

# Cornwall by coach

The Eden Project and Heligan gardens were on Norman Wright's Cornwall coach tour itinerary but, sadly for the female travellers, there was no sign of *Poldark* hunk Aidan Turner



The Looe River at the lovely Cornish town

**C**RIES OF suppressed fear pierced the tranquil air and heads turned to witness the extraordinary sight of two people side by side, in skydiver pose, suspended below zip wires swooping down past the famous domes of Cornwall's Eden Project.

The zip wire ride and several other leaps and jumps that sound even more terrifying are fairly recent additions to widen the appeal of this amazing ecology project. Rest assured, however, that while the youngsters and a few more mature

thrill-seekers enjoy the aerial view, down below in those space-age Biome domes Eden just gets better.

The tropical zone is a humid stroll through the roots and tree tops of the jungle with plenty of displays alongside the pathways that explain and highlight environmental issues.

Pass through to the Mediterranean Biome and the warmth turns dry and the plantings offer vivid colour, with the backgrounds change from lush greens to sage greens and beiges.

We were visiting Eden as part of a spring coach holiday in Cornwall. We have

visited the project several times since it opened in March 2001. Every time new developments have been added and the site has matured and been refined.

Visiting by coach proved to be an excellent way to arrive. Even in April Eden was busy – as a major tourist destination it has attracted around 15 million visitors since 2001. The coach park is close to, but above, the entrance. If you don't fancy the series of steps down, there is a buggy service.

There's a big range of food and drink to sustain you during your visit but we stuck to traditional Cornish pasties – highly recommended. From there we moved on



**Clockwise from main picture: The Looe River at the lovely Cornish town; Deep inside Eden's tropical Biome; Learning about the multiple uses of coconuts and their economic importance to tropical countries; Spring at Heligan's pleasure grounds; Mud man at the Lost Gardens of Heligan on the woodland walk. Inset: Classic view of the Eden Project's Biomes. The zipwire station can be seen above the middle dome**

to a more traditional garden – the Lost Gardens of Heligan near the fishing village of Mevagissey.

This was Eden founder Sir Tim Smit's first horticultural project, to rescue and restore the abandoned gardens that had lain overgrown for several decades.

The decline had its roots in August 1914 with the outbreak of the First World War. Heligan's team of gardeners was broken up for ever. Just as with the staff of most of Britain's great houses, 13 of Heligan's 23 gardeners served in the war, most of them from Mevagissey and surrounding area. Nine of the 13 gave their lives. Gradually the gardens they had tended became taken over by brambles and overgrown trees and shrubs.

Its rebirth came following the great storms of 1990 when the latest member of the Tremayne family to own the estate, John Willis, took local archaeologist Smit to hack their way into the jungle.

The lost garden inspired Smit and local builder John Nelson to rescue it. They







Clockwise from main picture: The perfect film set at Charlestown; Mediterranean colour at the Eden Project; One of the vivid flower displays in the Mediterranean Biome; Tropical flowers explained at the Eden Project



found many poignant reminders of the men who created the Heligan gardens, none more so than the signatures of some of the men who left for war in 1914 found on the wall of the Thunderbox Room – the gardener’s toilet.

The gardens themselves are now superb and developing all the time. Since our last visit much development has been done on the Jungle, a winding collection of sub-tropical plants in the rocky gorge that leads down towards the coast. A suspended bridge has been added, as well as stepped pathways. The jungle is somewhat hard going if you have mobility difficulties but there’s plenty of garden to see on the flat.

However, the walled kitchen garden, the Victorian glasshouses and ingenious methods of growing exotic fruits like melons and pineapples, peaches and apricots tie Heligan to that pre-Great War golden age of the ‘big’ house.

It’s where the gardener’s potting sheds, tool stores and that Thunderbox Room act as a memorial to the lost generation of gardeners and the change in society that led Heligan to be lost in the first place. The fact it was found again is something we can celebrate every time we visit.

Our mini sampler tour was on board an Edwards coach staying at their own Portbyhan Hotel in Looe. Their expertise

in coach holidays means the hotel is organised to cater for coaches, with a location on the Looe River waterfront.

