



Dinas

A natural remedy.

Lush, soothing and secluded, the Dinas bird sanctuary is also a haven for humans. This secret pocket of Carmarthenshire, in mid-Wales, offers a natural remedy for the stress of modern life. For a start, the background noise resembles the track listing of a relaxation CD: birdsong echoing under a woodland canopy; a gurgling stream; a rushing river; soft rainfall, and wind rustling through the trees. All that's missing is the crashing surf (the thunderous River Towy makes up for it) and the whale sounds (although the occasional baa of a sheep adds a pastoral charm). If Dinas sounds like a wellness CD, it also looks like the cover of one, with misty, soft-focus scenes of verdant deciduous forest – oak, birch, alder and willow – and foaming white waterfalls.

If that sounds too New Age pretty, relief is at hand: the softness is punctuated by rugged outbursts: jagged outcrops, grey shale slopes and austere hills, above which soars the red kite, a majestic bird of prey. In the foothills of the Cambrian mountains, this is where the soft scenery of southern Wales meets the spartan and dramatic north. This clash of landscapes makes for a complex beauty, but the striking contrasts produce a harmonious whole – a bit like the dawn chorus of tits, thrushes, woodpeckers and warblers at this 2,000-acre RSPB sanctuary.

Wales



The pied flycatcher is one of the avian stars of this RSPB reserve; the River Towy (below) runs through it.



Wales

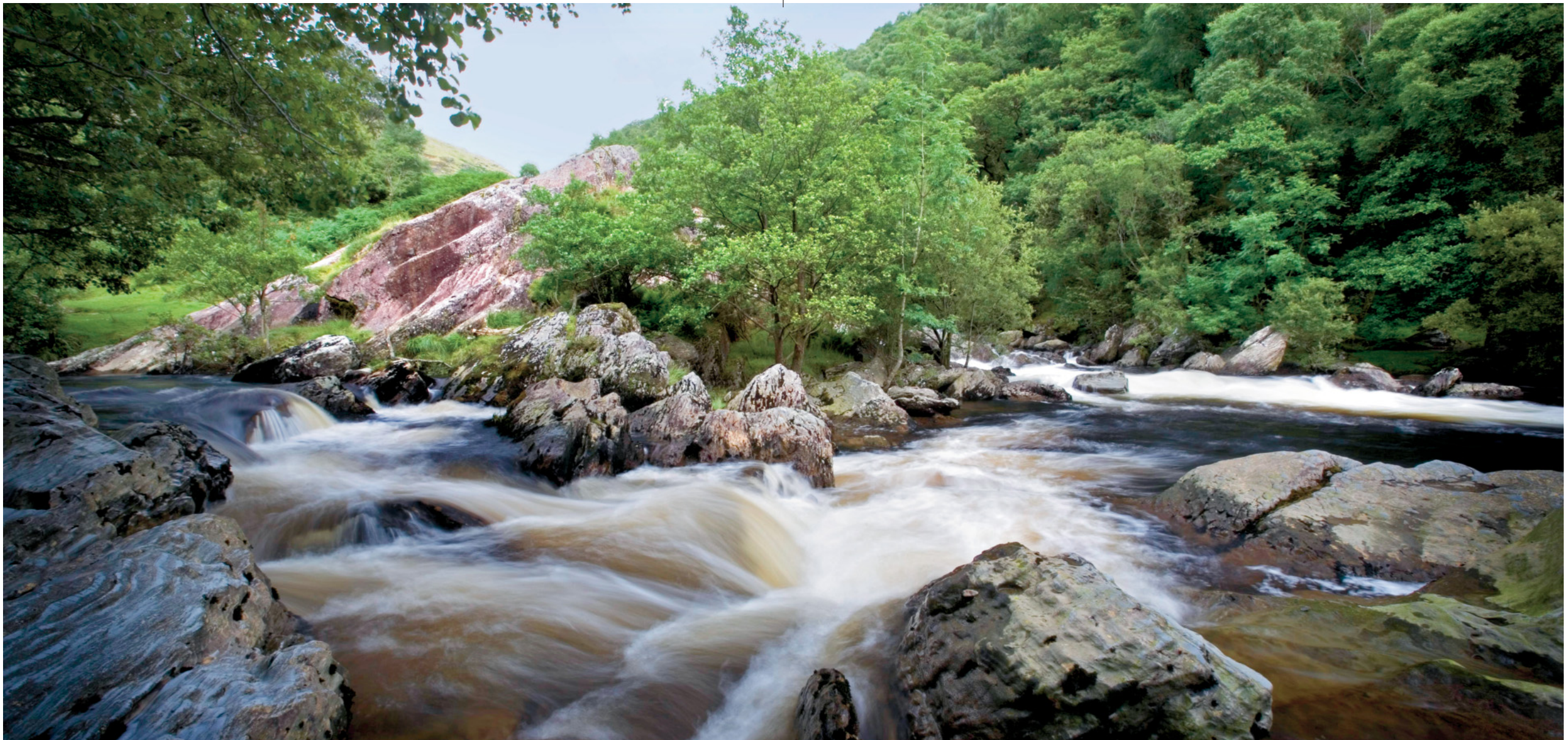
The birds might be your only company. If hell is other people, this secluded Carmarthenshire valley is heaven. There are no mobile-phone signals, and, apart from the odd twitcher, no people. Most tourists, determined to climb the Brecon Beacons or surf the Pembrokeshire coast, pass it by. Easily done, as the reserve is on the road to nowhere. This is good for motorists: the narrow lanes are virtually free of traffic (except for sheep), so even the driving is relaxing.

