

# 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 2

# EAST OKEMENT POOLS AND TAW MARSH CIRCULAR

An epic walk, taking you from ancient woodland and up to the stark heights of the moor with beautiful waterfalls and pools.

You start on the edge of Okehampton, underneath a handsome stone viaduct, built in the 1870s, which used to carry the main trains between Plymouth and Waterloo. Not quite so handsome is the road bridge carrying the A30, which thunders overhead. You then walk beside the river, which is like a wonderful watery staircase. It gurgles down a series of drops of varying shapes and sizes and is packed with pools and waterfalls. This stretch is known as West Cleave, and is surrounded by ancient woods.

The map-maker Samuel Rowe, in his classic work of 1848 *A Perambulation of Dartmoor* describes it as follows: “The course of the river through this secluded glen presents a succession of scenes of romantic grandeur and wild magnificence. The river comes foaming down from the moors over a solid granite bed, in some places sufficiently steep to form a succession of waterfalls, and makes its way through a deep mountain gorge.”

Particularly notable are West Cleave Rocks (an unusual horizontal mass of rock like a pavement), and a little further up there is a spectacular, twenty foot high waterfall ❸, which is one of the best places to stop and swim. Make a base at the top of the waterfall and you can swim in a large pool above it, with cascades at the top. You can then climb down to the pool below the waterfall and swim there – an exhilarating experience because of the sheer energy buzzing from the waterfall.

After your swim you leave the woodland and head out onto the open moor. Walking south you see the river making its way into the distance on your right. Don't miss the Nine Maidens stone circle ❹, which has a wonderfully intimate feel because it is particularly small. There are actually a lot more than nine stones, and the traditional myth is that they represent nine young women who were turned to stone after going dancing instead of attending church. But in fact, in

## INFORMATION

**DISTANCE:** 7 miles

**TIME:** 5 hours

**MAP:** OS Explorer Dartmoor OL28

**START POINT:** Fatherford. Park by the side of road at SX 603 948, EX20 1QG. From the centre of Okehampton take the B3260 East and then turn right down Fatherford Road. At the bottom turn right. The road comes to a dead end and there is a parking area on the right.

The walk strays into a small part of the Okehampton firing range so check there's no firing before you go: [www.gov.uk/government/publications/dartmoor-firing-programme](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/dartmoor-firing-programme)

**END POINT:** Fatherford

**PUBLIC TRANSPORT:** Trains from Exeter to Okehampton and plenty of buses to Okehampton. Then a half hour walk out of Okehampton to the start point

**SWIMMING:** Pools and waterfalls on the East Okement, particularly at the large waterfall (SX 607 936), large pool at Taw Marsh (SX 619 914)

**PLACES OF INTEREST:** East Okement River, West Cleave Rocks, Nine Maidens Stone Circle, Cullever Steps, Irishman's Wall, Taw Marsh.

**REFRESHMENTS:** The Tors pub at Belstone is the only place that serves food and drink on the walk. It's a fairly basic pub where you can get simple food and refreshments (01837 840689, EX20 1QZ).

cultures across the world, there are many stories about nine women, going back to pre-Christian times. For example the Nine Muses or the Nine Valkyries. One writer, Ruth St Leger-Gordon, believed the concept went back to witches worshipping the moon in three phases: crescent, full and waning, with each phase being represented by a lunar goddess. These three phases were again separated into three, giving nine moon goddesses or maidens. This theory could also explain why the 'Nine Maidens' name is often found at sacred places such as groups of trees or wishing wells.

You then head down to Cullever Steps 7, an ancient ford. There's a beautiful plunge pool in the stream a few hundred metres downstream, just below Scarey Tor. You are now in the Okehampton firing area. The army have been using Dartmoor for training for around two hundred years. It's particularly suitable for marines, paratroopers and infantry, as well as other forces that move mainly on foot. You may well see them training, as the public aren't excluded when they're firing blanks. We once witnessed a training exercise here involving explosions and gunfire, which was particularly exciting for the younger members of the party.

The walk then takes you up and over the hill into the next valley. Walking up from Cullever Steps note Irishman's Wall straight ahead of you. Legend has it that an Irishman came here during the famine and decided he wanted to keep stock on Dartmoor, and so built a wall not knowing that enclosing the commons was not allowed. The locals took great pleasure in letting him build it and then, once it was up, removing most of it overnight.

