

— WEEKEND IN... —

ILFRACOMBE

Increasingly referred to as the new St Ives, Ilfracombe has a rich history, rugged coastline and plenty to see and do, making it a perfect weekend away destination, says RACHAEL SHARPE



'I love how Verity looms over the pier at the entrance to the harbour, which looks out over the Bristol Channel towards south Wales – I find her both powerful and moving'



Almost as synonymous with Ilfracombe's historic harbour as the multi-coloured houses with fishing boats bobbing in the water in front of them, is *Verity*, Damien Hirst's 20m-high, 25-tonne stainless steel and bronze sculpture.

The statue depicts a pregnant woman, holding a sword while carrying the scales of justice and standing on a pile of law books. Half of the sculpture shows the internal anatomy of a pregnant woman, including foetus and, like lots of good art, divides opinion entirely.

Personally, I love how *Verity* looms over the pier at the entrance to the harbour, which looks out over the Bristol Channel, towards south Wales – I find her both powerful and moving. No surprise then that the harbour is always my first port of call when I visit Ilfracombe for the weekend.

I promised my son that the next time we visited Ilfracombe we would visit the aquarium, so that was our next port of call – handy as it's located in the Old Lifeboat House on the pier.

Ilfracombe Aquarium is unlike any other I've visited before – it takes you on a fascinating, true to life journey from an Exmoor stream source, down river, to the lake,

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The statue *Verity* is a prominent sight standing over Ilfracombe harbour.

ABOVE Climb aboard *The Princess* for a fascinating cruise along the shoreline.

pond, estuary, local rockpool, harbour and coast in north Devon, then out to Lundy and its marine reserve. Certainly not only for those visiting with children – it's captivating to learn about the local aquatic species, which are housed in realistic habitats. The cafe is well worth a visit, too.

Still thinking of native crabs, common sunstar and bass, we set off for St Nicholas Chapel, which is the oldest working lighthouse in the country. Perched on Lantern Hill overlooking the harbour – the easy, circular walk up is part of the South West Coast Path and starts from the car park behind the aquarium and opposite *Verity*.

First built in the 14th Century, the curious chapel is named after St Nicholas, the patron saint of sailors, has an interesting history and is free to look around. It also offers a tremendous viewpoint from which to watch the picturesque harbour's comings and goings.

Once a fishing village, there has been a port in Ilfracombe since the 12th Century and a settlement for much longer. The town became popular as a fashionable seaside resort in 1874, when the railway arrived. While its use today is mostly leisure and tourism, it does remain a working harbour, where fish

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ABOVE Head to Tunnels Beaches to discover an amazing stretch of coastline.

and seafood land daily and this makes it a lovely place to while away a few hours.

After a runabout on the harbour's sandy beach when the sun made an appearance, we headed into town, but not before taking a look at the RNLI Lifeboat station which sits just off the harbour. Ilfracombe has had a lifeboat for nearly 200 years, offering a rescue service up and down the coast and visitors are welcome inside, when open, to talk to staff, see the boats and learn about the station's history.

After a tasty and revitalising lunch at Annie and the Flint in town - where the Victorian architecture very much remains and steep gradients are the norm - as are the stunning views down into the harbour, we headed to Ilfracombe Museum. Open since 1932, the museum is an eclectic mix of Ilfracombe's history and also everything from natural specimens to war time memories.

Our favourite space was the Maritime Room, where the floor features a map of Ilfracombe harbour, and there's an interesting collection of model ships and paintings of maritime Ilfracombe and maritime curiosities. The pièce de resistance though is a ship-to shore coastal radio operating desk from the Ilfracombe Coastal Radio Station, which was closed in 1986. It plays its last ever transmission and visitors can tap out a Morse code message - great fun!

A few minutes' walk and we were at Tunnels Beaches - one of my favourite places in Ilfracombe



The Carlton is the ideal place to stay in Ilfracombe.

WHERE TO STAY

Fusing the grandeur of a bygone era with its imposing Victorian build and the comfort and styling of a modern boutique hotel, The Carlton is a stone's throw away from Tunnels Beaches and a short walk into town, meaning you don't need to use a car to get around, so you can concentrate on exploring and enjoying the town.

Newly renovated, with restful neutral and soft grey colour palettes, modern artwork, and plush furnishings, all 40 rooms at The Carlton are relaxing, welcoming, and spotlessly clean. The beds are particularly comfortable with luxury bedding - you'll need the promise of chef's breakfast to get you up in the mornings!

The hotel's excellent Brasserie restaurant, headed by chef-patron, Eliot, makes the most of north Devon's larder using local seasonal ingredients for breakfast, dinner, and epic Sunday lunches. There's also a well-stocked bar, coffee lounge, delightful games room, gym, and spa treatment rooms.

• ilfracombecarlton.co.uk



PHOTOGRAPHY: THE CARLTON; SHUTTERSTOCK; NANCY HUTCHINGS



The Lime Kiln is a must visit for when dining out in the town.

