

The people of Wales are fiercely proud of their country and Blue Badge Guide, **Amanda Whitehead** highlights some of the many iconic symbols that reinforce this distinct feeling of 'Welshness'.

There's a joke told in Wales that when God was dividing the world up into countries and got to Wales, he was challenged, "It's not fair. You've given this tiny country golden beaches, sparkling waterfalls, majestic mountains, lush pastures, mineral wealth galore and they can sing like angels." God replied "It IS fair - you should see who I've given them for neighbours!"

That joke sums up both the pride the Welsh people have in their iconic landscapes and the friendly rivalry they have with the larger country across the border. Wales is full of symbols that could be clichés but are not. Rather, they are treasured sites and sights shown off to our visitors with pride.

"...take a trip on the Ffestiniog & Welsh Highland Railways - one of the best ways to appreciate the stunning scenery of North Wales."

Sheep, coal, castles, red dragons, choirs, beaches, daffodils, Celtic crosses - any or indeed all of these could be considered for inclusion on a trip to Wales. So, to explore that concept further here follows my exposition of some of the icons that form the basis for a tour of Wales.

Sheep: Wales has a population of fewer than 3 million people but over 10 million sheep. Any tour through rural Wales has visitors clamouring to make a stop to photograph the woolly beasts. Gift shops and woollen mills overflow with souvenirs from top quality woven blankets to air fresheners made from hand-made sheep poo paper and that's without the tasty meat for which they are bred!



Bodnant Garden, Conwy

My favourite site for sheep-spotting (and petting if you want!) is Ewe-phoria, near Llangollen where Aled Owen, a past World Sheepdog Trials champion, shows off his prize rams of varying breeds in his agri-theatre and amazes visitors with the antics of his clever dogs and eliciting lots of "aaahs" with puppies and lambs if he has them at the time.

Castles: Wales has more castles per square mile than anywhere else in the world. Most tours of Wales will include at least one castle. If you want your castles towering and impressive - go to Raglan or Caernarfon but if you prefer interesting furniture and fine fittings choose Cardiff or Penrhyn.

Harlech or Carreg Cennen are best for beautiful, evocative settings. However, for the full fairy princess experience, Castell Coch (north of Cardiff) will tick all the boxes. It was built on medieval remains for the third marquis of Bute by William Burges. Lavishly decorated and furnished in the Victorian Gothic style, its romantic turrets are spotted as a true 'castle in the air' from the A470.

Although not strictly a castle, the stately Hall at Abbey-Cwm-Hir is a 52 roomed, Victorian Revival Gothic Mansion standing in 12 acre grounds overlooking the ruins of the 12th Century "Abbey of the Long Valley" some 7 miles north of the lovely town of Llandrindod Wells in Mid Wales.

Here you will be greeted personally by the proprietor and his wife, Paul and Victoria Humpherston who have lovingly restored the entire property over 10 years. The Hall is now open to daily group tours and is well worth a visit.



Portmeirion, Gwynedd

Choirs: Wales is known as the Land of Song. Your trip to Wales will always have an accompanying soundtrack whether it's of modern rock bands or ancient harp music. However, the most iconic sound of Wales has to be the male voice choir. It is a little-known fact that almost every choir will welcome visitors on their rehearsal night with the only charge being a donation to choir funds - and perhaps to stand them a pint when they retire to the pub afterwards as most of them do!

The Red Dragon: We are immensely proud of our Welsh Dragon which is such a powerful image. You'll see it flying from all sorts of buildings and adorning everything from T-shirts to mugs. It is the oldest national flag in the world based on an old legend of the red Celtic dragon and the Tudor colours.

But, to really hear the dragon roar and to get inside information on another of the great icons of Wales - rugby - book your group in for an hour-long tour of the Millennium Stadium in Cardiff to see the dressing rooms, hear the roar of the crowd cheering the home team as you walk down the players' tunnel and raise the rafters.

The leek and the daffodil: Legend has it that during a battle long ago, Welsh archers plucked leeks from the field to pin to their jerkins to distinguish friend from foe and, since then, they have been linked to St. David and Welshness. The Victorians were less keen to adorn their attire with a vegetable and chose instead to adopt the more clothes-friendly daffodil.

