

# We are Sailing...

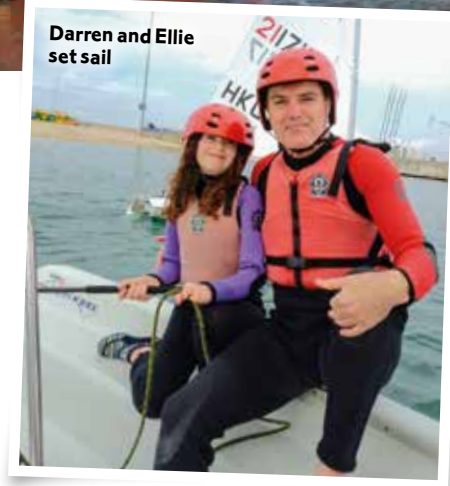


Weymouth's picturesque old harbour

## Darren Calpin heads to Weymouth – historic port town, family seaside resort and now elite watersports mecca

AND THEN HE said 'They've made me angry, and you don't want to make me angry.' My daughter Ellie is chuckling. She thinks it's funny that

the greatest Olympic sailor of all time morphed into a very British version of The Incredible Hulk, albeit briefly. I'm telling her about Ben Ainslie, the



Darren and Ellie set sail

living legend who became one of the icons of the London Olympics. It's especially poignant as we're sitting in Weymouth's pretty Nothe Gardens, where a simple yet entirely fetching sculpture of Ainslie's dinghy, Rita, now stands. A year before Ellie was born, spectators gathered on this impressive promontory in their droves to watch the 2012

Olympic and Paralympic sailing events play out dramatically across Weymouth Bay and Portland Harbour. I remember watching it on telly: Weymouth looked fantastic, seemingly the perfect combination of historic port town, family seaside resort and elite watersports mecca.

Ten years on and it's mine and Ellie's chance to check out the best

of what Weymouth has to offer. Our first stop is Portland, the imposing windswept 'isle' which is tied to Weymouth by a mile-long causeway running alongside Chesil Beach.

On the way, we park up briefly so we can ascend the slender strip of barrier beach (a UNESCO World Heritage site) and soak up the epic views. Ellie and I both say "wow" in »

# Go explore

unison as we gaze along its awesome 18-mile length. Five minutes later we're at OTC Watersports, where we have a stand up paddleboarding (SUP) taster session awaiting us. As we approach the casual reception area we're greeted exuberantly by Romeo, an adorable ball of energy with bleach blonde hair who just happens to be the friendliest little boy in the world. He takes an immediate shine to Ellie, insisting she plays Hot Wheels with him.

## A VAST FLAT WATER ARENA

In just a short time, Ellie and I are sealed into our wetsuits and down at the water's edge where our laidback instructor Luke, takes us through the basics of SUPing. As newbies to this paddleboarding lark, we share a board to begin with, paddling happily

around by the shore while sitting on our bottoms or kneeling.

Under Luke's patient guidance though, we soon manage to stand successfully, a feat which makes us feel a little too heroic. The moment is cut short sadly when I, for reasons that will forever remain unknown, decide to bust out an impromptu moonwalk, causing both of us to plunge spectacularly into the briney. After laughing hard for a good couple of minutes, Luke decides now is probably a good time to have a board each. And so the three of us spend the next 45 minutes or so, standing up on our boards (which becomes second nature after a while), chatting and paddling around Portland Harbour's

vast flat water arena beneath an azure, near cloudless sky. It dawns on me why SUPing is one of the fastest growing watersports around; it just feels so good.

We return to The Royal Hotel feeling very content with ourselves. Ellie and I both took a liking to this grand, 19th century Victorian pile straight away when we clocked its location – smack bang opposite the beach on Weymouth's handsome



A stand up paddleboarding taster session, courtesy of OTC Watersports

esplanade. Ellie quickly decides the giant deckchair in the foyer is the best thing about the place. In contrast, I rate the successful mash-up of classic styling with contemporary furnishings as more of a pull. We don't stay in for long though as our exertions have made us hungry. And then some.

Half-an-hour later we find ourselves sitting on a bench by Weymouth's glorious old working harbour, tucking into a mountain of pies, sausages and chips from Fish 'n' Fritz, an award-winning fish & chip shop which rates highly with locals and visitors alike. To describe the portions as 'generous' would be a huge understatement. Watching Ellie struggle to eat "just one more chip" is as rare as it is amusing. We chuckle about what pigs we are, watch a few more boats parade along the harbour channel and then, >>

# Go explore

finally, muster every ounce of energy we have left to perambulate our inflated frames back to the warm embrace of our welcoming hotel.

