

**CORNWALL: The British Riviera***Sandy Welches MGv '05*

Calla Lilies bursting from the ground in hot dry locations. Enormous succulents gracing the side of a stone cliff. Palm trees everywhere. Is this England? The Cornish coast in late May surprises and delights you with its tropical climate and pristine waters. On its east side is the English Channel and on its west, the Atlantic.

My husband and I spent 5 days in the county of Cornwall this May and traveled around the shire with a British guide born and raised there. Penzance, a very old town rich in history, was home base. For you PBS fans, Cornwall is also the filming location of both *Doc Martin* and *Poldark*. Tin, copper and silver mining gave it a critical role in Britain's Industrial Revolution.

Once the domain of pirates, wreckers and smugglers and now beloved by the thousands of holidaymakers, the Cornish coastline is dramatic and diverse. It is wrapped around an ancient peninsula for almost 300 miles. You'll find high rugged cliffs that plunge into the Atlantic and long sandy beaches with some of the best surf on the British Isles and gorgeous sheltered bays and coves.

Of all the ports and coves we visited, our favorites were St. Michael's Mount near Penzance and the Minack Theatre on Porthcurno, near Penzance. They were also a horticulturalist's heaven. I'll describe **The Minack Theater** in this issue and *St. Michael's Mount* in our September/October issue.

**The Minack Theatre.**

This spectacular amphitheater-style theatre was planned, built and financed by one extraordinary woman, Rowena Cade. Since the first performance in 1932, where the stage was a simple grass terrace and lighting was provided by batteries, car headlights and the feeble power brought down from Minack House, the theatre has evolved into the fully equipped, internationally famous theatre that you see today. Minack means "rocky place" in the Cornish language.

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The theatre clings perilously to a granite cliff, a stone's throw from Land's End and its stage juts right into the sea. Its creator, Rowena Cade, built a house above the cliff in 1929, when she joined a local theatre group in producing *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in a nearby meadow. She offered the garden of her house for their next production, *The Tempest*, because it was by the sea. She and her gardener, Billy Rawlings, made a terrace and rough seating, hauling down materials from the

house or up the winding path from the seafront below.

*The Tempest*, performed in 1932, was a great success, and was even mentioned in the *London Times*. Miss Cade resolved to improve the theatre, working over the course of the winter months, with Mr. Rawlings, every single year through her long life. She passed on March 26, 1983, at the age of 89.

Over the decades, The Minack became a heralded venue for some of England's finest actors and directors. It currently is used from Easter to September for a full summer season of 20 plays, produced by companies from both the UK and visiting

companies from the United States. In 2012, some 80,000 people attended productions, and more than 100,000 annually pay an entrance fee to look around the site.



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### The Gardens

While Rowena Cade landscaped the cliffs around the theatre, today's gardens are a result of the vision and hard work of local gardeners Niall and Jill Milligan.

The plants reflect the nature of the site, enduring "salt laden gales" and many inches of winter rain often followed by hot dry summers. The theatre itself, sheltered from the worst of the western winds, allows for the growing of tender plants from all over the globe, including:

**Silver Trees and Bird of Paradise from South Africa—Aeoniums from the Canary Islands  
Geraniums from Madeira—Agaves from Mexico—Poppies from California**



Photographs by Sandy Welches





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