

Rough Guide author reveals his Valleys Essentials

What's your ultimate Valleys experience? Cycling high up in the Afan Forest? Journeying underground to relive our industrial past at Big Pit? Maybe it's the taste of Sidoli's ice cream? Now is your chance to share your Valleys Essentials.

The Valleys Heart and Soul campaign has teamed up with Rough Guide author Mike Parker to create a list of the Top 50 Valleys Essentials*, including must-see heritage attractions, unmissable eateries and events and scenic walks across The Valleys, which spans from Kidwelly in the west to Pontypool in the east.

People in Wales are being encouraged to vote for their favourite from Parker's Top 50 unranked list to determine the ultimate Top 10 Valleys Essentials or if their favourite is missing to nominate it for People's Choice. The final list will be revealed in March 2011 and a special plaque will be awarded to the Top 10 Essentials.

Places that have been nominated are being provided with campaign packs to drum up support and encourage visitors and local people to vote for them. Voting is taking place online at www.thevalleys.co.uk/top50 where the full list of Valleys Essentials can be viewed.

The Valleys Heart and Soul is a three year campaign led by partnership organisations from the Western Valleys, Heads of the Valleys and The Valleys Partnership, and aims to change perceptions of The Valleys and bring long-term economic benefits to the area.

Mike, who is co-author on all five guides to Wales, picked well known attractions including Caerphilly Castle and Blaenavon World Heritage Site as well as new additions for 2010 such as 'Guardian', in Abertillery, alongside the best pubs for local ale and real hidden gems to feature in his list.

The 50 Valleys Essentials are not only essential things to see, do or taste, for Mike they are experiences that form the essence of the region. Mike, who lives in Powys, said: "Fifty was a good number of sights to pick, for it gave me chance to highlight all of the many aspects that make The Valleys such a rewarding place to visit.

“There’s raw natural beauty in the shape of hulking mountains, glorious upland commons and thundering waterfalls. Or industrial heritage at some imposing remnants of the coal and iron industries, as well as many of the region’s best little nuggets tucked away well off the beaten track. The option to go back even further is everywhere too, by poking around ancient castles, stately homes or churches.

“There’s physical activity of all sorts, be it walking, running, mountain biking, swimming, climbing or caving. Eating and drinking too, of course – it would be churlish to ignore the area’s many fine options, from home-made Italian ice-cream to prize-winning whisky.

“Best of all, there was space for the quirky and the unexpected, traits in which the Valleys excel. Whether witnessing the venerable Welsh New Year tradition of the Mari Lwyd, or digging around the places associated with revolutionary Victorian druid Dr William Price, there are plenty of things to tick the box marked ‘weird and wonderful.’

“This is just my list; you’ll have your own in no time. And like me, you’ll also have your own amazing memories of this most highly individual part of the world.”

Minister for Heritage, Alun Ffred Jones, said: "There is a wealth of wonderful attractions, activities and experiences that deserve to be celebrated in The Valleys and this campaign aims to bring a sense of pride to communities where they have a local Valleys Essential. And attractions, activities, our natural environment and heritage are key to attracting more tourism, with obvious benefits to the local economy.

“Valleys people are renowned for being warm and friendly with a great sense of spirit, so we’re encouraging local communities to get together and champion their Essential to help get it into the top 10 and to nominate their favourite for the people’s choice. We’ve got a lot to shout about in this fantastic area so make sure you have your say.”

To nominate a local treasure that you think is missing from the list or to vote for your favourite Essential from Mike Parker’s list, visit www.thevalleys.co.uk/top50 by 1 February 2010.

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Notes to editors:

*Top 50 Valleys Essentials list is below or please visit www.thevalleys.co.uk/top-50 to view.

