

The Jersey War Tunnels: A Glimpse into Life During WWII

by Cheryl Pendry, PassPorter Featured Columnist

There are lots of different ways to spend your vacation time, but learning about life in an occupied country has to be one of the more unusual.

□ For us as Brits, and probably for many other nationalities as well, we're lucky enough not to have experienced life during a wartime occupation. Although any attempt to invade mainland Britain were successfully repelled during the war, ensuring freedom, unlike the rest of Europe, the same can't be said for the Channel Islands, just off the French coast. Today, the [Jersey](#) War Tunnels, remembers those five years, and gives visitors an idea of life during that time.

As you approach the tunnels, the first thing you see are quotes from different people during the war, succinctly describing what happened. It starts with the announcement that the Channel Islands will not be defended against external invasion by sea or air and finishes with the news that "our dear Channel Islands are free again." The words are very emotive, and it's a good way to start your tour of the Jersey War Tunnels, as what you see during your time there is emotive.

□ The War Tunnels are based in HO8 or Hohlgangsanlage 8, which was a German underground hospital created during the war. It may sound like an obvious thing to say, but as they're underground tunnels, they can be chilly to visit. We were there in early November and we were certainly glad of all the layers we were wearing. Signs we saw seemed to suggest that they are pretty much a constant temperature whenever they're open, so I imagine they're probably a relief from hotter days in the height of the summer.

□ The tunnels were dug out by forced labour, which was brought to the island from literally around the world. One display highlighted where they came from, and included Africa, Russia, Poland and France. Although you take a self-guided tour, with exhibits throughout the tunnels, every so often, you catch glimpses of unfinished tunnels. There's nothing more eerie and I was fascinated by what we saw and just listening to the sound of the odd drop of water every now and again. Had it not been for other visitors wandering past, you could easily transport yourself to the days when these tunnels were first dug out.

When you enter, you start with life in Jersey in the 1930s, making you

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realise just how carefree life was on the island in those days. It probably made what happened after 1940 even more of a shock for the islanders. The first decision they faced was whether they should stay in their homes or evacuate, as the UK made the offer to take as many people as they could. It was a stark choice, as whichever one you opted for, there were unpleasant consequences, as we learnt about the conditions on the ships taking people to the Island of Great Britain and what awaited for those who remained.

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□ German forces occupied Jersey on July 1, 1940. Although things were relaxed enough for the first few months, steadily life deteriorated, as more and more laws were passed, impinging on everyday freedoms we all take for granted. Some were just unbelievable and had no rhyme or reason, including not being allowed to keep more than one dog in your house! As the number of laws grew, so did the number of islanders who were prepared to tell on their neighbours who were breaking those laws. This section of the exhibit was harrowing, particularly as some of the letters, all sent anonymously, to the German occupying forces, came from children.

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□ Despite this, resistance continued, and the ways in which the islanders managed to resist were just as staggering. From tiny letters on each corner of a stamp, insulting Hitler, to painting symbols in plain sight, the resourcefulness was just amazing. This section pulled no punches, and made it very clear about exactly what happened if those resisting were caught, which was very sobering.

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□ Another sobering section was the persecution that Jewish people on Jersey suffered, and the living conditions for all islanders. Obviously, food and drink were in short supply, but so were basic household provision, yet the resource that was shown to get around these issues was quite something! They certainly knew exactly how to recycle things, finding creative uses for old tins as kettles and saucepans and creating coffee from roasted, blackened parsnips or ground acorns.

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□ Once the German occupation of the Channel Islands began, they were determined that it would remain theirs, and they certainly put some serious resources into achieving that. Jersey was part of what the Germans termed the Atlantic Wall, running all across the coast of northern Europe and Scandinavia, but 10% of all the materials used in those areas went into Jersey.

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□ Despite all of this, the writing was on the wall for the occupation from the time of the D-Day landings in nearby Normandy in France, although the end didn't come as soon as the islanders hoped. While France was gradually liberated from Nazi control, Jersey was left alone, partially

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because of those fortifications that had been built. Increasingly, the islands became cut off, and food supplies diminished, with the island slowing starving to death.

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□The turning point was the arrival of the Red Cross ship, the SS Vega, which delivered desperately needed supplies to Jersey in December 1944. Everything on board went to the islanders and not the occupying forces, leaving the native population with better supplies than the German army. As a result, military morale plummeted, as soldiers continued to starve. Despite this, they clung on to the Channel Islands, and they were only finally liberated on 7 May 1945, on Victory in Europe Day, when the war in Europe concluded.

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□It's a fascinating story, and the fact that it's told in tunnels only adds more fascination. Each room had a different theme to it, with various exhibits, telling the story of that theme. It didn't necessarily have the interactive displays that you often find in visitor attractions today, but then again, it didn't need it. A lot of the storytelling was greatly helped by its setting.

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□Although the tunnels are the main part of the attraction, there are other areas to visit here. We were very impressed with the cafe, which continues the Second World War theme. When you get your tickets, you're given an identification card, and along the walls of the cafe are details of various people from Jersey, who lived under the occupation. Your challenge is to find the person named in your identification card and discover what happened to them. Although it took some hunting, we found both our people in the end, and their stories were humbling to read, with one shipped off to the concentration camps, and the other living a long and happy life.

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□The Jersey War Tunnels are open every day from the start of March until the end of November. For more information, visit www.jerseywartunnels.com

About The Author: Cheryl and husband Mark live in England and love to travel, particularly to America. They are in the process of visiting every Disney theme park around the world, having already been to Disneyland Resort Paris, Hong Kong Disneyland and both American Disney resorts. They are now planning for their trip to Japan in the spring to visit the Tokyo Disney Resort. [Click here to view more of Cheryl's articles!](#)

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