

GO WEST YOUNG MAN

The southwestern reaches of the UK have long been a favourite destination for those with kids. RUFUS PURDY visits Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly with his family, and discovers why

Parenting is never an easy ride. You spend half your sleep-starved, nerve-shredded existence trying to get your children to understand the rules of behaviour. And then life goes and plays tricks on you. At the moment, my wife and I are attempting to steer our daughter, Martha, away from using bad language. This isn't quite as worrying as it sounds. After all, when you're three years old, the worst words you know are 'Meanie' and 'Bottom'. But sometimes this limited vocabulary will be employed in the manner of a snarling drunk who's facing down someone that's just spilled their pint.

'Why can't I have an ice-cream?' Martha will scream, stamping her feet and curling up her fists. 'Daddy, you're so, so... silly.'

So my wife's imposed a simple rule. If Martha finds herself saying this word, she must immediately check herself. 'Sorry Mummy; no sillies,' she'll say contritely.

But then along comes our family summer holiday. Sarah and I have decided on a two-centre break in the British Isles – one in which we'll spend a few days in Cornwall and the rest in a tiny group of islands just off Land's End. These are as child-friendly as it gets. There will be long, sandy beaches, tropical fauna and – on the island where we'll be staying – absolutely no cars. The only problem is going to be telling our daughter where we're going. 'Martha,' I say, eventually plucking up the courage. 'We're going on a plane next week – to the Isles of Scilly.'

'Daddy,' she says, looking at me sternly. 'No sillies.'

We arrive on the islands on a bright Saturday afternoon, emerging onto a grass runway from the sort of tiny, eight-seater plane I'd only previously seen in the Indiana Jones movies. The transfer from our landing point on St Mary's to the nearby island of Tresco is as seamless as the flight itself. A driver is waiting for us, loads our luggage into the back of his minibus and drives us straight down to a quay, where we board a motorboat and are whisked

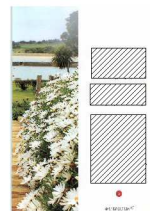
across the water to a jetty on the other side. Our two-year-old son Seth, who hated every second of the 15-minute flight from Land's End and couldn't exactly be described as content on the windblown, spray-churning boat journey, is delighted to see a mode of transport more within his comfort zone. 'Tractor!' he shouts happily, running straight to the farm vehicle and the trailer onto which our bags are being loaded. He stands, waving, in front of the cab, forcing the driver to engage with him for the next few minutes while we gather our things together for the short ride to our accommodation.

We trundle around New Grimsby Quay, passing the sandy beach upon which fishing boats lie scattered like skittles and turn up a hill that goes by the New Inn – Tresco's only pub. The island's interior is even more beautiful than I'd imagined. We pass stone walls draped heavily in flowers that would look more at home in the Caribbean: scarlets, burnt-oranges, canary-yellows, pinks and purples jump out at us from wherever we look. And palm trees and rubbery cacti-like bushes share soil with yellow sprays of gorse and milk-white daisies.

As we round a corner, we find ourselves looking through a wooden gate into the eyes of brown cows and their calves; hides burnished copper in the late-afternoon sunlight. Then the tractor pulls us onward beneath a twisting canopy of elder branches that sways in the breeze above our heads. Martha is first to see the sea on the other side of the island – a strangely tropical vista of dark-green headlands and islands dotted onto a baize-like sweep of deep-blue water.

This is to be our view for the next few days. Our cottage, Samphire (part of the Sea Garden Cottages complex in the northeast of the island), overlooks the sweep of butter-coloured sand at Old Grimsby Quay, from which lines of orange buoys stripe out across the water and point to the stone jetty and 16th-century ruins at Blockhouse Point. And to the right is the timbered Ruin Beach Café – over which flutters the red, white and blue of the Union Jack.

Samphire comfortably sleeps six to eight people (a fact reflected in its weekly rate), so there's plenty of room for the four of us. Martha and Seth rush around the two sitting rooms, three bathrooms and three bedrooms, climbing up on furniture and marvelling at the kaleidoscope of seaside-inspired art on the walls.



