



Splendid isolation

Discover an abandoned tidal island in the Dwyryd Estuary near Portmeirion

Time: 2 or 3 hours

Distance: 3 miles

Landscape: coastal

Looking across the Dwyryd Estuary at high tide you would be forgiven for thinking that the small island of Ynys Giffan was insignificant, unworthy of exploration and impossible to visit without a boat,

But on each count you would be wrong.

Visitors who are prepared to roll up their trousers can be well rewarded with an adventure unlike any other.

This trail is particularly enjoyable in the summer months when tidal waters have absorbed the heat of the sun.

Location:

Ynys Giffan, Gwynedd, Wales

Start and finish:

Talsarnau railway station, Station Road, Talsarnau LL47 6UA

Grid reference:

SH 60090 37052

Be prepared:

Bring strong shoes if you want to venture onto the island as it is covered in bracken and scrub. There is usually a good mobile signal in the estuary should you need it.

Take care!



Before setting out on the walk make sure you check the tide.
The island is only accessible for up to three hours either side of low tide.
Tide timetables are available online at <https://www.tidetimes.org.uk>



Route and stopping points



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01 Talsarnau railway station

However you got here today, Talsarnau railway station is a good starting point for any visit to the tidal island of Ynys Giffan, But before we venture towards the coast, it is well worth exploring this remote and isolated outpost of the national railway network.

The Cambrian Coastline Railway was originally built to serve the local industries, transporting Welsh slate from the quarries at Blaenau Ffestiniog and granite setts from Minffordd to Wales' growing cities. When road infrastructure improved in the 1960s, the demand for rail transportation declined.

Talsarnau, unlike other stations, survived the Beeching Axe that fell on so many rural branch lines during this time, but only just. The station building is now a private property and there are no facilities except for the station platform itself.

Talsarnau is a request stop station, one of several on this stretch of line. Trains and passengers only appear every couple of hours, so it is worth paying close attention to the timetable if you want to successfully hail a particular train!

It may well be easier to drive here than travel by rail, but where is the sense of adventure in that?

Directions

With the platform behind you, begin the half-mile stroll from Talsarnau to the estuary by following Station Road and taking the first left turn. Walk as far as the tarmac takes you, then go through the level crossing gates and across the railway line. Walk through the pastoral farmland and beyond until the marshland meets the estuary sands.

02 Footpath where pasture meets estuary

You might think that the pastoral farmland here is completely natural, but the entire landscape has been sculpted both by nature and human activity.

At the end of the last Ice Age when temperatures began to rise and the ice sheet that had covered much of Britain began to melt, the land unburdened by the weight of ice began to rise. As a result of this post-glacial uplift, the land here is higher than it once was and the coast has receded.

Also, active sand dune building and the growth of a sand spit along the coast from Harlech has formed a protective barrier between this area of low-lying, flat land and the powerful waves that travel across the Irish Sea. As a result, sea waves have been unable to erode the sand and it has instead been deposited in the mouth of the estuary allowing the wide saltmarshes to form. The land here is so flat that nothing stands between you and some fantastic views including the mountains of Snowdonia National Park which frame the views to the north.

The coastal plain is protected from flooding by the low-slung sea walls you can see ahead of you. Made of turf, soil and sand, these embankments enclose over 100 acres of drained pasture here at Draenogan Mawr. On a sunny day, the peak of Snowdon can be seen, but when storms drive onshore the landscape takes on a more sinister character and the railway line behind flooded and closed down. Such storms are becoming more common, raising concerns for the local community.

Stand quietly for a minute and listen for the sound of the animals in the fields, the wildlife and the birds high up in the sky. If you are taking a winter walk be sure to look out for regular visitors such as over-wintering pintails, grey plover, redshanks and oystercatchers.

Continue along the footpath, until you reach the sea wall and the improved pasture gives way to salt marshes. Beyond the sea wall, the path gets a little tricky to follow as you need to pick your way between shallow creeks and grass turfs, known as swards.

The sward (which is only ever covered at spring tides) includes flowering tufted grass like the tiny pink flowers of the Sea Milkwort and Buck's-horn Plantain with its distinctive rosette of toothed leaves and tiny four-petalled flowers. Soft rushes can grow to over a metre in height and can be found much closer to the sea wall.

There are only two channels of significant depth to navigate. So you have a choice. You can either hop from turf to turf or take your shoes off and wade through the shallow waters. Turf grown in the wet pasture is of such high quality that between 1953 and 1962 it was cut and supplied for football fields and bowling greens. It even appeared on the tennis courts at Wimbledon. Unfortunately, this turf industry was short-lived as rolled turf, a cheaper alternative was quickly developed.

Directions

Cross the estuary sands and walk directly towards the island. Walk to the right of the large pool located to the south of the island.

03 Large pool south of the island

Like most tidal crossings in Britain, this one has no causeway or easily definable routes. However, you do not need to rely on a map to guide you as Ynys Giffan is well within sight. Just a word of caution, there are two river channels that flow between you and Ynys Giffan, if you reach these and they are too deep to cross, for safety, you must turn back.

As you reach the edge of the marshes, step onto the rippled sand of the estuary. Take your time to explore the temporary pools, shallow channels, extensive sandflats and habitats of the inter-tidal landscape. The estuary is flat, but the sand and river channels can be uneven underfoot.

The difference between high and low tide (known as the tidal range) is four metres. This means that the island is completely cut off and impossible to reach at high tide without a boat. Yet, on the ebb tide it only takes five minutes to walk the 400-metre route to the island.