The Dinas reserve may restore the human spirit, but it was established to save the birds; indeed, it rescued the red kite from the brink of extinction. This iconic bird of prey – known for its forked tail, red plumage and six-foot wingspan – has been around for 120,000 years, soaring acrobatically on thermals. During medieval times, British skies were thick with the scavengers, but as farming expanded, a Vermin Act was passed in 1566 – and a bounty placed on the red kite's head. By 1977, the kite was almost extinct in Britain. The Dinas RSPB Reserve, established in the mid 1970s, became ground zero for Operation Red Kite – Gurkhas were even drafted to guard the eggs from collectors – and a successful comeback was launched (there are now four breeding pairs in the reserve, and 1,200 pairs throughout the UK).

These days, birdwatchers are blasé about red kites, as sightings are common, especially on weekends when local farmers stage feeding shows. The new stars are pied flycatchers, wood warblers and redstarts, rare spring migrants that summer in Welsh oak forests before retiring to Africa for the winter. The pied flycatcher is a dapper little bird – clad in tuxedo-like black and white plumage – with a melodious song. The wood warbler darts about quickly (bring your binoculars to catch a glimpse of its lemon yellow breast), but its song – characterised as 'shimmering and cascading' by RSPB ranger David Anning – is easy to discern. The redstart, a cousin of the robin, is shy, but its quivering red and orange tail is positively flamboyant.

Dinas' fan club is not restricted to birdwatchers: scientists and botanists swoon before its tongue-twisting set of natural credentials: SSSI (Site of Special Scientific Interest), SAC (Special Area of Conservation) and SPA (Special Protection Area). The accolades are partly due to all the velvety moss, delicate ferns and layers of lichen. These fecund carpets cover twisted oak branches and Stone Age boulders, and sustain a who's-who of rare bugs and butterflies (such as the silver-washed fritillary). This supernatural greenery is the result of fresh mountain air and moist conditions. Climatologists say Dinas is Britain's version of a 'cloud forest' – subtropical mountain woodlands found in South America. Cloud forests are also known as fog forests, a more fitting name for Dinas, the dampest corner of Europe (bring an anorak). Still, the gauzy air lends a mystical feel.

