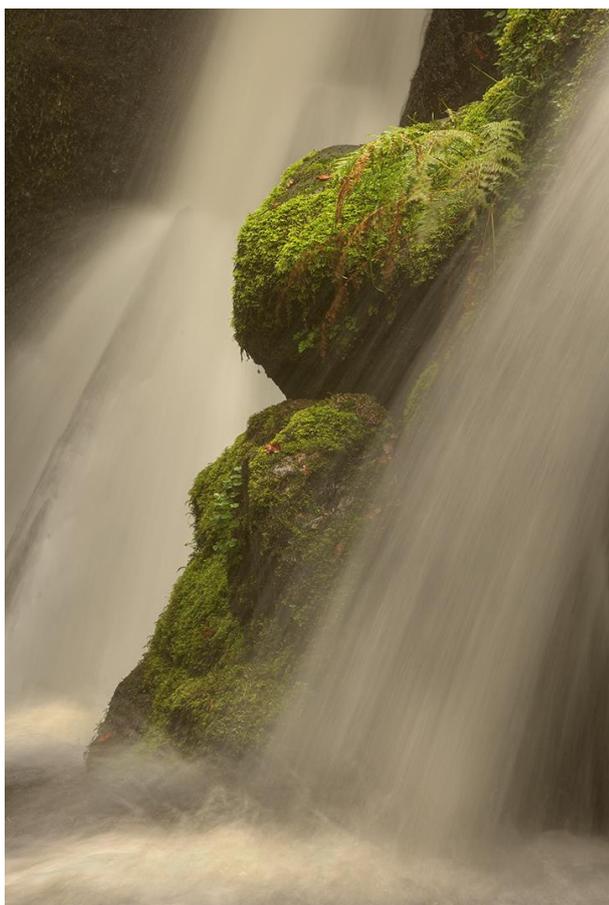


Dartmoor: Tors & Hidden Valleys

Naturetrek Photographic Tour Report

21 - 24 September 2017



Report & images by Robert Harvey



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Tour participants: Robert Harvey (leader) and three Naturetrek clients

Day 1

Thursday 21st September

Group members 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. Robert then gave an introductory presentation on the various locations that we would be photographing and the best techniques for capturing successful images. This led on to examples of astrophotography and a handout outlining methods and settings for night-time photography.

Our evening meal was specially arranged for 4pm to enable us to take advantage of clear skies for an extended evening sunset and astrophotography shoot. After enjoying our three courses, we drove to a car park near Great Staple Tor for a walk of about 40 minutes to the top. This gave us an hour of very pleasing light on the impressive granite outcrops, concluding with a glorious sunset behind the rock pillars. A variety of photographic viewpoints were tried to show the imposing twin pillars around sunset. We then had about an hour to wait for the sky to fully darken and stars to show, which provided time for practicing cameras set up and drinking hot apple tea.

It proved to be an ideal evening for astrophotography, with excellent visibility and the Milky Way arching overhead. We first photographed the constellation of Perseus and the Milky Way looking north. As the western sky lost the last glow from the sun we switched to imaging the constellation of Ursa Major (the Plough) and the bright red giant star Arcturus, together neatly framing the fantastic silhouette of a granite outcrop. Having mastered the settings for photographing stars and Milky Way, we finished the evening trying to photograph star trails created by the earth's rotation. By this time the temperature was dropping and dew formed on our lenses, which hampered the results. Packing up at 11pm, we navigated the route back to the vehicle and returned to the hotel for a good night's sleep.

Day 2

Friday 22nd September

We left the hotel at 7am to visit the medieval clapper bridge at Postbridge, which was well-illuminated by early morning light. The ground was frosted, a little mist was hanging along the East Dart River and extraordinary numbers of dew-laden spiders' webs adorned every bush. For just a few minutes, the clapper bridge was fully illuminated by sun but the background was still in shade, making the old bridge stand out. Returning to the hotel at 8.30am, we felt we had earned our hearty breakfasts.

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 from time to time, we waited until it disappeared behind a cloud again!

We took lunch back at the hotel and then journeyed to Lydford Gorge on Dartmoor's western edge. From 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. Another visitor, distinctively dressed in gabardine coat and hat, provided some unusual foreground interest. From here we walked up 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. Robert picked up the group from the top of the gorge.

As we arrived back at the vehicle, rain seemed set in for the rest of the day so we returned to the hotel for dinner, followed by a review of images and a demonstration of some techniques for processing them using Adobe Lightroom.

Day 3

Saturday 23rd September

The day dawned overcast with light rain but by the time we had finished breakfast, the weather was rapidly improving. Our first stop, in bright sunshine, was 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). However, the intense overnight rainfall had caused the leat to overflow, preventing us from crossing the Tavy River to continue upstream.

Descending the Cleave, we continued to Brentor, an unusual tor of volcanic breccia with a charming church at its summit. As we arrived, so did a party of wedding guests, being ferried up the tor by landrover. The bride was helped up the church steps by three bridesmaids keeping her train free of mud. During the service we made landscape photographs of the church and surrounding landscape, beautifully illuminated by autumn sunshine. When the wedding party emerged we were able to include the bride and groom in our images, well illustrating the dramatic setting of their wedding. All agreed that the unplanned addition of a wedding to our images of Brentor made a delightful addition.

By early afternoon we reached the prehistoric site of Merrivale Stone Row and circle. Here we practiced photographing using telephoto lenses, making sets of the same composition at different points of focus for later focus stacking.

Our final visit of the day was a walk of 1.5 miles up the gentle slope of Great Mis Tor. The compositions at Great Mis Tor are a little more subtle than those of Great Staple Tor. Our efforts to find them were rewarded by soft light, just enough to give some modelling to the rocks, and the appearance of a Sun Dog (an atmospheric phenomenon like a miniature rainbow) in the sky. Some of the most effective images included bold foreground rocks, with the lush lowlands towards Tavistock as a backdrop. Strong compositions were also formed by balanced rocks and natural rock arches.

Another excellent three course meal rounded off the day and left just enough time afterwards for a review of the day's images.

Day 4

Sunday 24th September

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. Although the descent was steep, 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. Some of the best images were close-ups of silky flowing water around verdant tapestries of green. As we left Venford Falls, the surrounding moorland was wreathed in mist, giving an ethereal quality to this very special location.

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