

# POSTCARD: HIKING DEVON'S MOORS

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Created 19/02/2010 - 12:36

We arrive in the coastal village of Combe Martin in mid-afternoon, having picked up the hire car at Bristol airport and motored 90 miles over the rolling moors to the farthest reaches of North Devon. We navigate the twisty road into the village and catch our first glimpse of the sea.

We are here, in prime hiking country, among the moors and rugged coast, for a long weekend of winter walks. Combe Martin will be our base. We are excited to take lungfuls of the air, but the walking boots will wait until tomorrow. This evening we must rest and re-fuel. We hole up in a bayside restaurant and fill our bellies with steak.



After a long lie-in we take a slow breakfast and review the Ordnance Survey <sup>[1]</sup> map. We work out a route, traced vaguely with toast crumbs and butter smudges, gulp down tea, grab coats, hats and patiently-waiting boots, and set out.

We take a frozen muddy footpath between the fields. A mischievous bramble reaches down and steals my friend's woolly hat. He puts hands to head with a look of surprise, then turns and growls disdainfully at the offending hedgerow. It dangles the headgear mockingly.

Hat retrieved, we move on. A pheasant pops out of the shrubbery ahead of us and obligingly leads the way to the end of the footpath before popping back. We emerge onto open moorland stretching outwards and upwards. I start to run. "Don't hills just make you want to run up them?" I shout gleefully to my friend. He gives me a sideways glance and starts singing, "The bear climbed over the mountain..."

"...And all that he could see," he sings on, "Was the other side of the mountain." I retort, "Well, there's plenty to see on the other side of *this* hill." And I speed up.

The burst of enthusiastic activity is soon checked by the reality of a 35-year-old, poorly-exercised heart. I sit on an old stone wall to recover, pretending to admire the moss, while my friend catches up. We walk on together. It takes about an hour to hike to the top of the first hill, and it is worth every muddy-booted step. To our right the moors roll on and on to the horizon. They are covered in brown heather, worn away in places like a balding velvet jacket. To our left the moors drop steeply to the Bristol Channel. South Wales is visible across the water. I wave.

The hill we stand on runs down into a valley and up again. We follow it and take the narrow path on the seaward side. There is only a short steep slope of grass and heather before the 800-ft drop to the rocks and icy sea. This is the highest sea cliff in mainland Britain, the

precipitous edge of Exmoor. For all its beauty, it inspires a strong awareness of one's mortality.

After three more hours of hiking, legs tired and wobbly, we meet a sizable sheep on the foot-wide cliff-side path. He looks nervous. I am more so. I might have foliage-gripping hands where he has only hooves, but he definitely has a lower centre of gravity. Plus he's fluffy. If he fell, he might bounce. Luckily he just darts past us with a timid "baa."

We walk on. It is late afternoon before the path yields a welcoming cove. In the shadow of the valley—already beyond the reach of the sinking winter sun—there is a beacon of warmth and light calling to us. On any long winter trek a well-planned destination is essential. Ours for today is the fireside sofa in the middle-of-nowhere pub, hot toddies in hand.

~ [RUTH WILLIAMS](#) [2]

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