## A FULL MORNING OF SAILING

Is there anything more satisfying than waking to a panoramic sea view and fuelling up with a comprehensive buffet breakfast? I ask Ellie the same thing but she's too busy wrestling with her second hash brown to answer. Today we have a full morning of sailing on the cards and so a nice full tummy will be well and truly needed. Another short drive (with yet another vantage point pit-stop) gets us back to Portland Harbour. This time however our taster session is being proffered by Andrew Simpson Watersports, a highly-regarded watersports provider with centres dotted nationwide.

After being welcomed effusively by the company's delightful pet

dogs, Ellie and I get changed within the impressive environs of the National Sailing Academy. Opened in 2000 and used as the base for the 2012 Olympics sailing events, this former Royal Navy facility is now the UK's de-facto hub for watersports excellence. We gawp at the Team GBR sailing vessels as we exit the building in our wetsuits, thrilled to be in the company of the country's finest windsurfers and sailors.

Our instructor, Billy, is both a passionate sailor and a font of knowledge. After explaining the basic mechanics of sailing and the various parts of our Laser Stratos sailboat, he takes us out a short distance from the water's edge so that we can practise turning ('gybing'). Sailing



is a highly technical activity thus I instantly feel like I'm taking driving lessons again: having to do A and then B before moving on to do C and then D. It takes a while but eventually Ellie and I – both complete sailing novices – get the hang of it, taking it in turns to execute swift gybes around the increasingly busy marina. We're both pleased that the only casualty is a stubborn buoy which resolutely refuses to move out of Ellie's way. Suitably impressed, Billy lets Ellie pilot us out of the marina and onto the open sea, although »

### Ellie takes the helm





A room with a view



The lighthouse on Portland – a windswept 'isle' tied to Weymouth by a mile-long causeway

this isn't strictly true as Portland Harbour is surrounded by huge stone breakwaters built between 1848 and 1905. This jaw-dropping architectural marvel, combined with the natural barrier that is Chesil Beach, is what affords the harbour such agreeable sailing conditions (accessible in all wind directions and tide states), all-year round.

## INTENSELY LIBERATING

Ellie is absolutely brimming with confidence now, gathering speed and pulling off error-free gybes with aplomb. I love it when she looks so focused on something – it means

she's loving it! Shortly after making yet another textbook turn, we see a group of three windsurfs – seemingly hovering above the water – zip past us at an incredible speed.

"That's the British foil team," Billy says matter-of-factly. "Some of them may be at the Olympics in 2024." As nine-year-old Ellen MacArthur continues to steer us effortlessly around one of the largest man-made harbours in the world, Billy explains how much Weymouth has changed since 2012. "The town saw a lot of investment, the seafront was upgraded and we even got a new road – the A354 from Dorchester." So the Olympics were good for Weymouth then? "Yeah," says Billy, pensively. "They put us on the map. Everyone knows Weymouth is the place for watersports now."

Ellie finally (reluctantly) lets me

have another turn at being captain. The hiatus has been so long though that I've completely forgotten what I'm meant to do. Thus, I manage to turn out of the wind and lose the momentum Ellie has spent so long generating. I'm a terrible dad.

Happily, Billy gets us back on track within moments then rewards Ellie's competence by showing her how to tie a daisy chain knot.

I can see why he's so passionate about sailing. Being out at sea, with an unlimited power source and the whole world ostensibly your oyster, is an intensely liberating sensation. [GTW](#)

## Next issue...

Ellie and Darren continue their tour of Weymouth as they hit the town and beach.



The 17th century waterfront of Weymouth's Old Harbour

Oh, we do like to be beside the seaside...

Fancy a classic seaside holiday in 2023? **Darren Calpin** and daughter **Ellie** head to Weymouth and find it lives up to every wonderful expectation

**T**HE TERM 'classic seaside holiday' is likely to mean different things to different people. When I shut my eyes, the images that normally pop into my head are of seafront promenades lined with stately hotels and sandy beaches dotted with donkeys, family amusements and

neatly-dressed pensioners. I only mention this as Denise, the manager of Weymouth's Royal Hotel, has just used the term "classic seaside holiday" to describe what she considers to be this Dorset town's ultimate appeal. Eager to see just how accurate her assessment really is, my

daughter Ellie and I strike out to discover the classic seaside holiday vibe for ourselves.

