

West Country

Cornwall without the crowds

Empty beaches, hidden coves and little-known places to eat. **Julia Brookes** finds the best of the West Country

Some of my greatest Cornish pleasures include eating a Chough Bakery pastry while dawdling around the streets of Padstow, and tucking into fish and chips at the Porthminster Café on the beach in St Ives after an hour with Barbara Hepworth at the Tate. But not in high summer, not when the world and the Camerons have upped sticks with the same idea and the trade off is bumper-to-bumper traffic.

The only sensible way to enjoy Cornwall in late July and August is to winkle out some spots to escape the crowds, so I'm on a quest for lesser-known local delights, using the June half term as a barometer of popularity.

First on the list is the Talland Bay Hotel at the end of a winding single-track road on the south coast. Talland is a hamlet sandwiched between the busy resort of Looe and the cute fishing village of Polperro, and is well nigh invisible. It's little surprise that it was a smugglers' haunt in the 18th century — and again in the 1970s when what was then Britain's biggest drug-smuggling gang shipped in more than one tonne of cannabis wrapped in Christmas paper and kept it in a secret underground store in the Talland Bay



Café. These days, you're more likely to come across dog walkers and hikers (or if you're really lucky, Richard Madeley and Judy Finnigan who have a house here to get away from it all) than stoned smugglers.

The hotel — relaxed, well run, with great food, quirky art and immaculate gardens — is a short stroll from the sandy cove and the clapboard beach café, known for its cream teas rather than storing contraband. Walk them off along the southwest coastal path or potter over to the headland and the church dedicated to 5th-century Celtic saint Tallanus.

There's also a bitterly funny memorial tablet dedicated to Robert Mark, who was shot dead in 1802, and who may have been a local smuggling hero — or a customs officer killed on duty.

It would be easy to stay put but I've heard great things about a clandestine lunch spot, the Hidden Hut, tucked away on Porthcurnick Beach, half a mile from the fishing village of Porthscatho farther down the coast. It's only in its second season, and is indeed a hut and hidden from view, but it's a sunny day and the wait for lunch of mezé platters and sandwiches of up to 40 minutes proves that it's certainly no longer a secret. To avoid the crowds get there when it opens for coffee and cake at 10am, and then go for a walk around the headland to Curgurrell Farm shop (01872 580243, curgurrellfarm.co.uk), which sells crabs, lobsters and locally caught fish.

We have better lunchtime luck in nearby St Mawes at the far end of the Roseland Peninsula. The quayside St Mawes Bakery gets rave reviews for its pasties but there's a queue out the door. Less than a hundred yards away, however, is Delicious (01326 270045), which is not mobbed and whose pasties are huge, deep filled and, indeed, delicious.

We take them off to what we hope will be a deserted cove: Porthbeor is a National Trust beach near Bohorta village on the way to St Anthony's lighthouse. It's one for the agile — access is over a stile, across a field and down steep, stone steps but the reward is a long empty stretch of golden sand with caves, rock formations and rockpools.

Another secluded cove is Porth Nanven, near Land's End and known as dinosaur egg beach because of the rounded granite boulders great and small which make for brilliantly artsy photos and have proved so tempting to visitors that they're now legally protected by the National Trust.



Porth Nanven beach on the Penwith Peninsula

“ Access is down steep, stone steps but the reward is a long empty stretch of golden sand and rockpools ”

I wonder if we're pushing our luck to expect the same sort of solitude at St Just, the 13th-century church described by the poet John Betjeman as the “most beautiful on earth”. Most visitors come to take a picture. We're here for its sloping creekside garden, which must be the most exotically planted graveyard in the UK. It's full of ferns, bamboos and rare sub-tropical plants. We're in luck. There's not a soul in sight.

Time for dinner. Annoyingly, we're here on the wrong day to try the Atlantic Fryer, the mobile fish and chunky handmade chip business set up by the chef Ross McLachlan, who was previously at the Driftwood Hotel in Rosevine. He operates from a lay-by in Porthscatho — but only early on Tuesday and Friday evenings.

