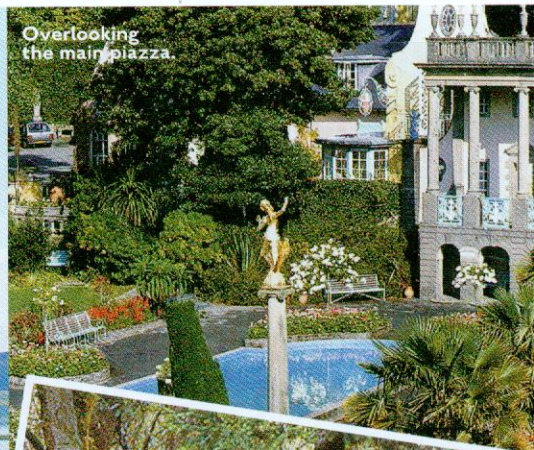
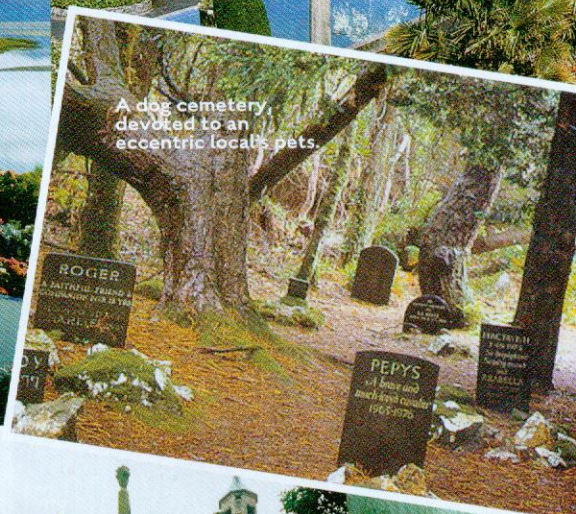




The village of Portmeirion was built on wilderness.



Overlooking the main piazza.



A dog cemetery devoted to an eccentric local's pets.

PASTEL PARADISE. Balmy warmth on the Welsh coast? You better believe it, even if the bright and bold architecture of Portmeirion seems straight from a childhood dream.

Noel Coward, George Bernard Shaw and HG Wells were all lovers of Portmeirion, yet when they visited, it wasn't even finished. It's not hard to fall in love with this fantasy village on Wales' north coast, near the famed, fabulous Snowdonia national park. It was the passionate life's work of an architect who had the vision — and the means — to follow a dream. He wanted to show it is possible to build a village that harmonised with the natural landscape — after all, beauty, he said, is "that strange necessity". So after finding the perfect, sheltered shoreline in 1925, Clough Williams-Ellis set about building his lifesized dream diorama.

It was a big vision, in a delicate, whimsical kind of way. Grand enough to attract around 250,000 visitors a year (it's only four hours from London), who come to eat gelatos and experience this precious, pastel paradise nestled in its mild, Gulfstream-warmed microclimate. But it's the nutty little details everywhere that make it even more interesting. Slip into one little loggia overlooking the main piazza, and waiting for you is a serene Buddha which appeared in the Ingrid Bergman film, *The Inn of the Sixth Happiness* (part of the movie was filmed nearby).

Along with the Chinese pagoda in the nearby woods, there are other Asian elements, somehow fitting in a backdrop of domes, Baroque shopfronts, Georgian gables and English-country-garden detail. Overlooking the piazza's fountain, gilded Burmese dancing figures pose atop soaring 18th-century Ionic columns. Just above, there are more of those columns within a Palladian pavilion — Williams-Ellis had rescued them from a castle in Cheshire. (Well, he'd actually lost them for a few years after he bought them, before finding a garden had grown over them.) The pavilion shows how the architect could play with optical effects — from a distance, its arches look grand enough to accommodate piggybacking basketballers; try and walk beneath them and if you're tall, you may need to duck. Williams-Ellis toyed with illusion both to keep things fitting within his landscape...and just for fun. Like the head peering through a trompe l'oeil window, or the ketch that appears to be moored by the hotel but is in fact well and truly embedded into the quay. "The purpose of the universe is to play," said Williams-Ellis. "And artists know that." Not that the man was entirely fooling about. When architect Frank Lloyd Wright



A Gothic-style pavilion sits at the other end of the piazza.

