

Railways, Rambles and Romans

Ravenglass, on the Cumbrian coast, is not a well-known destination. That's what makes it a great escape. Giselle Whiteaker heads to the Lake District.

You'd be forgiven for not knowing where Ravenglass is. Few stray beyond the well-known towns and walking trails of the Lake District National Park in Cumbria. Fewer still make it to the coast and this is where the small coastal village and natural harbour of Ravenglass sits, roughly halfway between Barrow-in-Furness and Whitehaven. The only coastal village within the Lake District National Park, whose main street is paved with sea cobbles, sits where three rivers meet: the Esk, the Mite, and the Irt. When the tide is in, the view from the main street is of sailing boats, bobbing in the breeze. When the tide is out, the boats rest at jaunty angles on the sand-flats that stretch into the distance.

On the main road, flanked by private houses, sit the Pennington Hotel and its sister property, the Inn at Ravenglass. My mother Judy and I are checked-in at the Inn, which doubles as a local

watering hole and a fish and seafood restaurant, with a focus on fresh local produce with locally landed and sustainably sourced fish and seafood a specialty. Above, sit two luxury suites - we're in the Master Suite, which sports a coastal theme. Feature walls are papered in a light turquoise, while the off-white sofas are piled with cushions to match the curtains in the expansive open-plan lounge area. In the nook off the lounge is a wooden dining table, sitting by a sideboard loaded with biscuits, tea and coffee, and to our delight, two mini bottles of Prosecco. A fine greeting. The highlight, however, is the spectacular views visible from three picture windows.

Ravenglass was occupied by the Romans for over 300 years and had a garrison of 500 soldiers. Standing in front of the remains of the Roman Bath House, it's hard to imagine this sleepy hamlet as a bustling town. The bath house is one of the largest

*Sunset at Ravenglass*

remaining Roman structures in England, although only one end is now visible. Sheep graze in the paddock beyond the crumbling structure, a short but pleasant walk from the main street.

tracks run across the estuary, through the hills, past seven request stops with a 1:40 gradient at times, en route to the final destination some seven miles up the line to Dalegarth for Boot Station.

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Our treat for today is the Ravenglass and Eskdale Railway, 'La'al Ratty', one of the oldest and longest narrow gauge railways in England with a station, workshops, pub and museum. This year, the 15-inch gauge steam railway celebrates its 100th year in this format, although the route has a longer history. Since 1875, the railway connected the mines of the Eskdale valley with the Roman port of Ravenglass. The

There's much excitement at the station when we arrive. Children are chanting "choo choo" as they clamber into the little train carriages. With a blast of steam, the engine starts chugging and we're away, on the 40-minute journey crossing seven miles of spectacular scenery to the foot of England's highest mountains, the Scafell Range, which reach 3,209 feet at their peak.

When we alight, we grab a quick bite at the station café and then set off for the walk to Stanley Ghyll Force, a 60 foot high waterfall in a dramatic, narrow gorge. The walk covers 2.5 miles and passes a series of falls and pools, where Rhododendrons grow wild on the ledges and precipices surrounding the waterfall. There are a series of small footbridges crossing the Ghyll across the beck below and with a final scramble along a rocky ledge, we are at the viewing point, the water gushing over the edge into the pond below.

Back at the Inn at Ravenglass, we watch the sun sink into the estuary, now filled with water. Gulls circle overhead as the sky turns orange, then crimson, before fading to pink. Our reverie is interrupted by a knock on the door, as our seafood platters arrive. We have opted to have dinner in the room and the platters are piled high with ocean-fare, from lobster to langoustines and crab, resting on a generous pile of mussels. A trio of dipping sauces turns each mouthful of fresh seafood into a flavour sensation.

We'll be leaving from this somewhat remote enclave in the morning, after a hearty breakfast at the

Pennington Hotel. Perhaps we'll swing by Muncaster Castle, a historic haunted castle, which is still a lived-in family home. The castle is a key part of the region's history. Whilst the Pennington family has recorded evidence of it being their home since 1208, some records go further back, suggesting that the family have been here since at least 1026. It's the jewel in the crown of this lovely setting in the Western Lake District.

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If Muncaster Castle is the jewel, the Inn at Ravenglass may be the heart. The secluded suites are an unexpected delight, and those views are worth the detour. It's a great base for a ramble, a rail trip, a seafood feast, or just to curl up with a book, gazing out to the water every so often, on a lazy weekend.

For more information on the Inn at Ravenglass, see: <http://theinnatravenglass.co.uk>.



The Inn at Ravenglass



Fresh seafood platter



The Inn at Ravenglass' welcoming bar