EATING OUT

For breakfast

You don't have to stay at the Carlton to dine there – non-residents get a warm welcome at The Brasserie. Breakfast is a hearty affair that will certainly set you up for the day whether it's fillet of natural smoked haddock, grilled kippers, a full English or something a little lighter like smashed avocado on sourdough with poached egg and chilli. Cooked to perfection with the best ingredients.

For lunch

So much more than a cool haunt for your daily caffeine fix, although they do serve sublime speciality coffees, Annie and the Flint, situated on the High Street, is the perfect spot for a casual lunch. Trendy décor, good music and a simple but impressive menu – the open steak sandwich with aioli, watercress, peppercorn sauce and crispy onions is very popular and with good reason – it's a real treat. annieandtheflint.co.uk

For dinner

A new addition to Ilfracombe's vibrant food scene, The Lime Kiln Cafe and Bar offers unparalleled views of the harbour and arguably the best view of Verity in town, which you can see from all tables thanks to the floor-to-ceiling windows.

There's nothing not to like about The Lime Kiln – the location, the friendly staff, knockout coffee and cocktails and a mouth-watering menu. The baked camembert with rosemary honey and candied walnuts was a heavenly starter and the west country pork chop from the specials board with mustard mash, red cabbage and cider sauce was both inventive and delectable. A must visit. thelimekilncafe.co.uk

PHOTOGRAPHY: RACHAEL SHARPE, SHUTTERSTOCK

and the town's main beach. Hand carved in the 1820s, you walk through the tunnels to the beach – which as well as being quirky, makes it seem like a special event, heightening your anticipation to see the coast. On your walk down, you can read about the site's history – we particularly liked the Victorian etiquette for boys, girls and for when boating with ladies! Oh, how times have changed...

The north Devon coastline is fantastic because it is rugged and wild – the scenery never fails to impress me. It wasn't a brilliant weather day when I visited, but we still had lots of fun watching the ferocious waves crash against the rocks and making patterns with shells on the shore.

The rock pools are amongst the very best in the UK here, not to mention the amazing tidal pool, which is visible for three hours before and after low tide and offers exhilarating safe swimming conditions for a wild dip. Our few hours at the beach rounded Saturday off brilliantly and giving us just enough time to change before heading to the town's hottest new eatery, the Lime Kiln, for dinner.

After an indulgent Sunday breakfast at The Carlton on Sunday morning, we were feeling well rested enough to decide to take on part of the coastal path. We followed the Ilfracombe and the Torr's route on the South West

BEOW The museum is an eclectic mix of Ilfracombe's history.



Coast Path website, which although only 5km is challenging enough to work off those brekkie sausages and will see you walk pavements, lanes, tracks and a stretch of fairly rugged coastal path, with some steep gradients. The wooded valley leading up to The Torrs, a rugged area also known as The Seven Hills, offers unmatched views across the Bristol Channel.

We enjoyed more views of the rugged coastline from the shelter of The Quarterdeck, the Landmark Theatre's relaxed cafe, which is right on the seafront and serves a great selection of drinks and delicious casual food. There's certainly no shortage of places to enjoy coffee and cake in Ilfracombe!

Another thing that punctuated our weekend was art, and not just Verity looming large – Ilfracombe is home to a number of brilliant, independent galleries. I especially liked the Pier Gallery at The Quay, where Ilfracombe resident Fiona Bates' original and quirky ceramics captivated me. A trip to FortyThreeShop on Fore Street, which is a joyful space filled with inspiring artwork from local artists, is another must when in town.

I hate to leave Ilfracombe without having been on The Big Yellow Boat – *The Ilfracombe Princess*, which offers a variety of coastal and wildlife cruises. I remember vividly the first time I saw 'Dave the Dolphin' from the



ABOVE Verity stands in a key position overlooking the harbour.

deck of *The Princess*, and I've been hooked since.

This visit, we did the Seals and Lighthouse cruise and I earned some tremendous mum points...

Turning west out of the harbour on board The Big Yellow Boat, which is a comfortable and clean vessel with plenty of room for everyone, we passed Tunnels Beaches, Lee Village and then it was on to Bull Point Lighthouse, originally constructed in 1879.

This part of the trip is interesting in itself but when you get to just past Rockham Beach, we were lucky enough to see some seals, which was just delightful. These sightings are regular too, so although obviously not guaranteed, you do stand a good chance of seeing Atlantic grey seals in the wild as the viewing deck is perfect for this.

The Princess carried on to Morte Point, where we learnt about smugglers and shipwrecks. Last stop was Woolacombe Bay, which offers stunning views of Baggy Point, Hartland Point and Lundy Island, before heading back to Ilfracombe. Two hours incredibly well spent.

After stocking up on some delectable cakes to eat at home from Stacc, and some local fudge for the dog sitter, it was time to head home – tired and happy with heads full of smugglers, seals, scones, hidden beaches, modern art and a dreamy, dramatic coastline.

• visitilfracombe.co.uk

