

# Dramatic Dartmoor

There's much more to delightful Dartmoor than the prison and *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, as **Norman Wright** discovers

PHOTOGRAPHY: CLIVE NICHOLLS

It's uphill but a reasonably gentle walk up to Haytor from the car park and visitor centre

JUST A few hundred yards across the moor on one side of the road was Hound Tor with all the chilling resonances of The Hound of the Baskervilles. On the other side, there was a chocolate-box scene as a Dartmoor pony mare grazed quietly with her foal.

There were more contrasts a little further along that ribbon road stretching away over the undulating moor.

At Postbridge, youngsters paddled in the shallow, but still icy, waters spanned by the ancient clapper bridge. Compare that with the grim sight of the grey, forbidding prison as you drive into Princetown – another ‘chocolate box to Conan Doyle’ moment.

However, there are a lot more sights and experiences to warm your heart on Dartmoor than moments to send a chill down your spine. And when you do glimpse the prison and imagine the gangs of Victorian convicts breaking up rocks or recall reading of the howl of the hound through a rolling mist, it serves to heighten the charm of so many delightful places in this very beautiful corner of Britain.

We were staying in an ideal place to enjoy Dartmoor in all its guises, the Ilington Country House Hotel, now being run by the fourth generation of the

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Ilington Country House Hotel

Dartmoor ponies roam the moor and charm visitors



Hassel family, brothers Tim and Richard. It's close to Haytor with its National Park Visitor Centre and walk up to the rock formation. It's also near the town of Bovey Tracy, one of the gateways to Dartmoor.

It's such a peaceful setting with wonderful views up to the heather-clad higher curves of the moor. There's an

indoor pool and health centre with spa facilities, fitness equipment and treatments from the resident beautician and therapist.

There are two choices for food, either the restaurant with all the gourmet trimmings or the less formal Blue Tiger Inn.

All in all, it's idyllic, and the temptation is to stay put instead of exploring further around Dartmoor.

There are plenty of places to visit, however. The lanes can be narrow in places, typical of Devon, but all you have to do is slow down and enjoy the reduced pace. There's usually a handy passing place when you do meet traffic.

Here are some places you shouldn't miss.

**Haytor**

Haytor is the best-known of the granite rock outcrops or tors that burst from the peaty soil all over Dartmoor.

There is a car park and National Park visitor centre on the B3387 about halfway between Bovey Tracy and Widdicombe.

To get to the rocks and the superb

view it offers of the coast of the Teign estuary and across the eastern part of Dartmoor, it is an uphill walk.

The summit is 1499ft (457 metres) but the way is over grassy terrain with a well-trodden path – easy walking if you are reasonably fit.



No sign of Uncle Tom Cobley at the charming village of Widcombe home of the famous fair



**Widcombe-in-the-Moor**

Widcombe is a charming village which gets busy with tourists during the season.

Its big day is the Widcombe Fair (September 9 in 2014) where you can expect to see Uncle Tom Cobley and all as well as lots of agricultural show events and some local favourites like ferret racing or square bale rolling.

The fair has been held annually for 150-odd years. The fair is an English country classic day but the village is more than worth visiting at any time.

**The restored Buckfast Abbey built between 1905 and 1937 by a team of no more than six monks**

**Postbridge**

Postbridge is a small village next to the East Dart River which merges with the West Dart River to form the Dart. It is named after the 13th century clapper bridge which enabled pack horses to cross the river, carrying tin to the town of Tavistock. The clapper bridge is complete, and stands alongside the ‘new’ road bridge built in the 1780s.

In summer the East Dart is a gentle, shallow stream. In flood it becomes a raging torrent, something the clapper bridge has taken in its stride for 800 years.

There is a National Park Visitor Centre in the car park.

**Buckfast Abbey**

The Benedictine Abbey church is a splendid sight framed by trees as you approach through the main gates.

It was founded in 1018 during the reign of King Canute and the monastery survived the ravages of the Black Death only to come up against Henry VIII in 1539 when the abbey was looted and destroyed. It stood in ruins for more than 300 years until six monks arrived from France in 1882 and began to reconstruct



The ancient clapper bridge at Postbridge

the abbey church on the foundations from 1147. The church was eventually finished in 1937, having been built by only six monks at a time using primitive construction methods.