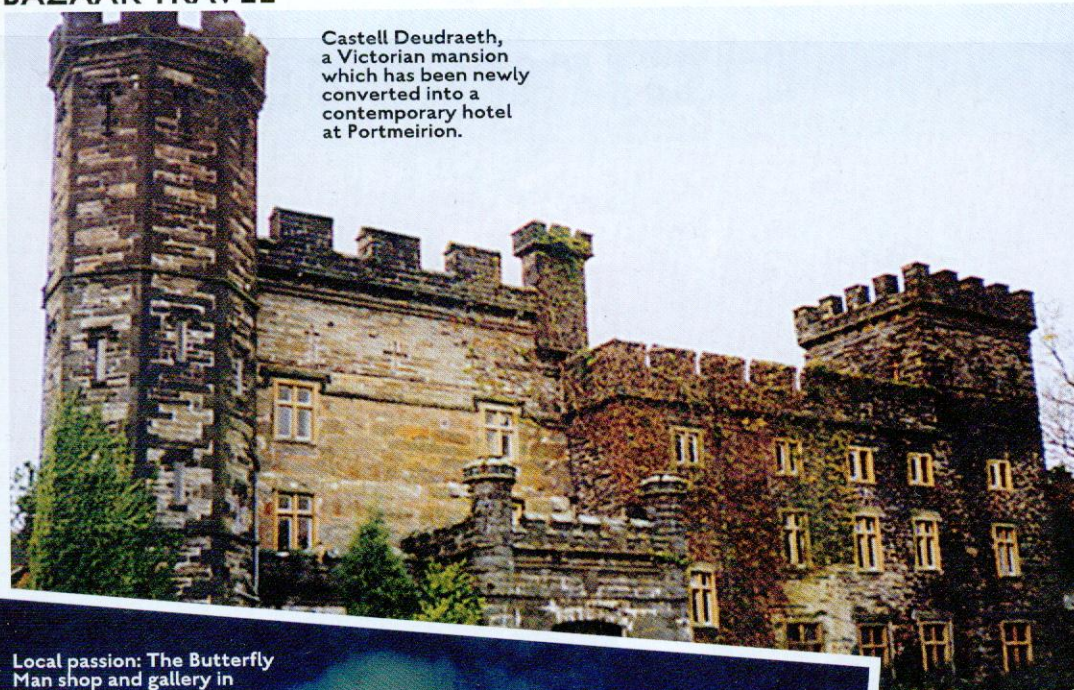
A 19th-century sculpture of Hercules commemorates some of Portmeirion's favourite summers.

visited the village in 1956, he turned to Williams-Ellis's wife, Amabel, and declared, "Why, I do believe you married an architect."

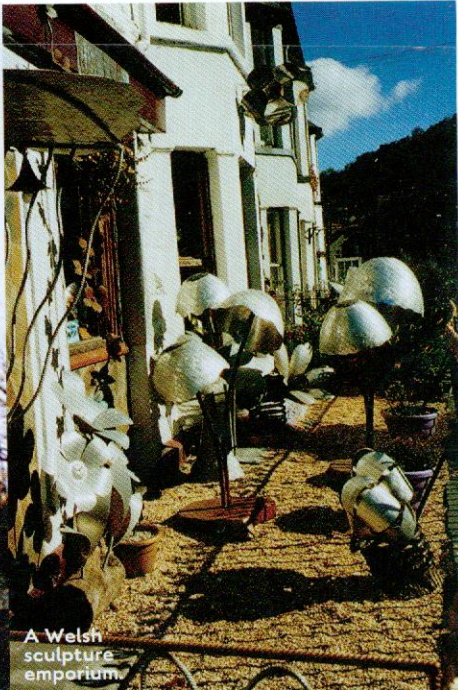
If you really want to be seduced, make sure you're at Portmeirion after hours, when the Palladian visitors' tollbooths have closed. Stay here, and not just for the sumptuous themed suites of its shorefront hotel — French provincial, 18th-century Welsh, Chinese — or because Noel Coward wrote the play *Blythe Spirit* in one of the village's guesthouses. You stay here for the serious magic of having Portmeirion more or less to yourself. In the late afternoon, when the sun's setting on the glassy, glacial estuary below, it's quiet enough to hear the trickling fountain up in the piazza. You wander up there to this meringue-hued, grand ghost town, watched by birds in the oak trees, and the stonier gaze of lions, eagles, mermaids and robed philosophers, and behold the magic.

And again, in those little details, you find the sense of serious joy that Williams-Ellis clearly wanted to pass on. Read the plaques on the side

