

Silent RUNNER

Sarah Stirling has been running the quiet, ancient pathways of North Pembrokeshire and Ceredigion for years. *OE* persuaded her to share a few of her secret haunts.





I'm feeling very torn, writing about my roots. Imagine a landscape of vibrant and earthy greens stitched together in classic British style; a patchwork quilt pulled over gentle hills. Between them, overgrown hedgerows arc over narrow ribbons of country lane. I'm in my car, munching a cereal bar in the middle of absolutely nowhere; the God-forsaken back of beyond, often stuck behind a tractor or sheep crossing the road.

Then I emerge to a mind-altering panorama: fingers of cliff pointing into the sea, primeval and alive with geological scars; bright light - perhaps a shade of yellow or purple - pierces clouds that are reflected in vivid blue water; a path that draws the eye through all this, rolling into the distance, bursts with wild flowers and gorse in pink, blue and gold. You could not CGI this any better. It could have been designed specifically for the trail runner. And there's no-one here.

As usual, I have an idea in mind. I think the light, tide and timing will be spot-on for arriving at a favourite hidden cove just as the sun sets over a wave-washed, sparkling beach, with pebbles here and there mirroring the starscape. Sky meets sea in pinks, reds, inky blue, gold and silver.

Over the years I've stacked up a full file of favourite runs in Pembrokeshire and Ceredigion, and the best times to go where. I know places even many locals have never seen because they always go to places like Whitesands Bay or Mwnt beach; undeniably pretty spots, it's true, and accessible, but they only hint at the wild beauty that lies further away from these well-trodden paths. There's 300km of coast path in Pembrokeshire, and another 100 next-door in Ceredigion.

On the one hand, I'm amazed that one of the most stunning coastlines in the world remains so pristine and incredibly quiet. True, people come, in the holidays. But they don't come in anything like the droves that hit Cornwall, for example, even during peak times and at weekends you can guarantee most of them will congregate at the popular tourist spots. Most of the year I have these coast paths entirely to myself, a few sheep and herds of friendly Pembrokeshire ponies. I'd like to keep it that way.

Yet, I always carry a camera, which betrays me. I reach for it as I pass an intriguing cave or unbearably beautiful empty expanse of white sand; I reach for it with every dramatic shift of mood as the light, water movement and weather change, ensuring no two runs are ever the same; and these images burn a hole in my pocket; secrets I want to share.

My family go back generations in Pembrokeshire and Ceredigion, a region that has become a haven for what I'll call posh hippies. There are people wearing expensively tailored country casuals while playing at scraping a living from the land. There are also those who really scrape, perhaps living in a yurt or straw-bale house. There are lots of hipster beards, bobble hats and 'spirituality', and there's not much cultural diversity, I'll be honest.

Wander into a cafe and you may hear people talking about the ecstasy of shaking or communicating with animals. Twinkly-eyed locals will gently joke, but want to know everything about you. You have to give a bit of yourself to live in a place like this. You'll get back whatever you give in gossip, in knitted jumpers for your kids and genuine help if you ever need it.

