

Below: At the end of our kayaking trips
we were shown classic confidence tricks

Below: Blokarting put a smile - and plenty of sand
- on all of our faces



Jersey... Watersports Heaven

“The prospect of trying blokarting was both thrilling and scary. But hitting middle age in parenthood didn’t mean that I was going to sit back and watch my children have all the fun”

There’s a hidden gem on our doorstep, but at 45 square miles in area you’d have thought that it couldn’t hide. It’s the island of Jersey. Far from trying to keep it a secret, Jersey islanders are beckoning loud and clear, in particular to families with children of all ages. But they feel that they are being overlooked by their bigger neighbour, the UK. They say that they’ve got lots to offer as a family destination, especially if you love any sort of seaside holiday: active, extreme or just playing on a sunny beach.

Jersey’s tourism team invited us to put their offerings to the test, so we visited at Whitsun. My children, aged 12 and 14, love all forms of watersports, and were keen to try out as many as possible. I had spoken to friends about our forthcoming trip; they all told me we’d love it. No-one could quite put a finger on it, but we’d love it.

I reflected on that love I’d have as I walked off Jersey’s longest beach at St Ouen’s after a session of blokarting, perhaps better known as sand yachting. I had sand in every possible nook and cranny of my face. I was chewing it, shaking it out of my ears and blowing it out of my nose. The kids’ hoots of laughter rang around the beachfront car park when I took off my glasses, because I had two clean circles of pink flesh around my eyes. The blokart had kicked up wet sand off the front wheel and sprayed it all over me, particularly when cornering at speed.



The prospect of trying blokarting was both thrilling and scary. But hitting middle age in parenthood didn’t mean that I was going to sit back and watch my children have all the fun; this was an opportunity too good to miss.

It was thrilling, but it’s fair to say you only need push yourself as hard as you dare; it’s easy to work out how to slow down and stop, which your instructor teaches you before you start, and in no time we were trying to beat each other and go faster and further along the sand, with Dad showing off and doing wheelies. ‘Falling about laughing’ took on a new meaning when we pushed the limits too far and slowly but surely tipped over sideways. Harnessed in, we looked like beached whales while waiting to be uprighted by our instructor; our laughter had drained all ability to get out and right ourselves.

That was enough adrenalin for one day, or so I thought, until we got back to base, the Merton Hotel. It’s got an indoor and outdoor pool complex, including waterslide, lazy river and flowrider, which is a surfing and bodyboarding machine; the children were itching to get into the pools. Adults can catch a quiet moment in the jacuzzi, fitness suite or steam room, as lifeguards are on duty poolside. Needless to say we slept well during the week and woke to full English buffet breakfasts, giving us a chance to fuel up before the next active day. ➤

Below: The Tri Yak shown here seats two or three if you don't want to paddle alone



So, batteries recharged, we returned to St Ouen's beach the following morning. This notably windy west side of the island is a mecca for the island's keen surfers, with water to about waist height for far enough out that beginners can feel safe. We've tried surfing before and managed then to stand up for a while, the rest of my family mastering it better than me – almost inevitably. Jersey Surf School helped us all to progress further. It's surprisingly easy to be able to surf at a modest level within an hour; a great sense of achievement for all.



Not all watersports have to be quite so energetic. Highlights included the two kayaking trips that we did with Derek Hairon. He takes you offshore into beautiful waters, through craggy rock formations, into caves and quietly watching wildlife. I think it's one of the best ways of getting to know a place. With boats to suit all sizes, you can paddle with a passenger, or children from about age 12 can paddle a smaller kayak on their own. Derek first teaches you technique in plain English, making your journey easier on the muscles.

There are challenges for all. Derek knows the tides and rocks well, and took those brave enough onto faster moving water swirling around a projecting rock, teaching how to paddle down the surf forming round the rock and making our apparently sedate activity more exciting for thrill-seekers.

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A second half day of paddling with Derek, up to and round Icho tower, was around gullies on the rising tide. Starting in very shallow water as the tide is coming in, you can learn paddling techniques in a couple of feet of water. Our trip out to moor on a resulting islet was a bit of an adventure, being able to rest en route in open water where Derek knew there was shelter.

Derek also offers a moonwalk trip on the island, around the south east coast. He explained the walk's title: the tidal range is one of the greatest in the world, and at very low tide the size of the island almost doubles. The resultant sea bed that you walk across looks like a moonscape where you can wander, investigate rock pools and head to Seymour Tower. Walking sometimes in sand and at other times nearly knee-deep in water, it's rock pooling on a huge scale for children, and Derek's knowledge is vast, both of underwater life and of the geology, geography and history around you.

You can go coasteering on the island but a bad past experience for me and the kids means I'm not in a hurry to try it again. It is an extreme sport after all, and sea, tides and, most of all, your leaders need to be respected, provided they are good enough to lead you. I spoke to Pure Adventure's owner, petite Penny, at length; it's clear that she operates high standards. Her biggest problem is from strapping men when she either tells one to turn back because she can see that he won't have the stamina for sea swimming, or a whole group because the sea is too rough. She may be small but she's tough with her standards. She ensures a ratio of 1 to 6 with a minimum of two leaders, and specifies a minimum of 10 years of age for participants.

