

Dipping in Dartmoor

Liz Lowe plunges into some of Dartmoor's pools and rivers, soaking up the history and folklore of this fascinating region



A Dartmoor legend tells of nine maidens (or seventeen brothers, depending on the version) who danced on the Sabbath and were turned to stone in punishment. Here they remain, as a Bronze Age cairn circle near Belstone Tor. In reality an ancient burial site, it's said the stones 'dance' when the local church bell rouses them, daily at noon and on every Hunter's Moon.

We came here to swim, not dance, and so don't hang around for the maidens' midday show. Descending gorse-studded slopes under slanting autumn sun, we cast off our rucksacks by the pool below Cullever Steps, near Scarey Tor, in the East Okement River.

I'm already revitalised by the limitless, raw beauty surrounding us. "To walk and swim and be able to see across the moor for miles, without roads, buildings, or people, offers a sense of spaciousness and peacefulness," says our guide Emma Cunis, AKA Dartmoor's Daughter, who offers walks, talks, and nature-connection experiences. She's not wrong.

I'm here, with some Wiltshire Wild Swim friends, to hike and sample the diverse waters of Dartmoor. Known as 'mother of rivers', the moor is the source of more than a dozen including the Dart, East and West Okement, Taw, Teign, Bovey, Avon, Yealm, Erme, Plym, Walkham, Tavy and Lyd. There are also peaceful quarries, natural plunge pools, cascades and cataracts to explore.

Giggles pierce the stillness as bodies meet bracing water and enjoy the swoosh from the top of the pool. Emma joins

us, later telling me how as a girl her mother borrowed the local farmer's pony, rode up on the moor and taught herself to swim. Emma too learnt here as a child.

LAND OF MYTHS AND LEGENDS
History is etched into Dartmoor's 368 square miles. As the earth's crust shifted, 280 million years ago, molten material rose through cracks to the surface and a granite mountain chain was formed. The landscape was eroded and transformed over millennia and the distinctive granite tors are what remains.

Sea levels were once so high that, around 100 million years ago, Dartmoor was largely submerged and reduced to an island. The combined effect of ice ages and warmer interglacial periods slowly shaped the rivers and valleys we know today.

We continue our circular route from Belstone to a pool below Horseshoe Ford in the River Taw, home of Tarka the Otter. With easy access from the grassy bank, we slide into clear, crisp water.

Sinking into the shallows, we're immersed in this land of myth and folklore. Legends surround many of the locations here. Popular swimming spot Crazywell Pool, near Princetown, boasts many: it's said to be bottomless (it actually has a maximum depth of 4.8 metres), that its water rises and falls with the tides and that at dusk a voice can be heard calling out the name of the next local person who will die. →



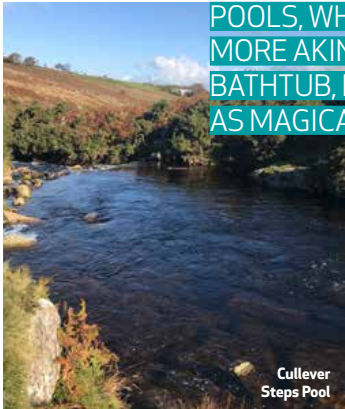


Image: @devonswimgirls

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Cullever Steps Pool

Another fable warns of the 'cry of the Dart' which 'every year claims a heart'. Emma quotes this before cautioning of the "many moods" of Dartmoor's rivers, from "calm and gentle" to "wild and furious". They rise and fall quickly, she explains, suggesting swimmers check weather forecasts frequently and assess safety on arrival.

DISCOVER THE SEASONS

Dartmoor's landscape continually evolves, season to season, day to day and even hour to hour. "Take everything," advises Emma, when we ask about wet weather kit. And, sure enough, we find ourselves frantically pulling on waterproof trousers as the wind lifts and clouds roll in shortly after our dip in the Taw.