TRAIL RUNNING WALES

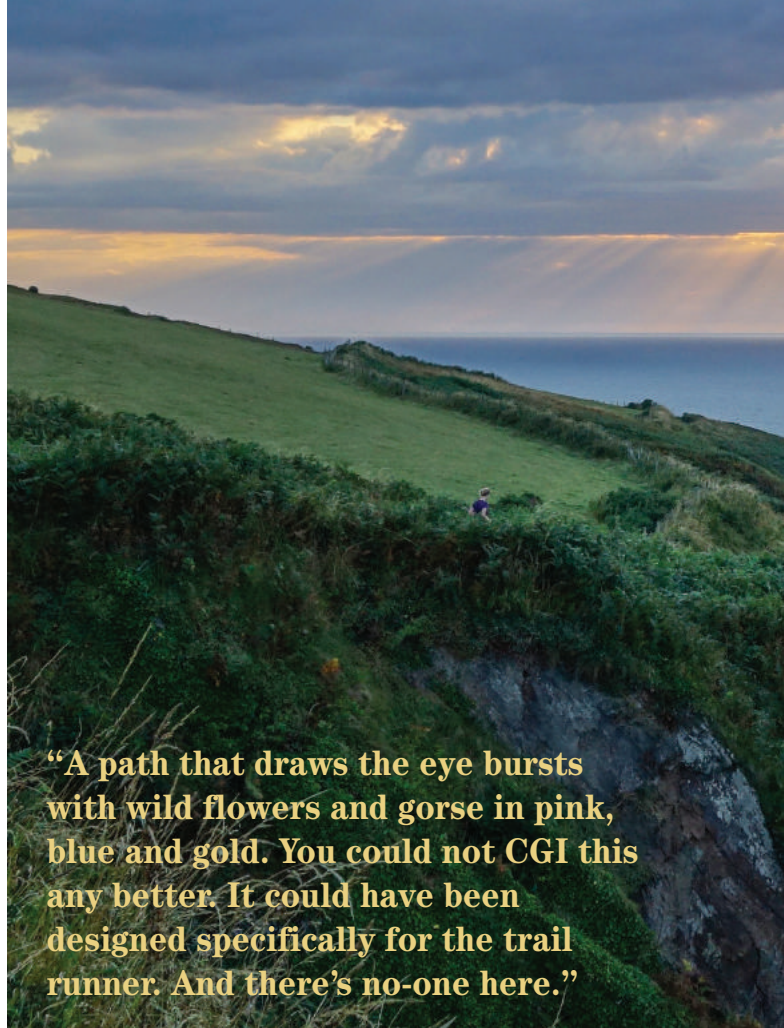
Britain's smallest 'city' of St Davids is probably the best-known base for a visit to the area, and with good reason. Perched right at the western tip of Pembrokeshire, it's got everything you want - a handful of good shops, cafes and restaurants - and nothing else; besides the huge 12th-Century cathedral that gives it city status (the population is only 1600-strong), which is intriguingly set low below the town, hidden from view.

BRITAIN'S SMALLEST CITY AND MOST BEAUTIFUL COASTLINE

I begin a favourite half-marathon circuit at Porth-Clais, a little inlet just south of St Davids, where easy rock-climbs and coasteering scrambles line calm, sparkling waters. It's a great place to launch a kayak, too. Keeping the sea on my right, I follow coast path signs around pretty little coves, looking out at the expanse of Ramsey Island nature reserve (open for boat trips in the summer), clad in pink heather and gorse, and the 'Bishops and Clerks' islets beyond. Peregrines may dart overhead, if I'm lucky.

Finally I round the tip - it could be calm apart from the tinkle of waves and cry of birds or completely storm-battered - and sight the huge expanse of Whitesands Bay, where surfers bob in the waves. Beyond the bay rises Carn Llidi, a mini-Tryfan-esque peak. Pembrokeshire ponies often munch the grass below it, working hard to mow the grass so wildflowers and birds can flourish. From here I trot along country lanes back to St Davids for an ice cream, then contentedly plod the final few miles back to the car.

Another favourite circuit begins at Whitesands Bay, explores the rugged and wild mini-summits of Carn Llidi, Carnedd-lleithr and Penberry, then returns hugging the sea. In fact the whole stretch of coast path in between St Davids and Fishguard is stunning, and south of St Davids lie the huge, breezy and breathtaking beaches of Newgale and Freshwater West. You can't go wrong around here really; planning any route is as exciting as poring over a treasure map!



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PENBRYN, SECRET TUNNEL BEACH, YNYS LOCHTYN AND CWM TYDU

Head a little further north, over the border onto the Ceredigion coast path, and there's a change in atmosphere. It feels more isolated and untamed up here, with particularly photogenic geology. Just beyond Cardigan lie three picturesque landmarks that I regularly run between. Out and back it's about six miles each way, but you can break it into shorter segments, too. It's particularly atmospheric for sunsets.

Beginning at the mile-long stretch of white sand at Penybryn - filmset for the final scene in Bond film *Die Another Day* - I run with the sea on my left, up and over a headland, until I spot a little cove below. A chunk of rock on the beach has a tunnel through its heart. Scouting reveals a little track leading to the head of a waterfall, and from there down to the beach, where you can investigate further.

Ahead, the distinctive arm of Ynys Lochlyn points into the sea; you can scramble down to explore that, too. And further on, half-a-kilometre past the former smuggler's cove of Cwm Tydu, a rough path winds down to a tiny, half-moon bay. Intriguing and pretty grass-topped mounds of rock stand on the beach. With their raw geological folds they look like they've just risen from the ocean.