Now you can visit the church, subject to services, and buy the strong tonic wine and honey products that the monks are now famous for. Website: ([www.buckfast.org.uk](http://www.buckfast.org.uk)).

### Bovey Tracy

Only three miles from Haytor, Bovey Tracy is a small town perched on the very edge of Dartmoor and sees itself as the gateway to the moor.

The Devon Guild of Craftsmen is based in the converted Riverside Mill and you can watch craftsmen and women create unique jewellery, sculpture, prints, glass and textiles, from the traditional to the modern. There's also a craft shop and spacious gallery.



The waterfront at Teignmouth

### Princetown

The highest settlement on Dartmoor, Princetown is an essential place to visit. Dominated by the great grey walls of the prison, it has a visitor centre that will give you a good introduction to the moor and places to visit.

The National Park visitor centre ([www.dartmoor-npa.gov.uk](http://www.dartmoor-npa.gov.uk)) is in the old Duchy Hotel that was originally built as an officers' quarters for those in charge of guarding prisoners of war from the Napoleonic Wars and the American War of 1812 – the original purpose of the prison.

As a hotel it had several famous guests including Prince Albert, Winston Churchill after a visit to the prison, Alfred Lord Tennyson and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, who reputedly wrote some chapters of *The Hound of the Baskervilles* there.

You can also visit the Dartmoor Prison Museum just a few yards from those grey forbidding walls.

### Devon coast

Dartmoor is close to the sea and rather than the direct route from Exeter we drove along the coast before cutting up to the moor from Teignmouth.

First we took some sea air on the beautiful stretch of sand at Dawlish Warren before visiting the part-Victorian, part-Georgian town of Dawlish with its park known as The Lawn stretching along a duck-populated brook leading to the sea.

At Teignmouth we headed for the old harbour and watched the lazy afternoon boat traffic over a glass of red wine from the terrace of one of the quayside pubs.

## Passport to Dartmoor

### Getting there

■ By car: From the north, the M5 takes you directly to Exeter. From here take the A30 dual carriageway towards Cornwall, turning off on to the north of Dartmoor at Whiddon Down.

Alternatively, take the A38 towards Plymouth, turning off on to the eastern edge of Dartmoor at Bovey Tracey.

From the south-east, the A303 brings you again directly to Exeter. From Cornwall, take the A30 towards Okehampton, turning off at Sourton Cross and head towards Tavistock in the east of the moor

■ By train: Devon is well connected to main line services. The closest rail stations are at Exeter, Newton Abbot, Totnes, Ivybridge and Plymouth. For further information, contact National Rail Enquiries, tel: 08457 484950, websites: ([www.nationalrail.co.uk](http://www.nationalrail.co.uk)) or ([www.thetrainline.com](http://www.thetrainline.com))

■ By coach: National Express runs direct coach services to Okehampton from most major towns and cities throughout Britain. For details, tel: 08705 808080, website: ([www.gobycoach.com](http://www.gobycoach.com)).

### Getting around

■ Dartmoor has a good summer public transport network including buses and trains. The Haytor Hoppa is a scenic bus route, offering plenty of circular and linear walking opportunities. The Dartmoor Sunday Rover ticket gives unlimited travel for a day on a whole range of buses and trains across the moor and is a good day out in itself. For full information, including interactive journey planning, see the website: ([www.traveline.org.uk](http://www.traveline.org.uk)).

### Where to stay

■ Standard rooms at the Ilsington Hotel start from £100 per night for two, including (excellent) breakfast. Stays in superior and deluxe rooms start from £130 and £155 respectively. For bookings, tel: 01364 661452, website: ([www.ilsington.co.uk](http://www.ilsington.co.uk)).

### Find out more

■ Dartmoor Tourist website: ([www.dartmoor.co.uk](http://www.dartmoor.co.uk))

■ Dartmoor National Park website: ([www.dartmoor-npa.gov.uk](http://www.dartmoor-npa.gov.uk)).