

Why a weekend in Cornwall is a rejuvenating winter pick-me-up

Don't be put off by colder weather — captivating art classes, wild shores and foraging walks give the West Country a different kind of warmth at this time of year



Prussia Cove is not far from St Michael's Mount

ALAMY

Sean Newsom | Monday December 02 2024, 12.01am, The Times

The landscape artist Anita Reynolds picks up a bottle of ink, settles her drawing board on top of a dry-stone wall and considers the Cornish skyline. “It’s hard to work down here in summer,” she says. “It’s too... fluffy. Like someone wearing all of their clothing, all at once. You can’t see what’s underneath — the hard edges, the structure, the bones of the place. You have to wait for winter for that.” Then she unscrews the ink bottle to reveal a pipette, from which she can squeeze a thin stream of jet-black ink, and without taking her eyes off the skyline, she starts to draw.

The next 20 minutes are breathtaking. Above us, rising from the coast west of Zennor, is the top of Carn Galver. It’s a tight knuckle of granite, punching through the heather like a defiant fist. And in a couple of deft, carefully articulated sweeps of her hand, Reynolds captured its essential elements. Then she sprays the patches of the thick, heavy paper with water. It encourages her next drops of ink to spread over the sheet like a bloom of lichen on a stone. By

the time she's finished, she's caught not only the shape of this weather-beaten winter coastline, but its texture too.

"Now it's your turn," she says, and hands me her bottle of ink.



The landscape artist Anita Reynolds at work on the Cornish skyline

And there I was thinking I'd spend my entire trip to Cornwall indoors, reading my way through a pile of novels. That was the fantasy, anyway. It's been a bumpy couple of months, and with November darkening around me, I felt like drawing the curtains on the world. I was going to find a low-slung pub, braced against the prevailing wind, and pull up a chair by the nearest fire. Outside, an Atlantic storm would be raging and when, inevitably, it brought down the power lines, I'd light some candles and keep on reading. Book by book, I'd slip my moorings and drift free of all contact with the outside world.

Somebody suggested Cornwall as the place to go. In winter? After decades of summer holidays there, the idea felt counter-intuitive. But then I remembered the Gurnard's Head near Zennor. It's on that stretch of Cornish coastline that's so far west of everywhere that it feels as if it's parted company with the rest of Britain. The Gurnard's Head is its totem pole, painted mustard-yellow to make it unmissable, with its name emblazoned on the roof in giant white letters. It has eight cute bedrooms, serves a rich and warming crab macaroni and has not one but two open fireplaces. In other words, it was the perfect fit. And never mind the Atlantic ocean, heaving and swirling around the nearby headlands. Its foaming pints of West Coast pale ale were what interested me.

Or at least they were, until I heard about Reynolds. She's a tutor at the excellent Newlyn Art School on the other side of the Penwith peninsula, and I've long been an admirer of her work. She teaches a series of four-day abstract landscape courses, aimed at anyone who wants to loosen up their approach, and officially her tuition work for 2024 was done. But Henry Garfit, the school's founder, told

me she'd still be in Cornwall when I was there. Would I like to spend a day working with her? "Winter's her favourite season," he told me.

Then the Gurnard's Head asked if I'd like to meet Caroline Davey. For more than 20 years she's been foraging along Cornwall's coasts, and in 2007 she founded the Fat Hen wild cookery school. She also collaborates with the pub on a range of foraging events and offers bespoke, two-hour guided walks (from £75; the-fat-hen.co.uk). Privately, I rolled my eyes. It was November. What would we pick? Pebbles? But even if it was snowing, I was tempted by the thought of this new perspective I'd get on a familiar landscape. "Yes please," I said to both — and kicked the door of my personal lock-in wide open.



One of Anita Reynolds's paintings, Embattled Landscape

"We're lucky down here," Davey said when we walked together to Prussia Cove a few days later. "We can pick herbs and salads almost all winter." And to prove it, she slung a wicker basket over her arm and led me through a tunnel of trees towards the sparkling sea. Prussia Cove faces southeast, not far from St Michael's Mount, and it's a softer, more sheltered spot than Zennor. But even so, I couldn't believe it was mid-November. The sun shone, soft and golden. The sea slopped lazily against a rocky headland. And at almost every turn Davey found green shoots. Black mustard, growing beside a stream, was fiery and evanescent, with a sudden flare of spice that burnt out almost as soon as I'd tasted it. Rock samphire, by contrast, seemed to last for ever; it started earthy and complicated, before clarifying slowly into sweetness. "Carrots?" I asked. "It's related to them," Davey said, "unlike the marsh samphire that everybody usually eats." Her knowledge is encyclopaedic.

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Admittedly, my senses were already tingling. On the way over from the Gurnard's Head I'd stopped in Newlyn and had a scorching-hot sauna with JennyGarland, who runs Rising Embers — a welcoming, barrel-shaped hot-house near the harbour — then followed it with the shock of a cold-water swim (saunas from £8; risingembers.com). But this was a dazzling and disorientating experience. The last of autumn's leaves were falling. Colours deepened as the temperature dropped. And here we were, eating our way through Cornwall's hedgerows. Never mind four seasons in one day, this was four seasons in one moment. I wondered if I'd nibbled on something hallucinogenic by mistake.

And now here I was with Reynolds, on a wilder shore, facing west, uncorking another part of myself that I thought I'd bottled up and put away till spring. In truth, it's not easy to make meaningful marks using her ink-pipette method, but when — finally — they come, they're as emphatic as a Cornish sea cliff. The idea, Reynolds said, is to work quickly and make as many drawings as possible, before heading back to the studio, sticking them up on the wall and working out where you're heading.



Newlyn Port is all the more beautiful in winter

ALAMY

Back in Newlyn she shows me how. In another studio nearby, the artist Jon Doran is revealing the secrets of successful figurative painting to a friendly and attentive class. It's a patient, step-by-step process, and one of remarkable clarity, dealing first with composition, then tone and finally colour.

Here, by contrast, Reynolds is setting off fireworks — tearing paper, scraping pastels against the sharp edge of a pair of scissors, rubbing and smearing — and, in the process, filling one of her black-and-white ink-scapes with colour and mood. With a touch of orange here, burnt sienna there, and smears of grey and pink, she evokes a thrilling, battle-scarred sense of the Zennor coast and sets it against a troubled sky. And as I watch her work, I realise that there's only one present I want this Christmas: a contribution to the cost of her next course. It starts on March 8 (£595; newlynartschool.co.uk).

Even so, I leave early, because there's one more thing I must do before dinner. I want to walk out to the teetering rocks at Zennor Head and get a final, seething sense of the sea and sky as they marshal their forces. Forget hibernation. Suddenly, I'm ready for whatever's coming next.

Sean Newsom was a guest of Visit England (visitengland.com) and the Gurnard's Head, which has B&B doubles from £168 (gurnardshead.co.uk)