

Rhossili Bay

A view to a thrill.

The Gower peninsula, in the south-west corner of Wales, was the first place in Britain to be designated an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. But Rhossili Bay, the region's showpiece, should receive an award for best drama. If you've come in search of cosy coves, gentle paddling and seaside jollity, move along – or get serious. This is the landscape of the sublime. The beach gives new meaning to the word sweeping; the thundering surf is relentless; the dunes (and downs) are mountainous; and the wind can whip you raw. On a stormy day, this is Wales at its wettest and wildest. You are at the mercy of the elements, and the Atlantic – there's nothing between here and America – throws everything it can at you. Yet, above all, it is the view that really stirs the soul. The scene from above could compete with some of the world's most famous coastal vistas: the US Highway 1 in California, say, or Australia's Great Ocean Road.

Though the Gower won its natural beauty designation back in 1963, the news has been slow to catch on. On a sunny summer Saturday, for instance, the beach can be deserted. This is partly down to scale: Rhossili's vastness (it is three miles long and, at low tide, feels about three miles wide) means you will never be jostling for towel space. But you may never want to bring a towel: the wind can be merciless (sunbathers take refuge behind windbreaks here) and the swimming can be treacherous. The water is frigid and, when the surf is strong, there can be a dangerous undertow.

