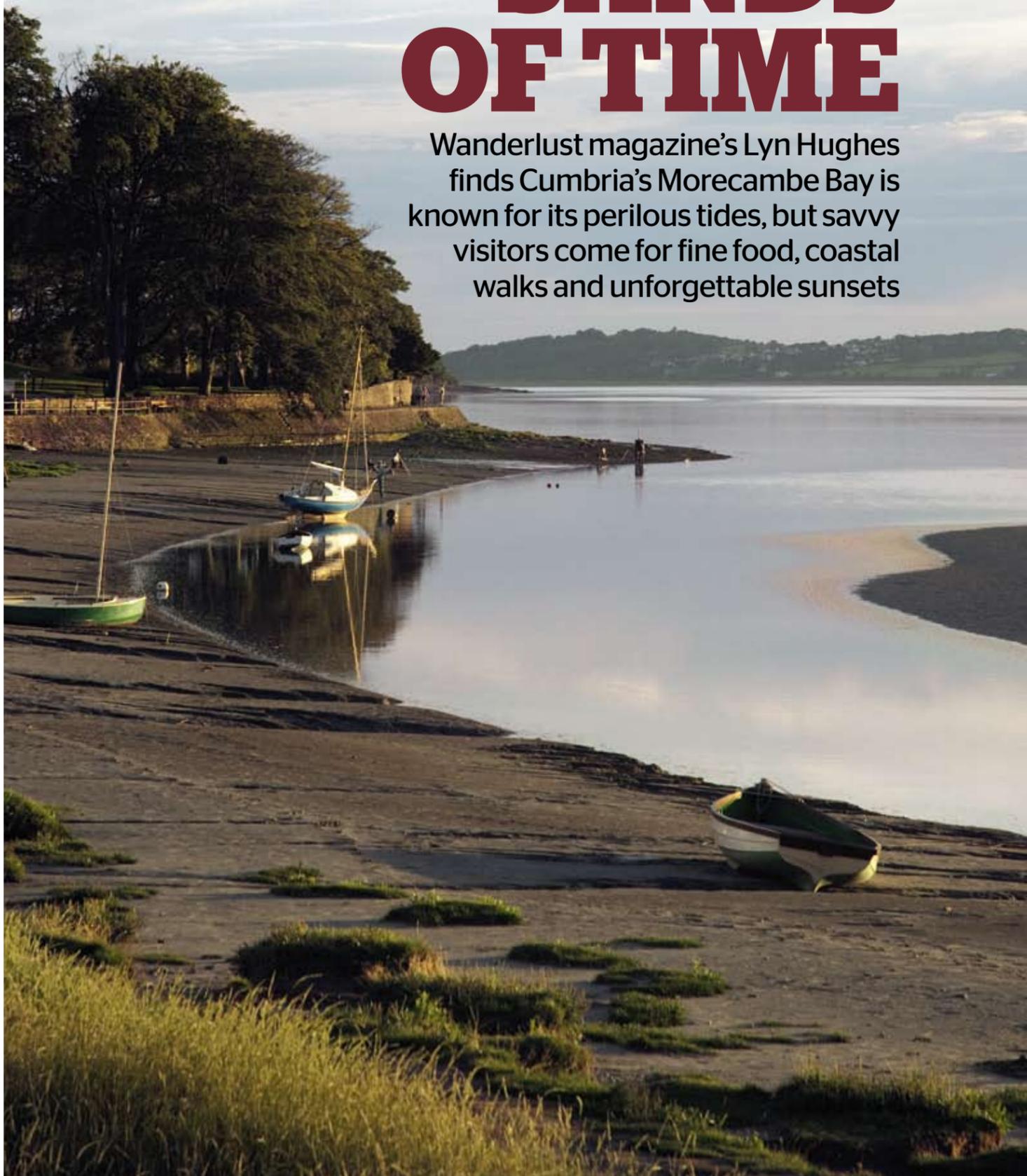


SANDS OF TIME

Wanderlust magazine's Lyn Hughes finds Cumbria's Morecambe Bay is known for its perilous tides, but savvy visitors come for fine food, coastal walks and unforgettable sunsets



