



The stately horse-drawn trams ply Douglas' two-mile prom



The famed Snafell Mountain Tramway



The island's fuelled by horse power



Claremont is one of the island's leading hotels



Snafell Mountain Tramway

Well, Isle be!

Put your watch back to the 1950s... **Darren Calpin** enjoys the Isle of Man's wonderfully relaxed vibe

ASK THE PERSON next to you about the Isle of Man and chances are they'll murmur something about favourable tax rates and exhilarating motorcycle races before running out of things to say.

But why is this? Why do so few people know about this tiny little island's stunningly varied landscape, glorious marine wildlife and

timeless, unhurried vibe? Why are its Victorian engineering marvels, and enchanting heritage railways and trams, not better known? Well, it could just be because the island's residents (all 84,000 of them) like it that way. They know they're on to a good thing and maybe, just maybe, they want to keep it all to themselves.

Unfortunately for them, I recently took the Heysham-Douglas ferry over to discover this wee island enclave for myself. And I'm lousy at keeping secrets...

EASING INTO DOUGLAS

The first thing you notice about the Isle of Man when you step off the ferry at Douglas is the absence of hustle and bustle. The hushed terminal building, decked with evocative 1930s-style travel posters, is as laid-back as a village Post Office. The traffic – such as it is – on the elegant, Llandudno-esque seafront is equally relaxed. Understandable really when a 20-minute commute is considered 'long' in these parts.

The stately horse-drawn trams, which ply the two-mile prom with leisurely grace,

reinforce this unhurried, bygone vibe. Pulled by powerful Shire or Clydesdale heavy horses, this charming old 3ft-gauge tramway – the oldest of its kind in Britain – lets you gaze out over the curving bay and inspect the traditional guest houses and Victorian theatres in delightfully sedate fashion. And, yes, the car drivers on the prom will happily wait and share a cheery wave whenever you get on or off.

And when it comes to refuelling, try 'Coast', a chic brasserie offering fine sea views and even finer meals. It's a cinch to find too as it's right next door to The Claremont, the island's leading four-star gold standard hotel.

UNDER YOUR OWN STEAM

At just 33 miles long and 13.5 miles wide, the Isle of Man is easy to get around, either by car

or by way of the surprisingly comprehensive local bus network. The most glorious way to explore the island though is undoubtedly via its treasure trove of heritage railways.

The island's Victorian Steam Railway is arguably its crowning glory. This majestic narrow gauge railway, replete with original locomotives and redolent 19th century carriages, is to all intents and purposes, a time machine.

Effortlessly evoking the golden age of steam, it puffs majestically through idyllic countryside and historic towns on its hour-long journey along the south east coast from Douglas to the twee seaside town of Port Erin.

If far-reaching sea views and quaint country vistas are your thing then a ride on the Manx Electric Railway is a must. Shy coves, lush

GETMETHERE:

▫ Darren travelled to the Isle of Man for a five-day trip with GRJ Independent, with prices from £675pp. The price includes four nights in a four-star hotel, all internal rail journeys, and selected meals and excursions.
▫ See www.greatrail.com/grj-independent or call 01 904 5271 81.

glens and gorse-topped hills peep in and out of view as the 100-plus year-old tramcars duck and weave their way along the east coast from Douglas, round to the quaint town of Laxey, and then up to Ramsey >>



Steaming into Douglas Station

Uncover the island's past

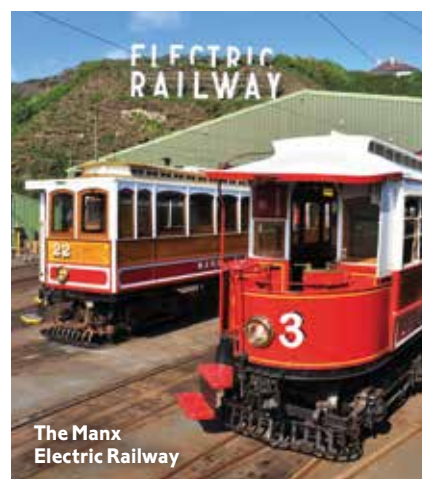
Though it's now a Crown Dependency (not part of the UK but loyal to the Queen), the Isle of Man's heritage is distinctly Celtic and Scandinavian. Indeed, the island didn't even become 'English' until the 15th century, when the Scots, who took over from the Norsemen, who took over from the Vikings, who themselves succeeded the Celts, were finally given their marching orders.

The story of the Isle of Man's remarkable journey from powerful sea kingdom to genteel island enclave is celebrated at the House of Manannan, an enjoyably visceral museum in the west coast town of Peel. Boasting detailed recreations of Celtic roundhouses, entertaining films and even a replica Viking longboat; it's often described as a Manx version of the ever-popular Jorvik Centre in York.

Peel Castle (see below), a menacing 11th century fortress, which played a key

role in the island's maritime history, is only a quick stroll along the harbour. A short distance away in the sleepy village of St Johns is Tynwald Hill and the Royal Chapel, spiritual home of the Manx Parliament.

Said to be the oldest continuously existing parliament in the world, 'Tynwald' is made up of the directly-elected House of Keys and the indirectly chosen Legislative Council. If you like, you can watch politics come alive at the Old House of Keys building in nearby Castletown where a well-staged session of debate led by zealous actors and beguiling avatars sheds light upon the (frequently shady) inner-workings of government. Join in and you may even get your own top hat to wear! Be sure to visit atmospheric Castle Rushen while you're there. Its medieval walls and quirky clock (it's correct only twice a day) are just across the road.



The Manx Electric Railway

beyond. Stopping at impossibly cute stations with names like 'Fairy Cottage' and 'Far End' to let children with tiddling nets clamber aboard completes the Enid Blyton effect.

MOUNTAIN HIGH...

Altogether more dramatic scenery awaits on the famed Snaefell Mountain Railway, an epic feat of Victorian engineering that transports passengers 2,000 feet to the top of the island's only mountain, Snaefell.

Starting at Laxey, the five-mile journey takes in the world's largest water wheel and the famed TT race track, while all the while treating you to a slideshow of sublime vistas which, depending on how high you are, are dead-ringers for North Wales, the Peak District and the Scottish Highlands.

This 'everything in one place' sensation continues at the summit where, on a clear day, it's possible to see seven kingdoms at once: England, Wales, Scotland, Ireland, Mann, Heaven and Neptune (the sea). As international 360° panoramas go, this one's right up there with the very best. [CTAW](#)



STEPHEN CORRAN