Look on an OS map and you'll see that this estuary is vast. To the south-west, towards the Irish Sea, you can see where the Dwyryd and Glaslyn Estuaries unite to form one of the largest and most unspoilt estuaries in Cardigan Bay.

This is a dynamic landscape where nutrient-rich sediments constantly shift and channels meander with each tide. Over 348 hectares of sand flats and salt marshes are a haven for wildlife, home to wildfowl, otters and water voles. If you are lucky, you might even catch sight of osprey diving for fish. When the sun is high in the sky, estuary sands dry and skip seawards on the wind. These sands have built the dunes at Morfa Harlech, a living museum of rocks broken down and deposited through time to form one of our longest and active sand dune systems.

Directions

Take a walk around the edge of the entire island. This will only take you 10 or 15 minutes, although curiosity may make your journey longer.

04 On the island

There are many rewards awaiting you on Ynys Giffan. On a hot day you can play in the deep brackish pools to the south or circumnavigate the island to get a better sense of its splendid isolation. Overlooked by the Moelwyn Mountains, that stand just in front of Snowdon, and the Rhinogs to the south-east, the rocky island of Ynys Giffan is a distinctive and unique feature of the Dwyryd Estuary.

Standing at 39 metres in height, the granite outcrop is one of only 43 unbridged tidal islands in Britain. In the 1700s, the island was gifted by Queen Anne to Lord Harlech and named Ynys Giffan meaning 'Anne's gift island'. It has remained in the Harlech family as a consequence of Anne forbidding its sale.

In the following century the Afon (River) Dwyryd became central to the Welsh slate industry. Boats and later the railways carried slates from the quarries at Ffestiniog and Llanfrothen, past Ynys Giffan, for global export from Porthmadog. If you look carefully timbers from some of the boats wrecked in the estuary can be seen at low tide.

Directions

Return to the east of the island ready to venture inland and explore the abandoned house and barn. You will know you are near to the house if you can see either a black water pipe or the abandoned cart on the island's edge, or if you look through the trees and you can see the roof of the house.

05 Abandoned farmhouse

If you look carefully through the trees, you might see the roof of the island's only house. If you want to find out what a remote farmhouse looks like, here is your opportunity. The path to the house is overgrown, but enough people trample through, that the ground is relatively clear (see photo 1).

For much of the twentieth century the island was inhabited by the Roberts family and abandoned in the 1960s when Hugh Roberts moved to the nearby village of Minffordd. The derelict and decaying farmhouse and barn are now the only real evidence anyone ever lived here and neither are in a particularly good state of repair, although the roof does seem to be doing a good job of keeping the rain out for now.

Directions

Back track to the estuary sands, walk clockwise round the island past the rusty cart, then you will find a path cutting into the island, just before you reach the rock outcrop and deep pool to the south.

06 Top of the island

At this point you are probably curious about what the rest of the island has to offer. So it makes sense to climb to the top. This is probably the most strenuous part of the trail, but at 39 metres in height, the hike takes little more than five minutes. Several small rock outcrops at the top of the island make great platforms to stand on and get a 360-degree panoramic view of this natural amphitheatre.

As you explore can you uncover any proof that the island was once inhabited? The fields are now covered in foxgloves, bracken and scrub and any evidence is becoming harder to find. Having been abandoned,

Ynys Giffan is now a haven for young adventurers and wildlife. On a spring day look out for the tent caterpillars that cover the gorse bushes and the multitude of butterflies basking on the southern slopes.

Directions

Instead of taking the same route back to Talsarnau, head south, on a bearing of 200 degrees. This will take you to a rock outcrop in front of a small farmhouse at Llechollwyn, located at a low-point in the hills behind (SH 59691 35845). As you scan the horizon you will see that this is a little to the right of, and beyond, the small tributary that flows past the two visible cottages at Ty-gwyn. Here there are two small car parks and easy access onto the estuary. Once back on firm ground follow the road to Ynys and turn left at Ty-gwyn-Gamlas cottage.

07 Ty-gwyn-Gamlas cottage

The landscape here changed significantly as a result of the 1806 Enclosure Act. Permission was given to build two turf embankments, allowing the land behind the embankments to be drained.

Pasture could now be grazed by sheep and cattle. By 1810 the embankments were complete and farm cottages including the ones here at Ty-gwyn-Gamlas were built for the farmers (see photo 3.). A new coastal road (the A456) was built to take advantage of this newly reclaimed land and improve accessibility between Blaenau Ffestiniog and Harlech.

The final stretch of this trail takes you along the 1810 embankment. As you continue to walk, observe how different the landscape is on either side of the wall and imagine how it might look if the Enclosure Act of 1806 had never been passed. Would the turf industry have been possible? Would the railway have been possible? Could you have even travelled here today?

In our busy lives and interconnected world there is something to be said about exploring the remote corners of Britain, such as the inaccessible island of Ynys Giffan. If you have enjoyed this trail, why don't you turn your attention to one of the 42 other tidal islands dotted around the mainland? Some popular ones include the Holy Island of Lindisfarne off the northeast coast of England and St Michael's Mount off Cornwall, but what about the lesser travelled Dova Haw off Cumbria or Northey in the estuary of the River Blackwater, Essex?

Directions

Take the path to the south west, past the front of Ty-gwyn-Gamlas cottage and walk 400 metres along the sea wall, then cross the Afon (River) y Gilyn and pick up the sea wall again (keep the marsh on your left and pasture to your right) and return back to Talsarnau railway station.



Thank you to...

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