



Lyrical
Landscapes

Born 250 years ago, the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge was one of many writers to be awed and inspired by the wild beauty of Exmoor, and fellow romantics will be too

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Previous page: Medieval Dunster Castle sits amid the rolling hills of Exmoor
Opposite: The castle looms above the pretty medieval village of Dunster
Below: Coleridge Cottage in the village of Nether Stowey

The national park of Exmoor, which carpets 267 square miles of Devon and Somerset, is a microcosm of England's most iconic landscapes: heather-clad moors; undulating green hills dotted with sheep; tumbling rivers in deep wooded valleys; and dramatic cliffs plunging to the shoreline.

It's thrilling to travel between these varied terrains via the winding lanes that criss-cross Exmoor, which reveal stunning views at every turn. And it's not all about the landscape: enfolded within the hills are historic towns and villages with houses hewn out of the local stone, and centuries of traditions and stories to discover.

Many visitors' first stop is the medieval village of

Dunster, pretty as a picture with its cobbled streets, thatched cottages and fairytale castle perched high on the hill above. This Saxon castle was the home of the aristocratic Luttrell family from 1376, who transformed it into a lavish country home in the Victorian era. Dotted with family mementos, the castle has a warm, lived-in feel that gives you the lingering sense that the Luttrells have only just left the room. Among many treasures, the jewel of the collection is a set of rare 17th-century leather wall hangings telling the love story of Antony and Cleopatra.

Exmoor's wild beauty has drawn many romantic souls here over the years, most famously the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834), who was born 250 years ago this year. Coleridge was fond of walking from his cottage in Nether Stowey across the moors to the sea, often accompanied by his friend and fellow poet, William Wordsworth. The Romantic poetry movement, rooted in reverence for the natural world and the notion that nature can set the imagination free, was born on these long countryside strolls.

The Coleridge Way allows modern-day romantics to follow in the poet's footsteps. Signposts marked with a quill lead the way to the bustling village of Porlock and, further down, Porlock Weir, an ancient port that's now a quaint hamlet, sheltered beneath towering cliffs. You can walk from here along the coast path to the hamlet of Culbone, where England's smallest church has a 'leper window', created for a 16th-century leper colony to peer in during services.

In 1797, after walking to Culbone, Coleridge stayed in a nearby farmhouse where he fell into an opium-induced trance that inspired his strange, hallucinatory poem



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Left to right: Wild Exmoor ponies amongst heather and gorse, with Dunkery Beacon in the distance; the ancient bridge and ford leading to Lorna Doone Farm in pretty Malmsmead

Kubla Khan. The arrival of a visitor from Porlock shattered his reverie and caused him to leave the poem unfinished, hence the phrase ‘a person from Porlock’ to mean the unwelcome interruption of one’s creative flow.

On the path to Culbone, two tunnels are all that remains of Ashley Combe House, the summer retreat of Ada Lovelace, daughter of another Romantic poet, Lord Byron. Obsessed with mathematics rather than poetry – her father called her his ‘Princess of Parallelograms’ – she is now considered the world’s first computer programmer. The grand house, demolished in the 1970s, had an Italian-style terraced garden with tunnels built into the cliff so that tradesmen could approach the house without spoiling the view.

Another writer inspired by Exmoor’s wildly romantic landscapes was RD Blackmore (1825-1900). One of the most famous novelists of his generation, Blackmore set Lorna Doone in the mystical Badgeworthy Valley. His tale of nobles turned outlaws was based on stories of the Dounes, a family of brigands that once roamed these hills.

Visitors to Lorna Doone Country, as it’s now known, can peek into 15th-century Oare Church, scene of the novel’s climactic wedding-day shooting, and seek out the Lorna Doone Farm in the picture-postcard village of Malmsmead, with its ancient bridge and ford.

If you’re lucky, you’ll spot Exmoor’s oldest inhabitants: a herd of wild ponies that have grazed here for thousands of years

For a change of pace, it’s a short journey (though something of a rollercoaster ride) to Lynton and Lynmouth on the coast. The dramatic, almost alpine feel of these twin towns was beloved of the Victorians, who nicknamed them ‘Little Switzerland’. The poet Shelley honeymooned here with his teenage bride Harriet, but they were forced to leave town when the local authorities found that Shelley had been spreading his revolutionary political ideas by launching pamphlets in corked bottles into the sea.

