

The Weekend *Travel*

There's no place like Herm

Tom Ogg recently enjoyed a five-day holiday journeying around Guernsey, Herm and Sark with his wife and children

ONE of the few downsides to going away on holiday is the inevitable comedown as and when the holiday ends and everyday working life resumes – and this is true even if, like me, you have a job which you enjoy.

And, as I discovered last month, the comedown is doubly pronounced if the holiday in question entails spending a fun-filled five days in Disneyland Paris with two excitable children, especially if the eldest of the two wants to jump on every stomach-turning thrill ride or loop-de-looping rollercoaster in the park. Five times we rode on Thunder Mountain – *five!*

So, how, then, to avoid descending into the post-holiday blues after such an adrenalin-pumping trip?

The answer: why, immediately go on another holiday, of course. Ideally, a much less intense but no less entertaining and enjoyable holiday, and one that doesn't involve carting luggage to the opposite side of the globe.

Step forward, VisitGuernsey, who very kindly offered me, my wife, Lucy, and our children, Teddy (6) and Alby (4), a five-day Channel Island-hopping holiday with two nights in Guernsey, two nights in Sark and a visit to Herm.

Yes, forget Peter Pan, Little Mermaid and Baby Herman – here's St Peter Port, Little Sark and Herm.

After travelling with Brittany Ferries from St Malo to Guernsey, we began by picking up our Hertz hire car – a Ford Puma – at the ferry terminal. It was an ideal vehicle for our two days in Guernsey, being easy to drive and the ideal size for a family of four, with a pair of booster seats



■ The view from the sea-facing suite at Cobo Bay Hotel: "One of the nicest hotel rooms in which I have ever spent a night"

for the boys and plenty of boot space for our belongings.

Parking in Guernsey is free, even in busy St Peter Port, and we never once struggled to find a parking space during our 48 hours in the island. The States of Guernsey incorporate a thoughtful parking structure in the island's capital, with two-hour, three-hour and ten-hour spaces available for drivers. Quite why the government in Guernsey can do this but the government in Jersey cannot is a mystery, but it gave us – and, presumably, all other tourists – real freedom to explore whenever and wherever we fancied.

We were staying at the Cobo Bay Hotel, a stunning beach-facing hotel in the Castel parish of the island. Our family-friendly suite was similarly stunning and likewise faced directly onto the beach. The beginning of every morning – and the end of every evening – was spent sitting on the balcony and watching as the sun set or rose over the bay, with the ocean changing colour in sync with the sky. Magical stuff.

I'll be honest, I've never quite understood how the hotel star-rating system works. The Cobo Bay Hotel is officially a

three-star hotel and yet I can say without a smidgeon of hyperbole that our suite was one of the nicest hotel rooms in which I have ever spent a night. The decor was lovely, the views unbeatable, the beds impossibly comfy and the bathroom absolutely enormous, with a beautiful old-fashioned standalone bath and a separate walk-in shower. Breakfast was also top-tier, with a fine selection of cereals, breads, fruits and juices, a cracking full English brekkie and various veggie and vegan options. I have stayed in four-star and even five-star hotels that have been much, much less impressive than the Cobo Bay Hotel. (One of the most uncomfortable hotel experiences of my life involved staying in a five-star hotel in London, but that's a write-up for another day...)

Once we were checked into the hotel, we then made our way by car to Saumarez Park, with its huge pirate-themed playground allowing the boys to run wild for the part of an hour. We then grabbed a bite to eat at the Saumarez Park Café, which has long been a favourite of ours. The café has the sort of warm, unpretentious, "hey, you're on holiday" vibe that is absent

from too many outwardly similar venues in Jersey. There is plenty to keep little ones entertained (Alby was mesmerised by the various teddy bears dangling from the ceiling) and the food is good no-nonsense grub, with a homemade tiramisu – billed as "Luisa's Famous Tiramisu" – which just might be the tastiest dessert you will ever eat.

The rest of the afternoon was spent visiting the famous "Fairy Ring" (La Table Des Pions), which we all walked around three times before making a wish, before we then returned to St Peter Port for the first of four evening meals organised by VisitGuernsey.

The venue was Dhaka, a colourful Bangladeshi restaurant serving street-food-inspired fusion cuisine. The versatile menu offers a wide selection of rasta khabar (snacks and street food), biesh khabar (specialties), shorma (tanduri ruti sandwich), aro thakse (side orders) and misti (desserts), with the various spices used in creating these dishes displayed on the middle floor of the three-floor restaurant, which in turn infuses the entire building with appetite-whetting aromas. By the time your food arrives, you are *really* ready to tuck into it.

Prior to our visit, I had assumed that said food would taste the same or similar to Indian or Thai cuisine, but it was completely different in terms of appearance, taste and texture, from the beguni (deep-fried aubergine in gram flour batter with onion chutney) and the gorur kala bhuna (Bengali dark and tender curry with beef shoulder pieces and spices) to – my personal favourite – the spicy cauliflower (turmeric and ginger cauliflower with green chilli, aamer acher and spicy onion jam).

The restaurant itself was every bit as colourful as the food, with bright oranges and vibrant shades, and quirky touches such as the bicycle incorporated into a table and the large aluminium tiger head positioned directly above our table. If you like trying something new (and delicious), add Dhaka to your "must-visit" list when you're next in Guernsey.

It was the following morning that our island-hopping adventure truly began, as we left the car behind and boarded the Travel Trident ferry over to Herm – the smallest of the five main Channel Islands.

The crossing took just 20 minutes and we were soon making our way to Shell Beach, which does indeed have rows of multi-coloured shells lined up along its shoreline. Much like everything else on the 1.5-mile x 0.5 mile island, the beach is picturesque and entirely unspoilt.

