

Country Walks

Many paths and green lanes criss-cross the countryside in the beautiful South Hams and there are some glorious coastal walks, including a long stretch of the South West Coast Path. Dartmoor National Park also offers a wealth of walking opportunities, including romantic wooded river valleys as well as wild open moorland and tors.

A walk to nearby Dittisham, a beautiful village set at the edge of the River Dart, some 3 miles away combines countryside and water. It's a fabulous walk, with stunning views, but you can take several different routes of various levels of complexity. You will see that you can branch off from the path and quite easily loop back to Gitcombe House.

The Dittisham walk takes about 1¼ - 1½ hours each way depending on fitness and walking pace! Some of the valley sides are quite steep, but well worth the effort for the spectacular views. Dittisham has two inns where you can stop for refreshments, the Red Lion and the Ferry Inn, which is right on the waterfront. If you've the time, and you've taken the necessary kit, the children will love crabbing here, when the tide is in!

Open for the summer, just across from the Ferry Inn, is the Anchorstone Café, also overlooking the water, and serving delicious food, as well as teas and coffees. You may need to book, at busy times of the year, as it is very popular, tel 01803 722365. Walking is the perfect way to experience Dittisham, as car parking is very limited.

If you are keen to explore the countryside here, do get yourself a local Ordnance Survey map. Most local petrol stations, post offices and book shops sell them, as well as walking route guides

Here are one or two walks from your cottage door to get you in the mood.

NB – 'green lanes' are a distinctive feature of the South Devon Area of Outstanding National Beauty. These are often ancient packhorse and drovers' tracks which have left a legacy of hidden routes running between tall hedge banks often with overhanging trees.

Walk One: The Maltsters Arms Inn, Tuckenhay

This walk takes about 40 minutes to reach the creek side inn at Tuckenhay. It combines shaded woodland, with open fields and roadside walking close to the pub. It usually requires wellies in winter and after wet weather. If you have a baby with you, then take a baby carrier. It's not pushchair friendly.

Walk out of Gitcombe, and up the driveway, leaving the outdoor swimming pool to your left. After about 100 metres, turn left at the public footpath sign. Follow this path and look out for the yellow arrow footpath signs to show you the way. You will go over two stiles and then drop down into the valley, where there is another stile over to a path leading through a small copse. You are now at the bottom of the valley, on a green lane, facing two cottages, the thatched one called 'Coomery'.

Turn right and follow the green lane to the main road, about 150 metres. At the main road, and opposite you, will be Edgecumbe Barn. Turn right, up the hill and just past the barn, immediately to the left, turn into a unmetalled lane/footpath, (sometimes very overgrown). This is Stack Hill.

Follow the path up the hill, through the woods, down the other side and you will find yourselves at the back of Tuckenhay Mill. Follow the path down to main road, turn right. The Maltsters is approximately 400 metres.

(Detour to the Watermans Arms: should you feel up to it, another quarter of a mile walk past the Maltsters, brings you to the pretty Waterman's Arms pub, where children can feed the ducks and paddle in the stream)

Return journey (avoiding steep hills) from the Maltsters Arms: to avoid walking up very steep hills on the way back, you can instead follow the road from the Maltsters all the way to the green lane at Coomery Barns (opposite Edgecombe Barn).

Pass Coomery Barns on your right hand side but this time continue on the green lane until you reach a metal gate with side entry, inset on your left hand side - some 400 metres. This is the entrance path to the back of Gitcombe (it does not have a sign on it). Pass through the gate (please shut it afterwards) and follow up the path, through the woods, back to Gitcombe, bringing you out at the main car park.

Walk Two:

The Hamlet of Allaleigh

This is a pretty, fairly gentle country walk along the green lane in the valley behind Gitcombe, great for small children and the naturalists amongst you, as there is quite a lot to see and do along the way. It is approximately 1 1/2 miles there and back. Take refreshments if you feel in need of sustenance en-route as no inns or shops here!

Wellies definitely required unless the height of summer (well theoretically!). Please note: this is not really a pushchair friendly walk.

Start from Yennadon Barn, at the end of the row of barns behind the main house. You will see a narrow path leading off from the car park, and down through the woods. Follow this bridle path down the valley to a metal gate (please shut gate). This marks the end of Gitcombe's grounds.

Go through the gate, turning left onto the green lane. Follow this as it wends its way through the wooded valley, until you come to the small hamlet of Allaleigh.

As you come out of the green lane turn right and then almost immediately left into another green lane. This will take you around the back of Allaleigh Farm, where you may see pigs, geese, sheep etc.

As you leave the farm, up a short steep hill, turn right, and follow the road back to the green lane that leads to Gitcombe on the left, past 'Land Matters' gate.

As you leave the farm, and turn right, opposite the house is an open fronted cupboard which often has plants and homemade jams for sale. The proceeds go to local charities.

NATURE NOTES

As you walk in the local area you will have lots of opportunity, and hopefully fun, spotting the local flora and fauna.

Wild flowers abound in the lanes in the spring and early summer – you will spot drifts of snowdrops, wild daffodils, primroses, bluebells, poppies, foxgloves and rose bay willow herb, many of which attract butterflies and other nectar loving insects.

Later in the year it's the time for fruit and berries, look out for lots of juicy blackberries, sloes (for gin), elder berries, crab apples and cider apples, in old orchards. You may even see plums around Dittisham, once famed for its plum orchards. Autumn is also the time for beautiful fungi, but please do not eat any, unless you are a serious expert on the subject.

In the countryside, you may be privileged to see the secretive deer – often out at dusk, in the green lanes and woodland surrounding Gitcombe. Dusk is also a good time to spot Brock, the ancient badger and various species of bats. In fact dawn and dusk are the best times to observe much of our local wildlife. You may see hares here too – larger and faster than rabbits, of which there are many! Foxes are probably less common here than they are on the streets of London and other urban areas, similarly with grey squirrels, but there are quite a few in the woodland below the barns.

You may catch a glimpse of a field or harvest mouse, shrew, stoat or weasel or even a lizard. Frogs, toads, newts, dragon and damselflies love ponds and rivers. As do many species of duck. So does the occasional otter or predatory mink. You might catch a glimpse of dazzling turquoise, as a kingfisher darts by. You may also see a wild trout or salmon negotiating the river course. The occasional grass snake or adder basking in the sunshine may also be spotted. They are usually gone before you reach them, as fond of humans as we are of snakes!

Around the fields, hills and farms, you'll see beef and dairy cattle, sheep, chickens, geese, the occasional pig, goat and alpaca plus, of course, horses and Dartmoor ponies roaming free in the National Park.

Out on the coast, you could get lucky and spot one of our resident grey seals and dolphins. And in the rock pools and on the shoreline, crabs, sea urchins, shrimps, small fish, star fish, jelly fish plus shells galore. Seahorses live in the South West waters, but are extremely shy and hard to find.

Airborne, you'll see – and hear - owls (barn owls still fairly common here), buzzards galore, the rare circling bunting (down on the coast at East Prawle), cormorants, shags, gulls, egrets, herons, swallows, swifts, house martins, and all the usual feathered friends!

***GO QUIETLY AND
HAPPY NATURE SPOTTING!***