



Fistral beach is the home of British surfing. Photo: Toby Abbs

Newquay, so good

The home of European surf, a mecca for holidaymakers for more than a century - Newquay has it all going on discovers EWEN MACDONALD

The first sight which greeted us looking out at the stunning vista from the balcony of our room at the Harbour Hotel in Newquay, was the local kids jumping, diving and in one instance back flipping, off the harbour walls into the deep green waters which seemed a long way below them. Not your normal after school activity for most teenagers in Britain, but it does illustrate a certain sense of Newquay. A place of fun, entertainment, pleasure and adventure. A land of the sun, the sea and the sand. Where the derring-do of the physical landscape, of cliffs, beaches, hills and harbours enters into the mind, the heart and the soul.

The name of The Harbour Hotel is no misnomer; it literally does form one part of the harbour. It is a quaint and charming place, which I would be tempted to call a boutique hotel, but it's far more substantial

and old world than that. A unique romantic hideaway for couples, but they were just as ready to accommodate our little family.

Our weekend really began with our evening meal in the hotel restaurant The Harbour Fish and Grill. Sat in the conservatory we gazed out at a gently retreating tide and the fishing boats rocking upon it. Across the way were the town's main beaches: Tolcarne, the surreally poetic named Lustyclaze and further on Watergate Bay, famed location of Jamie Oliver's Fifteen restaurant.

I don't imagine you could find a better view of both a harbour and several beaches than you can get from the Harbour Hotel. It felt like two views for the price of one. The view itself was matched only by the food created by executive chef Aaron James. I opted for the soup du jour a wonderfully velvet butternut squash soup garnished by crisp little fried onions, giving the dish an

added texture and depth of taste. My good lady wife had baked Camembert with garlic and rosemary accompanied by miniature crudités for dipping.

The boy wonder scoffed down all the complimentary olives before starting on his main dish of that all time British classic: fish, chips and peas, but being a vegetarian like the rest of the family he ate it *sans* the fish.

He did however appear to get a double helping of chips which he pronounced excellent, no small compliment from such a frites aficionado. The condiment of tomato ketchup was freshly made on the premises, which was every bit as unctuous and tangy as would be expected, but with that added specialness that comes from something made in the kitchen from scratch.

My main plate was a gorgeous tomato, basil and caramelised onion tartin, >

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accompanying which was one of my all time favourite salads, a rocket, pinenut and parmesan salad. The tartin, all maximum umami, though as light as air was substantial on its own, but I had greedily ordered some of those skin-on chips for myself. Otherwise I would have had to commit that most cardinal of sins and stolen some of my son's.

My wife opted for the garden vegetable risotto with crispy poached egg. The risotto was luxuriously rich and with the added infusion of the egg it was taken to a newly decadent height. Which was beautifully balanced by the fresh vegetables. I consider risotto a great restaurant favourite. The type of dish you keep threatening to make at home, but never do, because you know it'll disappoint in comparison to one made in a professional kitchen.

Having gorged myself full I simply plumped for a digestif of coffee. My son had his favourite pudding of ice cream, strawberry in this instance. He cleaned the bowl in record time, what more can I say? My wife's dessert was something different altogether. A mango meringue that was as dissimilar to the kind of lemon meringue pie I had as a child as the Taj Mahal to a terraced house. It was one of those desserts you couldn't create yourself in a million years and that you don't want to eat for fear of destroying something so incredibly beautiful and unique.

The whole meal was as relaxed a fine dining experience as it's possible to have, the service was friendly but unobtrusive, just like the effortlessly smooth bottle of new world wine we drank. As for that view, well you have to experience that for yourself.

After a restful night's sleep we managed to muster ourselves out of bed, which wasn't easy with the picture postcard views of the harbour, the ocean and the beach.

The first port of call was the Blue Reef



Newquay Harbour is the perfect spot for sealife spotting

Aquarium which has a visual smorgasbord of oceanic delights on offer from crustaceans to caiman and fish from local waters to those from far flung seas and rivers around the world.

Crocodilians are weirdly, creepy creatures, as the caiman aptly proved. They appear statue-like, unmoving, unblinking, as though the taxidermist has made his rounds. Then suddenly a brief instant and they've twitched slightly, but you have to be patient. Even these small specimens of

the crocodile world scared the bejaysus out of me. As did the intensely watchful piranhas, the fish in this tank are one of the four deadly varieties of these small, highly carnivorous fish. One dip of the hand in the water with these fellows and the gums get bared back, those razor sharp teeth protrude and it's goodnight Amazon.