Magnificent Morecambe
Laurel branches guide
walkers across the Bay's
treacherous sands
Opposite: The River Kent
estuary at Arnside

There's only one leader: that's the guide!" announced Cedric Robinson to as many of the 1,100 walkers as could hear him. With that, the 79-year-old removed his shoes and set off barefoot across the sands of Morecambe Bay, pole in hand. Cedric set quite a pace, but then he has walked this route countless times over the 50 years he's been the officially appointed Queen's Guide to the treacherous sands.

Morecambe Bay is the largest continuous intertidal area in England, infamous for its quicksands and fast-moving tides. Everyone remembers the dreadful incident in 2004 when 23 Chinese cocklers were trapped by the tide and drowned (the skull of one had finally been found just days before my visit).

But the Bay has a long history of danger. Until the building of the railway in 1867, the sands were a major transport route; tales abound of coaches and horses having to race the tides – not always successfully. The first official Royal Guide was appointed back in the 1500s, although the monks at the nearby Cartmel Priory acted as pathfinders before that.



Walking on water
The starting point for many cross-Bay walks is the modestly pretty village of Arnside, which sits in the Bay's north-east corner, where the incoming tide meets the outflowing Kent River. A former port, Arnside's glory days passed with the arrival of the railway: the river silted up when a viaduct was built.
It was a resort for a while, and there are photos of Victorian ladies strolling along the promenade. But since then it has been one of Cumbria's best-kept secrets, as hordes spill into the Lake District, ignoring the quiet beauty of the coast.

These days, numerous charities arrange fund-raising walks with Cedric, and he had told me 300 or more people might attend. But on this particular day, six different charities had mustered massive support, probably helped by promised sunshine. A quick headcount by organisers revealed the full extent of the gathering. "That's at least 1,100, maybe more," Cedric told me. "One of the biggest."

It was very different to the previous day when a relatively relaxed (but still watchful) Cedric had taken a group of horseriders across the same route, he leading the way in a pony and trap, while I hitched a lift in the back of the support tractor. Today we were going to walk the same 13km route, crossing the Kent Channel.

With such a large group of people, of all shapes and sizes, Cedric ran it like a military operation, though he rarely raised his voice. His helpers were well-drilled too, and we found our column of walkers split into groups, sometimes without realising it. Time and again they spread us out to wade through channels of water, before we fell back into one army, following the laurel branches that he'd staked out as markers.

"Even Turner paintings show laurel branches in the sand; it's always been >

Ben Page

Morecambe Bay



Good tidings
Cedric races across the Bay; B&B Number 43 serves up fine breakfasts; coastguards practice with life-size dummy Eric; the pele tower once defended against marauding Scots

‘Thanks to the tides, the view was always different: sandbanks appeared; the water changed mood as much as the light’

the tradition,” Cedric explained. “The leaves will die but not drop off, so the branches stand out.”

Occasionally a careless walker or two would wander off a bit too far to the side, or try to get ahead, but a whistle would blow, an arm wave, and they would fall back in.

After about three and a half hours we neared our finishing point and I glanced back; the column stretched back at least half a mile. We were off the sand and onto tussocky grass, criss-crossed by ditches: it seemed to take forever to cross. At Kent Bank train station, coaches and cars were waiting for most of the walkers, but I waited for one of the irregular trains back across the Kent Viaduct to Arnside, which was already feeling like home.

Gourmet delights

My drive up to this corner of south-west Cumbria had been far from auspicious, with the M6 hellish thanks to strong winds and driving rain. Turning off, within minutes I'd found myself in the quiet, twisting lanes of the Arnside and Silverdale Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. The road led down into the village, and a view of a rather moody Kent Estuary opened up in front of me. Despite the foul weather, my spirits lifted.

