

Llandudno – In the Lap of the Great Orme

Llandudno, Wales's largest seaside resort often referred to as the 'Queen of the Welsh resorts' lies within the Conwy County Borough. It has two beaches – the busier, award winning North Shore and the quieter, sand duned West Shore. The former between the magnificent headlands of the Great Orme and Little Orme has the traditional British holiday attractions – the pier (the longest in Wales) with its variety of amusements and colorful kiosks, pleasure boat trips around the bay, Punch and Judy shows and donkey rides. The West Shore offers fantastic views of the Conwy estuary and the Snowdonia further away.



Llandudno has retained its Victorian character despite recently increasing tourist flows in summer. In spite of modern attractions, development has been controlled and restrained. The buildings are architecturally attractive, in good maintenance and the town is clean, bright and floral.

The Great Orme is a place of infinite mystery and speculation among historians and archaeologists. It intrigues many for its shadowy beginnings and many long to discover her ancient secrets. The name 'Orme' is derived from the old Norse word for worm or sea serpent.

The huge headland composed of Carboniferous limestone, formed 300 million years ago on a tropical seabed has fossil remains of primitive fishes, sponges, corals and molluscs. The Tertiary period witnessed violent volcanic activity giving rise to mountains. Although relatively sheltered by the Snowdonia slight warping and folding caused limestone layers to fracture into faults. During the Palaeolithic era, Old Stone Age man would almost certainly have shared the Orme with the mammoth and woolly rhino.

The immense variety of habitat and wildlife in the lime-rich Orme has evolved through the continual, unrelenting process of changes created by the forces and passage of time. One among the botanical rarities is the cotoneaster growing in the remote, inaccessible corners. In summer, the bloody cranesbill, thrift and sea campion cling to the rock face, while pyramidal orchid, common rockrose, wild thyme and lichen carpet grasslands creating a colorful display. Spring squills abound old copper works. The white horehound on western slopes is believed to be cultivated by 14th century monks. The silver studded blue and the grayling butterflies feed on limestone flowers and grasses.



Kashmiri goats, whose ancestors inhabit the mountains of North India, climb the steep cliffs of the Orme with amazing agility. The long established herd of about 200 feral goats (a gift from Queen Victoria) despite their shy nature, arouse much emotion among locals and tourists. In summer the air fills with the cries of kittiwakes, razorbills and guillemots nesting on narrow cliff ledges or fishing the waters for their ever-hungry offspring. Fulmars are visible on rocks above the Marine Drive.

Despite harsh tides, rock pools are rich and varied with specialist fauna. Hermit crabs scuttle about searching for new shells and red beadlet anemones ensnare small creatures in their tentacles. Grey seals swim along sheltered coastlines and bottlenose dolphins frequent during warm weather. Basking sharks can be spotted occasionally. Nocturnal creatures inhabit the deep tunnels, caves and dens. Foxes head towards old mine cottages, attracted by the scent of discarded food. Cave pools support niphargus – small blind shrimps living in darkness and feeding on organic floating matter.

Gnats and craneflies hibernate; sheltered from wind and rain. Cave spiders and rare horseshoe bats suspending from roof tunnels during day venture at dusk feeding on beetles and moths. Mice and shrews gorging on insects fall easy prey for the sharp-eyed tawny owl. The toad, hedgehog and badger lurk in darkened corners springing out at the sign of food. At daybreak, the melodious dawn chorus of birds goes full swing driving the animals back to rest and prepare for another busy night.

During the Victorian era, roads on the Great Orme were fairly primitive with steep slopes preventing all but the most sure footed from reaching the summit (607 ft/207m). With Llandudno fast gaining prominence as a popular resort, it was not long before local businessmen latched on the idea of a tramway. Fifteen months after construction commenced, the line was opened on 31st July, 1902 (with centenary in 2002) with the first car moving from Victoria Station to the sound of the town band playing God Save the King.