A corniche road twists and turns round a series of hairpin bends to reach the pretty lower town, Lynmouth. Today it’s a cheerful fisherman’s village, with salty pubs and cafés selling hot pasties, but an exhibition in the Memorial Hall remembers its darkest hour: in 1952, the West and East Lyn rivers burst their banks, toppling houses and shops throughout the town, and 34 people lost their lives. ▶



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Left to right: A spectacular sunset as seen from the coastal path at the Valley of the Rocks; a thatched farmhouse in the village of Bossington




You can climb the zizagging steps to clifftop Lynton – bigger than its sister town, with a more refined air – or take the water-powered Victorian funicular for wonderful views of the sea far below.

A precipitous path hugs England's highest cliffs from Lynton to the Valley of the Rocks, an evocative landscape of craggy tors and vast boulders with names like 'the Devil's Cheesewring', 'Ragged Jack' and 'Castle Rock'. The poet Robert Southey, a friend of Coleridge, described the valley as 'rock reeling upon rock, stone piled upon stone, a huge terrifying reeling mass' – a forbidding landscape, certainly, but one whose harsh angles are softened by the serene beauty of the sea views. Coleridge himself was inspired to write *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* during his wanderings here.

After sea air and dramatic views, a cream tea is called for. Watersmeet is a National Trust tearoom in a magical setting, deep in a wooded gorge with tables set out on a lawn next to a ferociously gushing river. There has been a tea garden here since 1901; Devon tradition dictates that you spread the cream on your scone first, followed by a dollop of jam.

Rivers tumble through tree-clad valleys throughout Exmoor, most famously at Tarr Steps, where an ancient 'clapper' bridge (formed by resting slabs of rock on stacks of stones, without the use of mortar) spans the River Barle. It is by far the longest such bridge in Britain, and its origins are a mystery: some date it to as far back as 1,000 BC, while local legend says that the steps were first laid by the Devil. As the story goes, when the Devil refused to let locals cross, the local parson decided to try his luck, confronting his adversary on the bridge and intimidating him into backing down. From then on anyone could cross unharmed – on the condition that they let the Devil sunbathe on the rocks when he wished. Assuming the way is clear, you can cross the bridge for a walk along the river, whose banks are swathed in bluebells in the spring.

The Devil looms large in many local legends, often to explain Exmoor's geological quirks. According to one tale, it was by hurling a spadeful of earth from Winsford Hill that the Devil created Dunkery Beacon. Somerset's highest point at 1,705ft, this hill topped with Bronze Age cairns towers above the heathery moorland, a sea of purple in summer. From here, breathtaking views of a tapestry of landscapes unfold as far as Wales. If you're lucky, you'll spot Exmoor's earliest inhabitants on the moors: a herd of wild ponies that have grazed here for thousands of years.

More elusive is the fabled 'Beast of Exmoor', a phantom feline resembling a panther that's said to roam the moors. Eyewitness sightings have been recorded since the 1970s, but the existence of the 'beast' remains uncorroborated. As the Romantic poets proved, the imagination does run wild on Exmoor. 

THE PLANNER

GETTING THERE

Trains run from London Paddington to Taunton, from where you can take a local bus to Minehead, gateway to the Exmoor National Park, a journey of 3hr 15min.

The West Somerset Railway is a heritage line that skirts the eastern edge of Exmoor from Bishops Lydeard to Minehead. www.thetrainline.com; www.west-somerset-railway.co.uk

WHERE TO STAY

Minehead on the coast is a good base for exploring Exmoor, with a historic harbour, plenty of local amenities and appealing places to stay such as the 17th-century Anchor Cottage, whose rooftop terrace has lovely sea views. In Dunster, the Luttrell Arms Hotel has elegant rooms, some of which come with four-poster beds and original fireplaces. In Porlock Weir, Locanda on the

Weir is a boutique offering overlooking the harbour with stylishly eclectic furnishings. anchorcottageandminehead.co.uk; www.luttrellarms.co.uk; locandaontheweir.co.uk

WHERE TO EAT AND DRINK

Reward yourself after a walk at Tarr Steps with a hearty lunch or a drink by the fire at Tarr Farm, an atmospheric inn dating from the 17th century. There's a cosy bar menu as well as more formal restaurant fare. For fine dining, try The Coleridge Restaurant at Dunkery Beacon Country House, whose menu has dishes such as Fillet of Brixham sea bass with a prawn and udon noodle broth. www.tarrfarm.co.uk; dunkerybeaconaccommodation.uk

FURTHER INFORMATION

www.visit-exmoor.co.uk