If Arnside was on the south coast, it would be full of chi-chi boutiques, galleries selling

nautical knick-knacks and at least one celebrity chef. Instead, there are a couple of pubs, a traditional fish and chip shop (dating back to 1860), a convenience store and a mere handful of other shops.

What Arnside *has* got, though, is an award-winning five-star guesthouse, Number 43. It had been recommended, and it was obvious why. Owner Lesley Hornsby has created a stylish but comfy home-from-home, with every little detail thought out. Lying in a great spot on Arnside's promenade, it has sublime views across the estuary to the town of Grange-over-Sands, and to the Cumbrian fells beyond.

The rain was still lashing down when I took a pre-prandial stroll down to the Arnside Coastguard Station. Despite the weather, some of the coastguards were preparing for a drill. Simon Maxan explained that they are all volunteers with day jobs, and gave a quick introduction to quicksand. “With an area of quicksand, the water has drained out and the sand then sets like concrete. You need to put the water back in to make it liquid again so that you can pull the person out.

“How do we do this? By injecting gallons of water into the quicksand with special equipment, and using lances to release the pressure.”

I dimly remembered old films in which people got sucked down by quicksand, but it

seems that isn't what happens. Instead, it holds you fast, trapping you tight when the tide comes in. And the water really does come in fast and high here: a siren sounds to warn of approaching high tide. There are plenty of tales of people who have lost their lives to it and, despite the warning signs, the coastguards are called out to a rescue on average once a month.

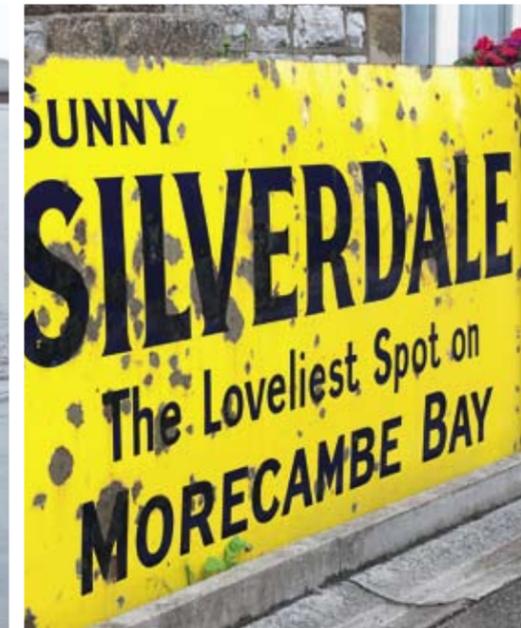
“There was a Frenchman and three kids just the other day,” recalled Simon. “He was letting them play at getting stuck in the sand. We pointed out the error of his ways!” (Sadly, just before we went to press with this article, they didn't manage to get to a father and young son in time to rescue them.)

Nigel Capstick, who installs TV aerials by day, showed me a Jet Ski: “We're the only coastguard crew with one!” Wetsuit on, he and another volunteer headed out into the water with a dummy (called Eric), practising pulling it out to safety.

I caught up with Simon and Nigel later at The Albion pub, a well-known local landmark. The décor didn't promise much, and the couple at the table next to me were tucking into curry and chips. But first appearances were deceptive: the specials board offered wild sea trout on local samphire, potted shrimps, salt marsh lamb. All were sourced from within a few miles of where I was sitting, and all treated with the respect such good ingredients deserve. >



Allen Marley





Light fantastic
The ever-changing
light over Morecambe
Bay inspired many
a painting expedition

◀ More local produce dominated the magnificent breakfast at Number 43 the next morning, starting with the juice of local apples from a reclaimed orchard. This was followed by a rhubarb smoothie 'shot', fresh fruit salad, cereals, hot fruit compote and then a choice of cooked 'main courses' that featured Cumberland or wild boar sausages, free-range eggs and line-caught haddock.

