



South Devon

Maidencombe - Watcombe Circular

Maidencombe: a red-rock bay with a quaint and comely shore. It's one of the few places where you can get down to the sea along the hilly coastline that stretches from the back-end of Torquay to Shaldon at the mouth of the Teign. This walk explores a southerly section of that magical littoral.

The manor of «Medencumbe» is mentioned in the Domesday Book, but today the coastal farm and woodlands are managed under a Countryside Stewardship Scheme under the auspices of the Torbay Coast and Countryside Trust to protect wildlife, encourage traditional farming and allow public access and enjoyment of the area.

The red sandstones you can see in the cliffs down in the bay were once part of a huge desert similar today's Sarah, and the limestone fragments found in them were carried into the dunes by enormous flash-floods. Who says climate change is a new thing?

We made our way to the car park at the bottom of Maidencombe, then headed south along the coast via lower paths to Roundhouse Point - returning along higher, less vertiginous tracks.

You'll see the basic route if you look at Ordnance Survey's Torquay and Dawlish Explorer 31 - but note that a number of permissive paths have now been opened in addition to the existing rights of way which appear on the map.

The South West Coast Path weaves its way south along the wooded edge of the cliffs after leaving Maidencombe, then veers inland in the most dramatic of ways to gain access to the Valley of Rocks.

Until I stumbled upon this most remarkable ravine I would have put big money on Devon having only one gorge of this name. The gaping, boulder-strewn and craggy crevice near Lynton on the north coast is the Valley of Rocks I know and love - but believe me, this secret southerly cleft is every bit as dramatic in its own sylvan way.

To gain access to this secluded place there is a dramatic debouchment of the path which has brought you the mile or so from Maidencombe. It suddenly swings from the gloom of a copse into the bright, sunlit, vertical, side of a cliff that runs at right-angles away from the shore, which is hundreds of feet



Basic Hike: from Maidencombe taking the South West Coast Path south as far as Roundhouse Point, before returning along higher tracks.

Recommended map: Ordnance Survey Explorer 31.

Distance & going: five miles, plenty of ups and downs on good paths.

beneath. The path traverses down this face of red rock, offering the most spectacular views, before reaching the trees of the coombe.

One of my companions commented: «I think it's more Undercliffian than the Undercliff near Lyme Regis. You can imagine the French Lieutenant's Woman coming here to mope, or whatever it was she did...»

No doubt about it. Immense trees darken this shady glade and nought but a million leafy ferns adorn its floor. But through the chiaroscuro of dappled light, glimpses of the bright red rock flit through the high canopy to remind you that this is no ordinary glade. There are also caves that add a sinister, prehistoric edge to the place.

Looking at the contours on the map you get the feeling that the tortuous composition of the place must be natural, but something there seems to suggest that man has been at work here hewing and hacking at the rock for goodness knows what.

«This walk might be comparatively short but you have to be fit to do it,» puffed my companion as we ascended past Smuggler's Hole. Having said that, we had very little difficulty traversing the handsome section by Shag Cliff. And then, with a heart-pounding zig-and-a-zag, we ascended the ramparts of Roundhouse Point. Here the upper, return path shoots off to the right, but my companion insisted on walking another few hundred yards so that we could enjoy the superb views of Babbacombe, Long Quarry Point, Black Head and Hope's Nose.

Well worth the effort - as is the slightly less energetic route back - skirting, as it does, the top of the woods most of the way back to Maidencombe. You occasionally dip down to join little sections of the outward journey's path, but eventually the higher route crosses fields to reach the lane that leads down to the hamlet.

All along this walk you will see fantastic displays of wild flowers at this time of the year, and I learn from the Torbay Coast and Countryside Trust that the 150-acre Maidencombe Farm is a stronghold for the rare Cirl Bunting. The farm also has a network of permissive footpaths, which makes the area an ideal place in which to take numerous short circular walks.

The hamlet of Maidencombe lies at the centre of the farm and the Coast and Countryside Trust also looks after the village green, car park and the excellent beach café.