Happily, The Royal Hotel's location is such that we only have to take six steps to tick off our first box. Weymouth's prom, The Esplanade, is a handsome yet entirely unpretentious

affair. Lovely and wide and just under a mile long, it has Victorian seating shelters and historic monuments sharing space with laser lights, modern eateries and even the odd palm tree. A busy but not too busy road separates the prom from an orderly parade of neatly kept guest houses, ice cream vendors and seaside hotels of varying grades and sizes.

**GET INTO THE GROOVE**

Ellie is nine but has the legs of a 12-year-old, so walking the prom's

full length is a doddle, starting at the striking 1930s Art Deco styling of the pier bandstand and ending at the 988-seat Pavillion Theatre.

There's a nice buzz about the place, with families and groups of all ages milling about and soaking up the sun. While it would be unfair to say the beach is the jewel in Weymouth's crown, it is fair to say that it's an absolute belter.

With everything from pedalos, donkeys and volleyball nets to sand sculptures and a few modest

fairground rides dotted evenly along its meticulously raked golden sand, this is exactly the kind of beach 'classic seaside holiday' epithets were made for. The only thing missing is a Punch & Judy booth.

Ellie and I are quickly in the classic seaside holiday groove, devouring ice creams with Flakes stuck in them, exploring arcades and shovelling coin after coin into the all-too-addictive 2p pusher machines. We even get to enjoy a prolonged game of wave jumping at the end of the day as, >>

# Tried & tested

thanks to the way the sandy beach shelves ever-so-gently into the sea, we're able to get far out into the bay without ever losing our footing or standing on a single stone.

## PICTURE POSTCARD VIEWS

Tired and hungry from a full day of classic seaside fun, Ellie and I head back to our room at The Royal Hotel to get washed and changed for dinner. Ours is a large twin room, complete with contemporary furnishings, boat rope lampshades and a large colourful beach scene mural on the wall above our beds.

Ellie is kicking back in a lounge area with a bay window offering postcard-like views of the prom, beach and sea. She is reluctant to have a shower in the swish bathroom as she's enjoying watching the comings-and-goings outside: horses cantering along the beach, classic cars lining up along the prom and paddleboarders lazily crossing the bay. Completely unprompted, she suddenly says: "I like Weymouth, Daddy," and I treat myself to a wry smile. Showered, refreshed and dressed in something



From donkeys to historic proms, this Dorset town has it all

approximating smartwear, Ellie and I wander down to the super-evocative Old Harbour, ducking down warrenous back alleys dotted with ramshackle taverns straight out of Treasure Island. Ten minutes later we're at Les Enfants Terribles, a rather charming looking seafood restaurant on the Harbourside with an equally attractive terrace. We head in and are enthusiastically greeted by the owner, Eric Tavernier, who also happens to be a classically trained French chef.

Ellie and I are both quickly won over; me by Eric's passion and her by

the cute Eiffel Tower ornaments on the window sills. The general vibe is agreeable, too; intimate and unfussy, a bit like a Parisian bistro. Once the delectable gratis shrimp nibbles have been devoured, we fire straight into our mains. We're both having fish and chips, which can only really be described as 'another level'. I had been informed that Eric – a chef of some renown for 30 years – is famed for bringing a certain je ne sais quoi to the local seafood scene. However, I wasn't expecting a relatively straightforward staple like fish and >>

Dine in style at the Hatch on the Harbour restaurant



Ellie gets a taste of the classic English holiday resort



# Tried & tested

chips to have such va va vroom!  
Formidable, Eric, and merci beaucoup.

Walking slowly back to our hotel, we rejoin The Esplanade at the Pavilion end of the prom. The sun has set, the laser lights are on and the cute little family fun fair is doing a brisk trade. A stunningly pretty carousel spinning super-excited infants around on beautifully crafted horses hits me with a pang of wistful nostalgia. Ellie walks straight past the carousel and finds an amusement arcade decked out with more 2p pushers than Scarborough and Blackpool combined. An hour later we have four keyrings, two mini-pinball games and a lollipop. I reckon I've spent about a grand. She's practically skipping as we head out into the night for the final time. "I love Weymouth!" she sings. Amazingly, I still have enough energy to manage a wry smile.

I'm up early the following morning. Pulling back the curtains to reveal that view now feels like a treat akin to opening an advent calendar when you're a kid. As we're a bit later for breakfast today than we were yesterday, I notice there are more groups staying in the hotel than I'd initially thought. "As one of the largest hotels in Weymouth, we're



well set up to accommodate groups", says Denise. "And if you want to stay on the seafront as part of a group, it's a lot more convenient to stay here, where everyone can be in one place, rather than be spread across several guest houses." I nod, just as a coach draws up outside.

