

WILD swimming *Walks*

Dartmoor and South Devon
28 lake, river and
beach days out

Sophie Pierce
Matt Newbury



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WILD SWIMMING WALKS

Leads you on 28 adventures into the beautiful scenery and wild swimming paradise of Dartmoor and South Devon. Discover wooded river pools and tumbling waterfalls, secret coves and amazing sea caves, safe in the company of Devon's two most intrepid and fun-loving explorers.

All the walking routes include places to swim and ideas for pubs and refreshments along the route.



**WILD
THINGS**
PUBLISHING





Sophie Pierce lives on the edge of Dartmoor and started the South Devon Wild Swimming Club after getting caught in a rip-current during a New Year's Day dip. She has worked as a reporter for the BBC for 20 years.



Matt Newbury is a writer and marketing specialist born and raised in Devon. He has completed many swimming challenges including escaping from Alcatraz and swimming to the Isle of Wight.



Sophie and Matt are authors of *Beyond the Beach: the secret wild swims of Torbay*.

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WILD SWIMMING SAFETY



Splan your walk, taking necessary supplies and protection; don't forget water, a map, compass and waterproofs, especially on the moor.

Remember that cold water can limit your swimming endurance. If it is your first outdoor swim of the season, be careful to enter the water slowly and acclimatise. Stay close to the shore until you are comfortable. Wear a wetsuit for added warmth and buoyancy. Do not overestimate your ability. Remember that the cold water quickly creates hypothermia – shivering is the first stage.

Don't enter water without first establishing an exit point, especially in fast-flowing water. Never jump or dive into water without first checking the depth and whether there are any obstructions. Even if you have jumped/dived there before, always check every time. Large obstructions like tree branches and rocks move about underwater and an area that was previously clear may well be blocked.

Swim in a group wherever possible or, if swimming alone, let people know your movements and take extra special care.

Take extra care following heavy rainfall, when rivers might be in spate and flowing much faster than normal.

Watch out in high surf - rip-currents can form which take you out to sea, to behind the breaking waves. Swim perpendicularly from them to escape, then body-surf back in.

Beware of tidal currents, especially near estuary mouths and around headlands, especially at mid-tide, and on fortnightly spring tides, when flows are strongest.

If you are concerned about water quality, cover cuts and open wounds with plasters and do not swim front crawl.

TIDES AND WEATHER CONDITIONS FOR SOUTH DEVON

When planning a swim on the South Devon coast, it's very useful to look at the wind forecast as well as the tides. If you want calm water, you need to know which way the wind is coming from. The prevailing winds in Devon are south westerly, and if this is the case, then choose a swim spot that faces east. Conversely, if the winds are easterly, then it's a good idea to pick a west or south west facing beach. The principle here is that you don't want the wind blowing from the sea onto the land, as the sea is more likely to be rough. Tides are of course very important. Before you go, find out what the tide is doing; it is important to know whether it's going out or coming in. The interesting thing to note about tides in South Devon is that on spring tides (the biggest tides, occurring at the time of the full and new moons), high water will always be at about 6pm, while low water will always be at about noon.

Walk 1

WEST OKEMENT AND MELDON CIRCULAR

Plunge in a mountain waterfall pool, hike up to see the highest points of Dartmoor, and finish with a swim in a large green lake.

The walk starts at Meldon Reservoir, which certainly divides opinion. It was opened in 1974, and involved the destruction of the lower part of the West Okement gorge which caused huge controversy at the time, especially as Dartmoor had only recently become a National Park. One Dartmoor blogger, John Bainbridge, who has now sadly left the area, doesn't mince his words, describing how a "magnificent valley" was lost, he claims, "as a result of a short-term solution to Devon's water-shortage, and promoted by local jobsworths who seemed to have a real hatred of the National Park". However Eric Hemery, in *High Dartmoor*, describes the reservoir as "serpentine" and a place of "stern, almost classical beauty".