Nature trails

Groaning with calories to burn off, I took the train a stop to Silverdale, where it's easy to walk back either around the coast or straight over the middle. First there was a brief diversion into Leighton Moss Nature Reserve, famous for its reedbeds and the rare bitterns and otters that live within them. I wasn't lucky enough to see these star performers, but did look up just in time to see a peregrine swoop over.

I then headed across Silverdale golf course and through a caravan field until I reached Arnside Tower, a ruined 14th century pele tower, built as fortification against marauding Scots. From there it was a short walk to a track up Arnside Knott, the limestone hill that dominates the area and offers superb views across Cumbria.

But the biggest joy in Arnside was sitting in my room at Number 43, watching the constantly changing light over the Kent Estuary. One atmospheric morning there were tendrils of mist, another was dazzlingly

clear, the light almost blinding. Some sunsets were magical; one drew a large crowd of people to watch along the promenade.

Thanks to the tides, the view was always different. Within a few minutes a sandbank would appear or disappear. The water could appear dappled or smooth, its mood changing as much as the light. Herons, oystercatchers, redshanks and other waders would come and go. Every now and then you would hear the cry of a curlew, while once an hour or so there would come the rhythmic ker-dunk ker-dunk of a train crossing the viaduct.

"It's always different, always fascinating. I love it," Cedric Robinson had said of the Bay – and I could well understand why. I had been completely seduced.

On my last day I gazed out of my bedroom window, trying to drink in one last glorious view, when I spotted a young woman walking out on her own across the sands. It was low tide, but my heart went into my mouth at the danger she might be in.

Then I saw a man walk fast and purposefully along the promenade below, until he was level with the woman. She, meanwhile, turned round and started to saunter safely back, oblivious to the concern she had caused. The man with the fast reactions strode back to his van, and it was only then that I recognised him as coastguard Nigel. Just another day for one of Morecambe Bay's guardian angels. ■

Arnside

Footnotes



Getting there

Arnside is a 15-minute drive west of Junction 35 off the M6, approximately four hours from London and three hours from Edinburgh.

Trains serve Arnside station direct from Manchester Airport (around 1 hour 15 minutes) and from London Euston via Lancaster (around 3 hours). Car hire is available from nearby Grange-over-Sands.



Where to stay

No. 43 (The Promenade, Arnside; 01524 762761, www.no43.org.uk) is a five-star boutique guesthouse on the seafront. B&B rooms £120-£185 pn; minimum two nights at weekends.

YHA Arnside (Redhills Rd; 0845 371 9722, www.yha.org.uk) is a large Edwardian building at the top of the town, with accommodation from £12 pppn.



Where to eat

The Albion pub (01524 761226, www.albionatarnside.co.uk) was taken over in early 2010, and offers good local produce – Morecambe Bay shrimps, Cumberland sausage – as well as the usual stalwarts (curry, chilli, scampi).



Cross Bay walks

Charities run walks most weekends over the summer, tides permitting. Many of them are listed on www.morecambebay.org.uk/crossbaywalk.html or www.grangeoversands.net. Otherwise, call Cedric on 01539 532165. It may be possible to arrange a private walk.

If you're doing a walk, it's best to wear shorts or a skirt, as you'll have to wade through water. You'll need shoes or trainers that will give your feet support but that will easily slip on and off (bare feet are not advised – unless you're Cedric). Don't forget sun protection and be prepared for changeable weather.

Always heed local safety advice and be aware of tide times.



Further information

Arnside gets scant mention in most guidebooks and there's no tourist information office.

www.wanderlust.co.uk More photos and a feature on nearby Piel Island – and its king!

www.arnside-online.co.uk Local community info

www.arnsidesilverdaleaonb.org.uk Site for the local Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty

www.visitcumbria.com Tourist board

www.destinationcumbria.co.uk Cumbria outdoor activities info and booking centre