"Plus, we provide evening entertainment, which helps create more of a holiday atmosphere."

## MAKING WAVES

With the weather looking like it might go either way today, a trip to the SEA LIFE Weymouth Adventure Park & Aquarium seems a good bet. Being able to get there in the car in under ten minutes pleases me immensely. Not being able to use my debit card at any of the six available parking machines sends me into a rage. Top tip: bring plenty of change when parking in Weymouth!

Fortunately, my blood pressure comes right down once we're inside the seven-acre site, as our first port of call - the largest man-made

rockpool in the country - is an absolute delight. While looking at the starfish, sea anemones and crabs in their respective pools, we are caught out by a surge of water which causes a trickling waterfall to release a gushing tide, washing over the stepping stones we're standing on and making us squeal and hop around. When we figure out it happens every five minutes or so and is a great photo opportunity, we stick around to watch it flood us two more times!

We check in with the super-cute Humboldt penguins next, where one little rascal in particular makes a beeline for Ellie. His name is Bonsai and for some reason he stays attached to her shoulder for almost the whole time she's at the underwater viewing window. Happily, SEA LIFE Weymouth isn't that busy today so we can amble around the various areas and zones at a languid pace. The shark tunnel is my highlight, although the quasi-psychedelic jellyfish tank, with its changing >>



Fun and watery games at SEA LIFE Weymouth Adventure Park & Aquarium



Weymouth's  
Royal Hotel

colours and Pink Floyd-esque backing music, pushes it very close. Ellie falls completely and utterly in love with one of the adorable sea otters (Isa or Badger), so much so that she spends a good 15 minutes following it back and forth as it darts between its cosy little house and the nearby pool.

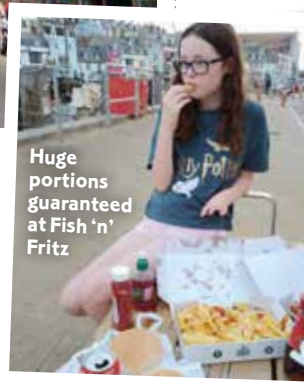
We round off the day with an energy release session at the outdoor park area and take in a keeper talk and show at the sealion arena. I'm pleased to discover that the sealions (like all of the animals here) are not made to do tricks in order to entertain humans.

## GREATER THAN THE SUM OF ITS PARTS

Sadly, our brief time in Weymouth is

drawing to a close. However, it's going to be a very long drive home so we'll need to refuel before heading off.

As we know by now, the quayside is the place to head when a good scoff is needed so it's only right we venture there for our last meal. Within 20 minutes we're seated on the outside terrace of Hatch on the Harbour, a casual rock-up-and-dine-style eatery which is big into serving locally caught, sustainable seafood. Indeed, their food is so fresh that it comes right off their two boats, both of which dock directly opposite where we're sitting now and deposit



Huge portions guaranteed at Fish 'n' Fritz

their catch straight into a holding tank in the back of the premises!

Ellie is enjoying the people-watching opportunities that abound, as folk really do enjoy milling around here, soaking up the authentic quayside ambience while watching boats ply the harbour channel. The undoubted highlight though is when the Town Bridge lifts up in true Tower Bridge style to let tall vessels in and out of the handsome marina.

While I'm tempted to try the

Portland lobster or Dorset scallops, I eventually, on a complete whim, plum for the Katsu curry cod croquettes with pickled shallots. And boy am I glad I did; what a treat! Ellie, who has played it safe with another helping of fish and chips from the kids'

menu, cannot understand why I'm getting so animated about a "fish curry". I try to explain that, in culinary terms, it has successfully managed to merge several familiar things together in order to create a treat that is greater than the sum of its parts, but she has just spotted a big dog being scared by a little dog so all bets are off there. In a rare moment of insight, I conclude that Weymouth is a bit like this rather excellent dish. After all, it takes several familiar holiday facets: the classic seaside holiday, the excellent watersports options, and the historic harbour setting, and mixes them all together to provide visitors with, well, something really rather tasty.

Ellie seems to be reading my mind. "Do you like Weymouth as much as I do, Daddy?" Another wry smile. "Yes, sweetheart. I think I probably do." **CTW**

## Join in the festive fun

Right now, Weymouth is ramping up the Christmas spirit with a series of events held across the town in the run up to the big day, from elf trails to pudding runs. Find out more at [weareweymouth.co.uk](http://weareweymouth.co.uk)