MIKE PARKER'S TOP 50 VALLEYS ESSENTIALS (in no particular order)

Heritage:

Big Pit and World Heritage Site, Blaenavon. Just a fascinating town, definitely Valleys but, unusually, in a lofty upland position. Iron made Blaenavon: see the ironworks, but also the iron graves and font in the parish church. Big Pit, the National Mining Museum, is an authentic deep mine underground experience and is brilliantly done throughout.

Blaengarw Workmen's Hall: we have heard much about community regeneration over the past quarter century, but see it in action at this splendid old miners' institute at the top of the dead-end Garw Valley. The murals and decorations indicate that you're in for something special, and you're not disappointed.

Brynaman Lido. Wales' last council-run open-air swimming pool, built in their heyday of the 1930s, complete with the original wooden huts and iron turnstiles. A wonderfully evocative and enjoyable place, absolutely at the heart of this wonderful community. This classic pool was closed in 2010 and will most likely remain so in 2011, but it's hoped that it will reopen in the future.

Brynmawr Museum and town trail. Wales' highest town (at around 1200 feet) has some amazing stories to tell, including pioneering its own self-government and as the refuge for Jewish people during the anti-Semitic riots of the 1920s. The small local museum has some memorabilia, the rest is discovered en route around a town trail.

Caerphilly Castle needs almost no introduction, for it dominates the town in a way that both unique and quite jaw-dropping. The thirty acre fortress – second largest in Britain, it's said, after Windsor – sits within its moat, the jaunty angle of its leaning tower the thing that keeps drawing the eye.

Cyfartha Castle Museum, Merthyr Tydfil: this gaudy mock-Gothic castle was built in 1825 for William Crawshay, one of the town's most notorious ironmasters, and enabled him to look down – in every sense – on his workers in the seething town below. It's now home to a fabulous museum about this most gutsy of towns, together with a delightful art collection.

Cynon Valley Museum, Aberdare: one of the most interesting and diverse museums in Wales, a treasure trove of 'ooh, I never knew that', whether about the local coal industry, the 1984-5 miners' strike or the area's proud part in Welsh publishing history.

Eglwysilan church, near Senghenydd: High on the ridge between most of the Valleys you'll find far older settlements, often little more than a pub, a church and a few farms. Eglwysilan is one such place, its solid church tower a focal point for miles around. A wander around the churchyard is a sobering experience, as you see the dozens of graves from the two massive pit disasters (1901 and 1913) at neighbouring Senghenydd – whole generations wiped out in an instant.

Griffithstown Railway Museum: one man's astonishing collection of railway memorabilia, concentrating on the many lines and networks that spun out all over the Valleys like a spider's web. Memories, pictures and even film of the old Crumlin viaduct especially inspiring.

Guardian, Six Bells, Abertillery: Sebastien Boyesen's brand new memorial to a 1960 pit disaster which killed 45 men and boys is utterly breathtaking. A twenty metre high sculpture of a sinewy miner, it towers over the spectator and provides a moving memorial to all miners, in this region and beyond.

Kidwelly Castle. Dazzling medieval fortress in a commanding position above the River Gwendraeth and the sleepy little town of Kidwelly. More than most

Welsh castles, this is the one that makes you feel like a fourteenth century knight as you scamper around the battlements and up the towers.

Llancaiach Fawr, nr Nelson: a magnificent Tudor manor house that's been turned into a superb hands-on history experience to give visitors a glimpse into life at the time of the Civil War. The guides in period dress are phenomenal. Fascinating, and great fun too.

Margam Abbey & Stones Museum, Margam Park. Much overlooked in the headlong rush to neighbouring Margam Park, the Romanesque abbey and its accompanying stones museum are a terrific surprise. The abbey is cool and sombre, some of the old stones and carvings next door quite breathtaking.

Merthyr to Brecon Mountain Railway: The ever-popular Brecon Mountain Railway is a slight misnomer for one of Merthyr's favourite days out, on board steam trains along the lovely valley of the Taf Fechan and the Pontsticill reservoirs. Don't miss a pint and a bowl of cawl in the Red Cow inn at Pontsticill village".

