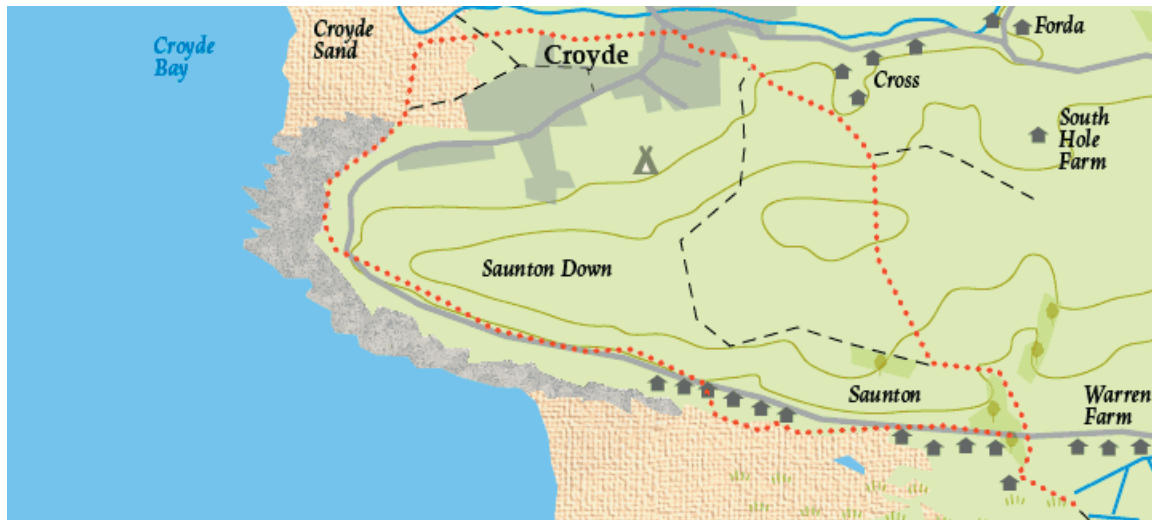




North Devon

Saunton-Croyde



Braunton has one of the best fish and chip shops in the Westcountry, so that alone is enough of an excuse to embark upon some sort of local walk.

The B3231 heads north-west out of Braunton on its way to Croyde, and after a couple of miles begins to climb the flanks of Saunton Down. Along here there are a couple of lay-bys with some of the finest roadside views in the county. You can look south across Saunton Sands and Braunton Burrows towards the estuary of the rivers Torridge and Taw - and it's one of the most astonishing panoramas in the region.

You can walk directly up a small path which leads back up to the road - and exactly opposite you will see the South West Coast Path sign heralding the famous public right of way. The celebrated path heads west past the hotel, but the one we want proceeds directly up the hill. The map shows that remains of ancient cultivation terraces can be found on these slopes, and though I'm at a loss as to who grew what here - I am not in the least surprised to learn that this was a spot favoured by early growers. The site is south-facing and fairly sheltered - and so hot in the sun that I was boiling by the time I'd climbed to the top.

Across the broad and breezy downs we went, to descend the even steeper northern slope to Croyde - which can be seen snuggling around the western edge of its horseshoe bay far below. The path swings north-east to meet Down Lane and this carries on to the village. Two footpaths issue left from the

Basic Hike: from Saunton Sands car park over Saunton Down to Croyde, and back via the South West Coast Path.

Recommended map: Ordnance Survey Explorer 139.

Distance and Going: three miles, steep in one section. Just before you get to Devon's answer to Big Sur on the B3231, there's a little lane leading down to Saunton Sands car park on the left - and this is as good a place as any in which to leave the car.

track and we took the second which leads to the centre of the busy seaside resort.

Croyde apparently gets its name from a Viking raider called «Crydda». Anyway, it's a curious little place that combines the old and the new - and somehow just about gets away with it. The old village is pretty in a classic Westcountry way - thatched and cream-tea-ish - but it is besieged by large caravan and camping sites. Let's face it, these places, though necessary for the local economy, are never beautiful.

But Croyde has something pleasant about it despite the caravans. The centre nestles behind the dunes, and somehow it's difficult to visit without thinking of all those brave Americans who rehearsed the World War II Normandy landings on the sands.

It must have been very difficult for those young soldiers who trained here to imagine that a similar place in France could be so dangerous while this was so pretty and innocent in a seaside sort of way. But dangerous it was - the men of the 146th Engineer Combat Battalion, which trained on Baggy Point, were among the first to land on Omaha Beach and, of course, many were killed.

The village has a rather eccentric local tradition: apparently men who'd been rousing their spirits in the local pub used to be crowned Mayor of Croyde if they fell into the stream which runs through the centre. They would keep this title until the next inebriated fool got a soaking.

In town the walker must turn right for a few yards along the main road, keeping a look out for the path that leads to the beach. This takes you to the heart of Croyde Burrows which provide a superb venue for snoozing or generally lying about in the sun. They are especially good if there's a chill wind coming off the sea. You can find a snug, warm, sheltered hollow and doze off in solitude - even though the beach is humming with holidaymakers just a few feet away.

Now it's off again, down to the beach proper where you pick up the Coast Path just above rocks to the south of the sands. Follow it around the small point under Saunton Down - eventually the path crosses back over the road to avoid a property - then it's simply a matter of proceeding east back to the car.

Three miles at the most - an hour's walk including the snooze - and plenty of fresh sea air and panoramic views. What more could you ask for?