It is a picturesque little town with plenty of sailing boats and fishing vessels to watch on a stroll or a few minutes rest at the harbour on the river mouth.

The town is only a short drive from St Austell and the two gardens, giving plenty of time for looking around.

Our other destination over the weekend was a place made very recognisable by the TV series *Poldark*.

Charlestown, just three miles from St Austell, developed from a small fishing village when Charles Rashleigh

## Beachscape at Charlestown



commissioned a new harbour, inner harbour, dock and shipyard in 1791. A lock gate was added in 1799 to maintain water levels in the dock. The dock was used to export copper ore from nearby mines and then, with the discovery of china clay, this became its principal cargo.

After the final commercial clay load left Charlestown in 2000, the dock has been used mainly as a location for film and TV. Looking down on the dock and harbour from the car park at the top of the village, you can immediately see why.

There are three square-rigged ships tied up in the dock, with pastel-washed cottages on one side and the village inn on the other, and then the outer harbour and its towering stone walls waiting for the tide to fill it. On either side of the harbour entrance are beaches around the bay.

Before the harbour was built, the fishing boats, mainly after pilchards, landed on

the beach. Again, it is a lovely place to stroll around, perhaps stop for a pint and a pasty and imagine the scene in its sailing boat heyday. You can almost hear the creaking timbers, shouts of the loaders and the jingle of the harnesses as heavy horses towed in the clay wagons to the dockside.

Just watch an episode of *Poldark* and the perfect setting of Charlestown will become clear. Some of our party were clearly disappointed not to see actor Aidan Turner supervising the preparation of his ships, especially if he was showing off his toned upper body.

This eastern part of Cornwall is the closest to visit. The north Cornwall coast is also easily reached, especially if you are interested in TV locations. Padstow has featured many times as the base of TV chef Rick Stein.

A bit further up the coast is Port Isaac, location for *Doc Martin* and home of the

sea songsters Fisherman's Friends. Again, Port Isaac is a picturesque village to spend time relaxing and strolling, ideal for lazy days pottering around and enjoying the sea air and stunning scenery.

For a pit stop on the journey to Cornwall, try the Jamaica Inn on the A30 as it skirts Bodmin Moor. It was the setting for Daphne Du Maurier's novel of passion and smuggling, and location for the BBC adaptation a couple of years ago.

Lots of visitors over have used the inn as a landmark to announce they have now reached Cornwall. From the elevated viewing platform of our luxury coach's seats, we could see why Cornwall is such a popular destination and we can't wait to visit again and venture further west.

## Passport to Cornwall

### Getting there

■ **By coach:** Our trip to Cornwall was by coach. Every regional coach company organises holidays to all parts of the county. The easiest way to find one from your area is to log on to the website: ([www.findacoachholiday.com](http://www.findacoachholiday.com)). This will give you the details of holidays available from where you live

■ **By car:** If you are travelling independently by road, the routes from the rest of Britain feed in via the M5 to Exeter, and then you have the choice of the A30 north of Dartmoor and Bodmin Moor or south of those two magnificent landscapes via the A38 and Plymouth

■ **By train:** High-speed train services run frequently from London Paddington station, including the Night Riviera Sleeper Service to Penzance. There are also direct trains daily from Bath and Bristol to Cornwall and its branch lines. More information from: ([www.nationalrail.co.uk](http://www.nationalrail.co.uk)).

### Where to stay

■ We stayed at the Portbyhan Hotel in the heart of Looe, tel: 01503 26207, website: ([www.portbyhan.com](http://www.portbyhan.com)).

### Find out more

■ The Lost Gardens of Heligan, website: ([www.heligan.com](http://www.heligan.com))

■ The Eden Project, website: ([www.edenproject.com](http://www.edenproject.com))

■ Visit Cornwall, website: ([www.visitcornwall.com](http://www.visitcornwall.com)).

Just waiting for *Poldark* - a square-rigger at the Charlestown dockside

