



North Devon

Morte and Bull Point Circular



Life on a knife-edge, that's what this hike offers. That's how it feels to walk out to the end of Morte Point.

The rocks out there on the penultimate finger of North Devon are of the knife-edge variety. It is an ever-narrowing land of a thousand vertical razorbacks.

No other place is at once so beautiful and so terrible. Morte Point – Death Point – is tipped by the Morte Stone, which was known to the sailor-folk of old as the Death Stone for very good reason. A lot of ships went down on the Morte and its wayward rock over the centuries.

We begin our hike in Morteheoe, a mile north of Woolacombe. Parking is tight, so find the small car park that serves the village and negotiate the narrow street to until you see the church. A track leads out to the point adjacent to St Mary, but tarry a while by visiting the old temple because the historian WG Hoskins describes it as "One of the most interesting in North Devon."

The small Norman church, "has been largely spared by the 'restorer'," says Hoskins. Transepts have been added down the years, but not for a very long time and, if you are into wagon-roofs, Morteheoe's long open-timbered example will warm the cockles of your heart. Though, the grotesque sea monsters carved on some of the bench-ends might cool the cockles down again.

The track which leads past the cemetery takes us out onto the upper flanks of Morte's central ridge. Cliff flowers abound among the many crags and sheep trundle here or there grazing upon the salt-flavoured grasses. Far off to the west, Lundy reminds the walker that – though Morte appears to be the last

Basic hike: From village of Morteheoe out to the end of Morte Point then north around Rockham Bay to Bull Point before heading inland back to the village.

Recommended map: Ordnance Survey Explorer 139. Distance and going: three miles easy going.

vestige of terra-firma in a large ocean – there is an ultimate outpost further west.

The general impression given by Morte Point is one of lonesome and savage wilderness, but a glance to your left will instantly reveal the, at times, highly populated acres of Woolacombe Beach. And the sense is identical to the one you get when circumnavigating neighbouring Baggy Point and looking down into Croyde Bay: you are so divorced from the holidaying hordes you feel you could be walking in some distant universe.

Various sheep tracks and paths lead out to the end of Morte, but I took the rather tricky one which threads its way right down the spine. This provides the full impact created by all those razorback rocks. They run down the ridge like the jagged solar plates some dinosaurs used to have on their backs.

Morte Slate: that's the official name for this terrifying rock, which looks for all the world as if it was specially designed to rip the bellies out of ships. And this, of course, is exactly what used to happen in the days of sail. But as I covered some of the gory details of the local shipwrecks in my Neptune article, I won't repeat the woeful litany here, save to say that very few of the stricken crews survived.

It's rather odd contemplating all this maritime mayhem while enjoying a picnic out there amid the razorbacks on a calm and sunny day. Odd, but strangely satisfying. Crab sandwiches (available in a remarkable home that has been converted to a shop back up in the village) seem to have a more resonant flavour.

The coast path makes a more determined and unified stab at travelling along the northern edge of the point. Up and down it goes, in true coast path form, past Whiting and Oreweed Coves to reach little Rockham Bay. The rock pools, by the way, are god for prawns if you have a net.

But no time for that now as we climb the final ramparts of Bull Point. This is North Devon's big corner – the place where the east-west coast of the Bristol Channel finally gives up in abeyance to the ocean, and heads south.

Morte might be the fine and dramatic finger, but Bull is an altogether more stolid affair around which the oceanic tides mix with those from the channel in a stew of terrifying violence. Standing guard over all this watery waywardness is the lighthouse – and it is along the paved lighthouse road that we wander back to Morte to complete the circular route.

And it was along this road that, several years ago, I saw Southern Ireland. I wrote about it at the time and have the pictures to prove it, but few people believe me. I was armed with a map, a compass and a zoom lens so I will reiterate the claim. It was very hazy, and very distant, but there on the horizon was a land-mass exactly where the Knockmealdown Mountains in Ireland should be.

It was on one of those ludicrously clear days when you can see the number plates on cars plying along the Welsh coast opposite, but my brother reckons the curvature of the earth would just about prevent such a view.

He might be right, but I know what I saw and would love to hear from any reader who has been out to Bull Point on such a day. Is Ireland visible, or have I kissed the Blarney Stone?

The lighthouse road joins a lane that leads back into Morte-hoe. A few hundred yards after entering the village you will find yourself directly opposite the village car park.