tides. The tower above is thought to be a 19th century navigation beacon, although a more romantic explanation is that the quarry manager had it built as somewhere he could eat lunch with his wife away from the rough-and-ready workers.

As you paddle around this headland you may notice the first minor tide race; it is soon over however as you round the corner into the shelter of Traeth Llyfn bay. This bay boasts some spectacular cliffs, fantastic rock-hopping and a beautiful sandy beach. The beach can be accessed by a steep flight of metal steps (the original steps were apparently built by Italian prisoners of war in the 1940s). Leaving the bay you paddle past the small islands of Carreg Gwylan (or Barry Island as it's locally known). A tide race forms both sides of the islands and, with a little wind, overfalls can form on

the seaward side. The next two bays of Porth Egr and Porth Dwfn offer some shelter from the tide, but with tide races forming off their headlands. There is an obvious channel and a less-obvious cave through the headland of Penclegyr, after which you will pass a disused quarry before seeing the white stone columns which mark the entrance to Porthgain harbour.

As you paddle into the harbour at Porthgain you are immediately struck by the industrial history of the village. Now a popular place with tourists, the harbour has a pub and a renowned fish restaurant as well as public toilets and a car park. The coastal bus also stops here to take you to St Davids or Fishguard.

At certain states of tide, the tidal stream can flow very close to the harbour entrance and often not

in the direction you would expect! Once you are round Trwyn Elen headland you are again sheltered from the tide and into a couple of beautiful bays. Aberdraw offers road access and a short walk to the village of Trefin where there are public toilets, a bus stop, a paddler-friendly hostel and a great pub, The Ship Inn.

The stretch from here to Abercastle has some particularly beautiful bays with spectacular high cliffs, caves, natural arches, channels, storm beaches and a waterfall. It's worth giving yourselves some extra time on this section to take advantage of the fantastic rock-hopping as well as tackling the tide races that form off the headlands of Trwyn llwyd, Pen Castell-coch and the island of Ynys Deullyn. The latter can form overfalls at the right state of tide, but it is often possible to sneak through the channels directly into Abercastle bay ▶

Sea Kayak Guides

Sea Kayak Guides, (SKG) is a collaboration of two of Pembrokeshire's most experienced sea kayak coaches, Nige Robinson and Martin Leonard. Drawing on years of sea kayaking and coaching throughout Europe and further afield and considerable local knowledge. We are able to deliver bespoke guiding and coaching to cater for a wide range of sea kayak needs.

Our emphasis is on high quality;

- Stunning Locations
- Highly experienced, qualified and mature guides
- Wide range of quality equipment
- Customer led
- Small Ratios

We specialise in catering for small numbers, couples and families 1:1 to 1:6 max. SKG is also a member of the Pembrokeshire Outdoor Charter group which aims to educate groups in sharing the coastline with the wildlife with minimal impact. www.seakayakguides.co.uk



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and its tidal harbour (really more of a sheltered beach with moorings). Parking is very limited and every effort should be made to minimise impact by paddlers. It is free to park, but there is a launch/landing fee of £1 per kayak which should be put into the honesty box by the slipway. There are also public toilets here during the summer season.

Manobier to Tenby (10km)

This paddle is on the southern side of South Pembrokeshire. The geology and therefore the paddling are quite different from the trips described above, all of which are on the northern peninsula. This part of the coast is exposed to the tide which flows at 2.5 knots at its peak on spring tides, causing races and sometimes overfalls off some of the headlands. There is an added element of danger as the trip takes you through two Ministry of Defence live firing ranges (Manobier and Penally). If the ranges are firing there is no access to this stretch of coast; the best way to check this is by phoning range control on 01834 871282 (Manobier), 01834 843522 (Penally) or else HM Coastguard Milford Haven.

Manobier is a pretty village and well-known surf beach. There is a large car park with toilets near the beach and the village has a shop, pubs and a castle. If you are launching from the beach here when there is swell, the south side of the bay will be considerably safer and will prevent any conflict with surfers. Leaving the bay and heading east you will round Priests nose with its Neolithic burial chamber visible from sea. From here paddle past Presipe beach before reaching the promontory of Old Castle head. Tide races and overfalls can form off this headland, but once round the corner you are into the relative shelter of Skrinkle Haven and Lydstep Haven Bays. These are both popular holiday beaches offering road access. Skrinkle Haven provides a change in geology from the gentler sandstone to the steeper and more spectacular limestone which is a feature particular of the South Pembrokeshire coastline. Features along this stretch include 'church doors', a natural limestone arch, disused limestone quarries at Lydstep point and some impressive caves.