'Daddy, quick!' Martha calls out. I find her in the master bedroom, peering through French doors onto a balcony that overlooks the bay.

'Look!' she says excitedly. 'The birds are all looking at me.'

She's right. The wildlife on Tresco, we quickly realise, doesn't have the same suspicion of humans as its cousins on the mainland. The sparrows, robins and blackbirds lined up on the balcony rail, peering in at Martha, are just the first birds we encounter on the island who regard us as equals. As the week goes on, we'll find beaks poking into our crisp packets, finches hopping across our shoes and even a pheasant that returns daily to our terrace to remind us we are on its territory.

We spend an idyllic few days on Tresco. Part of the island's charm is there's actually very little to do – and, as a family, we find this surprisingly easy to embrace. We go to the beach, we poke around in rockpools, we go to the New Inn for pints of Cornish ale and glasses of apple juice, and, a couple of times, we head over to the Ruin Beach Café for plates of prawns, crab sandwiches and other fresh seafood. But, the rest of the time, we simply relax. Martha and Seth play on the lawn, lining up toy dinosaurs or pretending the boats in the bay are carrying pirates into land, while Sarah and I read books on sunloungers, prepare meals in the large open kitchen or just open a bottle of wine at the outside table.

We're having such a lovely time that none of us want to return to the mainland. Until, that is, we see the house in which we'll be spending the second part of our break. We're staying in St Mawes on Cornwall's south coast – home to Olga Polizzi's famed Hotel Tresanton – and we're booked into Moonrakers, a stunning, five-bedroom house on the hill above the village. The house is more luxurious than an urban boutique hotel: there's an open-plan living space on the ground floor that incorporates two sitting areas, a dining room and a huge kitchen, and leads onto a games room with a pool table and a Wii games system. The children don't know which way to look. To one side there's the biggest flatscreen television they've ever seen, to another there are bookshelves filled with kids' books and toys. Seth takes down a pop-up volume on pirate ships and carries it over to a Scandinavian-style coffee table. 'He's obsessed with pirates at the moment,' I explain

to Ingrid, the housekeeper who's showing us around. 'Though all he knows is they say "Ooo arrr".'

'Oh, I find myself saying that sometimes,' she says in her broad Cornish accent.

Outdoors, it's equally impressive. The grounds at Moonrakers are more akin to a park than a garden and there are several distinct areas for children to explore. On one lawn there's a giant trampoline next to a sundeck, on a terrace halfway down is a table-tennis table, and in a separate area, reached by steps through the flowerbeds, a goal and a basketball net have been set up. There's even a 'secret' garden containing a miniature picnic table specifically for children. For a two- and three-year-old it's utterly magical.

It's pretty special for Sarah and I, too. On our first night, Moonrakers' owner Amanda Selby arranges for chef William Marsden to come and cook us a meal in the kitchen while we relax with glasses of gin and tonic on the wraparound terrace. He serves us local asparagus, lemon sole with Cornish new potatoes and homemade profiteroles at our own dining table, and even takes care of the washing-up afterwards. On our second night, Ingrid – who the kids have already fallen in love with – arrives to babysit so we can walk into St Mawes for dinner at stylish restaurant The Watch House.

Family life – stripped of work and educational commitments – takes on a wonderfully relaxed pace. Martha and Seth love having both their parents available 24 hours a day, and neither feel the need to misbehave or seek attention. The house and its grounds – which look down onto the wide, sail-dotted expanse of St Mawes Bay – are the perfect playspace for them and, again, they're happy to invent their own games; content so long as Sarah and I are within yelling distance.

Occasionally, we wander down a steep hill into St Mawes to pick up shopping, stroll along the harbour or stop for a drink at The Victory Inn; and we take short drives to close-by beaches – Towan, Pendower, Porthcurnick – for paddling, sandcastle-building and some spectacularly unsuccessful attempts at crabbing. The most strenuous activity all week is a day-trip to The Eden Project – which we persuade the kids along to by showing them pictures of the famous biospheres and telling them we'll be going inside some giant bubbles. 'Will we float away?' asks Seth concernedly.

