



modern history

From its thriving capital to its Celtic heartland, Wales is a country as in touch with the past as it is passionate about the future. Colleen Krause discovers a world of wonders

Cardiff is not usually included on the must-do list of your average traveller. Rugby, leeks and town names with too many Ls in them is about where most people's knowledge of Wales begins and ends. Well, mine, at least. But here I am in the fastest growing city in Europe – a compact metropolis that is at once a historical haven, cultural hub and entertainment hotbed – and I'm thinking that, as cities go, it's pretty cool.

In the space of a few days, I've been to an international rugby match at the legendary Cardiff Arms Park site, seen impressionist masterpieces at the National Museum & Gallery, and heard a 400-voice choir at the Wales Millennium Centre. Not only that, but

wandering the city's main shopping area and its Victorian arcades, I came across a huge Gothic castle at the end of the street. A little more than you'd expect from your local mall.

This year sees Cardiff celebrate 50 years as the capital of Wales, as well as its centenary as a city. These events, along with last November's opening of the Millennium Centre (a thriving showcase for performing arts and culture), have created a community spirit that I haven't witnessed since the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games. Patriotic pride has also seen a nationwide revival in the Welsh language, which had, until recently, been in decline. And while all this makes the future look stellar for the unique principality, it is the richness – and visible presence – of its history that first strikes the visitor to Wales.

Driving out of Cardiff one morning, I head for the magnificent Wye Valley and the ruins of Tintern Abbey. Founded in 1131 and ravaged during King Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries in 1536, the abbey has inspired generations of poets and artists. Wordsworth's ode to the "beauteous forms" being perhaps the best known tribute. I'm not surprised that this place has such an effect on people – surrounded by wooded hills, it is vast and impossibly elegant, and being here makes me feel small and insignificant.

In fact, scale is one of the most appealing aspects of Wales for travellers. The country stretches barely 270 kilometres from north to south, so it can easily be covered in a short time, but there's so much to see and do here that it's worth savouring every moment,