You arrive at Vellake Corner ③, a marshy plain which has an interesting array of boggy plants, including Dartmoor's answer to the venus fly trap, the carnivorous sundew plant, which eats insects, and is incredibly rare. You will also see bog asphodel, which has a bright yellow flower. If you don't mind getting a bit damp, get down on your knees and look at the plants close up; it is a fascinating world in miniature. These plants are best seen between June and August.

The walk then proceeds up beside the West Okement River which bubbles, tumbles and rushes down the hillside. This part of the river is traditionally known as the Valley of the Rocks and some of the boulders are truly enormous. They have undoubtedly been moved around in violent storms over the last millennia; the force of the water is an awesome thought. Just before the brow of the hill, when you see an oak tree on the left ④, there is a great plunge pool with two waterfalls. Scramble down to the right of

INFORMATION

This walk is best done in summer as it can be boggy. The terrain is high so in misty weather it is easy to get lost.

DISTANCE: 5 miles

TIME: 5 hours

MAP: OS Explorer Dartmoor OL28

START POINT: Meldon Reservoir car park (SX 561 917, EX20 4LU)

END POINT: Meldon Reservoir car park

PUBLIC TRANSPORT: Bus or train to Okehampton, then travel by taxi to Meldon Reservoir

SWIMMING: Pools and waterfalls on the West Okement (SX 559 900), and large quarry lake at Meldon Pond (SX 563 921)

PLACES OF INTEREST: West Okement River, Black-a-Tor Copse ancient woodland

REFRESHMENTS: There are lots of cafés and pubs in Okehampton, including Toast Coffee House, in the old Edwardian cinema, which has free wifi (01837 54494, EX20 1HN). There is also the Bearslake Inn in nearby Sourton, in a beautiful thatched Devon longhouse (01837 861334, EX20 4HQ).

the path, and you will find the pool. It's surprisingly deep under the main waterfall where you can brace yourself against the moss-lined rock for a vigorous pummelling. There is also an intriguing 'indoor' waterfall next to it, in a niche formed from several large boulders. It even has 'windows'! This is a great place to stop for a dip and a picnic.

After your dip, as you continue along the path, you pass a tree with a big round growth into which someone has carved a smiley face. You pass around the left side of a wall enclosing a weir, and are out in open country again, with magnificent Corn Ridge up ahead to the right, and Shelstone Tor looming over the Valley of the Rocks. Corn Ridge is the part of the walk that feels like the Lake District; it's a proper mountainside. Look out for the Slipper Stones on the side of the ridge (they are marked on the OS map). These are large areas of granite, exposed by the constant passage of water down the hillside. Why they are called the Slipper Stones is not clear. William Crossing, who wrote a famous guide to Dartmoor, believes one looks like a large slipper, while Hansford Worth, another well-known authority on Dartmoor, believes the name is a corruption of 'Slippery Stones'. Eric Hemery describes them rather beautifully as "shining when wet like a giant skylight on the hillside".

The next point of interest is Black-a-Tor Cope 5, one of three ancient oak woodlands on Dartmoor (the others are Wistman's Wood and Piles Cope). This is the highest of the three. Here's what Worth has to say about them: "All these woods are so exceptional in their main characteristics as to be unique, not only in Britain but also probably in the whole world. They are remarkable, not for luxuriant tree growth or great extent, but for their diminutive trees and extremely limited areas; while the excessive

humidity of the region in which they exist and other extraordinary conditions amid which they grow can only be described as weird."

It's thought that these three dwarf oak woods are the ancient remains of forests which could date back many thousands of years. Most of the forests were destroyed by prehistoric people in the Bronze Age, when they started to clear land for farming and settlement. Black-a-Tor Cope, or to give its old name, Black-a-Tor Beare, contains many species of mosses, ferns and lichens, and is a wonderful place to sit and let the mind wander back to ancient times. There is certainly a mystical air, and you could well start to dream about the woods being populated with Druids and pixies.

