

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.



SOAR MILL COVE CIRCULAR

A spectacular swim walk taking in golden beaches, thatched hamlets, stunning clifftop walks and some of the most eccentric history you will ever stumble upon.

The walk begins at the sandy tidal beach of North Sands, just to the south of fashionable Salcombe. In fact the town has become so popular with wealthy yachty types, that the town has the highest property prices in the UK outside of central London, ahead even of Sandbanks in Dorset. Thankfully walking and swimming are free! As you climb up above the beach along Cliff Road, look back towards the ruins of Fort Charles, resembling something out of a Famous Five story. This was the last fort in England to hold out against Cromwell's men during the English Civil War of 1646.

The walk continues past the driveway to The Moul, a property that proves that Salcombe has been popular with the wealthy for hundreds of years. Recently on the market for 'offers over £5 million', the villa on this private headland was built in the early 19th century around the core of an earlier house dating back to 1764. The town became very popular with rich Victorians, who came to holiday in what was regarded as the warmest resort on the south coast, and the house became the maritime residence of Viscount Courtenay, the Earl of Devon's eldest son. Famous guests included Alfred, Lord Tennyson, who stayed there shortly before his death in 1889. Legend has it he wrote his last poem, *Crossing the Bar*, an allegory to his own imminent death, while staying in the property's thatched summerhouse. Sadly the woods of beech and sycamore trees screen the house from prying eyes, meaning the historic house can only be seen from the water.

There are plenty of other desirable properties to view as you climb up the hill, before you eventually pass some bollards to enter the woods. The path then drops down onto a delightful

INFORMATION

DISTANCE: 6 miles

TIME: 4-5 hours

MAP: Ordnance Survey Explorer South Devon OL20

START POINT: North Sands car park (SX 730 382, TQ8 8LD)

END POINT: North Sands car park

PUBLIC TRANSPORT: Buses: the 606 from Kingsbridge and the 164 from Totnes

SWIMMING: Soar Mill Cove (SX 697 374), Starehole Bay (SX 726 365), North Sands (SX 730 381), South Sands (SX 728 376)

PLACES OF INTEREST:

Overbecks (National Trust), Fort Charles, Starehole Bay

REFRESHMENTS: The Winking Prawn at North Sands is ideally positioned right by the beach. It's open all day with a good variety of 'surf and turf' (01548 842326, TQ8 8LD). The Soar Mill Hotel is a good halfway stop with nice cream teas (01548 561566, TQ7 3DS). For something a bit special with amazing views, check out the rather smart South Sands Hotel (01548 845900, TQ8 8LL).

country lane and up through a valley to the attractive thatched hamlet of Combe. Why not take a refreshment stop at the shady bench beside the stream and take a moment to read the charming inscription? It's then an energetic climb up the lane to Higher Rew Farm and a stunning campsite at a former dairy farm, which has been run by three generations of the Squire family.

The steep climb continues through fields above the camp site until you reach the former coastguard cottages at the aptly named hamlet of Soar. However the name has nothing to do with the elevation or the fact that there is an air strip nearby, but actually derives from an old English word for the plant sorrel. This is a herb with a sharp lemony flavour, which in turn derives from the French for 'sour'. The walk takes you past the rear of the five cottages, built in the 1870s, and then on to some barn conversions with chickens and ducks greeting you as you pass.

The path then takes you down past the curious looking Soar Mill Cove Hotel, a 22-bedroom four star hotel with an award-winning restaurant, a champagne bar and amazing spa facilities, including a seawater swimming pool. The hotel also has a remarkable history. The original building once housed a cinema at the Devonport Naval Base in Plymouth. The entire structure was then transported to the aerodrome near Rew during the Second World War, where it became an unofficial officers' mess. The building was then purchased from the navy and transported to Soar Mill Cove where it has been run as a hotel by the Makepeace family since 1978 (with several extensions added over the years). Incidentally if you do decide to dine here, save room for the pavlova, which was a favourite of Audrey Hepburn when she used to stay here.

It's then a stunning five minute walk down to the secluded sandy inlet, which owners the National Trust describe as one of the best places in the UK for a picnic, and we're certainly not going to argue. If you're feeling adventurous, and only if you are a strong swimmer, you can swim around the Ham Stone, a small island off shore. A less daunting option, at high tide, is to swim around the Priest and Clerk rocks which cluster to the right of the beach (looking out to sea). There are also some wonderful caves to explore when the tide is out. One in particular goes back a long way and opens out into a dark, eerie cavern. At lower tides the beach is a rock pooling paradise, while look out for sea beet, rock samphire and the rare rock sea-lavender on the lower cliffs. Drying off on the beach after your swim, it's worth taking in the amazing moor-like hillsides above you, with granite outcrops resembling tors. Up to the right where the South West Coast Path continues, you can also spot the Iron Age fort remains, which was once a hillfort. It's a popular spot to sit at the close of a summer's day, watching out for dolphins and porpoises, or even gannets and peregrine falcons framed by the setting sun.