So do the rocks. After you leave the boardwalk near the entrance, the gentle forest path gives way to a jagged world of shale, slate, limestone and sandstone, with some clambering required. There are so many rugged boulders strewn among the cold black waters it looks like a quarry exploded. In places, the scene even evokes the American West – more 'Rocky Mountain High' than *How Green Was My Valley*. In fact, this geological display is part of Carmarthenshire culture: quarries were once common in these parts; there's a gold mine nearby in Dolaucothi; and high above Dinas, along a dangerous rocky path, lies a cave where Twm Shon Catti, the Welsh Robin Hood, used to hide out in the 16th century.



For peace of mind, stay close to the river. Its roar drowns out the birdsong, but it also drowns out your cares. With all the rocks, foam and pure water, it's as if you have stumbled into a bottled-water advert. In fact, in Victorian times, Welsh doctors sent their patients to the springs of nearby Llanwrtyd Wells, to take the waters and walk the hills. Solace can also be found away from the water, where wilderness gives way to wistfulness in the form of a bluebell wood: here, warblers sing and sheep graze. It's a fittingly peaceful finale to the walk. For stressed-out souls, Dinas is truly a natural remedy.

OTHER BEAUTY SPOTS

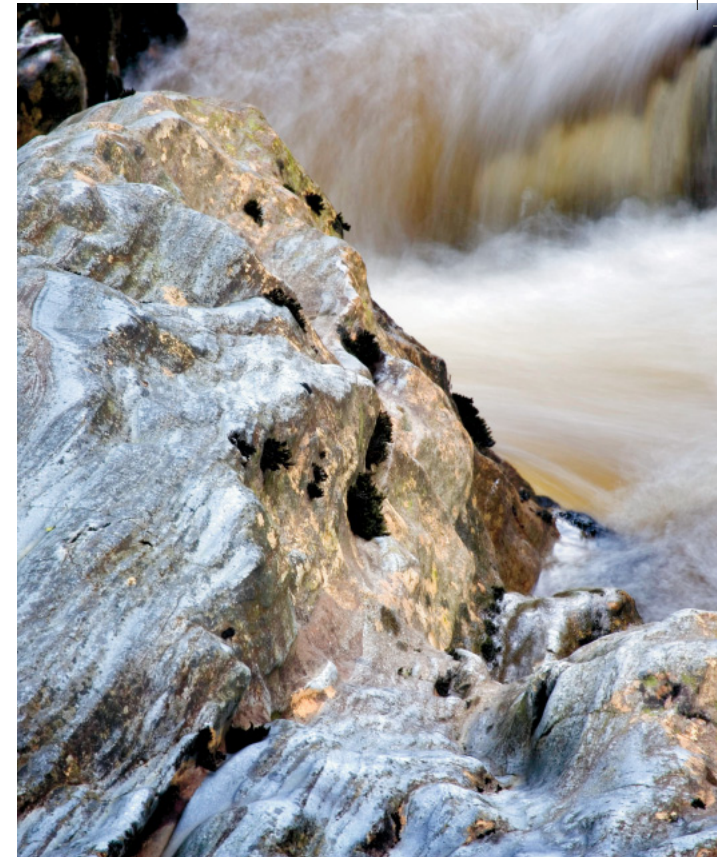
Dinas RSPB lies at the top of the Towy (Tywi) Valley, whose lush, undulating and farm-dotted hills stretch from Carmarthen to Llandovery. The Industrial Revolution passed this valley by: there were no coal mines here, and life on many of these farms hasn't changed

The rushing river drowns out the birdsong in places, but its thunderous roar is just as soothing.

much in a century. Indeed, the medieval legends of Merlin the Magician – Carmarthen's most famous son – live on here. And the River Towy, which winds through the Dinas Reserve, is still overflowing with salmon and sea trout.

Llyn Briane, just north of Dinas, is a dramatic reservoir fringed by coniferous forest plantations. The road follows its shores with photo ops at every bend, before reaching Soar y Mynydd, a lonely 1820 Methodist chapel. A traditional red phone box amid green hills is another postcard shot, reached via a five-minute drive north towards Tregaron. Cwm Rhaeadr, south of Dinas, is another stress-beating reserve that has woodland, warblers and the highest waterfall in the Towy Valley.