Below: Reaching our destination at Icho Tower, amidst moonwalking scenery
Below right: Helpers are roped in to fire the cannon at noon at Elizabeth Castle



She'll be able to judge within about 5 minutes if she thinks you won't have the strength and ability to go with the group. To me, those are just the sort of reassuring words you need from a leader in this area of sport, and should it appeal, Jersey has plenty of rocky crags off which you can throw yourself.

We found time to explore on land too. St Helier is a bustling, cosmopolitan town. You'll hear almost as much French being spoken as English, and at commuting time, mopeds and scooters buzz everywhere as though you're in an Italian town. Al fresco lunches with work colleagues spill out onto pedestrianised streets to enjoy the sunny weather. This is a proper working town, not dressed up for tourists, but we felt like we were overseas.

We wanted to spend some time visiting historic sights, starting with the Jersey War Tunnels, as the Channel Islands were the only parts of the British Isles to be invaded and occupied by German forces during the Second World War. The war tunnels were excavated by forced labour from throughout Europe during the German Occupation. Now converted into a museum, they are committed to preserving and presenting an accurate account of the Occupation and provide a poignant account of life on Jersey at that time.

Reminders of Occupation are evident throughout the island. In the middle of St Helier, the offices of Jersey Tourism are in the former railway station terminus. A plaque on a side wall is a chilling reminder that over 1,000 English residents of Jersey were deported from that terminus to Germany in 1942. Elsewhere, eight German bunkers have been restored and are open to the public. The excellent M19 Fortress Mortar Bunker, permanently lived in by 9 people for over 12 months, gave us all an opportunity to witness the conditions and to handle some of the grenades and extremely heavy rifles used. ➡



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Below: Simple evening fun on the beach on the south east side of the island
Below right: Our 14 year-old was up for a long tow by the third attempt



We couldn't finish our stay without returning to the water, this time with a bit of guilty indulgence as we were on powered craft. At least, I was feeling guilty about pointlessly burning up fuel as we jetskied, while the kids were very keen to say the least, feeling like they'd become new James Bond characters. While the operator we used has now gone, another has been established on the island for 26 years. Our half hour of jetskiing is now remembered as one of the highlights of any watersport the children have ever undertaken. Each jetski is big enough to take three, and children aged 12 and over can take the controls because there's a speed limiter and a cut-out function if you fall off. Despite the guilt, I couldn't help but enjoy the thrill and speed it offers - just this once.

Waterskiing was last on the agenda, just as bad on the gas guzzling front, I know. The large, safe St Aubin's Bay was a perfect place to learn waterskiing, but one of the tricks was to keep your mouth closed, as one of my two discovered to his cost. He chose to end his waterskiing early, the rest of us again making surprisingly good progress in a few minutes, being able to stand up and ski until our arms ached and we chose to stop.

Is there any other water-based fun to be had on the island? We've overlooked the simple pleasures which we could enjoy in the evenings: BBQ's on one of the island's 27 beaches, together with paddling in the sea and beach games. With the fish market in St Helier giving us the option to try out unusual BBQ meals, the beaches provided a fine end to the day. we'd

So were our friends right that we'd love it? Of course they were - it's a cracking family destination. The only surprise is that Jersey folk are happy to tell the rest of the world about this gem and invite their neighbours over to share the fun. ■

“St Helier is a bustling, cosmopolitan town.... at commuting time, mopeds and scooters buzz everywhere as though you're in an Italian town”



Jersey's favourite family hotel



For many visitors to Jersey, the Merton Hotel continues to provide the perfect place for an unforgettable stay on the Island.

The Hotel's success is built on its appeal to all ages, whether travelling as a family, a couple or alone. The range of accommodation and facilities ensures that, whether you are aged nine or ninety, we can satisfy your needs.



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Jersey Fact Box

THE ISLAND Our week away felt like a longer break, perhaps partly because we didn't have to travel far to experience something new, both getting to and around the island. Dubbed Europe without the euro, the island is safe and courteous, with no worries about foreign food or water, all ideal for children.

www.jersey.com

GETTING THERE Condor Ferries run daily in the summer from Portsmouth, Poole and Weymouth, with the fast ferry taking just 3.5 hours and costing between £175-£283 each way for a car with a family of four travelling in July. FlyBe and BMI Baby are amongst those who offer flights to the island.

GETTING AROUND We took our bikes in addition to the car, but it's not ideal cycling country with children - Jersey is hilly! Bus services are good if you want to leave the car behind. www.mybus.je shows timetables and the island is 9 by 5 miles. Payment to park your car operates via a system unfamiliar to many - Paycards - used from 8am-5pm and purchased in advance from over 200 outlets on the island.

