

# WILD swimming *Walks*

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

Sophie Pierce  
Matt Newbury

A stylized illustration of a woman in a red swimsuit sitting on a rock by a waterfall, with another person swimming in the water below. The scene is set against a backdrop of large, rounded yellow hills and a bright yellow sun.

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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



**S**plan 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 18

# BANTHAM TO THURLESTONE CIRCULAR

This short walk takes in abundant wildlife, magnificent cliff-top views and a selection of beaches perfect for dippers or more serious swimmers.

**B**antham is a popular beach on one of the most beautiful stretches of coast in the UK, with views across Bigbury Bay to Burgh Island and its iconic Art Deco hotel. Understandably popular with both surfers and swimmers alike, the beach is nestled at the mouth of the River Avon and can be found at the base of marram grass-covered sand dunes.

Our walk takes us from the car park where generations of surfers have gathered whenever the rumour of a swell from the south brought the promise of sizeable waves. Once you have climbed up the slope from Bantham Surf Life Saving Club, it's worth pausing at the bench to take in the charming tidal island just a stone's skip away in the distance. Cut off by the tide twice a day, it oozes romance and mystery. It's no surprise that Agatha Christie used the island as the inspirational setting for two of her most popular books, *Evil Under the Sun* and the oft-renamed *And Then There Were None*.

According to local folklore, back in the 20s and 30s, floating cocktail bars were moored in summer at various points offshore for swimmers. The hotel always used to run an annual round-the-island swimming race, with drinks served to the winners by waiters in black tie. We took part in the last one, in 2012, which was a wonderfully glamorous and eccentric occasion. Sadly, after that, it became too much of an insurance headache for the hotel, and the annual tradition ended. The mile-long circumnavigation, past imposing cliffs, rocky inlets and mysterious coves remains popular with swimmers, although currents and choppy waters can make for a bold swim and caution is advised.

### INFORMATION

**DISTANCE:** 4 miles

**TIME:** 3–4 hours

**MAP:** OS Explorer South Devon OL20

**START POINT:** Bantham car park (SX 663 436, TQ7 3AN)

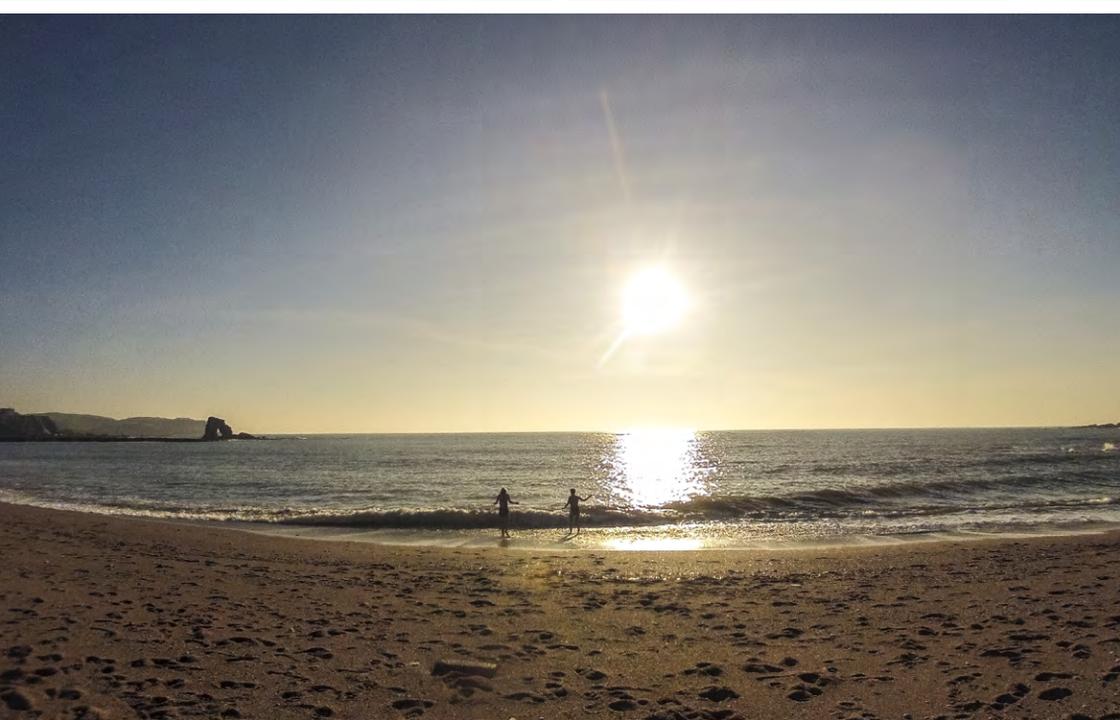
**END POINT:** Bantham car park

**PUBLIC TRANSPORT:** Seasonal passenger ferry to Bigbury. Nearest train stations are Totnes (17 Miles) or Ivybridge (14 Miles). There are no buses to Bantham, but you can reach Thurlestone on the 162 Tally Ho! service which runs from Kingsbridge

**SWIMMING:** Bantham Sands (SX 662 437), South Milton Sands (SX 676 417), Leas Foot Sand (SX 673 421)

**PLACES OF INTEREST:** Bantham Village, Thurlestone Village, Thurlestone Arch

**REFRESHMENTS:** The Beach House at South Milton Sands does amazing seafood but is always busy so best to book (01548 561 144, TQ7 3JY). The Sloop at Bantham is a comfy pub with good food (01548 560489, TQ7 3AJ). You can also eat at the Village Inn in Thurlestone which makes a good stop  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the way round (01548 563525, TQ7 3NN), and there is the brilliant Gastrobus in the car park at Bantham which does a great line in quality 'fast food' (07592 81 1277, TQ7 3AN)



As the walk continues you'll pass Thurlestone Golf Club, which must have some of the most dramatic views of any course in the world. On a clear day you can see across to the headland of Bolt Tail to the east and Plymouth Sound to the west. You might even be able to make out the Eddystone Lighthouse and the stump of Smeaton's Tower (the main lighthouse was moved to Plymouth Hoe) some nine miles out to sea in front of you. This stretch of coast is a haven for bird lovers: regular visitors include rock pipits, pied wagtails and wheatears, as well as buzzards and kestrels.

