

# WILD swimming *Walks*

Dartmoor and South Devon  
28 lake, river and  
beach days out

Sophie Pierce  
Matt Newbury



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## WILD SWIMMING WALKS

Leads you on 28 adventures into the beautiful scenery and wild swimming paradise of Dartmoor and South Devon. Discover wooded river pools and tumbling waterfalls, secret coves and amazing sea caves, safe in the company of Devon's two most intrepid and fun-loving explorers.

All the walking routes include places to swim and ideas for pubs and refreshments along the route.



**WILD  
THINGS**  
PUBLISHING





Sophie Pierce lives on the edge of Dartmoor and started the South Devon Wild Swimming Club after getting caught in a rip-current during a New Year's Day dip. She has worked as a reporter for the BBC for 20 years.



Matt Newbury is a writer and marketing specialist born and raised in Devon. He has completed many swimming challenges including escaping from Alcatraz and swimming to the Isle of Wight.



Sophie and Matt are authors of *Beyond the Beach: the secret wild swims of Torbay*.

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# WILD SWIMMING SAFETY



**S**plan your walk, taking necessary supplies and protection; don't forget water, a map, compass and waterproofs, especially on the moor.

Remember that cold water can limit your swimming endurance. If it is your first outdoor swim of the season, be careful to enter the water slowly and acclimatise. Stay close to the shore until you are comfortable. Wear a wetsuit for added warmth and buoyancy. Do not overestimate your ability. Remember that the cold water quickly creates hypothermia – shivering is the first stage.

Don't enter water without first establishing an exit point, especially in fast-flowing water. Never jump or dive into water without first checking the depth and whether there are any obstructions. Even if you have jumped/dived there before, always check every time. Large obstructions like tree branches and rocks move about underwater and an area that was previously clear may well be blocked.

Swim in a group wherever possible or, if swimming alone, let people know your movements and take extra special care.

Take extra care following heavy rainfall, when rivers might be in spate and flowing much faster than normal.

Watch out in high surf - rip-currents can form which take you out to sea, to behind the breaking waves. Swim perpendicularly from them to escape, then body-surf back in.

Beware of tidal currents, especially near estuary mouths and around headlands, especially at mid-tide, and on fortnightly spring tides, when flows are strongest.

If you are concerned about water quality, cover cuts and open wounds with plasters and do not swim front crawl.

## TIDES AND WEATHER CONDITIONS FOR SOUTH DEVON

When planning a swim on the South Devon coast, it's very useful to look at the wind forecast as well as the tides. If you want calm water, you need to know which way the wind is coming from. The prevailing winds in Devon are south westerly, and if this is the case, then choose a swim spot that faces east. Conversely, if the winds are easterly, then it's a good idea to pick a west or south west facing beach. The principle here is that you don't want the wind blowing from the sea onto the land, as the sea is more likely to be rough. Tides are of course very important. Before you go, find out what the tide is doing; it is important to know whether it's going out or coming in. The interesting thing to note about tides in South Devon is that on spring tides (the biggest tides, occurring at the time of the full and new moons), high water will always be at about 6pm, while low water will always be at about noon.



## Walk 17

# WESTCOMBE AND WONWELL CIRCULAR

This is an exciting and quite strenuous walk, taking in an old smugglers' village, fascinating caves and rock formations, a wooded estuary and two swimming beaches.

**T**he walk starts by the Church of St James the Less ❶ in the heart of the village of Kingston, and immediately you pass the historic Dolphin Inn, which dates back to the 16th century. Note the images of dolphins everywhere, even over the sign to the gents! You head out of the village down a track, which can be extremely muddy, passing fishing lakes and, unusually, a willow plantation. The fishermen of the village traditionally made their lobster and crab pots out of willow and it is interesting to see it is still being grown today. This track would no doubt have been used by fishermen to get to the beach, and indeed smugglers too!

When you get to Westcombe Beach ❸ you'll see a dilapidated building on your left. It's the remains of old stables, built to accommodate the horses belonging to the local landowners the Mildmays, of the Flete estate. They would frequently drive their carriages to local beaches for parties, including to Westcombe, where they had a tea house (which sadly no longer remains). It's even rumoured that members of the Royal Family were among their guests. A pamphlet about the history of the village, published in 1987, records the reminiscences of villager Ivy Willcocks, who died in 1987. Ivy describes how the then carriageway down to the beach was "kept beautiful and trimmed and cleared up...they used to bring the servants to wait on them and all, it was wonderful for us kids to see them."