With this Llandudno's mountains did not seem quite so big and inhospitable with people of all ages and physical abilities enjoying the rugged scenery, wildlife and remarkable views of Orme. Today, thousands travel uphill between Easter–September in the 20th century tramcar; Britain's only cable-hauled, public road tramway (others in San Francisco and Lisbon) using original Victorian carriages named after a saint. From the landscaped gardens in Happy Valley to the Summit runs the longest aerial cable car lift in the UK. Yet others walk or drive around the Marine Drive admiring some of the most strikingly beautiful scenery along the 4 miles cut out of sheer limestone cliffs. A bus from Llandudno town also offers an informative and visually rewarding sight-seeing tour.

Much of the surface of the Orme bears testimony to man's constant search for metallic ores. For many

years, cavers, archaeologists and geologists have been burrowing deep into an old copper mining system beneath the Orme. Members of the Great Orme Exploration Society discovered tunnels dating back to the Bronze Age, some 3,500 years ago. In 1991, a company called Great Orme Mines opened up part of a Bronze Age Mining Centre (the oldest metal mine opened to the world) – an enjoyable and educational experience for the young and old. Here one can enjoy introductory films before exploring underground passages leading to the amazing prehistoric caves or view the Great Opencast, the oldest part of the complex. The Centre offers an insight on prehistoric man who inhabited the Orme leaving behind a long legacy.

The Great Orme Country Park on the summit is a dramatic limestone headland renowned for its wildlife and history. It offers breathtaking views from Snowdonia and Angelsey, onto the Isle of Man, Blackpool and Lake District. The visitor center has interactive displays, a video introduction to the Orme and a live camera link-up for viewing seabirds run by Park Wardens, it promotes environmental awareness through informative displays and photographs on the ancient headland. Guided walks leave thrice a week and a small gift shop is run by members of the Welsh Wildlife Trust.



Before the tramway, work started on a white, 9-bedroom hotel adjoining an 18-hole golf course. Known as the Summit Complex, it had several owners, a big fire and many 'face changes'. The RAF requisitioned the hotel in 1941, when it was a temporary radar-station. In 1952, a champion middleweight boxer Randolph Turpin became the resident licensee until 1961. The Llandudno Council bought him out of financial difficulties although he ended life with a bullet in 1966. The golf course has disappeared but the popular complex boasts a Randolph Turpin bar, restaurant, cafe and gift shop.

In the 6th century the Celtic monk, Tudno, came to the Great Orme with the message of Christianity. He founded his cell on the north east, overlooking the sea; a site worshiped ever since. As the original parish church of Llandudno it dates to the 12th century. Restored in the 19th century, it holds open-air Sunday summer services and the St. Tudno's day on 5th June.

Many mysterious, impressive views of the Orme are best appreciated when viewed seaward. In the precipitous cliff face between the Town Toll Gate and Pen-trwyn is the Midday Cave where at noon on the equinoxes the sun shines directly. Around the headland of Pen-trwyn is a long wave lashed fissure – the Dutchman's Cave. In the bay of Porth Heli is Pigeons' cave, a favorite haunt of sea anglers. Two boulders and a crescent shaped indentation in the boulder clay left from stone quarrying form a well-known fishing mark – the Frog's Head which local boatmen believe points upwards during fine weather!



Austen's Rock, a jagged and menacing expanse of submerged limestone pavement visible at low tide is named after the first keeper of the Great Orme Lighthouse. Throughout the ages, the Great Orme has been a serious navigational hazard for seafarers. Incalculable vessels have perished within sight of the Orme, their existence forgotten amidst wave lashed cliffs. Others are remembered with stories told and retold over countless generations and from tomb inscriptions.

Trains connect Llandudno to Holyhead, Crewe, Cardiff, Birmingham and London. Frequent public buses offer cheap all-day rover tickets from Llandudno with Colwyn Bay, Rhyl, Bangor, Conwy, Llanrwst, Bodnant Gardens and Caernarfon. The local Tourist Information Centre and Traveline Cymru offer free bus and train information and timetables. Alpine Tours operates open top sight-seeing tours of the Great Orme Marine Drive, Llandudno and Conwy commencing near Llandudno Pier.

Whichever way you make it, you can be assured that a day in the Orme will be as fun-filled and action packed or as peaceful and relaxed as mood dictates.

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