The walk takes you right past the ninth hole and close to another bench, which is well worth pausing at. Dedicated to Bill Bennett, it includes a verse that combines quotes from Shakespeare and Dryden and clearly shows his passion for both the sea and life itself:

*"His delights were dolphin like  
Joy ruled the day and love the night"*

From the bench you can see a cove below and we'd recommend a scramble down to this secret beach, which is wonderful for rock-pooling on a low tide. Back on the coast path the next small headland is known as Loam Castle, 'loam' being a high quality earth combing sand, clay and decaying plant material. You'll then reach Yarmouth Sand, another popular swim spot - the best area to take a dip to avoid submerged rocks is directly out from the sandy path that leads down to the beach, near the lifebuoy.

Continue on around the perimeter of the golf course and Warren Point for the first glimpse of Thurlestone Rock, an imposing rock arch that was immortalised by JMW Turner. The iconic natural sculpture was originally known as the

'Thirled Stone' from an Anglo-Saxon word meaning 'hole'. Before reaching South Milton Sands (formerly known as Thurlestone Sand, but controversially renamed, much to the consternation of locals), you'll pass Leas Foot Sand ③. It's the smaller of Thurlestone's two beaches and owned by the golf club, with fine shingle sand. Part of the lane was swept into the sea here during the big storms of February 2014.

Walk down through the car park and onto South Milton Sands ④, which has a small natural swimming pond that forms on the higher part of the beach at low tide. Many swimmers plan to get here at high tide however, so they can walk to the southern part of the beach and swim out to and through the arch, which sits at the end of a reef about 500 metres from the shore.

The swim out to the arch is stunning. At high water, the reef on which it stands is covered, and to swim over it is like being in a natural history film. Brightly coloured seaweed and darting fish create a colourful marine garden below you, while the arch itself makes the perfect natural picture frame to take in the magnificence of this wonderful section of coastline.

For the return part of the walk, retrace your steps back to Leas Foot Sand and turn right up the sand path at the start of the beach. You'll pass four stone slabs known as the Fool Stones. Legend has it that if you kiss each of the stones from right to left you can make a wish! Continue through the grass overflow car park and left into the main car park, towards the club house. There are public toilets on your right. Follow the road past the tennis courts and on up the hill, walking up the raised pavement on the left.



In Thurlestone Village itself, you'll reach the war memorial and be able to spot the post office to your right, which is ideal for refreshments. The red phone box has been converted into a charming mini library. It's also just a short stroll to the 16th century Village Inn (a separate part of the Thurlestone Hotel) with beams salvaged from Spanish Armada ships, wrecked on the nearby coast.

The walk continues up past the memorial and then right, following the sign for Footpath to Bantham and past All Saints Church, built from local dark grey slate. The walk takes you over a stile, past the rear of the golf course and across several fields, before you are rewarded with spectacular views over the estuary below. Another popular swim adventure is to walk or drive up to Aveton Gifford and then swim the three miles down to Bantham with the tide. This swim finishes with a 'swoosh' where the estuary narrows, allowing you to swim at eight knots, or four times faster than normal. The Outdoor Swimming Society organises an annual Bantham Swoosh event.

Head down the fields and through a stile in the hedge, before a really steep field leads you back into the village near the 14th century Sloop Inn. It's worth a stop for a well-earned drink or bite to eat. An amusing local story goes that you used to be able to tell whether a man came from Bantham or Thurlestone by looking at his trousers. A man with a patch on them came from Bantham and those with no patch came from the nearby village. How did they know? The Sloop Inn boasted benches for its customers while, the Village Inn at Thurlestone had none!

## DIRECTIONS

1 From the bottom left hand corner of Bantham Sands car park take the road towards the beach and the Surf Life Saving Club, forking left at the bottom to go through the kissing gate and onto the South West Coast Path. It is signed for Thurlestone. Climb the slope and follow the path up to the point. **0.3 miles**

2 Follow the path along the cliff top. You go past several beaches which are swimmable, and then past the golf course on your left. **1.4 miles**

3 At Leas Foot Sand keep going along the coast path with the sea on your right, past the large block of apartments and then down to South Milton Sands for a swim and picnic. On a calm day and at high tide, some swimmers like to try and swim through the rock arch. The arch also marks the end of a reef that runs parallel to the shore which is great for snorkelling. **0.3 miles**

4 From South Milton Sand, return to the start of Leas Foot Sand and then turn right up the sand path, through the overflow parking field and left into the main golf club car park. Continue up onto the road to Thurlestone past the golf club and tennis courts on your left. Continue up the hill to the war memorial, perhaps pausing in the village for refreshments. **0.9 miles**



5 At the war memorial leave the road and continue straight on along a track signed Public Footpath Bantham 3/4 mile. Follow the waymarked path through several fields before descending steeply

into the valley. After two stiles you will eventually come out onto the lane in Bantham, near the Sloop Inn. Follow the lane back down to the car park. **0.9 miles**