Never mind — there's another foodie secret that is likely to soon be in all the guides: try a tapas dinner at Genki Cornwall in St Agnes, an old mining village. Genki was opened in a beach hut in April by Owen and Natalie Lewis, who lived in Japan for six years but decided to return after the tsunami. It's a lovely, tranquil spot. Just don't tell the Camerons.

Need to know

Julia Brookes was a guest of Talland Bay Hotel (01503 272667, tallandbayhotel.co.uk) where a classic room costs from £115 B&B. First Great Western (08457 000125, firstgreatwestern.co.uk) has advance single fares from London Paddington to Bodmin Parkway from £15 one way.

Where to eat
Genki Cornwall, Quay Road, St Agnes (01872 555858) has cheese or charcuterie platters for £7.95, salads £5.95.
Hidden Hut Porthcurnick beach, half a mile from the fishing village of Porthscatho (Porth (hiddenhut.co.uk)) has mezé platters from £8, ciabatta sandwiches from £3.
Atlantic Fryer (01872 580248, cornishfishandchips.co.uk) has fish and chips for £6.
Delicious the quayside, St Mawes, has pasties for £2.75.

RICCARDO SPILA / SIME / A CORNERS

15 Best Cornish bolt holes with space this summer

UNIQUE HOME STAYS



1 The Sea Room near Fowey

With its own mooring and private beach, this converted boathouse overlooking St Austell Bay makes the ultimate romantic retreat. Climb a steep path to the pretty beach hut-style house with French doors leading to a patio. Gaze out to sea from the king-size bed on the mezzanine level overlooking the sitting room with its woodburning stove and well-stocked bookshelves. There's also an ensuite wetroom and a contemporary kitchen. **Details** A week for two is from £1,850; availability in July, August and September (01872 553491, boutique-retreats.co.uk)

2 Tycara Polperro

This stylish cliff-top cottage up a steep path has sea views from almost every window. Enjoy lunch alfresco on the sunny terrace or cosy up in the lounge with its underfloor heating and woodburner. If you don't fancy cooking in the sleek modern kitchen the manager can organise a chef, as well as fishing trips and painting classes. Walk out the door and

3 Kernock Cottages Saltash

Children will love the freedom to roam at this family-friendly cottage complex on a secluded estate in the Tamar valley. With an Indian teepee for sleepovers, a 14ft trampoline and two adventure playgrounds there is plenty to keep them occupied on days you don't fancy going to the beach, which is a 15-minute drive away. Sterilisers, cots and stair gates are available to use. The chintz-free cottages also offer White Company bathrobes and toiletries, Egyptian cotton linen and a hamper. **Details** A week for up to eight is £2,250; available in July (01579 350435, premiercottages.co.uk)

4 Helston Lodge near Helston

On the edge of a tranquil lake and with an adjacent hide, this former gatehouse lodge on a National Trust estate is perfect for birdwatching. Amble through the woods to the beach, a 30-minute walk away, or head to the nearby Lizard Peninsula, an area of Outstanding Natural Beauty with rugged coves such as Kynance and Mullion. If you like gardens, you'll be spoilt for choice with sub-tropical delights such as Trebah and Glendurgan lining the wooded Helford river. **Details** A week for four is from £1,365; available in July and August (0844 8002070, nationaltrustcottages.co.uk)

5 Carn Tommen St Mawes

This architect-designed eco house commands an elevated position overlooking Falmouth Bay. In warm weather pull back the folding glass doors



6 Pixie Nook Warleggan, Bodmin Moor

Relax in the hot tub in the pretty garden of this quirky Grade II listed granite cottage. The place oozes character with beamed ceilings, a huge lintel fireplace, vibrant Designers Guild fabrics, Venetian mirrors and a velvet-covered headboard on the king-size bed. Pack a picnic and walk to nearby Cardinham Woods — or explore the National Trust Elizabethan manor at Trerice, near Newquay. **Details** A week for two is from £1,295; availability in July and August (01637 881942, uniquehomestays.com) ▶