Nantyglo Roundhouses: semi-derelict, but all the more atmospheric for that, these solid military-looking towers were built in 1816 by ironmaster Joseph Bailey, whose treatment of his workers was so poor that he rightly feared insurrection. These towers, with four-foot thick walls, iron plate doors and musket holes, were where he planned to hole up if it all kicked off.

Pontypool Museum & Park (Shell Grotto & Folly Tower). The often turbulent history of this eastern Valleys town includes the surprisingly delicate trade of japanning. Continuing the surprises, the adjacent parkland contains a folly and the quite bizarre shell grotto.

Pontypridd Museum: a fascinating romp through the history of the famous Valleys gateway town, including entertaining memories of two famous local sons, Sir Geraint Evans and Sir Tom Jones. The setting in a huge old chapel is an exhibit in itself.

Rhondda Heritage Park: The old Lewis Merthyr colliery gives visitors the chance to sample many of the sights, sounds and smells of the pit, but it is the thoughtful presentation of the social effects of mining that really stimulates, none more so than the stirring section about the women of the Valleys.

Rocking Stone and druidic circles, Pontypridd Common. As well as giving stunning views over Ponty and surroundings, the stones provide an atmospheric reminder of Dr William Price, arch-druid and flamboyant Victorian, who used this spot for his ceremonies. Just down the road, the two semi-circular houses are the gateposts to his planned druidic temple.

Ruperra Castle, near Machen: an unexpected delight, Ruperra is a medieval castle that was heavily Victorianized, and now lies in gaunt, ivy-clad ruin. Extensive outhouses and the remains of formal and kitchen gardens can also be made out: this was one massive estate. You can't get into the ruin, though a public footpath goes alongside and gives some great views and a good sense of the size of the estate.

South Wales Miners Museum, Afan Forest Park. No whistles and bells here; just sober, sometimes quite detailed and utterly fascinating exhibits about the story of coal in south Wales, and the men who mined it. Proud, moving and inspiring too.

Vaynor old and new churches, nr Merthyr: the 'new' Victorian church was built by the Crawshay ironmasters of Merthyr: famously, Robert Thompson Crawshay's massive, ten-ton grave in the churchyard includes the sombre inscription 'God Forgive Me'. Genuine remorse or a hollow gesture? A short walk away are the gloomy ruins of the medieval church deep in a wood.

Food and drink:

Blaenafon Cheddar Company: is there really any better cheese than a good Cheddar? I'd say not (sorry, Caerphilly!). They don't think so here either, and produce a selection of delicious cheddars, in a variety of flavours from hearty to delicate. Their goat's cheese is gorgeous too.

Brynffynon Hotel, Llanwonno. A real gem of a pub – great beer, good food and a cracking set of regulars, and all the better for its location, another one of the tiny ridge-top hamlets between the Valleys, in this case between the Cynon and Rhondda.

Bunch of Grapes, Pontypridd. Every town should have a pub like this: warm, cheerful and serving the kind of beer, cider and food that you'll never get from a supermarket. The food has a firm emphasis on local and seasonal produce, and it is always superb.

Carpanini's Café, Treorchy: the Italian cafes of the Valleys are legendary. Sadly, many have closed, but this is one of the finest of the survivors, run with the same love and flair by the grandchildren of the couple who first opened it in 1947. Open all day, and for take-aways through the evening, the food is wonderful and the service a delight.

Cwmcerrig Farm Shop and Grill, Cross Hands: how much do we hear these days about eating locally-sourced and seasonal produce? The Cwmcerrig makes sticking to the ideal easy, for this purpose-built farm shop is stuffed with local treats, none more so than the farm's own meat, including beef, lamb, chicken, turkey, geese and duck. A fine on-site café gives you chance to sample.