Black Tor 6 is the next stop. It's a hard steep climb up to the top, but it is worth the hike. Give yourself a pat on the back when you reach the summit, as you've climbed virtually to the top of Dartmoor. Over to the north east (the opposite direction from Black-a-Tor cope) you can see High Willhays, at 621 metres the highest point on the moor, and then to the left of it is Yes Tor. Military huts and red-and-white markers for the Okehampton firing range are also visible.

Looking the other way, back down over Black-a-Tor Cope, is an equally spectacular view, starting with Branscombe's Loaf on the top of Corn Ridge, a small squat tor like a pimple on the horizon. Moving along to the right, you will then see Sourton Tor, with three outcrops, and Shelstone Tor, above the Valley of the Rocks. You also get the chance for another good look at the Slipper Stones.

Branscombe's Loaf is named after a medieval Bishop, who got lost while travelling on Dartmoor. Tired and hungry, he came across a stranger who offered him bread and cheese, if he





would only get off his horse, doff his cap and call him master. He was about to accept gratefully, when his sharp-eyed chaplain noticed the stranger had a cloven hoof. The Bishop cried out to God and made the sign of the cross, whereupon the stranger vanished and the bread and cheese was turned to stone – and remains on the top of Corn Ridge to this day!

From Black Tor the walk continues directly north along a track, heading downwards. From here the counties of Cornwall and Devon spread ahead of you, a spectacular view that stretches for miles. The track takes you down to the old site of Meldon Quarry, with the very pretty Red-a-ven Brook running through it. The quarry was created in Victorian times to mine stone for the railway industry, and is now mothballed. The lake , or as it's often known, Old Meldon Pond, is absolutely beautiful. Above it towers the magnificent Meldon Viaduct, built in the 1870s to carry the railway. It's now home to the Granite Way cycle track.



We first visited the lake on a winter's day and were entranced; it was an enticing slate-green expanse, glimpsed through a network of branches. There is a beautiful, angular cliff hanging precariously over the water. It's one of those places where the colours constantly change, according to the sky, the season, and the amount of leaves on the trees. In the winter, it has a stark, grey beauty; in the summer it's a lush green oasis. It is a truly amazing place to swim, but one thing to be aware of is glass around the edges; it's a bit of a party hangout on summer evenings, so litter can be a hazard. Whenever we've visited it's been empty, and the sheer freedom of swimming in such a vast pool of water is a memorable and very pleasurable experience.

DIRECTIONS

1 From the car park, cross the dam and turn right, following the path with the reservoir on your right.

0.4 miles

2 By a gate, marked Meldon Reservoir, keep on the main path and follow it as it bears left, crossing a footbridge and continuing on around the reservoir until you reach a wide marshy area called Vellake Corner.

0.8 miles

3 From here, follow the path to the left of the open area, with the West Okement River on your right, and follow it uphill.

0.5 miles

4 Just before the brow of the hill, you will see an oak tree on the left. You can scramble down here to the right of the path for a dip in the waterfall and pool below. Continue along the path and follow it to the left around a crenellated walled off area (which encloses a weir). Continue to follow the path to Black-a Tor Copse.

0.5 miles

5 Explore the copse and then retrace your steps to the beginning of the copse. Turn right to climb up to the top of Black Tor which is behind the copse.

0.2 miles

6 From the top of Black Tor, look north and you will see a track into the distance. Take this track. Following the track, you pass a

flagpole for the military firing range on your left. The track starts to descend and you can see a quarry ahead. The track then curves downwards to the left.

1.5 miles

7 Take the first path off to the right. The path hairpins down to the bottom; just keep on the path and it will bring you out by Red-a-ven Brook. Cross the brook via the bridge, turn left and follow the path towards Meldon

Pond. You get to a fork in the path; keep left and follow the path to a clam bridge which takes you across Red-a-Ven brook again and to the Pond.

0.6 miles

8 From Meldon Pond, to get back to the car park, walk back past the clam bridge, keeping the river on your left, and the path takes you up hill back to the car park.

0.3 miles