'No Seth,' says Martha, laughing. 'Don't be silly.'

She claps her hand over her mouth. 'Sorry Mummy,' she says. 'No sillies.'

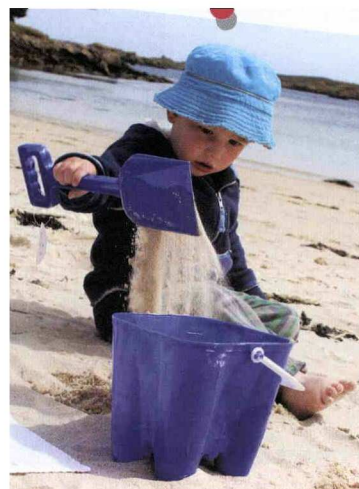


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SCILLY SEASON

Clockwise from left:
Martha in front of
The Ruin Beach Café,
Tresco; terrace at Sea
Garden Cottages;
Seth on the beach at
Old Grimsby Quay



THE LOWDOWN

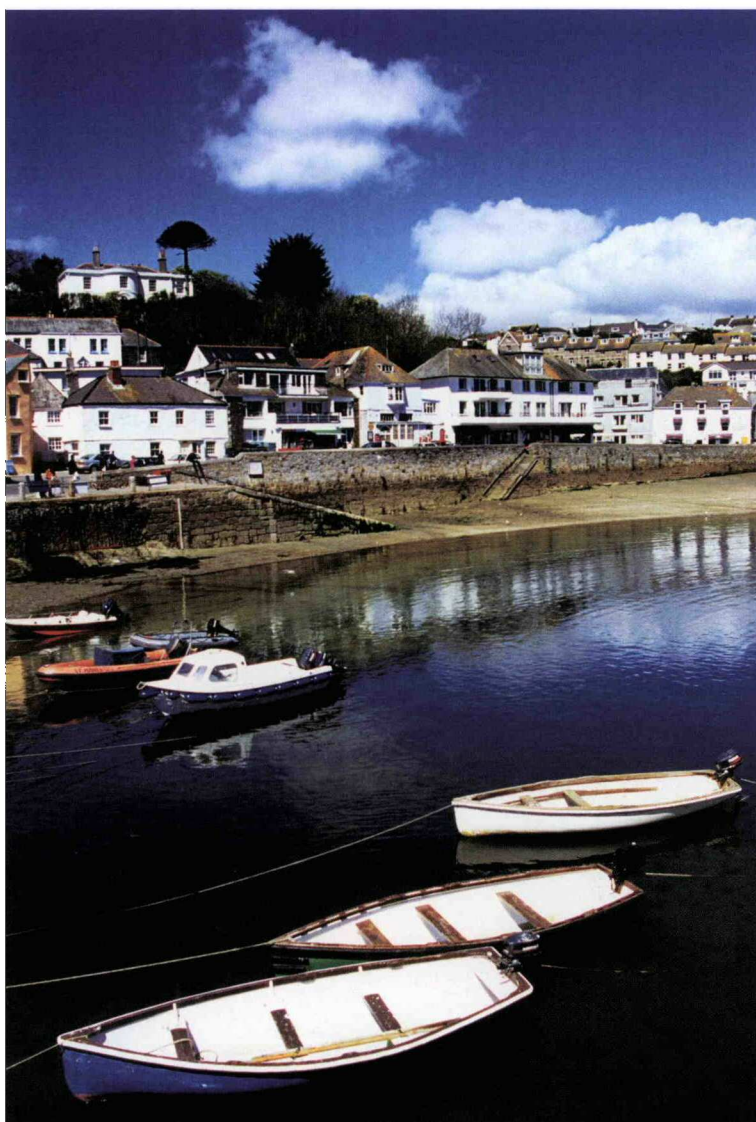
How to get there

easyJet (easyjet.com) flies from London Southend to Newquay, from around £60 return. **First Great Western** (firstgreatwestern.co.uk) travels from London Paddington to Penzance, from around £85 return. Alternatively, Land's End is a six- to seven-hour drive from London.

