



CUT-OUT-AND-GO GUIDE | MYSTERIOUS DARTMOOR



# Mysterious Dartmoor

Eerie mists, ancient tors — get back to nature at its mystical wildest

As national parks go, it's not the biggest: you can drive across it in an hour, and see the best of it in a weekend. But by car or on foot (or, ideally, both) it's a real adventure: savage moorland, misty mires, Stone Age barrows, and eerie granite tors (from the Celtic for tower). Enigmatic and intriguing — welcome to southern England's last true wilderness. **By Sean Thomas**



**SEE & DO**

The name alone, Grey Wethers, is occult enough, and the reality is a great introduction to Dartmoor's mystic desolations. Start the weekend by parking your car in the hamlet of Frenchbeer, then do a two-hour map-and-compass hike through the conifers of Fernworthy Forest, to the swathe of moorland sedge, and you'll find these **melancholic, delicately twinned stone circles, huddled together in rolling and infinite bleakness.**

Not spooked enough? Drive 25 minutes east, through Chagford, to rugged Castle Drogo (nationaltrust.org.uk/castle-drogo; £12). Famously 'the last castle built in Britain' (for the mega-rich Drewe dynasty), it was completed in 1930. Its lush gardens and aristocratic salons definitely merit a tour. But the **silent, aching heart is the room belonging to an eldest son, slain in the Great War.** With its sepia photos of lost and gilded youth, it feels like the memorial to an entire generation.

End your first day by blasting historic cobwebs at Dartmoor Stables (01364 621281, www.dartmoorstables.com; £59 for two hours; book ahead), in cute cob-n-thatch Widecombe-in-the-Moor, half an hour south of Drogo. Kids, novices and jockeys alike can all **hack real Dartmoor ponies onto the granite heights.** Try and do it at dusk when the moor has a unique and spectral light, known as 'dimmitty' to lyrical locals.

**PONY TALES**  
Dartmoor's ponies are a bit of a mystery, possibly introduced here as far back as 3500BC. Though they appear to roam wild, each has an owner somewhere on the moor

**Mistral magic:** early morning in Widecombe-in-the-Moor; below, one of the wild ponies that live on Dartmoor; St Michael de Rupe Church, Brentor

Next morning, truck on east for 10 minutes and you'll come to one of the grandest of Dartmoor's tors, the mighty, must-ascend massif of Hay Tor. A 20-minute scramble up slopes, then stone, brings **stirring views of distant Exmoor to the north, and the glittering Channel to the south.** Crowds often throng the top, but walk a few hundred metres, and it's just you and the ever-present black ravens. Circling. And watching.

Now head arrow-west to Princetown. Quite possibly the most forbidding settlement in Britain, the entire place is **dominated by its notorious prison, which feels like the mad black palace of a local despot.** Serious jailbirds deemed too old and inert to escape are kept here. Check out the prison museum (dartmoor-prison.co.uk; £3.50), with its creepy hoard of historic DIY shivs and guns, made by evil cons. Brrr.

No tour of moody Dartmoor would be complete without a yomp to Wistman's Wood, just minutes by car from Princetown and a rare survival of stunted oak trees, proving that the entire moor was once forested (and warmer, and drier). The **gnarly, ancient trees are adorned with pelts and ribbons of fairy-tale moss,** like something from the fevered daydreams of a drunken Tolkien.

Your trip is nearly over, so spend that second afternoon somewhere very different: Lydford Gorge, (nationaltrust.org.uk/lydford-gorge; £9.80), on the far western edge of the moor, where the **garrulous river Lyd chatters its way down wooded cataracts and bosky cascades.** A two-hour round-trip begins at the White Lady Waterfall and ends at the Devil's Cauldron. Legends abound in between, as do picnic spots.