Penderyn Whisky Distillery. Welsh whisky was thought to be a bit of a joke, until it starting winning awards galore over its more established Scottish and Irish cousins. Penderyn is a wonderful drink, and the tours of the distillery show the love and care that is put into its creation. Iechyd da!

Sidoli's ice cream parlour, Ebbw Vale and Cresci's Café and ice cream parlour, Gwaun-Cae-Gurwen: many of the Valleys Italian cafes included home-made ice cream on their menus, and some have continued solely as ice cream parlours. These are two of the best, and for all their fancy ideas, I still don't think you can beat their creamy vanillas.

Wern Fawr Inn, Ystalyfera: it is quite hard to single out just a few pubs, but this one is a winner on all counts. A home brew pub, the superb ales are all sold under names to do with Buddy Holly, for you'll swiftly see that this place is a bit of a shrine to the old rocker. Who'd have thought you'd find that in the Swansea valley?

Walks and drives:

A4061 Bwlch pass from Rhondda to Cwm Ogwr or Cwm Afan (with an ice cream at the top!). During the Depression of the 1920s and 30s, one relief scheme was to build hairpin roads out of the hitherto dead-end Valleys, both to bring some work to the area and open the various valleys out. Ever since, this roller-coaster of a road out of the Rhondda has been a popular excursion, for views, fresh air and an ice cream at the top. The same family have been selling them there since the thirties.

Aberdulais Falls, Neath Valley: after admiring the sheer powerful beauty of the area's waterfalls, it's good to see them harnessed for action, as they once were up and down the valley. Here, the National Trust explain the umbilical connection between water power and industry and demonstrate its contemporary use for sustainable electricity generation. Worth a walk down to the canal basin below too.

Cwm Clydach nature reserve, Llanelly Hill, near Brynmawr: not to be confused with the identically-named reserve near Swansea, this is a hugely atmospheric limestone gorge, whose beech-clad sides descend to the rushing waters of the Clydach. Amongst the greenery, there is some spectacular industrial archaeology to poke around too, the highlight being the lovely old 1824 iron bridge and the neighbouring kilns. The new cycle path follows the impressive route of an old railway line.

Dare Valley Country Park: the prototype of turning the coal-black Valleys green, the Dare Valley country park was opened in the early 1970s and has thrived since. A good visitor centre, café and heritage exhibition give you a flavour of the place, but it's when you get out into the wide skies and lush slopes that you really begin to appreciate how well this place has been brought back from the brink.

Drive (or cycle/walk) across Mynydd y Gwair from Clydach to Ammanford.

One of the finest roads in south Wales, this is a magnificent stretch over a sombre moor. It feels miles from anywhere, but you can see the dirty coat-tails of Swansea just on the horizon. Wind farms are planned up here, so catch it while you can in all its bleak beauty.

Gelligaer Common: Capel Gwladys, Maen Cattwg and walks: wild ponies and sheep are the only real inhabitants high up on Gelligaer Common, making it an ideal walk for some windblown solitude. The remains of Capel Gwladys, although fifth century, are far from the oldest things here: there's a Roman road, a Bronze Age burial mound and the mysterious Maen Cattwg standing stone.

Gnoll Estate Country Park: Neath might not seem like the most obvious place to witness the phenomenon of the Picturesque, but the Gnoll, centred on a long-vanished mansion, is just that. The parkland was laid out to the fashionable Picturesque principles of the day, and included two dazzling water cascades which have now been restored.

Iron Mountain Trail, Blaenafon: the Bloreng is a mountain that's worked hard for its living: the pock-marks of mining and iron-making can be seen all over. This 12-mile trail goes along tracks, old tram roads and canals, and highlights some of the many unusual post-industrial features to be found in this unique landscape.

Melincourt waterfall, near Resolven. The Neath valley contains some stunning waterfalls, but this is the one that always seems most magical to me. The stately cascade hides at the bottom of an elfin little cwm, and is a world apart from all that you've just left behind.