THE GOLDEN ROAD OVER THE STONEHENGE QUARRY

It's easy to focus on the sea, but don't miss the rugged range of hill-tops just inland, which offer spectacular perspectives over the coastline. You can't help tripping over rocky relics up here, and imagining megalithic tomb builders and Iron Age warriors piling stones for these hill forts and burial chambers as you splash through the mud.

The Preselis are the best-known hills: famously, bluestones were rolled to 250-mile-distant Stonehenge from here! A seven-mile route



SARAH RECOMMENDS

Waterproof: Arc'teryx Norvan Jacket

Really minimalist yet properly weatherproof. Lighter than most 3-layer Gore-Tex shells thanks to a new backer, this weighs just 195g. It's a nice trim fit with gusseted arms and clever underarm vents, which actively pull air in.

Footwear: Salomon Speedcross 3

I'm on my sixth pair of these. The massive lugs offer unbeatable traction for Welsh mud, they last for ages and are even good in the snow.

Carry: Salomon S-Lab Advanced Skin 3 Belt Set

Some swear by rucksacks but I'm a lover of minimalist running and free shoulders. This stretchy pack fits everything I need for most runs and nothing besides: soft water flask, camera, phone, spare lightweight layer, buff and snacks all go into the small zipped pockets or bigger stretchy ones. It doesn't bounce and it's not at all bulky.



TOP TRAIL TIPS

- Get out in those weather windows. The weather can change very quickly and it's always depressing when rain moves in because you decided to go after lunch.
- Catch at least one sunset over the sea while you are here. It's absolutely stunning.
- The easiest way to make friends with Pembrokeshire ponies on the coast path is to sit down near them and ignore them. They are so nosy they won't be able to resist coming over to see what you are doing; sticking their noses in your face and gently nibbling your shoes.
- If you get a chance get over to Skomer Island to see the puffins. Seal beach at Cemaes Head is a good place to spot seals. The headland at Mwnt is a good place to sit and look out for dolphins.
- Don't miss the 24-mile Preseli Beast race on Saturday May 7th 2016:
www.preselibeast.wordpress.com
- Check out local trail running guide, wildlife expert and coach Chris Wanless:
www.trailheadguides.com

takes in the whole ridge, on an ancient highway called the Golden Road.

On the way you'll pass Bronze Age burial cairns on summits and the rocky tor of Carn Bica; a large lozenge-shaped rock overlooking Bedd Arthur, a ring of stones in the shape of an eye, which dates back to Neolithic times. At the end of the ridge lies Foel Drygarn, an Iron Age fortress (around 350 BC) with double ramparts and three more Bronze Age burial cairns. Look for a large flat stone, Bwrdd y Brenin (King's Table). Below it is Carn Meini, possibly the quarry for Stonehenge.

BACK IN TIME ON CARNINGLI VOLCANO

Another favourite run is a ten-miler beginning at the foot of 347m-high former volcano, Mynydd Carningli. A wide grassy scar leads upwards, turning into a hands-on scramble over the volcano's dead heart: lichen-covered, dolerite scree.

The rocky summit crown reveals the sea lapping Carningli's northern skirt hem, the golden scoop of Newport Sands and the green of Dinas Head jutting out. I imagine people in tunics and cloaks looking at the same view: Carningli was a hill fort during the Iron Age (roughly 750BC to AD 43).

Descending, I step further back in time, searching out Bronze Age hut remains in the heather and the tall Bronze Age burial cairn of Carn Briw. There's rarely another soul on the vast expanse of rock-strewn moorland over Carningli's gently-sloping back.

Finally a bridleway leads down into wooded Cwm Gwaun. Twists and turns of the Afon (river) Gwaun here lead the way along the valley floor, where vibrant moss has crept softly up tree trunks and turned stones into cushions.

By the time I reach my car the sun has often set, making Carningli look like the fiery volcano it once was. Back on the road, munching another cereal bar, I may well get stuck behind another country obstacle or slow driver. This time perhaps it's a Mansel Davies lorry or EJ-plate car that's probably never left the valley. But flicking through memories of the run in my head, I won't care a bit.

The seascapes and geology, colours, textures and light of Pembrokeshire and Ceredigion never cease to amaze me. I simply never get bored of the landscapes here. If you ever make it over this way, do look me up. Just don't tell too many other people, okay? 📷

Photo: Mair Bell



**"On the way you'll pass
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