Flights to Tresco from Land's End cost from £150 return when purchased via the island's website (tresco.co.uk); this price includes all taxi and boat transfers.

Where to stay

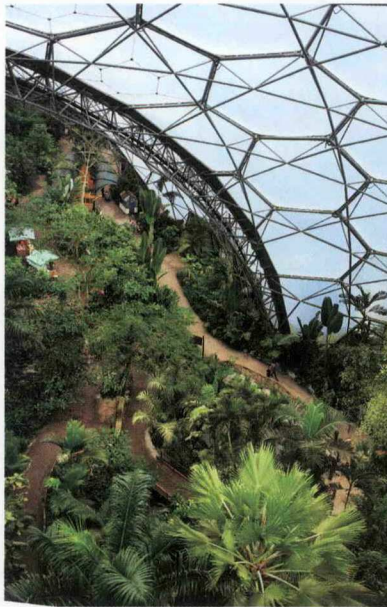
Rufus Purdy and family stayed at **Samphire**, which sleeps six to eight people, on Tresco (tresco.co.uk), from £1,615 per week. And at **Moonrakers**, part of St Mawes Retreats (stmawesretreats.co.uk), which sleeps up to 12, from £1,800 per week. Both Tresco and Cornwall have plenty of budget options, though. Four-person **Tresco Holiday Cottages**, also booked via tresco.co.uk, cost from £630 per week. And a four-person cottage in St Mawes from **Portscatho Holidays** (portscathoholidays.co.uk) costs from just £400 per week.

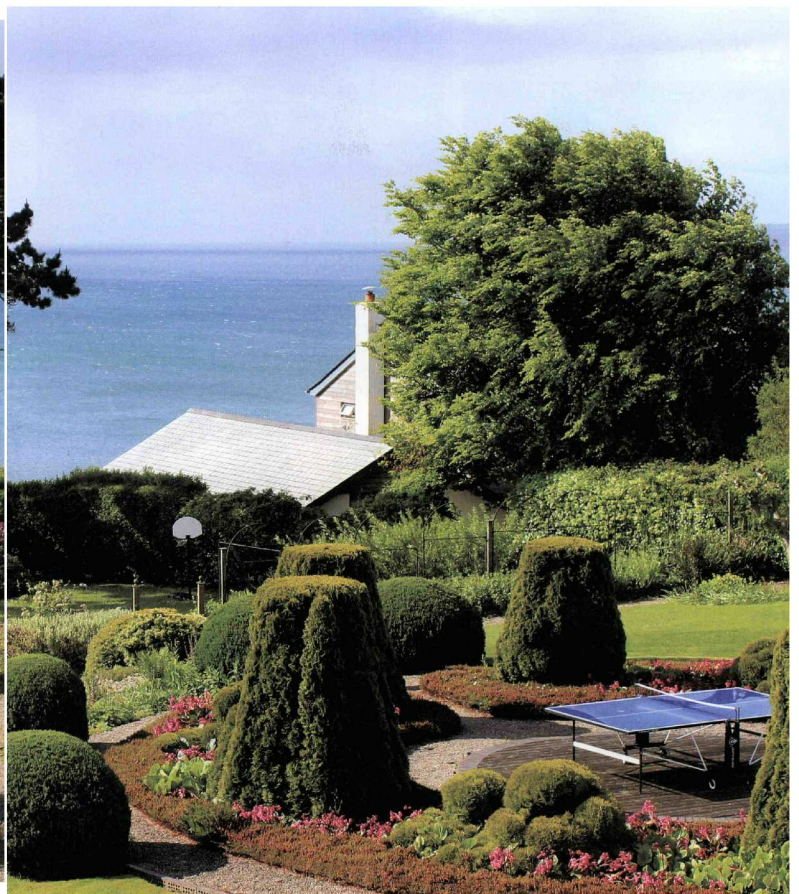




GO WEST

Clockwise from left:
St Mawes harbour;
Moonrakers, St Mawes;
Seth on Tresco; the
Purdy family at The
Eden Project, Cornwall;
inside a biosphere at
The Eden Project





BAY WATCH

The view from
Moonrakers over St
Mawes Bay, Cornwall