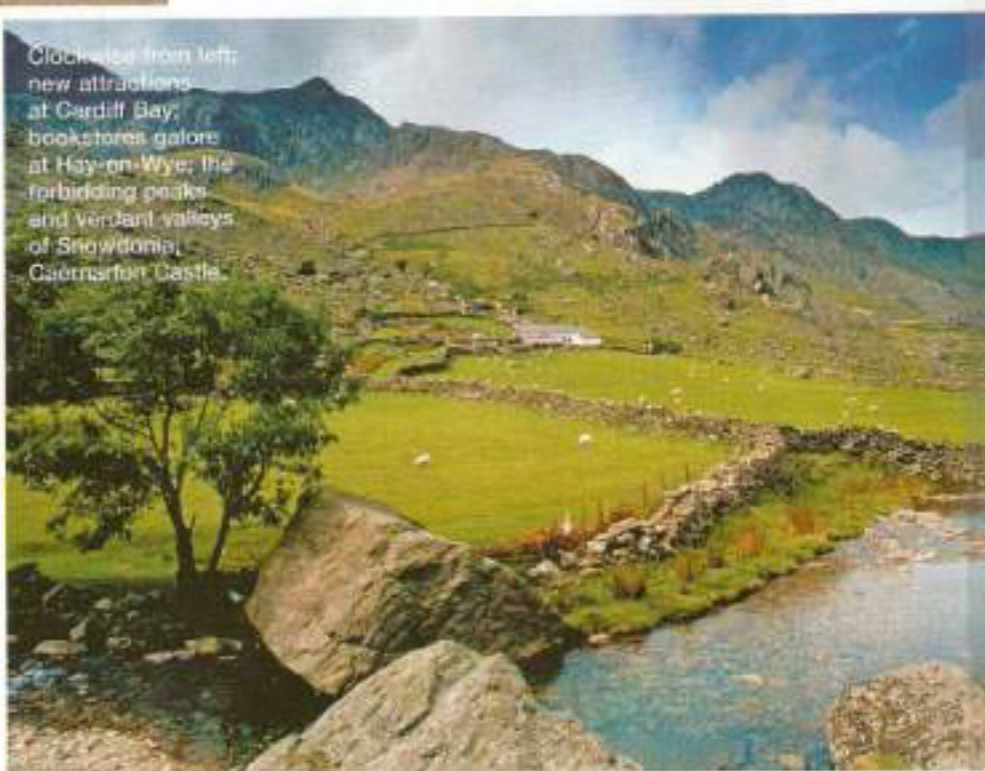


Clockwise from left: new attractions at Cardiff Bay; bookstores galore at Hay-on-Wye; the forbidding peaks and verdant valleys of Snowdonia; Caernarfon Castle



Next, we begin to wind our way down towards Lake Ymwy. A man-made dam built over a century ago to provide water for Liverpool, it is, ironically, a place of great natural beauty. Long walks are compulsory here, with a wealth of wildlife to spot on the way and mountains, moors, forests and waterfalls all creating a stunning backdrop. At the end of the day, we make like the locals and relax at the pub with a pint or few in front of an open fire, before turning in at the Lake Ymwy Hotel. The following morning, we wake up to the incredible sight of mist rising from the lake's still waters.

On the final day of our tour, Dr Mike takes us to Hay-on-Wye, a book lover's paradise on the border with England. Its inhabitants consider themselves neither English nor Welsh, one local eccentric even declaring the village an independent state and himself king in the 1970s. I spend a blissful hour – nowhere near long enough to visit all 40 bookshops – browsing through the specialist stores (such as Murder and Mayhem, which deals in horror, crime fiction and true crime), hoping to come

across a first-edition Dylan Thomas in one of the musty underground rooms. (I don't.)

Our last night is spent in Brecon, a pretty stone town that is an ideal point from which to explore the Brecon Beacons National Park. Its high, grassy ridges and wooded valleys are heaven for walkers and pony trekkers alike.

At the end of my stay, I marvel that such a small country can be full of such contrasting landscapes, from its moors to its mountains, from the quaint villages to the blooming capital. I'm in awe of a land so connected to the past yet moving so fervently towards the future. And suddenly, I don't want to be anywhere else. ■

#### HOW TO GET THERE AND AROUND

■ Malaysia Airlines flies to Heathrow daily from Melbourne and Sydney, and three to four times weekly from Perth, Adelaide and Brisbane (call 13 26 27 or visit [www.malaysiaairlines.com](http://www.malaysiaairlines.com)). Then it's two hours to Cardiff by road or rail.  
 ■ Dragon Tours provides personalised trips around Wales for all types of clients, from backpackers on a budget to those wanting five-star luxury. Call Dr Mike Davies on 0011 44 1874 658 124 or visit [www.dragon-tours.com](http://www.dragon-tours.com).

#### WHERE TO STAY

Cardiff: Macdonald Holland House Hotel – call 0011 44 1506 815 142 or visit [www.hollandhousehotel.co.uk](http://www.hollandhousehotel.co.uk); The St David's Hotel & Spa – call +2920 454 045 or visit [www.thestdavidshotel.com](http://www.thestdavidshotel.com).  
 Portmeirion: The Hotel Portmeirion – call +1786 770 000 or visit [www.portmeirion-village.com](http://www.portmeirion-village.com).  
 Lake Ymwy: Lake Ymwy Hotel – call +1881 870 692; visit [www.lakeymwy.com](http://www.lakeymwy.com).  
 Brecon: Peterstone Court – call +1874 665 387; visit [www.peterstone-court.com](http://www.peterstone-court.com).