

Survival tactics in the Severn Estuary

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The Severn, the longest river in Britain at 354km, rises in mid Wales and then curves downwards to Gloucestershire, where it enters the Severn Estuary near the Wales-England border. Until 1966, when the 1.6km-long Severn Bridge opened, if you wanted to get to southwest England, directly across the estuary from south Wales, you'd need to take a ferry from the village of Beachley, near Chepstow in South Monmouthshire, over to Aust, or face a very long drive.

Now, where the ferry once docked at Beachley, directly underneath the bridge, is the base of the Severn Area Rescue Association. It's an essential service as the estuary has the second-largest tidal range in the world (after Bay of Fundy in Canada). It's here in the car park that I meet Chloe Newcomb Hodgetts, a professional forager.

Her company, Gourmet Gatherings, offers a range of services, including sourcing foraged herbs and plants for Michelin-starred restaurants and guided foraging walks for individuals, families and groups. I'm here for the 90-minute Estuary, Meadow and Hedge-row Forage and Chloe asks how many plants and herbs do I think we'll find. "Ten?" I guess. She laughs. We come across at least five within the first few metres.

"This is my favourite spot to bring first-time foragers," Chloe says. "Not only is it easily accessible, but there's a good variety of plants thanks to the morning sun and warm sea air."

As well as encouraging her groups to taste their finds, Chloe reveals the many uses for

herbs and plants. I'm amazed to learn humans could survive on just nettles and mushrooms, which she says provide all the nutrients we need. Chloe grew up foraging in Wales and around the world with her peripatetic family, and after studying for a PhD in Chemical Ecology in the Caribbean and then running a cocktail bar in Honduras, she returned to

Wales where she was apprenticed to an expert local forager before setting up her business.

One of the several engaging tours she offers, in line with her interests and experience, is a four-hour workshop foraging for botanicals and then making gin, in partnership with Silver Circle Distillery, north of Beachley in the Wye Valley, which is a designated Area of

Chloe Newcomb Hodgetts of Gourmet Gatherings; and wild spinach on the Severn Estuary, Wales

Outstanding Natural Beauty. The River Wye is the fifth-longest river in Britain at 250km, and, like the Severn, runs from mid Wales down to the Severn Estuary. It's the lower section, between Hereford and Chepstow, that's known as the Wye Valley.

With cars and trucks thundering over the bridge above us, we head on to the muddy river beach. I'm disappointed not to see any of the eight remaining "lame fishermen", who usually fish for salmon using Y-shaped wooden structures draped with nets while standing in the river. In 2021, National Resources Wales announced that all salmon caught must now be released in order to replenish stocks, which has greatly affected this 400-year-old tradition.

Chloe is a keen cook and also offers "wild feasts". This is usually part of a day-long foraging outing but she has pre-prepared a lunch for us to try. There's nettle soup and pesto made with wild garlic, wild mushrooms in puff pastry, brie stuffed with morels, a salad of this morning's foraged leaves, and creme caramel made with sweet woodruff and birch syrup. While we eat, she points out the wild spinach, which grows above the waterline and explains that there's enough around the 1400km Wales Coast Path to supply the entire Welsh population.

As well as being a unique way to explore this little-visited area, foraging certainly makes me think about food and how we can use the plants and herbs that grow around us. Experts like Chloe show us how to do this legally and, crucially, without poisoning ourselves.

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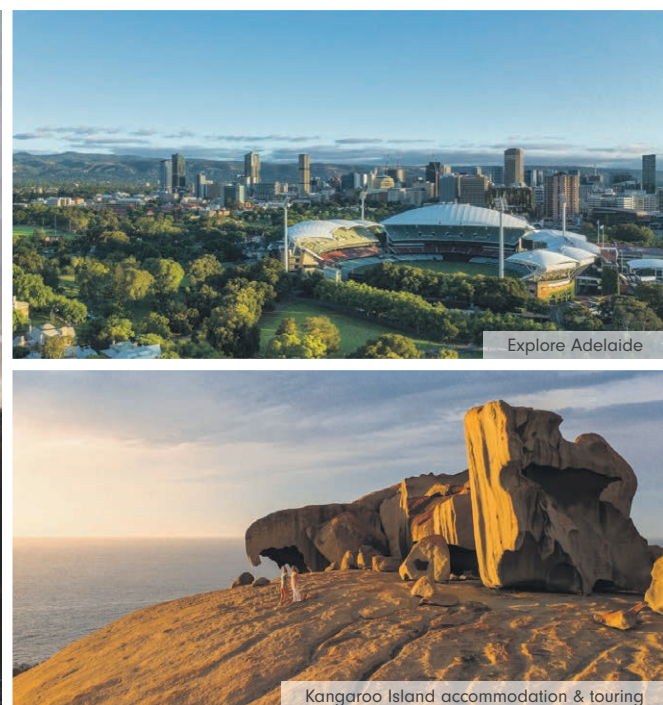
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