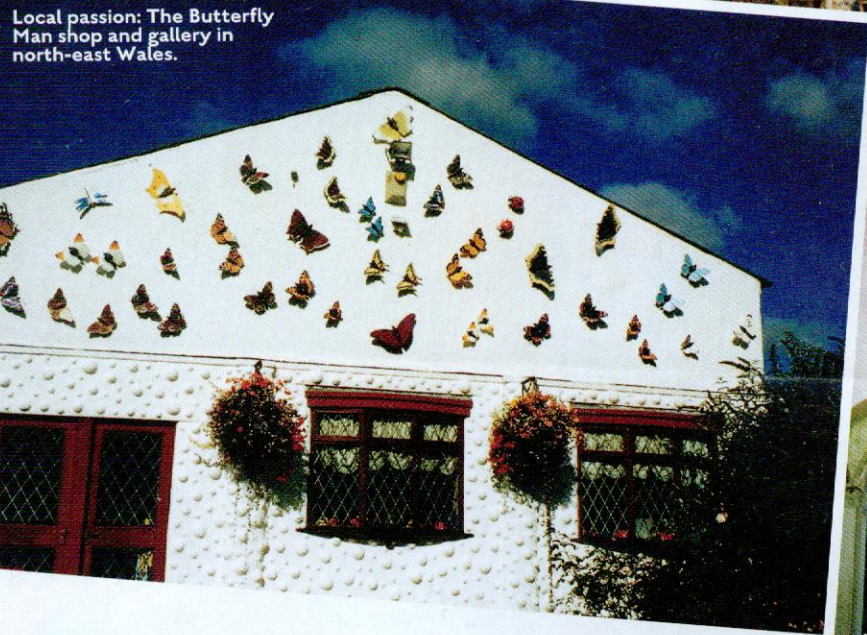
BY SALLY RAWLINGS



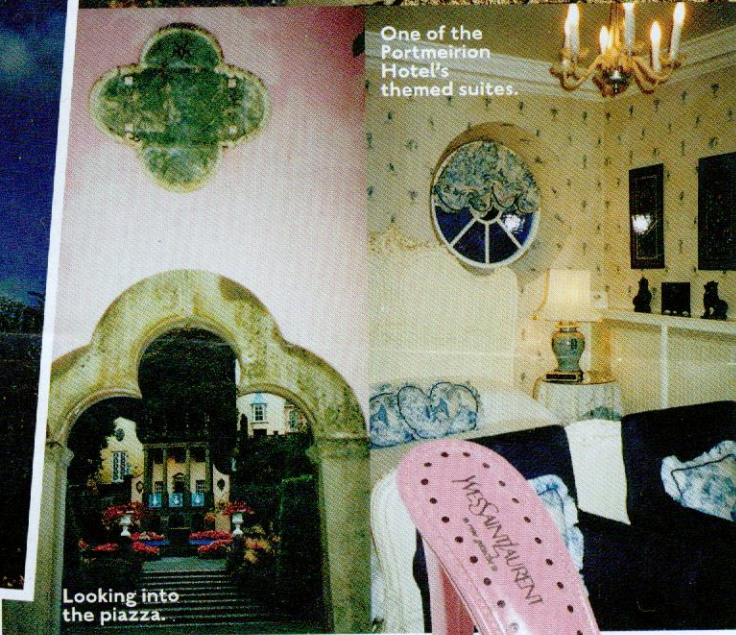
Castell Deudraeth, a Victorian mansion which has been newly converted into a contemporary hotel at Portmeirion.



A Welsh sculpture emporium.



Local passion: The Butterfly Man shop and gallery in north-east Wales.



One of the Portmeirion Hotel's themed suites.

Looking into the piazza.

of a suitably grand 19th-century statue of Hercules (Williams-Ellis apparently drove it back from Aberdeen in a pick-up truck). Why is it there? Easy. The architect liked his summer of 1959 so much, he figured it deserved its own statue. Inscribed on the plaques on the mossy stone: "To the summer of 1959, in honour of its splendour". And below that, afterthoughts: "1971 Highly Commended", "1975 excelled even 1959".

It's easy enjoyment, and like everything here, just a little offbeat. Like the nearby dogs' cemetery ("Roger: a beautiful friend and companion for 15 years") created by a local who preferred canines to humans and apparently read sermons to her pack in her mansion. Or a little further away, the apparent local obsession with decorative mushrooms and butterflies — painted, brushed stainless steel, tiny, gigantic — of a couple of local stores. Or the invitation to the world to flipper through a peat trench at the World Bog Snorkelling Championships at Llandwrtyd Wells. Maybe it all goes back to the language's consonant overload; whatever it is, Wales seems to offer the environment for twisted British whimsy to warp just a little more.

The result at Portmeirion is a blend of unharnessed beauty and undeniable fun. As Williams-Ellis sums it up: "I'd rather be just a little bit vulgar than a bore."

TRAVEL NOTES

Portmeirion is two hours' drive from Manchester or Birmingham, which can be accessed within the British Airways network. For bookings, call 1300 767 177 or go to www.britishairways.com.au. For accommodation at Portmeirion, go to www.portmeirion-village.com. For more information on exploring Britain, go to www.visitbritain.com.au.

PORTMEIRION: WHAT TO PACK

THE PANTS
Wayne by Wayne
Cooper pants, \$176.

THE TOP
Sportsraft
top, \$59.95.

THE SHOE
Tom Ford for Yves
Saint Laurent Rive
Gauche shoes, \$715.

THE DRESS
Boss Hugo
Boss dress,
\$750.

THE BAG
Escada bag, \$820.

SALE: PAUL LINDSAY; SHIRT: BAILEY; STYLED BY KATE PAYNE. SEE BUYLINES FOR DETAILS AND STOCKISTS.