End this mystical weekend with a twilight, half-hour clamber up nearby Brentor, redolently eerie, with its Neolithic remains, Iron Age hill fort, and peculiar Victorian church of St Michael de Rupe. But really it's the epic views that inspire, with Plymouth Sound to the south, Cornwall to the west, and the **desolate entirety of Dartmoor, rearing to the sky, right behind you.**



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EAT

● Proper local market

TAVISTOCK FARMERS' MARKET

**Because:** This Farmers' Market showcases top produce — perfect for a picnic. Get your carbs from Bread of Devon, meats from Pomeroy Rare Breeds, jellies and chutneys from Kingston Preserves, and much more. **Travel's tip:** It's open on the second, fourth and fifth Saturdays every month. Or try Chagford's delis and butchers. *Bedford Square, Tavistock; tavistockfarmersmarket.com.*

● Atmospheric pub grub

WARREN HOUSE INN (Mains about £6)

**Because:** In sweeping moorland, it radiates solitude, 15 minutes' drive from Princetown. Go for Warreners rabbit pie and a local Tanglefoot beer. **Travel's tip:** Settle in by ye olde peat fire, said to have been burning since the 1840s. *Nr Postbridge; warrenhouseinn.co.uk; closed Mon and Tues.*

● Very decent bistro

WHIDDONS (Two courses from £23)

**Because:** Chagford brims with good eating and this cosy bistro does reliably delicious food (eg, confit duck leg with plum sauce) at fair prices. **Travel's tip:** Sip aperitifs in the Three Crowns Hotel down the road. Dating from the 13th century, it's said to be haunted by Cavalier poets. *High St, Chagford; whiddonseatery.co.uk.*

● Serious restauranting

HORN OF PLENTY (Three-course dinner about £49)

**Because:** Food at this Jane Austen-ish Georgian manor house is tip-top, notably the Cornish partridge in Earl Grey jus. **Travel's tip:** Stroll around the gardens, with their views of the Tamar Valley. *Gulworthy; 01822 832528, thehornofplenty.co.uk.*

● For a real splurge

GIDLEIGH PARK HOTEL (Three-course dinner about £125)

**Because:** It serves up the best food in Devon, even the southwest: Cornish brill with hazelnut praline, Lakeland lamb with 'parsnip bark' — all amazing. **Travel's tip:** Come out of season for wooded weir walks — it's convenient for Grey Wethers and Drogo, too. *Gidleigh; 01647 432367, gidleigh.co.uk.*

FOOD BASICS

Self-caterers who need more than picnicy nibbles can shop at Tesco, Waitrose and Sainsbury's in nearby towns such as Tavistock and Okehampton — the moor has no supermarkets of any decent size

DAY-TRIP TIP

Add this pub to your itinerary with Lydford Gorge and/or Brentor — it's handy for both and perfect for a cold pint

IF YOU'RE WALKING...

Beware: chunks of Dartmoor are used by the Army as a firing range (see gov.uk for off-limits times). Other hazards include floods. Break an ankle in a remote mire, and you could die

DRINK

● Proper pub

RUGGLESTONE INN

**Because:** It has pies and crab sarnies and a lovely garden in one of the area's prettiest villages, yet maintains the air of a genuine local. **Travel's tip:** Fallen for the place? You can stay in a converted barn next door. *Widcombe-in-the-Moor; rugglestoneinn.co.uk.*

● Rambling Victorian coaching inn

TWO BRIDGES HOTEL

**Because:** It's good for Princetown and Wistman's Woods, and serves Jail Ale and worth-a-pitstop lunches, with log fires and moorland all around. **Travel's tip:** It's rightly popular — book ahead for a supper table. Cream-tea-time is even busier. *Two Bridges; 01822 892300, twobridges.co.uk.*

● Child-friendly stop-off

THE LONDON INN

**Because:** It's in one of Dartmoor's enticing, less-touristy villages. Dogs and hikers all welcome. **Travel's tip:** There's a playground at the back for infants. Look out for steak specials on Saturdays. *Horrabridge; thelondoninnhorrabridge.co.uk.*

ASK THE LOCAL

Paul Rendell has been guiding on the moor for more than 20 years (paulrendelldartmoor.co.uk)

“If you want to really get away from it all, then it doesn't get better than Lower Barn at Sherberton (anton-coaker.co.uk), a self-catering cottage, with no wi-fi or mobile reception. Amazing isolation. If you like fly-fishing, contact the Arundell Arms Hotel (arundellarms.com) — it's got almost as much river as Prince Charles. A real problem in Dartmoor is people who drive too fast and hit the wild ponies. There's a speed limit for a reason — stick to it. Do take a guided night walk along the Lych Way — where locals once hefted coffins to Lydford church, right across the moor. It's a spooky thrill, even if I do say so myself (I guide them!).”