PLACES TO STAY

THE MERTON HOTEL Part of the Seymour Group of hotels on the island - a private, family-owned trio of hotels, this one firmly suited to the family market. We weren't that keen on the concept of a family hotel to start with, expecting it to be running wild with unruly children. How wrong we were. It's a pleasantly quiet hotel, large enough both in the pool complex and hotel to cope, without being so large that it lacks character. And there wasn't an unruly child to be seen. Conveniently located in St Helier, rates are £51.50 per adult for February, Easter and October holidays, £66.50 at Whitsun and £74 summer holidays for bed and a comprehensive buffet-style full English breakfast. Under 2's free, 2-11 years at 50% and 12-15's at 75% of the adult rate. Weekly rates available. Special offers shown online or via email alert.

Facilities include family rooms and suites, clubs from crèche to teen, tennis court and DIY laundry facilities, free access to the fitness centre (for 16+ years) and leisure complex including the Flowrider, the only one of its kind in the British Isles and the only one within a hotel complex in Europe. It enables you to surf or bodyboard, whether a complete beginner or experienced. The Star Room provides nightly entertainment free of charge Whitsun to September, ranging from an Abba tribute band to a magician and music hall nights (might suit grandparents if they come with you). This was the first hotel in the British Isles to have a resident Blue Badge guide. Pete Webb offers walks on a variety of themes, to suit, at a small additional charge.

www.seymourhotels.com

CAMPING AND CARAVANNING Is possible but touring is not allowed - you and your caravan or motorhome get met off the ferry, guided to the campsite and allowed to pitch but not roam. How that works when your motorhome is your only vehicle I'm not quite sure, but it's clearly a bit more difficult.

WATERSPORTS AND OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES

BLOKARTING AND COASTEERING Pure Adventure in Jersey offers a range of activities including blokarting, rock climbing, coasteering and abseiling. Average prices £35 per adult for a 2 hour session, children 16 and under £20, students £25. For Summer 2009 they are planning RIB trips to the Ecrehou islands and possibly waterskiing. For those trying blokarting there's a sidecar for those too small or unable to take in the detail. Helmets provided. Coasteering is not for the fainthearted. Helmets and wetsuits provided. Wear suitable stout and sticky-soled footwear.

www.purejersey.com

SURFING Jersey Surf School operates from St Ouen's Bay on the west coast. Costs are £69 for a 1.5 hour lesson for a family of up to five or £25 per person. Summer camps for 8-16 year-olds are £170 for Mon-Fri 9am-3pm, excluding lunch. Mini summer camps, for 2 hours per morning, Mon-Fri, are available for £100. Wetsuits provided.

www.jerseysurfschool.co.uk

JETSKIING AND WATERSKIING Jersey Sea Sport Centre offers jetski hire at £35 for 30 minutes on the water for ages 12+, with extra passengers at £10 or £5 for under 12's, waterskiing at £22 per lesson or £110 for a course of six lessons for ages 5+ and banana boat rides at £7 per person. Wetsuits provided.

www.jerseyseasport.com

KAYAKING AND MOONWALKING Derek's got the British Canoe Union's highest coaching qualification in sea kayaking and has lots of expedition experience. With detailed knowledge of how the tide works against the coast on the island, we were comfortable in the knowledge that we were in the hands of an expert. It has stood us in good stead on an 'instructor' led kayaking trip on another holiday since, where the coaching was non-existent. And as a Jersey islander since childhood, Derek's a great tour guide too. He takes his own camera on kayaking trips, which means you don't risk getting your own wet, and he'll post on a disk of images at no additional cost. A 2.5 hour kayak tour costs £37.50 per adult and £25 per child under 17. Wetsuits provided. A 2.5 to 3 hour walking tour to Seymour or Icho Towers costs £12.50 per person. Bring suitable footwear that can get wet.

www.jerseykayadventures.co.uk and
www.jerseywalkadventures.co.uk

PLACES TO VISIT

There's lots more, but we chose:

DURRELL WILDLIFE Jersey's zoo, with a mission to save endangered wild animals from extinction. The entry fee helps their conservation programmes both in Jersey and overseas. £39.95 for 2 adults and 2 children, Under 4's free. Durrell's books are of course available in the large shop.

www.durrell.org

ELIZABETH CASTLE Open daily from 6 April, Family ticket £25 for castle only, or £30 for castle and ferry.

www.jerseyheritagetrust.org

JERSEY WAR TUNNELS Adults £10.50, Children 7-16 £6.50

www.jerseywartunnels.com

SECOND WORLD WAR BUNKERS The Channel Islands Occupation Society has both restored and mans the eight bunkers using volunteers alone. Opening times and prices vary, from free to £2.

www.ciosjersey.org.uk

THE WEATHER The sun shone day after day when we were there, and usually sets in for the summer when the high pressure settles over the Azores. Whilst Jersey was basking, Cornwall, Devon and Dor set struck unlucky for Whitsun half term with a lot of rain.

WEATHER WEBSITES

www.thisisjersey.com/weather

www.magicseaweed.com

www.metcheck.com

www.jerseymet.gov.je