Nye Bevan Trail, Tredegar. A terrifically interesting, and handsome, town in itself, a great way to see Tredegar is to do the walking tour based on some of the many places associated with local MP Aneurin (Nye) Bevan, the architect of the NHS. Neil Kinnock also came from here, and Michael Foot lived in the town for the many years that he was Bevan's replacement as Ebbw Vale MP.

Parc Penallta, Ystrad Mynach: there have been many new landscapes in the Valleys over recent years, as old mines have been filled in and greened. Perhaps the most spectacular is Parc Penallta, where a 200m long earth sculpture of a horse – Sultan the pit pony is his name – is the stunning centrepiece. Walks and wildlife ponds add to the appeal.

Sarn Helen, Banwen. On the cusp of the Valleys and the Brecon Beacons National Park, Banwen is a trim, proud little place, intersected by the great Roman highway that connected north and south Wales. It's a fine basis for some good walks, either north onto the wide slopes of Fforest Fawr or south into the woods of Hirfynydd, the 'long mountain'.

Walk up to Pen Pych from Blaenrhondda: more than perhaps anywhere, the Rhondda is the name associated with the Valleys, and this splendid walk takes you up to the very head of the Rhondda Fach at the hugely impressive 'table' mountain of Pen Pych.

Waterfalls walk, Pontneddfechan: the band of limestone between the coalfields of the Valleys and the sandstone of the Beacons is one of my favourite parts of Wales, especially for its many waterfalls. This wooded walk takes you past some of the best, all the way to everyone's favourite, Sgwd yr Eira, the 'fall of snow', that you can walk behind.

Events and activity:

Call of the Wild activities, Seven Sisters: there are a few outdoor activity specialist companies out there, but these are one of the best. They offer climbing, caving, biking (mountain or quad), gorge walking, canoeing, kayaking and more, all locally. It just shows how blessed the Valleys are, for they are one of the finest natural places to let off a bit of steam.

Mari Lwyd, Llangynwyd, nr Maesteg: the ancient Welsh new year custom of parading the skull of a horse around the parish to bring luck for the year ahead has been revived in many places. Here, it survives intact, and is enthusiastically pursued at pubs in the area, where the Mari's party try to gain access by singing, and those inside barter back, also in song. As ever, it's a good excuse for a few beers!

Mountain Biking in Afan Forest Park or Cwmcarn Forest. The Valleys' topography is ideal for the growth sport of mountain biking, and two of the finest courses anywhere can be found either side of the area. Prepare to get very muddy indeed!

Nos Galan race, Mountain Ash: an annual New Year's Eve event inspired by the legendary Guto Nyth Bran (buried at Llanwonno, see above), who, in 1737, ran a twelve mile race in 53 minutes, before dying from an over-hearty slap on the back in congratulation. The commemorative race, held over 5km around Mountain Ash, has hundreds of participants and, every year, an athletic superstar is revealed as the mystery guest runner.

Taff Trail: best known as the Cardiff to Brecon bike track, most of which runs along the route of old railways and canal towpaths, any section of the Taff Trail makes for a good walk as well. My favourite section is from Merthyr north to Pontsticill Reservoir, especially for the crossings of Pontsarn and Cefn Coed viaducts.

The Big Cheese, Caerphilly: this annual summer festival, right in the middle of town, is a tremendous mix of old-fashioned fair, modern music festy and a welcome touch of local eccentricity, in the shape of the Big Cheese Race. Now well into its second decade, the Big Cheese has a large, loyal and growing following.

About The Valleys – Heart and Soul campaign:

The Valleys – Heart and Soul of Wales is a three year campaign led by partnership organisations from the Western Valleys, Heads of the Valleys and The Valleys Partnership. The aim is to change perceptions of The Valleys, attract more tourists and bring long-term economic benefits to the area. The area has undergone major transformation with a total investment of £42 million and is now a flourishing tourism destination waiting to be explored.

www.thevalleys.co.uk