STAY

● Exquisite self-catering

WIDCOMBE COTTAGE (From £395 a week, sleeping two, ie, £57 a night)

**Because:** On a lush, wooded hillside, this stone croft has been imaginatively converted into a romantic bolthole, all open-plan exposed-oak rustic chic. **Travel's tip:** Rugglestone Inn (see Drink) is a five-minute walk, but shops are off the moor — so stock up. *Widcombe-in-the-moor; 01364 621466, www.exclusivelydartmoor.co.uk.*

● Happy hostel

YHA POSTBRIDGE (Doubles from £89, dorm beds from £19, room only)

**Because:** Bang in the middle of the moor (ie, near Two Bridges), and beautifully remote, with a games room, wi-fi, laundry, a decent bar, and everything from kayaking to rock-climbing on your doorstep, this hostel is a real bargain. **Travel's tip:** if you're travelling en famille, book one of the doubles sleeping four. *Postbridge; 01822 880227, yha.org.uk.*

● Devonshire serenity

MOORLAND GARDEN HOTEL (Doubles from £99, B&B)

**Because:** Handily situated on the Lydford edge of the moor, where the rocks and bracken surrender to pastoral hills, this quiet concrete-but-cute hotel also boasts one of the area's better restaurants — try the Elston Farm sausages. **Travel's tip:** Get an upstairs room for just £6 more. They have sizeable balconies with generous views. *Yelverton; 01822 852245, moorlandgardenhotel.co.uk.*

● Location, location, degustation

ILSINGTON HOTEL AND SPA (Doubles from £145, B&B)

**Because:** It's a sprawling Edwardian hotel, squirrelled away in its own grassy precincts, yet superbly located for some of Dartmoor's highlights. **Travel's tip:** The spa and pool are lovely for rainy days (there's not much else to do here but walk), and don't ignore the hotel restaurant, one of the best on the moor. *Ilsington; 01364 661452, ilsington.co.uk.*



CAR-HIRE CLEVER

Here you're 5km from the moor, so if you're planning to explore by hire car, note: roads are narrow and twisty, bridges barely two metres wide. Rent the smallest car you can

Bed and board: clockwise from top left, stay at Gidleigh Park Hotel — for the food; manicured exterior of the Moorland Garden Hotel; Bovey Castle; fine dining at the Horn of Plenty; Rugglestone Inn

● Great value luxury

BORINGDON HALL (Doubles from £149, room only)

**Because:** This is a Grade 1 Elizabethan armour-in-the-lobby manor house, with a Great Hall and minstrels' gallery (Elizabeth I herself stayed here), and two spiffing restaurants. **Travel's tip:** The spa, with its heated pool, saunas and ultra-luxe gym, is the best of its kind in southwest England — you won't regret a wallow. *Plympton, Plymouth; 01752 548058, boringdonhall.co.uk.*

● Moorland grandeur

BOVEY CASTLE (Doubles from £180, B&B)

**Because:** It's PG Wodehouse meets Beowulf, a '20s-esque resort for golfers in tartan (the course is right outside), yet it has huge antler-hung lounges with leaded windows, making the most of the moorland views. **Travel's tip:** Exploit the free facilities (pool, falconry displays). It also offers art classes, hot-air ballooning, and yoga-on-the-moor. *North Bovey; 01647 445000, boveycastle.com.*

GET ME THERE GO INDEPENDENT

Great Western Railway (0345 700 0125, gwr.com) runs to Newton Abbot from Paddington from £92 return; from Manchester £120. See [nationalrail.co.uk](http://nationalrail.co.uk) for national connections. Meet-and-greet car hire can be arranged at Newton Abbot through Budget (0808 284 4444, budget.co.uk). The nearest airport is Exeter, with services from Manchester, London City, Belfast and Edinburgh. Flybe (flybe.com) has Edinburgh-Exeter returns from £130.

FURTHER INFORMATION

With tundra-like eco-systems on the northern tors, and subtropical nooks in the sheltered south, there is no one perfect time to visit Dartmoor. While winter is brutal, autumn and spring are low on crowds, displaying the moor in all moods. You can escape to Plymouth in 20 minutes, or the 'Devon Riviera' (Salcombe to Dartmouth), which is temperate year-round. For more information see [visitdevon.co.uk](http://visitdevon.co.uk) and [visittartmoor.co.uk](http://visittartmoor.co.uk) ■