My favourite fish on display was my favourite animal of all; the shark. These sleek, graceful, balletic creatures are a joy to observe circling around the tank, constantly on point; alert, watchful, protective. Never the villains they're often erroneously portrayed as. Their presence is paramount to the ecology of our oceans. They feast on the weak, the diseased and the dying, allowing the healthy and strong to survive and thrive. Not great qualities in human terms admittedly, but essential for the maintenance of marine survival.

Not all sea creatures are as ruthlessly efficient as the sharks, the giant turtle swimming in the same tank was as easy, relaxed and chilled as the denizens of Newquay itself.

After watching all that activity in the water it was time for us to get in a swim ourselves. While the turquoise sea was appealing we went with the warmer climes



Harbour Fish and Grill



of Newquay's Waterworld pool. This large fun pool comes complete with slides, bridges, water canon and water jets and also a more grown-up traditional swimming pool which I swiftly deduced had been the training ground for the daredevils at the harbour the night before. Its deep end is 3.5 metres deep. It is the deepest pool I've ever been in. I couldn't get to the bottom of it. Well not this time anyway. I'll be back. I'm not going to be beaten by a damn swimming pool.

Next we headed to the neighbouring Newquay Zoo in time to watch the impressive lions being fed as we munched chips and listen to the penguins sing for their lunch. We even spotted the impressive fishing cat that had eluded us on previous visits and who was well worth the wait. After a well-deserved rest, hypnotised by the harbour once more, we walked the stone's throw from the hotel to the most famous surf beach in Britain: Fistral Beach - the home of British surfing.

However, Fistral is so much more than a famed surf spot, it is also home to families, romantic couples, dogs and their owners, young and old alike. It's a laid back sort of place with lots going on.

We positioned ourselves with the best

and uninterrupted view of the beach, the ocean and the sunset possible, at a table in The Stable restaurant.

The Stable does pizzas, pies and cider like no other and trust me when I say, gazing out the window, with the dramatic backdrop of a Fistral sunset, with good food and good company, there is absolutely no where else in the world you would rather be. It is simply unbeatable.

The absolute test of anywhere making pizzas is the humble yet classic Margarita - it is the cornerstone of all pizzas created. If you can't get that right, you won't be able to get anything right. I tasted my son's and it was spot on; light crisp base, garlicky, spicy tomato sauce and quality mozzarella.

All our pizzas were built upon the same flavoursome foundations. I had the Cribbar pizza, topped with local field mushrooms and roasted red peppers - though your Cribbar will also come with free range chicken. My wife went for The Headland Herbivore which came loaded with herb roasted potatoes, Cornish blue cheese, roasted Spanish onions and English spinach all on top of that wonderful Margarita base.

For dessert we all tucked into a pizza base smothered in chocolate Nutella and



Sunset over Fistral Beach. Photo: Toby Abbs

mascarpone cheese. An unusual and delicious alternative to the typical dessert fare on offer in restaurants. It's a reassuring trick, The Stable know their business well, they're good at it and they stick to it.

If cider is your particular tippie then you're in heaven at The Stable as there is a massive choice on offer. The adults among us slaked our thirst with our own particular brand of alcohol and ordered a fine and fruity bottle of Loire Valley Chardonnay.

The service in the restaurant was quick, friendly and efficient, no mean feat given the distraction of that most stunning of vistas.

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The local’s view

Newquay-based writer **Toby Abbs** has been writing about the joys of Newquay on his blog (tobyabbs.co.uk). We asked him to share his favourite spot.

Steeped in tradition and history Newquay Harbour is one of the few remaining places of the famous coastal town that remains unchanged. Somehow it has managed to avoid consumerism and a massive development of buildings that so often blot our landscape these days. It is a working

fishing port that is the hive of all activity relating to the sea but a total contrast to the hustle and bustle of the town. A relaxed way of life is the theme of the day here - never more so when looking at the abundance of families who visit here daily.

It is a place of solitude and safety, a place where the harbour walls wrap themselves around all who visit her in a protective blanket. Like a mother with a watchful eye, the harbour will safeguard you from the elements. Walking down the hill to the harbour is captivating and

a sight of families on the hill stopping mid-walk to take in the breathtaking views is common place.