At the crest of the hill, stop and admire Higher Tor on your left and Winter Tor on your right. As you descend into the next valley you can see the River Taw at the bottom. This valley feels bleakly beautiful: it is stark, and the landscape is smooth and unpunctu-

ated by tors. It feels as though you have crossed into foreign territory, perhaps into the wilds of somewhere remote like Afghanistan. At the bottom you reach the area known as Taw Marsh 9. There is a crossing point with a ford, and this is the next swimming spot.

There is a large pool on the bend just upstream from the ford. We've christened it 'Ophelia's Pool', as there are beautiful long green weeds, like hair, all flowing downstream, as in the famous painting by John Everett Millais. You can swim here and then go upstream as the river narrows. The water isn't very deep and at times it feels a bit like bog snorkelling, but it is actually very magical. You swim along, nose level with the reeds, flowers and sphagnum moss, totally immersed in the microcosm of the river, looking up to the majestic mountain of Steeper-ton Tor straight ahead of you. Sphagnum moss is found frequently on Dartmoor, and it was collected during the First World War to provide dressings for wounded soldiers because of its natural antiseptic and absorbent qualities.

The next part of the walk takes you north towards Belstone, but don't miss some extraordinary twentieth century remains just off to the right of the path. You'll see what looks like a bunker with Keep Out signs, and glass and metal hatches on the ground. These are the remains of an unsuccessful attempt in the 1950s by the North Devon Water Board to sink trial boreholes to see if there might be an underground lake. Water was found but it turned out to be radioactive and the project came to nought.

You then reach the picturesque village of Belstone 10, which despite appearing lost in the mists of time has its own Twitter account. Look out for the unusual old Zion Chapel with its Telegraph Office sign. There's a pub, The Tors, where you can stop for a well-earned rest, before making your way down through fields back to where you started.



## DIRECTIONS



1 Leave the car at Fatherford and walk towards the viaduct. Go through the gate and cross the wooden bridge over the river, admiring the viaduct overhead.

**0.1 miles**

2 Turn left after the bridge and follow the path up the river, with the river on your left. Keep following the path uphill, over a clam bridge and through a gap in the wall. You will pass lots of cascades.

**0.4 miles**

3 The path then gets steeper with a hand rail on the left. Notice the large waterfall on the left. This is the first swimming spot – there is a big pool above the large waterfall, and numerous other pools.

**0.2 miles**

4 Carry on walking with the river on your left. You come to another clam bridge over the river (there is also a ford and stepping stones). Cross the bridge and note the dramatic blasted tree. This is a good place for a picnic.

**0.1 miles**

5 Turn right and follow the path with the river on your right, and keep following it up the side of the hill. The path meets a military track. Cross the track, and another one, and head uphill. You will see Belstone Tor ahead. Bear slightly left to visit the Nine Maidens stone circle.

**0.6 miles**

**6** From the circle take the path south, and then bear right and pick up the military track. You reach a junction of paths. Turn right here to get to Cullever Steps (there is also another swimming opportunity at a pool downstream below Scarey Tor).

**0.6 miles**

**7** From Cullever Steps go back to the junction and, heading south, take the left fork. You will see Irishman's Wall to the left. Ahead is Higher Tor and to the right is Winter Tor. Turn left by the boundary stone marked WD. The path meets a rocky track which you follow uphill, bending to the right. It takes you around the hill, and at the crest you pass between Higher Tor on the left and Winter Tor on the right. Looking at Winter Tor you have the spectacle of, left to right, High Willhays, Yes Tor and Rowtor.

**0.6 miles**

**8** At the next fork you turn left. Note group of boundary stones on the left. Walk down the hill. Make your way down an indistinct path to Taw Marsh.

**0.8 miles**

**9** After swimming, with your back to the pool, take the track to the left, and then cross the rough ground to pick up the track going north to Belstone. Walk with the river on the right. This track takes you all the way to the village.

**0.9 miles**

**10** Walk into the village where you will find the Tors pub on your left.

Carry on past it and turn left at the old Zion Chapel, and then take the lane on the right. Don't go down the road marked Dead End. Follow the lane past old Rectory Farm on the left, until you get to a cattle grid.

**0.9 miles**

**11** Take the public footpath on the left signed to Fatherford, and follow

the path through the fields until you get to a stream which you cross over a little granite bridge. You then get to another lane. Turn left here, go under the A30 road bridge, and then under the Fatherford railway bridge. Turn left immediately after the bridge and you will see the parking area on the right.

**0.8 miles**