The walk back to Salcombe is along a remarkable stretch of the South West Coast Path, with some outstanding clifftop views. After ascending the hill from the beach, the path crosses another small valley before climbing up to one of the rugged tors. On a clear day you can see as far down the coast as Mewstone off Wembury, or even Plymouth Sound and the triangular shape of Rame Head in south-east Cornwall. The path then continues along a flat stretch of clifftop called The Warren. As the name suggests, this area was used to breed rabbits for their fur and meat back in medieval times. Today the area is managed by



the National Trust who use Dartmoor ponies to graze the cliffs, keeping the scrub under control so that wildlife and flowers can flourish.

The walk then continues around Bolt Head with amazing views across to Prawle Point, the most southerly point in Devon, before dropping down to beautiful Starehole Bay, another beautiful swimming spot. Be warned though, access was tricky last time we visited, because a footbridge which gives access to the beach had partly fallen away. We got down to the beach but it was a bit of a scramble. Apparently on a calm day you can spot the seaweed-covered wreck of the *Herzogin Cecilie* in the waters of the bay. This beautiful clipper had won the famous ‘Grain Race’ but it was the cargo that was to seal its fate. After running aground on the Ham Stone at Soar Mill Cove back in 1936, a rescue mission attempted to tow her back into Salcombe. However water entered the hold and the swollen grain split the timbers, and she sank in Starehole Bay. The wreck became a tourist attraction with local farmers charging a penny to view the wreck from their land. At very low tides, parts of her can still be seen above the surface, while timber and brass portholes salvaged from the ship can be found in the bar of the Cottage Hotel at Hope Cove.

Vikings are also said to have landed and settled in the bay sometime between the ninth and eleventh centuries. Indeed the jagged cliffs above you have been weathered into spires and crags and were dubbed ‘Valhalla’ by Henry Williamson, author of *Tarka the Otter*. It’s possible to swim in Starehole Bay before climbing up to the rough-hewn steps and rocky ledges to round Sharpnor, a remarkable route that wouldn’t look

out of place in an Indiana Jones movie. This is known as Courtenay Walk and was cut in the 1860s by Viscount Courtenay, whose former house at The Moulton we passed at the start of this walk.

The route now boasts stunning views over the entrance to Salcombe estuary, which, thanks to a sandbar extending just below the surface across the mouth, makes it notoriously hazardous to navigate. The estuary here is not actually fed by a river, but is a ria: a long narrow inlet formed when rising sea levels drown a valley. After walking through some woods, you’ll find yourself in the car park of Overbecks, a National Trust property once owned by an eccentric chemist, collector and inventor called Otto Overbeck. He invented something called the ‘electrical rejuvenator’ which he claimed would allow people to live for 350 years. However it didn’t work for him and he died in 1937, leaving the property to the National Trust on the condition it was turned into a museum and a youth hostel and not a brothel! Today the property is indeed divided between a YHA hostel and a museum of oddities he collected from around the world.

It’s then down to South Sands from where a quirky sea tractor (like the one at Burgh Island) transports people out to a ferry that runs to the main town during the summer months. However if you have had enough of water-based fun for one day, it’s just a final calf-stretching climb up a small hill and back down to North Sands and the starting point. It’s then got to be time to reward yourself with a well-deserved ice cream from the famous Salcombe Dairy, or perhaps a warming tippie in the Winking Prawn during the colder winter months.

DIRECTIONS

1 The walk begins at North Sands car park. Follow the road with the beach on your left as it curves up along Cliff Road, bearing right at the brown sign towards South Sands. Wind up the hill past 'The Moulit' and then fork right at the post box to continue along Moulit Road. The road becomes a track and continues into the woods. Fork left and cross the stile to head down through the trees to the road.

0.8 miles

2 Turn right and follow the road up to the thatched village of Combe, forking left by the post box and bench to continue up the road to Rew. Just before the brow of the hill, turn left at the public footpath sign for Soar. The path takes you into Higher Rew Caravan and Camping

Park. Continue on the green lane by the barn and then turn right into the field, following the hedges up the hill, before turning right to cross the cattle grid.

0.7 miles

3 Cross over to follow the lane past the rear of the coastguard cottages at Soar, continuing along to the next junction with a grassy bank dropping down to some barn conversions. Ignore the footpath on the left, but instead take the left-hand turn onto the drive signed for Soar Mill Cove. Continue past the thatched cottage at Lower Soar (ignoring another footpath) and follow the road left after the hotel and then through a gate on the right onto the footpath down to Soar Mill Cove.

0.8 miles

4 After your swim, follow the South West Coast Path signed for Salcombe up the hill above the cove, with the sea on your right. The path drops down into a valley and back up the other side, before flattening out along the Warren. Walk through the gap in the hedge and then fork right following the Coast Path around Bolt Head, descending down a steep hill to Starehole Bay.

2 miles

5 Cross a bridge and up the steps to round the dramatic cliff path at Sharp Tor. Continue through Fir Wood and into the National Trust car park at Overbecks. Continue straight on down the road to South Sands and then past the beach and up the hill before dropping back down to North Sands and the car park where you began.

1.4 miles