Lydstep beach gives easy access to a private road owned by the holiday park who will charge for access.

Between Lydstep and Tenby you paddle beneath sheer limestone cliffs and may notice the raised beach between Proud Giltar and Giltar Point. The tide flows through Caldy sound at around 2.5 knots on spring tides, and can be considerably faster close to Giltar Point where the flow accelerates around the headland. Once round Giltar Point, the town of Tenby will come into sight. You will need to paddle to the far end of south beach where you will find a pay-and-display car park and public toilets. From here you are just a short walk up the hill to the historical walled town of Tenby and all the attractions it has to offer.

Advanced Strumble Head (20km)

Strumble Head lies between Abercastle and Fishguard harbours. This is a rugged and committing section of coast with spectacular cliffs and caves and very few points of access. Many of the bays have shingle beaches, most of which are inaccessible from land. Highlights of this trip include wildlife, overfalls, interesting tidal conditions and history. Strumble Head has a considerable effect on the tidal flow due to its size and its position in relation to other features along the north coast. The guide books quote a 2.5 knots tidal flow on springs, but in reality it is much faster and forms a complex series of races and eddies. Add to this some wind and swell, and significant overfalls may be encountered. Having studied the tidal information for this trip you may well decide to start at Fishguard as the streams often flow more favourably in this direction.

Parking at Abercastle is very limited as mentioned earlier; please take care to minimise your impact on other users. As you leave the harbour you are immediately into the spectacular scenery with caves and blowholes and some of the best rock-hopping on the north coast. After 3km you will arrive at the picturesque wooded valley and beach of Abermawr. You can access the road from here, but it is a long carry up a slippery path. Abermawr was the original site chosen for Isambard Kingdom Brunel's Great Western ferry terminal. This would have meant piers, breakwaters and a railway; instead, there is a wild and beautiful coastline. The project was abandoned in favour of Neyland on the Cleddau estuary. An exploration of the wooded valley reveals earthworks,

tracks and bridges, showing how close the project came to fruition. Next door to Abermawr is Aberbach, another pretty bay popular with coaststeering groups due to its many channels and caves.

Pwll Deri is the next major bay with its impressive cliffs and shingle beaches. The youth hostel on the cliff tops gives stunning views back towards St Davids Head. On a clear evening, you can see the Wicklow Mountains of Ireland from the top of Garn Fawr (the hill above the hostel). In certain conditions a powerful eddy can form between Pwll Deri and Pen Brush, racing past the points and islands, making for some exciting paddling.

Carreg Onnen Bay usually offers some shelter and a well-earned rest before you are back into the tide at Strumble Head itself. As you sit and look up at the lighthouse you will often find you have curious seals for company. Leaving Carreg Onnen Bay you have several options. You can paddle through the tide around or between the islands of Ynys Meicel and Carreg Onnen, which could expose you to some technical and very challenging water depending on the day. At high water you do have the option to sneak under the footbridge which serves the lighthouse, avoiding the main tide race and experiencing far less-testing conditions.

It is worth studying the tidal streams between Strumble and Pen Anglas before you depart, as they are not straightforward. Keep your eyes on the water as you pass through this stretch as there is a resident pod of harbour porpoise and occasional sightings of bigger cetaceans. The series of headlands and pretty bays between Ynys Meicel and Pen Anglas are well worth exploring. Carregwasted Point was the scene of the last invasion of Britain by the French in 1797. Local legend tells how the French soldiers, having found and drunk smuggled alcohol at a local farm, mistook the Welsh women in traditional dress as British soldiers and surrendered.

Pen Anglas point with its 4m stone pillar and fog signal marks the entrance to Fishguard bay. Keep an eye out for the ferry as you round the breakwater and head across to Goodwick beach or Fishguard's lower town harbour to finish your trip. 