

The Cornish fishing village became popular with painters – but there's far more to it than red ochre says Peter Hardy

You'll be converted by beautiful St Ives

SCULPTOR Barbara Hepworth made her home here, and Turner and Whistler were seasonal visitors. But you don't have to be an artist, famous or otherwise, to be entranced by St Ives.

It is the unusual purity of the northern light that first strikes you. This explains how an ancient pilchard-fishing port near the Atlantic tip of Cornwall's coastline had such a decisive impact on the development of British painting in the 20th century.

Art galleries abound in the narrow cobbled streets which fringe the harbour and the sands of Porthminster and Porthmeor beaches. The most famous of these, the Tate St Ives, has transformed the town's economy by extending the tourist season from four months to all the year round since it was built ten years ago.

Stand on either beach by night and you can feast your eyes on a sight that is becoming all too obscured across vast tracts of light-polluted Britain – the stars.

HOW TO GET THERE

BY CAR: 308 miles from London, 191 miles from Bristol, 272 miles from Birmingham. Parking is limited – leave your car at Lelant Saltings and complete the journey by train or bus.

BY TRAIN: Paddington – St Ives 5hr 13 minutes, change at St Erth, Supersaver return £59.

BY AIR: Stansted – Newquay with Ryanair from £16.99 one-way, Gatwick – Newquay with British Airways from £53 one-way. Newquay – St Ives 35 miles by bus, rail or taxi.

WHERE TO STAY

GOLD: Blue Hayes (01736 797129) stands out in vivid relief from the otherwise bland canvas of hotel accommodation. The house, on the coastal path at the approach to the town, was recently re-opened, after a two-year makeover, with five stylish suites. No children under ten. £45 – 75 per person per night with breakfast.



WHERE TO EAT

GOLD: Porthminster Beach Café (01736 795352) on the beach has some of the best food. While we lunched on fresh fish and a New Zealand Chardonnay, dolphins frolicked in the sea 100 yards away. Main courses £6.95 - £13.

SILVER: Alba (01736 797222) on The Wharf has an international menu with the emphasis on fresh fish. Main courses £10.95 - £17.95.

BRONZE: On Shore (01736 796000) serves seafood and exotic gourmet pizzas cooked in a wood-burning oven in pleasant Mediterranean-style surroundings, £6.75 – 7.95.

BEST CREAM TEA: Cortina Coffee and Tea Garden, £3.20.

WHAT TO DO

Tate St Ives (01736 796226) on Porthmeor Beach has attracted nearly two million visitors since it was opened. The gallery currently has an exhibition marking the centenary of the birth of Barbara Hepworth. March – October daily 10am-5.30pm, Nov-Feb Tues-Sun 10am-4.30pm. Adults £4.75, 18 and under free admission.

Barbara Hepworth Museum and Sculpture Garden (01736 796226) on Barn9on Hill is laid out to the artist's original plans. March-Oct daily 10am-5.30pm. Nov-Feb Tues-Sun 10am-dusk. Entry as Tate.

St Ives Museum (01736 796005) in Wheal Dream, near the harbour, traces the history of the town. Exhibits include art,

SILVER: Pedn-Olva (01736 796222). Overlooking the harbour, this was once the fishing fleet's look out for the shoals of pilchards and mackerel from which the town made its living. Pedn-Olva is a comfortable family hotel with 30 rooms, all with sea views. £55 – 68 per person with breakfast. £62 –85 per person with dinner.

BRONZE: Primrose Valley Hotel (01736 794939 is a friendly family hotel in a quiet position, just back from Porthminster Beach. It was bought in 2001 by two couples, who have built a sun terrace with magnificent Atlantic views and are refurbishing rooms. £25 – 43 per person per night with breakfast.

BED & BREAKFAST: Ennys (01736 740262), 12 miles away at St Hilary, provides Cornwall's finest five-star country house accommodation in a 17th century manor in an idyllic rural location. Two double rooms and one twin £65 – 90, two family suites £80 – 130. Prices are per room with breakfast and afternoon tea. Ennys also has three fine self-catering suites in the grounds, £250 – 875 per week.

SELF-CATERING: Cornish Riviera Holidays (01736 797891) has a portfolio of flats and fishermen's cottages in St Ives. £195 - £690 per week for a water's edge cottage sleeping five people.

fishing, boat building and mining. Mon-Fri 10am-5pm. Adults £1, children 40p.

Diving: Dive St Ives (01736 799229) PADI diving courses from £199. www.divesives.com

St Ives Theatre (01736 797007) is home to Kidz R Us, a group of young actors aged six to 17 years which has won national acclaim since forming in 1994.

Boat trips to Seal Island on the Seahorse (01736 797328). Adults £7, children £5. One-hour cruises on the motor vessel Tranket. (07745 304794) to Seal Island, private charter and fishing trips. Prices on demand.

Self-drive boat trips with White Star Boat Hire (07967 620045) or Mercury Boat Hire (07967 620045) both £8 for 15 mins, £18 per hour.

BEST BEACH: Porthmeor attracts the surfers, Portminster is more sheltered for sunbathing. Both have Blue Flag awards.

BEST THING: Clarity of the light, which has made St Ives into a major artists' colony.

WORST THING: Lack of parking spaces in and around the town.

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