Newquay Harbour has to be one of the best beach locations for families to spend the day as it has so much to offer and occupy young minds. With a small footprint for the beach and nearly every location viewable from the naked eye, it makes the task of looking out for your children a whole lot easier. There are endless rock pools, sea creatures, fishing boats and rock crevices to

fascinate inquisitive growing minds. A texture of fluffy golden sand awaits you when the tide is out and with a crescent shaped beach line which always offers a different perspective of the harbour with every visit. If you are looking for a beach that offers so much for families with a safe environment then a visit to Newquay Harbour must be at the top of your list to do. A place of magic, a place that has stood the test of time and with the famous majestic coastline you are guaranteed an authentic Cornish experience.

Sunday began like the previous day with a delightful spread in the hotel conservatory. Fresh fruit and coffee to start with and then, for me, the inevitable classic full English breakfast. I always order it away from home because, like those great bon vivants the French, I can't be bothered to cook in the mornings.

It was a 21st century healthy, full English with grease-free egg, mushrooms, tomatoes and beans, with toast of course and there is certainly no rationing of toast at The Harbour Hotel. My son chose scrambled eggs on day one and eggs with toasted soldiers the next.

My wife being more sophisticated than I, ordered the grilled haloumi, fried eggs and grilled tomatoes. It's worth noting that you can order smoked haddock, kippers, trout or even a salmon fillet for breakfast by giving the kitchen a day's notice.

Our early morning feast was to prove invaluable for our one hour tennis coaching session at Newquay's very own Heron Tennis Centre. It's the part of the weekend that I was most apprehensive about. While not entirely unfit, my 45-year-old body has seen better days.

My experience of fitness training during my childhood appeared to consist of methods learnt while imprisoned in POW camps in Germany during the war. Happily there were no Teutonic words of encouragement, no circuit training and no punishment press-ups for failure to return a serve.

What we did find was a great tennis centre with eight outdoor courts and two indoor courts. There were toddlers getting lessons, older children under tutelage, groups of four friends having a semi-competitive match, couples playing together, others sitting in the sunshine



Inside Blue Reef Aquarium



Be astounded by the gorgeous inhabitants at Newquay Zoo. Photo: Toby Abbs

outside the on-sight café enjoying a drink. The whole place had a relaxed, friendly and wholesomely, unpretentious air about it.

Our coach Steve quickly had us knocking balls back and forth to each other and in a mere hour had taught us a good working knowledge of the forehand, backhand and serving swings.

We ended the session with a gentle game of Texas Tennis. Which I'm happy to admit my wife and I won, having given our darling child and light of our life, no quarter or mercy whatsoever - in your face son!

If there's a better way to spend a sunny Sunday morning (not on a beach) than a fun game of tennis then I've yet to find it. It brought it home to me how much I miss playing sports, that most nostalgic part of a misspent youth.

And so a magical weekend in Newquay came to a close, as it inevitably had to. Newquay has that real sense of Cornwall about it, a place which feels instantly familiar and yet somewhat foreign. It's recognisably British, but that strange, Cornish kind of British, as though you've travelled somewhere more exotic than simply the furthest end of these great isles.

It wasn't with the lightest of hearts that we headed off home, but I know that we can come back next weekend and the weekend after and every weekend after that, because we only live 30 minutes down the road. Cornwall, after all, is not just a choice, it is a necessity. ■

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The Harbour Hotel

harbourhotel.co.uk
£121.00 to £154.00 Prices are per room, per night, and are inclusive of breakfast

The Harbour fish and grill

restaurant is only open all year round 10am 11pm
harbourhotel.co.uk

Blue Reef Aquarium

Close up views of exotic marine species, sharks and turtles. For details go to -
bluereefaquarium.co.uk/newquay

The Stable, Newquay

stablepizza.com/locations/the-stable-fistral-beach
For delicious pizzas, pies & cider with panoramic & breathtaking views over Fistral Beach

Heron Tennis Centre

For prices and opening times visit
heron-tennis.co.uk

Newquay Zoo and Animal Wildlife Park

Visit the lions, penquins meerkats and more ...
newquayzoo.org.uk

Newquay pool

Slides, fountains and a dive pool
tempusleisure.org.uk