

# Dartmoor: Tors & Hidden Valleys

Naturetrek Tour Report

18 - 21 October 2018

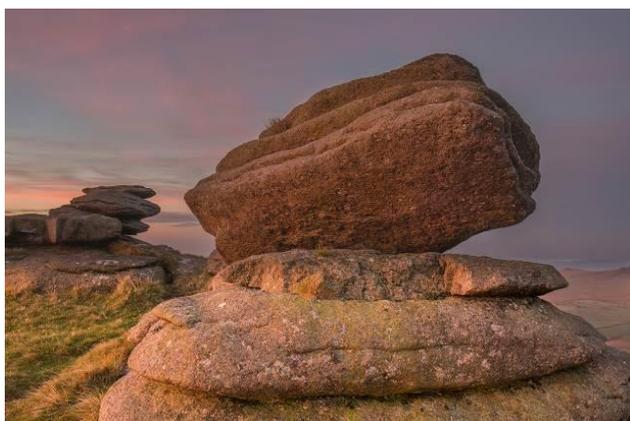
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Great Staple Tor at sunset



Tavy Cleave waterfall



Great Mis Tor at dawn



Brentor Church

Report and images by Robert Harvey



Naturetrek

Mingledown Barn

Wolf's Lane

Chawton

Alton

Hampshire

GU34 3HJ

UK

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

E: [info@naturetrek.co.uk](mailto:info@naturetrek.co.uk)

W: [www.naturetrek.co.uk](http://www.naturetrek.co.uk)

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

## Day 1

Thursday 18th October

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. The leader then gave an introductory presentation on the various locations that we would be photographing and the best techniques for capturing successful images.

Our main meal was specially arranged for 3pm to enable the group 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.

It proved to be an ideal evening for astrophotography, with excellent visibility, a gibbous moon providing gentle illumination of the granite tor and the Milky Way arching overhead. As the western sky lost the last glow from the sun we made images of the constellation of Ursa Major (the Plough) and the bright red giant star Arcturus, together neatly framing the fantastic silhouette of a granite outcrop. Packing up at 9.30pm, Robert navigated the route back to the vehicle and we returned to the hotel for sandwiches followed by a good night's sleep.

## Day 2

Friday 19th October

We left the hotel at 7.15am to visit the medieval clapper bridge at Postbridge, which was shrouded in mist as we arrived. When the sun rose at 7.45am, the mist cleared and the bridge was well-illuminated by early morning light, its setting enhanced by autumn colour of the nearby trees. Extraordinary numbers of dew-laden spiders' webs adorned every bush and a pair of Dippers flitted along the river, passing beneath the bridge. Returning to the hotel at 9.00am, we felt we had earned our hearty breakfasts.

The rest of the morning was devoted to a hike along Tavy Cleave, a little-known valley in western 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 the River Tavy, watching Tree Sparrows and other birds along the way. We reached a beautiful small waterfall with a stunning backdrop of tors and moorland. This provided an ideal opportunity to experiment with the effects of different shutter speeds (from 1/80<sup>th</sup> second to 10 seconds) on the appearance of moving water, using neutral density filters to vary the amount of light entering the lens.

After a picnic lunch, we continued our journey by minibus 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. The rest of the afternoon was overcast (the only time that the sun did not shine during the whole four day tour), which was ideal for making images in the shady gorge. Fallen leaves in the river were gathered up and arranged to make an effective foreground. 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 and we then returned to the hotel for dinner.

## Day 3

## Saturday 20th October

The day dawned crystal clear and as the first hint of daylight broke, the group was already part way up Great Mis Tor. We reached the top at 7.10am, in time to witness an amazing dawn. The whole sky turned pink, with even grey granite reflecting its gorgeous pink tones. Photographic 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 dawn light, just enough to give some modelling to the rocks. 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.

Returning to the hotel, we had already covered over three miles on foot and had been well-rewarded for our efforts. After breakfast, we 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. We sought strong compositions by concentrating on details and pleasing juxtapositions within the wood. This proved to be the most challenging photographic conditions on the tour, as bright sunlight made for contrasty conditions within the wood.

After an extended lunch break at the hotel, we set off in the minibus to the prehistoric site of Merrivale Stone Row and circle. Here we practiced photographing using telephoto lenses, compressing perspective to make the ancient stones stand out in the landscape. We continued to Brentor, an unusual tor of volcanic breccia with a charming church at its summit. The last hour of sunlight proved ideal for photographing the church on its impressive rocky outcrop, with golden light on the landscape and subtle cloud formations in the sky.

Another excellent three course meal rounded off the day.

## Day 4

## Sunday 21st October

Early morning conditions again looked promising, with mist forecast, so the leader added a bonus excursion to the tour. The group hiked up Sharp Tor before sunrise to photograph mist swirling around the River Dart valley and its steeply wooded sides. All agreed that we were very fortunate to have had three mornings of excellent conditions for dawn photography.

After breakfast, we then took a short drive to Venford Reservoir, from where we walked down into the valley below, through bracken and woodland. Although the descent was steep, 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 then returned to the hotel for lunch, which brought the tour to its conclusion.

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