

Leaping dolphins, like these bottlenoses in Cardigan Bay, might be showing excitement or just doing it for the view.



NATURE'S GREAT EVENTS BOTTLENOSE DOLPHINS, CARDIGAN BAY



Common dolphins are usually encountered further out to sea than bottlenoses.



Sightings of the extraordinary sunfish are rare, but do occur in Cardigan Bay.

## WHERE ELSE TO GO



**1 MORAY FIRTH**  
The UK's best-known group of bottlenose dolphins lives in the Moray Firth on the east coast of Scotland. Accredited boat operators are listed by the Dolphin Space Programme, but you can also watch the dolphins from land – Chanonry Point is one of the best spots. ☎ 07921 106144; [www.dolphinspace.org](http://www.dolphinspace.org)

**2 HEBRIDES**  
Up to 40 bottlenoses live in the Inner Hebrides, around Mull, Iona, Tiree and Coll, and another group of 12 is regularly seen in the Sound of Barra in the Outer Hebrides. But these groups are less predictable than the others in this article. Hebridean Whale and Dolphin Trust ☎ 01688 302620; [www.whaledolphintrust.co.uk](http://www.whaledolphintrust.co.uk)

**3 SHANNON ESTUARY**  
The Shannon Estuary is home to the only known resident bottlenose dolphins in Ireland. Trips are run by Dolphinwatch. For conservation information, contact the Shannon Dolphin and Wildlife Foundation. Dolphinwatch ☎ 00 353 65 905 8156; [www.dolphinwatch.ie](http://www.dolphinwatch.ie) Shannon Dolphin and Wildlife Foundation ☎ 00 353 65 905 2326; [www.shannondolphins.ie](http://www.shannondolphins.ie)

## Breach for the skies

### AT A GLANCE

- WHAT?**  
» One of the UK's biggest resident groups of bottlenose dolphins. Spectacular leaping behaviour, though not guaranteed, is a big draw.
- WHERE?**  
» Dolphin cruises leave from New Quay in Cardigan Bay.
- WHEN?**  
» Sightings peak between April and September.
- ALSO LOOK FOR**  
» Common dolphins, grey seals, choughs on the cliffs and the weird and wonderful sunfish.

Watch out for the chough's amazing aerobatics.

The explosive leaping and breaching of one of the world's most playful animals enchants us all – yet few realise that you can see it right here in Britain. **Louise Tickle** sails from New Quay to catch the daily dolphin show.

**IT WAS GOING** to be a blazing hot day for a boat trip, I could just tell. I had arrived in New Quay just after 9am and sunshine was already bouncing off the waves in the harbour. As the tourist shops and cafés started opening up for a busy summer's day of selling buckets, spades and ice cream, I headed out along the old sea wall, screwing up my eyes against the glare.

At the end of the wall, I joined a few other souls who were staring intently through their binoculars, their eyes sweeping left to right and back again across the water, hoping

for a glimpse of a dorsal fin breaking the surface. I knew there was a chance of a sighting here – dolphins often swim in to play in the warm shallows of New Quay bay – but a four-hour trip out to sea offered much shorter odds.

The research boat that I was joining – from Cardigan Bay Marine Wildlife Centre – goes out daily to monitor groups of bottlenose dolphins as they move around the bay to feed and breed. So, come 10 o'clock, greasy with suncream and grinning in anticipation, I hopped aboard.

An hour later, only the odd grey seal had popped out of the water to take a peek at us. All very nice, but a seal is not a dolphin, and – though it seems mean to say so – seals are ten a penny along this coast.

Meanwhile, the heat and the hypnotic drone of the engine were sending me into a doze. Suddenly I was startled by shouts suggesting that something more exciting than a gannet had just turned up.

The possibility that dolphins were around prompted a mass migration of all the day's punters to one side of the boat and, feeling

slightly dazed, my initial thought was that I might have missed the only sighting of the day. But there was never any danger of that. It turned out to be a pod of more than 20 bottlenose dolphins.

For nearly half an hour we watched a breathtaking display of muscular power at play as a

handful of dolphins – joined by more and still more – chased our boat, swimming alongside or crisscrossing right underneath us.

Then they were jumping clear out of the water in twos and threes – beautiful arcing leaps during which they flipped their gleaming tummies skyward before diving

sleekly back and disappearing below the waves.

At up to 4m long, adult bottlenose dolphins are big creatures. At times they were so close – just metres away – that the enormous strength required for these silvery torpedoes to breach with such grace was very evident. The skipper later described the encounter as one of the best they'd had all year.

I've been to New Quay since, taken other boat trips and even seen a pod of outrageously cute common dolphins further out in the bay. But nothing has ever quite matched up to my soaring bottlenoses. I'll keep going, though. It's reckoned that between 100 and 200 of them are out there – and as long as they are, I'll be back.

A former press officer for RSPB Cymru, **Louise Tickle** returns to Wales and its beautiful coastline whenever she can.

### NOW YOU DO IT

- SEEING WILDLIFE**  
» The best place to take your dolphin cruise from is New Quay.  
» About 200 bottlenose dolphins use Cardigan Bay during the summer, with numbers steadily increasing up until September.  
» There are two main operators offering trips from New Quay – Cardigan Bay Marine Wildlife Centre ☎ 01545 560032; [www.cbmwcc.org](http://www.cbmwcc.org) and New Quay Boat Trips ☎ 01545 560800; [www.newquayboattrips.co.uk](http://www.newquayboattrips.co.uk)
- WHERE TO STAY**  
» Nantgwynfaen Organic Farm is about 20 minutes outside New



Quay. ☎ 01239 851914; [www.organicfarmwales.co.uk](http://www.organicfarmwales.co.uk)  
» For a luxury option, try Ty Mawr Mansion, Cilcennin, near Aberaeron. ☎ 01570 470033; [www.tymawrmansion.co.uk](http://www.tymawrmansion.co.uk)

Bottlenose & common dolphins: Janet Baxter; sunfish: Chris Gomersall



Watch bottlenose dolphins from dry land at Chanonry Point.

Terry Whitehead/Alamy