The boys quickly befriended a group of holidaying children who were in the midst of building a kind of deluxe swimming-pool complex out of sand, with a bathing pool for toddlers and a larger pool for older children. It was surprisingly impressive but, alas, I was told in no uncertain terms that I was too old to sit or paddle in it.

Instead, I made my way to the Mermaid



■ The view from a cliff top in Herm, taken by Tom as he walked between Belvoir Bay and Shell Beach, and inset: "Herm prison"

Tavern, a delightfully old-school public house replete with a fine choice of ales, a sizeable outdoor area, and – the true sign of a high-quality pub – hundreds of beer mats decorating the walls. It has become fashionable these days for pubs and restaurants to offer small but elaborately-presented portions of food (too often "chips" equates to "half a dozen skinny fries in a miniature frying basket"). Thankfully, the Mermaid Tavern team are having none of that nonsense, and I enjoyed a big, fat bowlful of hardcore chunky chips.

It was while at the Mermaid Tavern that I met with Kate Moody, who is Herm's marketing, PR and brand manager, and who kindly gave me a goodie bag containing two toy puffs and a pair of Herm T-shirts

for the boys, a Herm tea towel, a bar of Herm soap and even a Herm Christmas bauble.

During our chat, Kate spoke about the unique delights and eccentricities of the island, including that the Herm school currently has a grand total of three pupils on its register ("It will increase as there are now quite a few babies and toddlers in the island"). Kate also spoke of her desire to dispel the common misconception that Herm is somehow inaccessible to those living in Jersey.

"We are trying to encourage Jersey people to come here for a stay rather than just a day," she said.

"There is the White House Hotel, self-catering cottages and the campsite, all of

which are ideal for inter-island getaways.

"Jersey people absolutely love Herm once they discover it," she continued. "It's just so different. Herm really is nothing at all like the other Channel Islands. And there is plenty to do here if you're staying for a few days."

To this end, Kate suggested that I visit St Tugual's Chapel – which dates back to the 11th century – and Belvoir Bay, both of which I did. My verdict? As Kate put it: "When you're on Belvoir Bay on a day like today, it feels like being in the Caribbean." It did indeed.

Although Kate lives in Guernsey, where she was born and raised, her partner, Tom, lives in Herm and has done for nearly two decades.

"Tom is head of hospitality for the island," said Kate. "When you live in Herm, you see the boat to Guernsey as more of a bus service. It's really no different to jumping in the car and driving for 20 minutes into town. In fact, it's often quicker for Tom to get to St Peter Port than it is for me driving from St Andrew in Guernsey."

As we parted ways, Kate offered me one last piece of advice: don't forget to top up the sunscreen. "Otherwise you'll end up with the Herm burn," she laughed.

Once reunited with my family, the four of us did a little bit of sightseeing – including taking a look at the Herm prison (it's pretty small) – before then returning to Guernsey on the ferry late in the afternoon.

Once back on Guernsey soil, we headed straight to the Puffin & Oyster for meal number two. Located on the northwest coast of the island, the pub is a hugely popular venue with locals and tourists alike, and we soon discovered why: the staff were friendly and good-humoured, the views rivalled even those of the Cobo Bay Hotel, and the food was utterly splendid.

The boys both had "proper pork sausages": chips and peas – and they were indeed proper sausages – while I opted for the 5oz sirloin steak (well done) with Café de Paris butter. For her main, Lucy had chicken supreme and grilled chorizo, roast garlic cream, polenta, blackened corn and chimichurri, but the best was saved until last: lemon cake with whipped yoghurt icing, raspberries and pistachio praline (see *photo right*). Nom and – for wont of a better word – nom.

After another good night's sleep, we checked out of the Cobo Bay Hotel and made our way back to the harbour, this time to board an Isle of Sark ferry to the second smallest of the main Channel Islands: Sark.

I was a little apprehensive about the crossing because... well, because the mere mention of the word "boat" is usually enough to leave me feeling seasick. In the event, however, I needn't have worried. The crossing was smooth and quick, and I

spent the entire half-hour voyage marveling at the sheer beauty of the surrounding islands, which looked even more dazzling in the scorching midday sun.

It is, of course, an age-old cliché to say of a rural location that visiting it feels like stepping back in time, but it is a cliché that is very much true when it comes to Sark. There are no cars, no street lights, no recognisable shops or retail brands (except for a curiously out-of-place HSBC) – instead, it is all bikes, tractors, horse and carts, family-run stores (the lone supermarket is called, simply, Food Shop) and the sort of laidback leisurely vibe and pace rarely found outside of remote Italian villages. It genuinely feels as if you've stepped out of the 21st century and into the 1800s.

Our home during our two-night stay in Sark was Vine Cottage, which belied its name by being roughly the size of an average family home, with a very large living room, a very large kitchen, two very large bedrooms with very large double beds, a bathroom (merely large) and a downstairs toilet. Like so many buildings in Sark, the cottage – which is located adjacent to the aforementioned HSBC – dates back to the late 18th century.

Much to my delight, the walls of the living room were decorated with old newspaper covers announcing world-famous news stories (the moon landing, the JFK assassination, etc), while the stairway and bedrooms featured black-and-white images of famous movie stars (Alfred Hitchcock, Audrey Hepburn, Marilyn Monroe).

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■ Clockwise from above: eye-catching decor in the Dhaka restaurant; spices on display on the second floor of Dhaka, which infused the restaurant with appetite-whetting aromas; some of the dishes enjoyed by Tom and his family during their meal



■ Tom's boys contemplate their running abilities in Herm. The sign reads: "Do not cross this field – unless you can do it in nine seconds because the bull can do it in ten seconds"