Visits to Wales usually include one garden and amongst the best to visit is Aberglasney in the Tywi valley, Carmarthenshire. The garden specialises in the rare and unusual and the daffodil collection is no exception. The highly sought after Narcissus 'Cedric Morris' can be seen in the garden. It is the longest flowering daffodil in the world! If you are too late in the year for that, don't worry because there are plenty of magnificent blooms whatever the season in this restored lost garden.

Also in the Tywi valley is the most visited garden in Wales. As well as some splendid collections, The National Botanic Garden of Wales has the world's largest single-span glasshouse designed by Norman Foster.

Snowdon: As the highest mountain in England and Wales at 1065 metres, Snowdon literally towers over all the other icons. You can drive around it with the best photo stops for coaches being the lay-by after Plas y Brenin national mountain centre with Dyffryn Mymbyr twin lakes in the foreground or pull off the B4547 near Brynrefail to see Padarn Lake reflecting the mountain.



Powis Castle, Powys

For a not too strenuous walk deep into the centre of the massif, drop your group off at Pen y Pas and let them follow the Miners Path for 3km to the shore of Glaslyn to marvel at the steep cliffs soaring out of the lake. Don't go any further though without proper mountain clothing and equipment.

Trains: Snowdon also has one of the finest examples of the famous Great Little Trains of Wales. So to get on the mountain itself, take the incredibly scenic rack and pinion Mountain Railway which slowly climbs up from Llanberis with a good onboard commentary up to the new multi-million pound centre at the summit. Or take a trip on the Ffestiniog & Welsh Highland Railways - one of the best ways to appreciate the stunning scenery of North Wales.

Waterfalls: Whether you are visiting North, South or Mid Wales, there are plenty of spectacular waterfalls accessible by those able and willing to walk for a while. Swallow Falls near Betws y Coed is accessed through a paying turnstile. For the best view one has to descend (and ascend!) a lot of steps. In Mid Wales at Devil's Bridge, again after payment of a fee, there's a choice of two walks - one taking 10 minutes and the other three quarters of an hour - to view the famous three bridges and wonderful falls. In South Wales one of the best waterfall walks is from the car park at Ystradfellte along the Afon Mellte.

Bara Brith and Welsh Cakes: At social gatherings in Wales it was traditional that the men drank Welsh Bitter and the women cups and cups of tea accompanied by Welsh Cakes fresh from the griddle with lashings of fine Welsh butter. These days both sexes drink both beverages and enjoy another tea-time favourite - Bara Brith or speckled bread with dried fruit providing the speckles. Every housewife has her own family recipe ranging from a currant bread to a rich fruit cake but the secret usually involves soaking the dried fruit in tea to plump them up. Share this tasty tradition and book your group in somewhere to enjoy a traditional Welsh tea.



The Great Orme Tramway, Llandudno

Coal: Wales is so rural today it's hard to imagine that in the not too distant past, it was a highly industrialised nation and groups are always fascinated to see life through the eyes of a rock face worker 150 years ago. For this experience either visit the Slate Museum in Llanberis where there are reconstructed quarrymen's cottages and a chance to see demonstrations of the old craftsmen's skills or, for a real feel of working underground, visit Big Pit in Blaenavon which involves travelling 300 feet underground into a real coal mine to see what life was like for the thousands of men who worked at the coal face.

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Neolithic Stones: In North Pembrokeshire stands the evocative dolmen of Pentre Ifan that dates from 3,500 B.C. The capstone is over 5 metres long, and is estimated to weigh 16 tonnes. Also accessible to those able to walk on unsurfaced paths for quarter of an hour or so is Bryn Celli Ddu on Anglesey with a 27 foot passage to enter the chamber, the alignment of which shows the significance of the Summer Solstice.

Tour guides are never at a loss for words and I could elaborate further still to include Celtic crosses, golden beaches or Dylan Thomas. Instead, I will wind up my tour of the icons of Wales by urging you to bring your groups to enjoy “Brand Wales” and to experience the warm welcome we'll give them showing off our country with both a sense of pride and a twinkle in our eyes.