

Wight sand and lobster to go...

Phil Davies relaxes on the UK's very own 'Faraway Island' – and devours a super-fresh seafood feast

IT WAS cake o'clock and my wife and I were indulging in perfectly sliced triangles of toasted teacake and sipping tea from bone-china cups on sun loungers as the children happily splashed in the pool. There are few things more quintessentially English than afternoon tea so, looking around the perfectly manicured gardens adorned with tropical plants under cloudless skies, it was easy to imagine us holidaying in a far-flung outpost of the Empire.

Smartly dressed waiters scurried around the immaculately trimmed lawns carrying silver trays weighted down with diet-busting confectionery crafted by a master patisserie chef. Even Oscar, the year-old Dandie Dinmont terrier, wasn't missing out as one of the be-suited staff appeared on the lawn with a bowl of dog food plus a separate jug of gravy, designed to appeal to even the most pampered pooches.

Oscar's owners are among a growing band of repeat visitors to the foodie family heaven that is the Isle of Wight. Much maligned by those not in the know, the island is dubbed 'the nearest faraway place' by a growing number of holidaymakers.

Like them, we wanted to avoid the ash clouds, British Airways strikes and airport chaos which, with two young children, inevitably raises the stress levels.

Forty years on from the final performance by Jimi Hendrix at the Isle of Wight festival, we discovered that there's a new type of revolution sweeping the island. Run-down bed-and-breakfasts, hotels and guest houses are being restored as chic boltholes.

Nowhere is the transformation more evident than in Ventnor, the once venerable Victorian resort. Queen Victoria herself was a fan of its fair-weather micro-climate, known for its restorative properties.

Kate Moss and Sienna Miller are among those who have also fallen for the charms of this, the island's southernmost resort, and neighbouring Steephill Cove, accessible only by foot or boat and home to Wheeler's beach-front crab shack selling the tastiest crab pasties of all time.

Ventnor is being given a culinary push by Robert Thompson, Britain's youngest Michelin-starred chef, who runs The Hambrough hotel and restaurant overlooking the re-established harbour. Meanwhile, the thatched Grade II listed Hillside hotel is a haven of Scandinavian cool set among five acres. The pier that attracted the Victorian gentry by steamship is long gone, along with the cross-island rail link, but Ventnor's great revival is exemplified by The Royal Hotel, set in exquisite grounds a steep crawl up the zig-zag road from the bustling beachfront. It was there that I bumped into Oscar and his owners on holiday from Buckinghamshire.

The former faded Trust House Forte property was taken on more than a decade ago by returning islander William Bailey. He invested a large chunk of his personal fortune in upgrading and reinventing it as a truly welcoming child and pet-friendly retreat, complete with high teas in the conservatory, meals by a brigade of chefs, a heated outdoor pool and even chocolate truffle master classes for the little



VICTORIAN CHARM: The Royal Hotel in Ventnor on the Isle of Wight and, left, Phil Davies nets himself a lobster, later served for a sumptuous quayside meal



GETTING THERE

Red Funnel runs ferries round the clock from Southampton to the Isle of Wight. Crossings start at £34 return for a vehicle and up to six people. Call 0844 844 9988 or visit www.redfunnel.co.uk. For information on The Royal Hotel, call 01983 852186 or visit www.royalhoteliow.co.uk. Two-night breaks start at £255 per person for dinner, bed and breakfast. Lobster safari details are available at www.oceanbluequay.co.uk.

(and not-so little) ones run by patisserie chef Steve Bott.

Mr Bailey is one of a band of entrepreneurial islanders being attracted to aid the revival. So enthusiastic is he about the island's prospects that he has created the Kiviera Terrace on top of a hillside opposite the hotel offering unrivalled views of Ventnor Bay. Upon the terrace guests can enjoy champagne and seafood lunches and sundowners, following a lead from the Victorians who dubbed the resort England's Monaco. The opening of the terrace was timed to coincide with the annual 50-mile Round the Island Yacht Race in June – a perfect precursor to August's Cowes Week.

Mr Bailey has also taken over the running of the cafe at the nearby Botanic Gardens, home to 10,000 exotic plants.

Strolling around Ventnor, it soon becomes clear that, aside from a few greasy-spoons, the use of fresh local ingredients has become a given in the area's restaurants. This is most evident on the quayside where

Rick Stein's Padstow is getting a run for its money thanks to local fishermen dropping their catches at hotel kitchens daily.

Here we booked a lobster safari with OceanBlue, a boat-building venture with a successful sideline running fishing trips where you can eat what you catch. It's great for families as children are encouraged to examine the catch, talking about sustainability while understanding the lifting of the lobster pots.

THE trips are run by oceanographer Lucy Strevens, who provides a fascinating insight into local history. More Bay-watch babe than salty sea dog, she talked with passion about Ventnor Bay, from rum-smuggling to the creation of the Botanic Gardens, as we cruised past Steephill Cove to the imposing St Catherine's Lighthouse before hauling up the teeming pots.

The adrenaline really kicked in when I took the helm of our

twin-hulled power boat and opened up the throttle close to its 32-knot maximum, skipping the waves as my wife and children held on for dear life.

On our return, two fat lobsters were cooked up at Goodman's Bistro at the quay. The catching and dining experience proved a real winner, particularly with a curious eight and five-year-old, although we diplomatically skirted around the fine detail of quite how our lobsters managed to make it on to our plates.

As my wife and I continued to devour the freshest seafood and salad imaginable, washed down with ice cold ale from the island's Yates' Brewery, the children made a bee-line for the adjoining paddling pool. Our only regret was not having the time to take a longer version of the trip which includes a champagne hamper and a stop at a secluded bay for a quick dip.

I'm not sure whether Queen Victoria would think much of life in the 21st Century, but she might nod approvingly at Ventnor's vision for the future.

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