The beach is spectacular, with rugged and intricate rock formations, and distinctive grey sand, reflecting the slate in the cliffs. At low tide, to the right, you can make your way through the rocks to another beach where there are extensive and intriguing caves,

## INFORMATION

**DISTANCE:** 5 miles

**TIME:** 3 hours

**MAP:** OS Explorer South Devon OL20

**START POINT:** St James the Less Church, Kingston. Park in the village outside the church (SX 635 478, TQ7 4QB)

**END POINT:** St James the Less Church, Kingston

**PUBLIC TRANSPORT:** On Fridays only, the 875 from Plymouth. However, it is impractical as it will not allow enough time to do the walk

**SWIMMING:** Westcombe Beach (SX 635 457) and Wonwell Beach (SX 617 472)

**PLACES OF INTEREST:** St James the Less Church, Westcombe Beach caves, Wonwell Beach and estuary

**REFRESHMENTS:** The Dolphin Inn at Kingston is a 16th century pub which also does bed and breakfast (01548 810314, TQ7 4QE). In the next village, Ringmore, is another nice pub, the Journey's End, which has some cosy nooks to sit in, and good food (01548 810205, TQ7 4HL)





many linked to each other. Rumour has it these were used by smugglers, and some even say there was a tunnel all the way from the caves through to Scobbiscombe Farm inland.

At high tide, if it's calm, you can swim through and in and out of the numerous rocky channels. You can also swim over the extensive reefs, admiring unusual anemones including the strawberry and snakelocks varieties. You can often see oyster catchers here too and, if you're really lucky, a peregrine falcon.

After a thorough exploration of Westcombe Beach, you face a tough ascent along the coast path heading west. At the top you have stunning views of Burgh Island to the east, and further along you reach Beacon Point, one of the places where huge fires have been lit to mark important events over the years. Apparently the first to be lit here was in Elizabethan times, to warn of the Spanish Armada.

You then reach the Erme estuary, one of South Devon's prettiest, with lovely Wonwell Beach 4 at the mouth. This is very much a locals beach as it involves a winding drive through narrow lanes, with very few passing places, to get to it by car. Over on the other side you can see a row of old coastguard cottages, where they tried to keep a lid on all the smuggling activities. Before the First World War, coal would be brought in here in barges from Wales, which would keep Kingston supplied for a year.

It's a lovely swimming spot, with views out to sea and across to Mothecombe on the other side. At low tide you may need to wade quite a way to get out of your depth! The estuary is totally unspoilt and you may see herons, egrets and cormorants. It is a truly peaceful place, and constantly changing, according to what the tide is doing. When it's low



you can walk a long way up the river, past old lime kilns, and if you get far enough you can see across to Efford House on the other side, one of the locations in Ang Lee's 1995 film *Sense and Sensibility*; the house played the role of the Dashwood family's Devon 'cottage'.

The walk finishes by ascending up through beautiful woods, full of wild garlic and bluebells in spring, and back through fields to the village.

## DIRECTIONS

**1** From the church, walk down the lane with the Dolphin Inn on your right. Turn right at the T junction and then left at Rock Cottages. Follow the track down the hill. Bear left at the fork marked Jarfin.

**0.2 miles**

**2** At the next fork bear right along the bridleway (don't take the footpath to Ringmore). Continue to follow the track to Westcombe Beach.

**1.5 miles**

**3** From the beach follow the coast path west to the Erme estuary and Wonwell Beach.

**2.3 miles**

**4** At Wonwell Beach, if it's low tide, you can walk up the sand and then up the slipway to the lane. If it's high tide, follow the coast path above the beach and through the wood until you get to the bottom of the lane.

**0.3 miles**

**5** Walk up the lane and then

turn right through the woods, following the public footpath signposted Kingston.

**0.3 miles**

**6** Once out of the woods follow the footpath through the fields until it hits the lane. Turn right here and then left at the end of the lane, and you will find yourself back at the church.

**0.7 miles**