Dinefwr Castle, a 12th-century ruin owned by the National Trust, was immortalised by Turner in a 1795 painting; on the edge of the River Towy near Llandeilo, it affords classic valley views. Carregcennen is another romantic ruin near Llandeilo with a sweeping panorama. The magical lake of Llyn y Fan Fach (see *p194*) is also nearby.



The Heart of Wales railway, a charming, one-carriage train, travels from Swansea to Shrewsbury, taking in the ravishing scenery of the Towy Valley and the Brecon Beacons along its 121-mile, four-hour journey.

WHERE TO STAY & EAT

The New White Lion (01550 720685, www.newwhitelion.co.uk) is a tasteful B&B in the grey market town of Llandovery. The six bedrooms are full of luxurious textures – sheepskin rugs, faux animal-skin bedspreads, plush white duvets – and fixtures (rainforest showerheads). The honesty bar in the drawing room adds a touch of boutique hotel. For supper, the dining room (open to residents only) serves country comfort food using local ingredients.

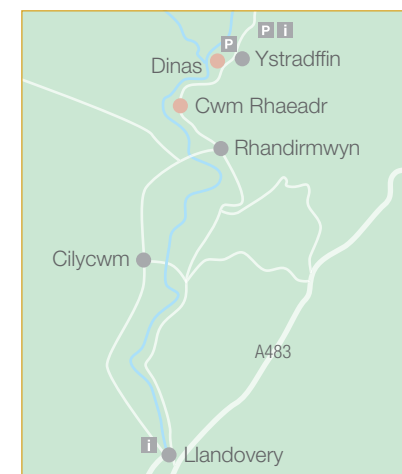
The Cawdor (01558 823500, www.thecawdor.com), in Llandeilo, is a big boutique B&B, with 23 rooms and a modern-classic schtick: period details, bold decor and creature comforts. The elegant restaurant uses local ingredients prepared with flair.

Fronlas (01558 824733, www.fronlas.com), a three-room B&B, has got it all: swish designer decor, a gorgeous location (also in Llandeilo, with views of the hills) and eco credentials (it is solar-powered, and breakfasts are organic).

The Plough Inn (01558 823431, www.ploughrhosmaen.com), on the side of a dual carriageway near Llandeilo, resembles a Travelodge gone posh. The rooms are stylish and well-equipped (pillowtop mattresses, flatscreen TVs, wireless internet) with bucolic views. The bustling restaurant, a local favourite, has gastropub aspirations.

Llanerchindda Farm (01550 750274, www.cambrianway.com) is a cheap alternative to a boutique hotel. Frequented by outdoorsy types who like off-roading in their 4X4s, clay-pigeon shooting and fly fishing, it is set in 50 scenic acres; just don't expect luxury.

Dinas' myriad mosses, lichens and ferns enthrall botanists, and its dramatic rocks lure geologists.



HOW TO GET THERE

The Dinas RSPB is a 2.5-hour drive north of Swansea in Carmarthenshire, 10 miles north of Llandovery on the minor road to Llyn Brienne. **By car** From Swansea, take the M4 and then the A483 through Llandeilo. From Llandovery, follow the

signs to Cilycwm, then carry on through the village until you reach the Cross Inn. Turn right, cross the bridge, and then turn left towards Ystradffin. There is a car park on your left before you get to Llyn Brienne. **By train** The Heart of Wales railway stops four times a day in Llandovery (01597 822053, www.heart-of-wales.co.uk), but you really need a car to get to the reserve. **On foot** The Dinas nature reserve has a circular 70-minute walk. The first section is a boardwalk, but the rest of the trail is more rugged; sturdy shoes recommended. **Map** Ordnance Survey Explorer 187, Llandovery; grid ref SN782467.

FURTHER REFERENCE

Llandovery Tourist Office (01550 720693, www.breconbeacons.org). RSPB (01654 700222, www.rspb.org). See also www.enchantedtowyn.co.uk.