

On Northern Shores

Located on the far edge of Germany, Sylt Island reveals the unparalleled island biodiversity of the North Sea.

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The Wadden National Park is an ideal destination for long beach walks whilst bird and sealife watching and understanding island biodiversity

Herds of grazing sheep speckle the island. Rustic, thatch-roofed cottages and miles of white sandy beaches dotted with lighthouses – two to be precise – characterise the landscape. The North Sea glistening under the sun-studded, bright, blue sky, as far as your eyes can see, forms the backdrop and amplifies the island's beauty. On a windy day – a typical day on the island – seagrass dances to the tune of wind and sand dunes submerge your feet as you wade through it to reach the Wadden Sea. If you're lucky, after a brief shower, a rainbow might even give you company.

Sylt, pronounced as Zult, is the 4th largest German island spanning 38 km in length and 13 km wide. It is also the largest German island in the North Sea and only 400 years old at that.

Sylt Island is often referred to as the island for the rich and famous as it attracts many affluent and famous visitors. Considered the queen of the North Sea, Sylt certainly radiates an air of affluence. The island boasts of exotic cottages thatched with straw and water reed, with endless meadows for a courtyard, and beaches for private pools. However, its lush island biodiversity is what makes Sylt extremely enticing.

I was lucky to meet Wiebke Peschau, a harbour porpoise researcher, while I was vacationing without an agenda. We decided to go mudflat hiking during the low tide, and marched through the ubiquitous Rosa Rugosa shrubs (also called Sylt Rose) to get to the Wadden Sea National Park – a World Heritage site.

“The shrubs are originally from Siberia and allegedly brought by Hitler's troops during World War II to hide explosives,” explained Wiebke. “They adapted well to the new conditions, grew rapidly and spread widely as you can see.” she continued. “Unfortunately, they are a threat to local endangered species such as heaths,” she remarked as I admired the soothing pink blossoms decorating our path.

As we reach the Wadden Sea, the first thing I notice is the dense seagrass buried in the sand dunes, forming a protective wall lining the sea. I learn that the

seagrass and the dunes play a vital role in maintaining the island ecology by soaking the water during high tide and keeping it from reaching land. Although the combination of grass and sand sounds fragile to stop a sea, I realise its potential as I try to climb the dunes. It feels no different than hiking up a steep mountain.

From a distance the shore appears very dry. On close observation, I discover that it is a hive of activity and teeming with life. The national park is a paradise for birdwatchers. It is the breeding and resting ground for many water and coastal birds that include Black-headed Gull, Arctic Tern, Pied Avocet, Common Redshank, Common Gull, Oystercatcher, Northern Lapwing, Common Shelduck and Tufted Duck.

During the migration, the island serves as a resting ground for thousands of Brent Geese and Shelducks, Eurasian Wigeons, and Common Eiders, as well as Bar-tailed Godwits, Red Knots, Dunlins and Eurasian Golden Plovers. Less common visitors include Ringed Plover, Common Snipe, and Ruff among others.

As we continue our walk on the soppy shore, discussing porpoise and whale watching, wattuwrms (sandworms) wriggle before our feet. I find the worms funnily curious. They keep themselves busy eating sand and excreting at the same time – unaware that they are laying their own death-trap since the trails of excretion effortlessly attract birds. Given the uncanny similarity between the worm and its excretion, many mistake the excretion for the worm itself. We even notice a few gulls tracking their way to feed in the distance.

Bright green seaweed and sparkling, white live mussels (shell) break the monotony of the monochromatic shore. Amidst the wattuwrms' excretion, crabs scurry watchfully and sometimes mount a heap of excretion as if to get a better view of predators on the shore. It is their activity that makes the shore come alive.

We occasionally stumble upon dead, translucent, blue jellyfishes. I pick one of them to feel the texture. It is soft, formless and slips out from the gaps of my fingers and it dawns on me why they are called

A bike ride from Westerland to Ellenbogen surrounded by lush green meadows, grazing sheep, immense white sandy beaches and a lighthouse could easily become the highlight of the trip to Sylt



The activity of scurrying crabs keeps the shore lively



A clutch of hatched snail eggs ornaments the banks



Rosa Rugosa shrubs with its red blossoms add a unique character to the island



Dead blue jellyfish, a common sight across the shore



Sandworms (Wuttwurm in German) feed many birds that come from faraway lands to rest and breed at the Wadden Sea National Park



Thatched roof cottages, sea in the backdrop, lush green meadows, a typical landscape of Sylt Island

jellyfish. We also come across hatched snail eggs lying scattered across the shore.

If a dry shore can offer such variety of life, what will life under the sea be like? I start pondering this and shiver thinking of the cold water. The sea is certainly not ideal for swimming.

Walking for a few hours on the shore feels akin to scuba diving for several hours. Even the life I discover on the shores of Sylt Island, left behind by the high tide, transports me briefly to the underwater world.

THINGS TO KNOW

To learn more about life in the North Sea it is ideal to visit Sylt aquarium in Westerland. Around 1,000 marine species of the North Sea, including sea wolves, dogfish, and octopus among others, are displayed in 25 tanks.

For adventure seekers, Sylt also offers activities such as bike rides from Kampen to Ellenbogen – an 18 km trail that involves watching grazing sheep over scenic, lush green meadows on one side and kite surfers in the gushing sea on the other. Landscape photographers, lighthouse lovers and kite surfers will love Ellenbogen, which also offers a distant peak into the Danish Island of Rømø, about 3km from Sylt.

The best time to visit Sylt Island is around May when it starts to get warmer. The only train station is in Westerland. Hamburg and Lübeck are the closest international airports. Despite its reputation for being an island for the rich, Sylt has reasonably priced hotels, hostels, shops, and restaurants.

More information about the island, accommodation, transportation, food and other activities can be found at www.en.sylt.de.



Spotting seaweed in delightful shapes and shades on the shore is quite fascinating



Seaweed surrounded by Sandworm excretion