Local swimmers Rhiannon and Ruth, Instagram's @devonswimgirls, know where to head in unpredictable weather. "In the winter, we find swimming around the East Okement, Taw Marsh and Cullever Steps good as it's not a huge walk to the swim spots, which is always handy if it's

terrible weather," says Rhiannon. "Crazywell pool is a safe spot after heavy rain," she adds, "and Taw Marsh more likely to be swimmable than other river locations."

Both keen knitters, Rhiannon says the shifting colours of the moor provide inspiration for their yarn projects. "We also choose our swim spots based around the wild food available in a particular place during any one season," she says. This year's bounty has resulted in rowanberry vodka, rowan jelly and gorse ice cream, using flowers foraged near Cullever Steps.

"The seasonal changes on Dartmoor are really worth discovering," agrees Emma. "There's such a variety of wetland valley mires, wooded river valleys, ancient oak woods and mossy boulders, and grassland with bluebells and wild daffodils in spring, moorland birds, butterflies and dragonflies."

On another outing, I head to Castle Drogo Weir and a swim spot named Salmon Leaps. Cascading metre-deep stone pools aid the fishes' journey to the spawning grounds, and also make an impressive natural spa (although watch out for sunken rocks at the bottom).

With the Teign running high and



Image: @devonswimgirls

fast, I stick to more sedate water upstream, entering the water from an old jetty (beware concealed wooden posts) and swimming towards Iron Bridge. This pretty spot lies on the Teign Gorge circular trail which also passes Fingle Weir, another popular place for a plunge.

Later, at Haytor, we hike to the top of the tor to warm up before seeking out Haytor Quarry. Our cheeks are slapped repeatedly by roaring gusts of wind and, as the first drops of rain land, it seems like an excellent time for a swim.

Haytor Quarry was operational in the 18th & 19th centuries and some machinery, plus evidence of a tramway used for transportation, remains. Dartmoor has long been a working landscape, with a history of tin mining, granite quarrying and agriculture. The majority of the land is now used for farming, with around 50,000 cows, sheep and ponies roaming here.

Swimming widths across one of the pools, I imagine the small quarry in its industrial heyday. Haytor granite was used in the construction of both the National Gallery and 'New' London Bridge (subsequently sold and currently residing in Arizona). Enclosed within granite walls, it's a tranquil and atmospheric place.

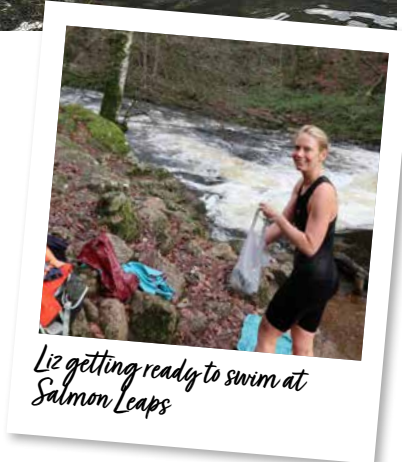
MAGIC TO EXPLORE

Dartmoor has countless other swim spots waiting to be explored, such as the flat rock water slides of Throwleigh's Shilley Pool or the calmer Sharrah Pool, near Poundsgate.

Rhiannon and Ruth love discovering their own secret places. "While they may not be as massive or impressive as some popular Dartmoor spots," says Rhiannon, "there's something lovely about finding secluded plunge pools, which may be more akin to a wild bathtub, but are just as magical for us."

In warmer months some sites can be busy and the Devon Swim Girls, who are "partial to an appropriate skinny dip", seek out quieter spaces. "While we love Foggintor Quarry, Sharrah Pool and swimming in the Plym near Cadover Bridge," says Rhiannon, "we only swim in these spots in the colder months as they're very busy in the summer."

Dartmoor leaves a big imprint on me and I come away restored and exhilarated. I think back to the Belstone cairn circle and those unfortunate maidens dancing for eternity, encapsulating both the stillness and the untamed energy of this enduring landscape. ☺



More info
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