

I was sceptical when a friend told me that Cardiff was a great place for children. I'd never thought of it in that way but I'm always ready to be convinced. Which is why I found myself at Cardiff Central station, with seven-year-old Arthur to investigate the "child-friendly" city.

Arthur's an active child, so after the long train journey from London, the Taff Valley Quad Bike Centre seemed a good idea.

High on the hillside with wide, dramatic views over the city, it's well run, but is also part of a family farm, so there's lots of space to charge around. It was marvellous to see how deftly the sheep managed to dodge the roaring quad bikes, while Lucy the sheepdog rushed about, convinced she was rounding up and herding noisy vehicles. Arthur adored it.

Hopkin Smith, the owner, began with a clear, child-friendly briefing, then started Arthur on his driving career on the end of a long lead-rope.

Arthur learned fast and was soon chugging around the rough course on his bike, in a macho outfit with breastplate and helmet, singing his heart out. Although it was a long and challenging session, he didn't want to take a rest, let alone leave.

"I love everything about that," he said, as we finally headed back to the city centre.

Our hotel, the Parc Thistle, adjoined the main pedestrianised shopping area. It was very comfortable, but Arthur couldn't wait to go to nearby St David's Mall because he knew that this mall contains one of the UK's few Lego stores.

I'd rather have explored the Victorian arcades and funky little shops, but since we were being child-friendly, I took a book as he played on the latest Lego computer games, and spent six months of his savings on a Mandalorian Starfighter.

Castle

Next morning, blue skies were dotted picturesquely with clouds.

Cardiff Bay, the city's once rundown dockland area, was a surprise. The bay has been enclosed into a huge lake, dotted with sailing boats, surrounded by shops and cafés, and was full of people having a good time.

We walked around the bay, spotting artworks commemorating Cardiff's kaleidoscopic past – Scott's departure for the Antarctic, local boy Ivor Novello, merchant seamen killed in the war, and even an evolution timeline along the waterfront. But for Arthur, the big excitement was its latest attraction, the Doctor Who Experience.

Previewed at Olympia last year, this interactive adventure features a ride on the Tardis and a 3-D film and is just across the water from the BBC studios where many of the TV episodes were made.

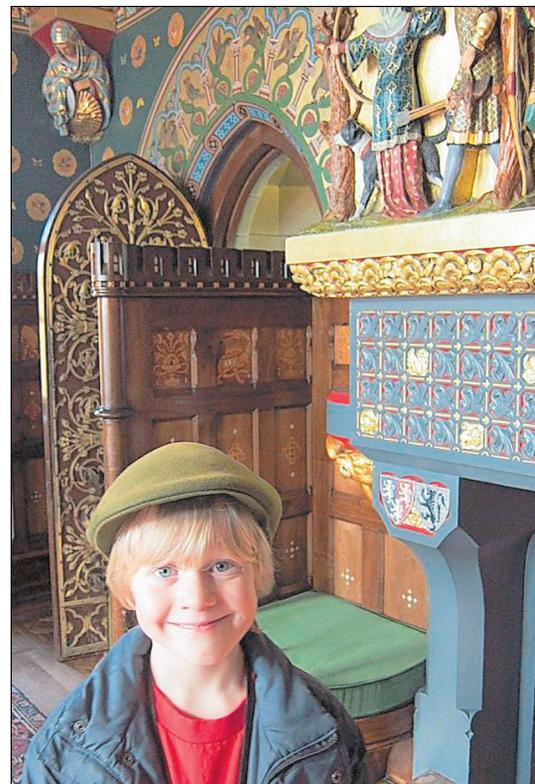
It's up to the standard of a Disney ride, but afterwards, Arthur was just as happy in the well equipped playground nearby, while I investigated a little white chapel by the lake.

Author Roald Dahl was christened in this quaint clapboard



From quad bikes to Doctor Who

Child-friendly Cardiff has all the ingredients you need to keep active youngsters content



■ **Clockwise from top:** Arthur at the Taff Valley Quad Bike Centre; strange creatures on the wall at Cardiff Castle and Arthur on his visit to the castle

Pictures: Jenny Woolf

place, originally a religious mission for Scandinavian seafarers. Now it's an art gallery with a café and we dined on a mixture of home-cooked Welsh and Norwegian dishes.

It was the nearby children's museum, Techniquet, which thrilled and captivated Arthur most.

Bright, light and welcoming,

Techniquet offers marvellous insights into the physical world.

You can test your sense of balance, thermal-image your body, see how leaf-cutter ants live, explore spooky optical illusions, understand magic tricks, beat your own reaction speeds or just play with water all afternoon.

Arthur found plenty of friends there and loved Techniquet so

much that he refused to leave until the staff were turning out the lights.

On our final day, we spent the morning at the well-equipped Boulders climbing centre, where vast climbing walls dwarfed us both.

Then, it was a toss-up between Cardiff Sports Village's new leisure pool or Cardiff Castle, renovated in the late 19th century by the famous Victorian architect William Burges.

Arthur chose Cardiff Castle, perhaps for the eye-catching stone animals carved upon its walls.

Inside, we found a trebuchet, designed to hurl huge boulders at enemy strongholds, green lawns with peacocks, far-reaching views from the top of the keep and a very good shop with toy castles and knights in armour.

But the main castle's claim to fame is its decor – the gilding, stained glass, tile work, coffering,

mirrors and medieval murals of Burges's flamboyant interior.

Arthur was captivated. He'd never seen a house with illustrated walls before.

Finally, it was time for the two-and-a-half hour trip back to London.

We'd have happily stayed for longer and I marvelled at how the drab, post-industrial Cardiff I remembered had somehow become so much fun. Why hadn't anyone told me before?

Still, I know now. And so does Arthur.

FACTFILE

■ First Great Western advance single rail fares from Paddington to Cardiff from £11.50. For best offers, buy tickets in advance at www.firstgreatwestern.co.uk.

■ Websites: whycardiff.com/ and www.visitcardiff.com/.