



Exmoor

Heddon Woo



This hike must surely be in the Top Ten of Wonderful West-country Walks.

If there was such a chart, the perpendicular plod which meanders from Woody Bay to Heddon's Mouth and back again would certainly be up there among the best-sellers. It boasts views by the vista-load, history by the ancient, dusty, book-full and enough solitude to wither a lonesome pine.

Getting to the little roadside car park near Woody Bay can be a perilous experience if you drive along the private lane from Lynmouth. Once through the dramatic Valley of the Rocks the road comes as close to the edge of 400-foot high cliffs as you'll ever want to be on four wheels.

But, having arrived safely, it's easy to find the wide, rather luxurious carriageway that heads west on the first half of the walk. Luxurious, because it is rare for the Westcountry walker to find such a well-made, and yet un-surfaced, track in such a wild place.

This is ideal in the circumstances because, instead of minding where you tread, you are free to enjoy the breathtaking views that sweep across the Bristol Channel – as our photographs by Richard Austin prove. The dramatic headlands that punctuate this vertical coast fall over themselves in a queue as they line up to show just who's best at being jagged and dangerous.

Getting there: The easy way is to head north from A 39 (Lynton to Combe Martin road) following signs to Woody Bay. The lane-side car park is between Woody Bay and Martinhoe.

Basic Hike: From car-park above Woody Bay along old carriageway down to Hunter's Inn, from there down to beach at Hunter's Mouth and then up the steep Coast Path which will return you to your car.

Ideal Map: Ordnance Survey Outdoor Leisure 9 (Exmoor)

Distance and Going: Just over 5 miles, not too muddy, but steepish in places – and be warned: this is not a good walk for those who dislike steep drops and heights.

There's Crock Point, Duty Point, Hollerday Hill above Lynton and Lynmouth and, of course the North Devon Foreland with its lighthouse blinking intermittently above the grey sea. And below you, more than 800 feet beneath your untroubled boots, there is Wringapeak.

Strange and lonely, and just about inaccessible, this humble tooth of a headland is forever swathed in a white cloud of gull and kittiwake. But it is what lurks deep in the dark waters beneath the rocks that perhaps gives the place its air of danger and threat. In those unwelcoming depths lives the «Gurt Fish of Wringapeak» - which has been swimming about and striking the fear of God into locals for centuries.

The journalist Peter Hesp once descended to what he loosely described as the beach with a climbing expedition a few years ago, and hot and bothered: «Plunged into the strangest swimming hole imaginable. As the water closed over my head a huge shape passed my blurred vision in the green, deep water and something brushed against my leg. «For a moment I thought I'd narrowly missed crashing into a rock as I dived, but when I turned to look I found only deep water...»

Talking to a local farmer later, he was alarmed to find that the man took quite seriously the legend of the «Gurt Fish» and regarded his escape as something of a lucky break. Few people would swim down there, he was told, not even James Hannington.

He was the boisterous young fellow - later to become a local curate, and after that an African bishop - who found himself 'rusticated' from Oxford to learn the duties of his calling at nearby Martinhoe. You'll see this rugged little hamlet a few fields south of the carriageway, but you won't see poor old Hannington who was eventually done to death by irreligious natives in deepest Africa.

But throughout this walk you'll be accompanied by traces of this adventuresome fellow who loved the vertiginous landscape hereabouts so much that he opened up a myriad of dizzying paths along the cliffs. Over the past 100 years since their making, many of these have now been tipped into the sea by landslides, and of those that remain, only a few are passable by anyone larger and less nimble than a goat.

When he later met his untimely end in Equatorial Africa, Hannington must have felt as homesick as the Italian soldiers who once froze on guard-duty in the Roman signal-station, which abuts the carriageway just before it turns the corner to head towards Hunters Inn.

Turning the corner you can enjoy the amazing drama of Exmoor's deepest V-shaped valley. It's called Heddon's Mouth Cleave and it must be one of the steepest, deepest valleys to be found anywhere in the region.

It runs straight out of the depths of the hills to the sea, and the fact that there's a hostelry at the bottom of the carriageway is almost thrown into insignificance by the grandeur of it all.

The carriageway winds its way gently down to Hunter's Inn. Turn right on the road and walk 500 metres and you will eventually come to the path that leads down the river's side

to the sea and to Heddon's Mouth itself. Sitting in a humble shack by the old lime-kilns in the blustery rain, it was easy to imagine why this was a favourite haunt with smugglers and even, if modern legend has it right, with Nazi U-boat skippers desperate for fresh water.

Heddon's Mouth is not exactly Brighton Beach when it comes to being by the seaside. No prom here and the nearest thing you'll get to a stick of rock is of the more literal kind, the sort that might become detached from the gigantic cliffs.

And now, unless you're in the brandy-smuggling game, it's back from whence you came, only this time along the lower, official South West Coast Path. You'll see this ascending up the eastern flanks of the valley, and this you must take to complete the circular walk. Be warned though: those with weak heads for heights might like to consult the map and find their own way back through Martinhoe.

There are bits of this path that take you alarmingly close to abyss. But it's well worthwhile. For instance, you may well see a peregrine quartering the slopes and you may even be lucky enough to witness one taking a death-defying, 120 mile-per-hour dive to consume yet another unsuspecting pigeon.

We saw a peregrine and a hen harrier, not to mention countless sea birds winging in and out of their cliff-side colonies far below. Eventually there's a climb through the woods back to the car, but not before you've crossed just above Wringapeak where the «Gurt Fish» lurks. Just looking at the darkness of the sea down there, you'll feel glad to be safe and alive.