

Waves and walks: the raw, romantic allure of Cornwall's Badlands

This stretch of shoreline, from St Agnes to St Ives, with its reminders of Poldark, is a dream for surfers and walkers – and this local novelist

Cornwall, more than any other place I know, is full of echoes of a past that retains its grip. Nowhere is this clearer than in commonly used place names that don't appear on any maps but which have a stubborn hold in the collective memory, shorthand for lives and uses long gone.

Budgie Corner in Bodmin has been known by this title ever since a sign appeared there offering the birds for sale. The sign and the birds no longer there but the name persists. There hasn't been a Timothy White's dress shop on the corner of Market Jew Street in Penzance for decades but what was once the town's red-light district is still known widely by the shop's name, and even now it's used as a light-hearted warning: "If you keep going that way, you'll end up on Timothy White's Corner."

And a section of the 20-mile stretch of coastline between the two honeypot tourist destinations of St Ives and St Agnes is still referred to locally as Badlands, a hangover from the 1980s and 90s, when local surfers, fed up with visitors' bad etiquette, such as "dropping in" on another's wave (the surf equivalent of cutting up on the motorway), daubed car park walls with "locals only" signs and offenders' windscreens with surf wax.

The name, to me at least, has also always conjured up images of plastic-strewn beaches, abandoned polystyrene bodyboards and disposable barbecues, still hot and just buried in the sand – all more pressing issues these days than localism in the surfing community.

I wrote much of my first novel ([The Many](#)) on this stretch of coast, sitting on the step of my van looking out over two tiny islands – Bawden Rocks – in the heart of Badlands. When I needed to stretch my legs I'd either walk out along the cliff path or climb [St Agnes Beacon](#), the highest point for miles, at 190 metres. From here, other echoes of Cornwall's past are visible and the panoramic view from the beacon takes in the engine houses and chimney stacks of copper and tin mines, caged-over mine shafts and spoil heaps that make stark moonscapes of the clifftops.

To the east, and visible from the beacon, is Perran Sands, close to where Poldark author Winston Graham lived for more than three decades. From the beacon it's not difficult to transpose a galloping Ross or Demelza into the picture. In fact, for those so inspired, [Wheal Buller Riding Stables](#) in nearby Redruth offers hacks, beach rides and swimming on horseback (open shirts and rippling pecs, gowns and heaving bosoms optional).

I walked this wild stretch of coast to mull over the tougher sections of the novel. Within the few miles between here and St Ives there are long white sands, sea caves, high cliffs, inaccessible coves, rare heathlands, ever-shifting dunes and cliffs that regularly collapse, reshaping the coast. It's less refined than St Ives, which sits at one end, and less chocolate box pretty than St Agnes at the other but the area boasts [two heritage coasts](#) ([Godrevy](#) and [St Agnes](#)) managed and protected by the National Trust (it's almost worth the price of

membership for the free car parking alone) and much of what is not covered by National Trust is zoned off by the Ministry of Defence. The Nancekuke MoD site between [Porthtowan](#) and [Portreath](#), with its white radar dome, is possessed of its own eerie beauty as well as echoes of its darker past as a chemical weapons plant, for which the name Badlands might have been truly appropriate.

In the sun, the pink sea thrift and campion compete with the blues and yellows of the heather and gorse to either side of the coast path but I prefer it towards the end of autumn and into winter, when the wind and rain drive in from the Atlantic and the waves surge against the cliffs. It's better for creativity somehow and I feel more justified when I drop down to [Chapel Porth beach cafe](#) for one of its clotted cream-filled toasted sandwiches or to Porthtowan's ever-popular [Blue Bar](#) for a beer with a view.

Some of the country's top surfers take to the waves along this coast and many live locally. I often sit on the cliffs above either Chapel Porth or Porthtowan with a notebook, though if there's a decent wave I can lose an afternoon watching championship longboarders, pro shortboarders and soul surfers catch wave after wave, effortless and balletic. The sea isn't reserved for the pros though and among the best beaches for beginners is [Gwithian](#), further west, which often has a long, gentle and consistent wave and a surf hire shop ([Gwithian Academy of Surfing](#)) for those who want to get their gills wet.

As summer cranks up and the A30 snarls to a holiday-long halt, it can be hard to find a quiet place in [Cornwall](#), but it's still possible to find peace in the liminal spaces. To the west of Porthtowan, sandy [Lushington beach](#) is accessible only at low tide, and even in high season I can usually find a quiet spot on the coast path from which to write or watch the sea, the surfers, the pods of dolphins passing through, and the fulmars and gulls that wheel against the cliffs.

Though this is still deep surfing country, few vestiges of the Badlands reputation remain. You're more likely to come across a locally organised beach cleanup than you are any aggravation in the water, and an increasing number of visitors are taking a "leave no trace" approach – this landscape, one of the National Trust rangers reminds me, relies on it. The environmental focus is not surprising: this is home turf for campaigning charity [Surfers Against Sewage](#) and some of the country's first plastic-free communities. Talk to anyone who lives here and you'll find they are fiercely protective of this landscape.

Perhaps, just as Timothy White's Corner stands as a warning not to get into debt, the Badlands moniker can now warn against a backslide into old habits, disrespect for the rules of the waves, and for a fragile shared landscape. Though of course, even if it's Badlands in name only now, if you drop in on someone's wave, the grief you get will echo in your ears long after you leave the beach.

- [Mount Hawke Holiday Cottages](#), just inland from Porthtowan, offers holiday chalets and cottages (chalet for four from £240 a week), plus basic [camping](#) (August only) in a field linked by footpath to the South West Coastal Path

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