

Dartmoor: Tors & Hidden Valleys

Naturetrek Tour Report

28 September - 2 October 2016



Report & images by Robert Harvey



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Tour Participants: Robert Harvey (leader) and eight Naturetrek clients

Day 1

Thursday 29th September

The tour convened at Two Bridges Hotel, conveniently located in the middle of Dartmoor. Participants introduced themselves, their interests, experience and what they would like to get out of the tour.

We then walked from the hotel to Wistman's Wood, about 1.5 miles up the West Dart river valley. This ancient woodland is full of gnarled trees, boulders draped in moss and luxuriant ferns, looking somewhat like a miniature temperate rainforest. This proved one of the most challenging but also rewarding photographic locations of the tour. We sought strong compositions by concentrating on details and pleasing juxtapositions within the wood. Overcast conditions suited the subject best and when the sun came out later on, many of us took a break from photography until it disappeared behind a cloud again!

Back at Two Bridges Hotel, the tour leader gave an introductory presentation on the locations we would be visiting and useful photographic techniques to capture them digitally. This led on to examples of astrophotography and a handout outlining methods and settings for night-time photography. We then enjoyed an excellent three course dinner at the hotel.

Day 2

Friday 30th September

We left the hotel before dawn to visit two medieval clapper bridges. The first was at Bellever, which is incomplete but has a lovely setting. We were rewarded by beautiful dawn colours, which participants were able to include in their images by bracketing multiple exposures for subsequent high dynamic range processing. When the sun rose, we moved on to nearby Postbridge, which was well-illuminated by early morning light. Returning the hotel at 9am, we felt we had earned our hearty breakfasts.

The main part of the day was devoted to the little-known valley of Tavy Cleave in west Dartmoor. A half hour drive along narrow, winding lanes brought us to the car park from where we walked along an attractive leat (irrigation channel) and then crossed the Tavy river using boulders as informal stepping stones. Following the east bank of the river, the valley narrows as it passes Ger Tor. A short distance further up we came to a beautiful waterfall in a perfect moorland setting. We were able to use a variety of lighting conditions to try a range of different viewpoints and experiment with changing shutter speeds to show the moving water to best artistic effect.

Descending the Cleave, we stopped at the prehistoric site of Merrivale Stone Row and circle, though the light was a little disappointing. Back at the hotel, our evening meal had been arranged at 4pm so we could be out again for sunset. Great Staple Tor is a short, though moderately steep, walk from the road and we reached it by 6pm in lovely evening light. A variety of photographic viewpoints were tried to show the imposing twin pillars around sunset.

Our plan was to wait until the sky was truly dark to include stars in our photographs. However, as dusk gathered so did some cloud. All was not lost, however, as the cloud was illuminated by artificial lights in Tavistock to the west and from Princetown television mast to the east. The group tried images looking in both directions whilst

the tour leader advised on settings and illuminated the tor with soft torchlight. The result was some really dramatic night-time images. This interesting extension to most participants' photographic experience was described by several in the group as a highlight of the tour. We returned to the hotel soon after 9pm.

Day 3

Saturday 1st October

A leisurely breakfast today gave everyone a rest after our exertions the previous day. We then took a short drive to Venford Reservoir, from where we walked down into the valley below. This was a steep descent through bracken and woodland. One group member admitted afterwards she thought it seemed completely mad! But everyone agreed that finding the twin waterfall of Venford Falls tumbling into a luxuriant gorge of ferns and moss at the bottom more than justified the hike. There was plenty of time for everyone to photograph the falls from the best position and to try a variety of other compositions within this very attractive but little known gorge.

We took lunch at the hotel and then set off the Lydford gorge on Dartmoor's western edge. After hiking along the top of the gorge, we descended to Whitelady waterfall, the tallest falls in south-west England. As we arrived rain started but good images were made during breaks in the showers. Fallen leaves in the river were gathered up and arranged to make an effective foreground. From here we walked the length of Lydford Gorge, which is spectacularly narrow in places, to reach the Devil's Cauldron, an unusual formation of churning water between rocky walls.

As we arrived back at our minibus, rain seemed set in for the rest of the day so we returned to the hotel for a review of images and a quick demonstration of some techniques for processing them using Adobe lightroom. Dinner was at 7pm, after which we retired in preparation for an early start the following morning.

Day 4

Sunday 2nd October

The sky had cleared overnight and we left the hotel at 5.30am under brilliant starlight. Arriving at Rundlestone, the tour leader gave a quick tour of the most recognisable constellations using a powerful torch as a pointer. We then walked 1.5 miles up the gentle slope of Great Mis Tor as dawn broke around us. The compositions at Great Mis Tor are a little more subtle than those of Great Staple Tor. Our efforts to find them were richly rewarded by beautiful dawn light. Some of the most effective included bold foreground rocks, with the lush lowlands towards Tavistock as a backdrop and a softly pink sky above.

By 8.15am, all agreed it was time for breakfast so it was back to the hotel. After breakfast the group decided on an amendment to the advertised itinerary. The church at Brentor was wrapped in cladding for repairs, so instead of Brentor we travelled east to the remarkable formation of Bowerman's Nose. By this time the autumn sunshine was so warm that we were in shirtsleeves. The light was perfectly placed to make interesting images of the tor from a variety of interesting angles, with just enough fluffy cloud in the sky to balance our images.

Our final stop was at Bonehill rocks, which gave a commanding view across the vale to Widecombe in the Moor and the tors beyond. From there it was time to say farewell and return to Exeter station for the homeward journey.

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