

GREAT
NATIONAL
TRAILS
THE SOUTH
WEST COAST
PATH, UK

BY THE BOOK

Great Walks grabs Cicerone Press' *South West Coast Path* guidebook and explores one of Europe's finest bucket-list trails.

WORDS AND PHOTOS_ **ANDY WASLEY**

Taking in the sea view near Lizard Point.



Left: View towards St Ives from the SWCP.

Below: Lizard Point, the southernmost point in Great Britain.



“BE not afeard; the isle is full of noises, sounds and sweet airs, that give delight, and hurt not.”

Caliban – a monstrous character in Shakespeare’s play *The Tempest* – spoke from a stone stage, in front of a suitably tempestuous sea. White-tops crashed on a wild jumble of rocks below a turbulent sky. Full of noises, too: the huffing roar of a salty coastal wind, and sea birds’ calls ringing from the indigo sky.

But these were no painted sets or special effects: Caliban spoke in the Minack Theatre, a spectacular open-air amphitheatre carved into a clifftop in the far south-west of England. I had walked more than 20km to see the performance, my face burned red by sunshine and that sea-scented wind. I welcomed a chance to sip hot chocolate and rub the feeling back into my feet.

Shakespeare is not how I end the average day’s hiking. But this hike was not average by any measure. I was following part of the South West Coast Path, Britain’s longest national trail: a 1,000-plus kilometre trek around the serrated coastline of England’s south-westernmost counties.

Over such an immense distance there are bound to be oddities to discover. Cicerone’s excellent guidebook for the route promises all manner of attractions: Arthurian legends, abandoned tin mines, dinosaur bones and historic ships. And the Minack Theatre, in its “remarkably imaginative setting” – my favourite oddity of all.

The Tempest finished as the sun set, bleeding magenta into the wild sea. By the dying light I checked the guidebook and its companion map volume. The next day’s route was visible from the theatre, rolling out across clifftops above Porthcurno’s perfect crescent beach.

“This is an attractive stretch,” promised the guidebook – a good start – “often rugged and sometimes difficult.” Damn.

Seeking support

The South West Coast Path (SWCP) is, by a wide margin, Britain’s longest national trail. At 1,014km it is more than twice as long as the Pennine Way and will eventually make up

nearly a quarter of the England Coast Path, a planned route that follows the entire English coastline. In Australian terms, the SWCP is roughly comparable to the Bibbulmun Track, albeit with an entirely coastal landscape.

A hiker of average fitness would take up to eight weeks to walk the SWCP in one go. A month is feasible, but coastal weather and rugged terrain are not to be dismissed too quickly. I am a dedicated long-distance hiker, and even for me this is a hike to be done in stages. But for a bucket-list hiker, or anyone who can spare a month or two for an intense and spectacular journey, it makes a tempting goal.

I have been walking stretches of the SWCP for many years, each trip offering a subtly different take on English coastal hiking. Around Porthcurno and the Minack Theatre, the path is steeped in modern history: this was where transatlantic telegraph cables linked Britain to its empire. Second World War fortifications gaze out across the pristine sand, a reminder of this quiet spot’s outside importance.

Further to the east, the Jurassic Coast World Heritage Site offers a glimpse at deep time, as even a casual stroll through its beaches and coves can turn up fossils. Another favourite stretch, around St Ives, offers a full immersion in art and design, through the town’s convoluted backstreet art studios and in its modernist Tate gallery.

There is a lot to take in – too much, perhaps, for a through hike, unless your sole aim is to make the distance and achieve the rare distinction of completing the route in one go. However you approach it, such an immense hike is a difficult project to plan – and a tiring one to walk. Thankfully, there is plenty of support available, from baggage transfers to tour companies that support hikers in myriad ways.

There is a lot to be said for relying on the SWCP’s healthy ecosystem of tour providers. Good providers will provide accommodation bookings, luggage transfers, information and transfers from transport hubs, with package fees ranging up to about £1,000 (\$1,900) for a seven-night itinerary of about 100km.

That fee buys you a lot of convenience. Using a local guide means you can rely on up-to-date information about the route, including diversions, seasonal attractions, transport options, food and drink and – crucially – accommodation. Some providers offer guided group walks too, where you can hear from a local expert about the region’s history, wildlife and geography.

Go your own way

However much I value the support and companionship of a good guide, I am a solo hiker by nature. When I tackle very long trails I usually take guidebooks from Cicerone, a small UK publisher that specialises in outdoor activities. In recent years its reliable guidebooks have helped me tackle the Pennine Way, the Cape Wrath Trail (*Great Walks* Feb-Mar 2023), the Kungsleden (*Great Walks* Dec-Jan 2024) and several stretches of the SWCP.

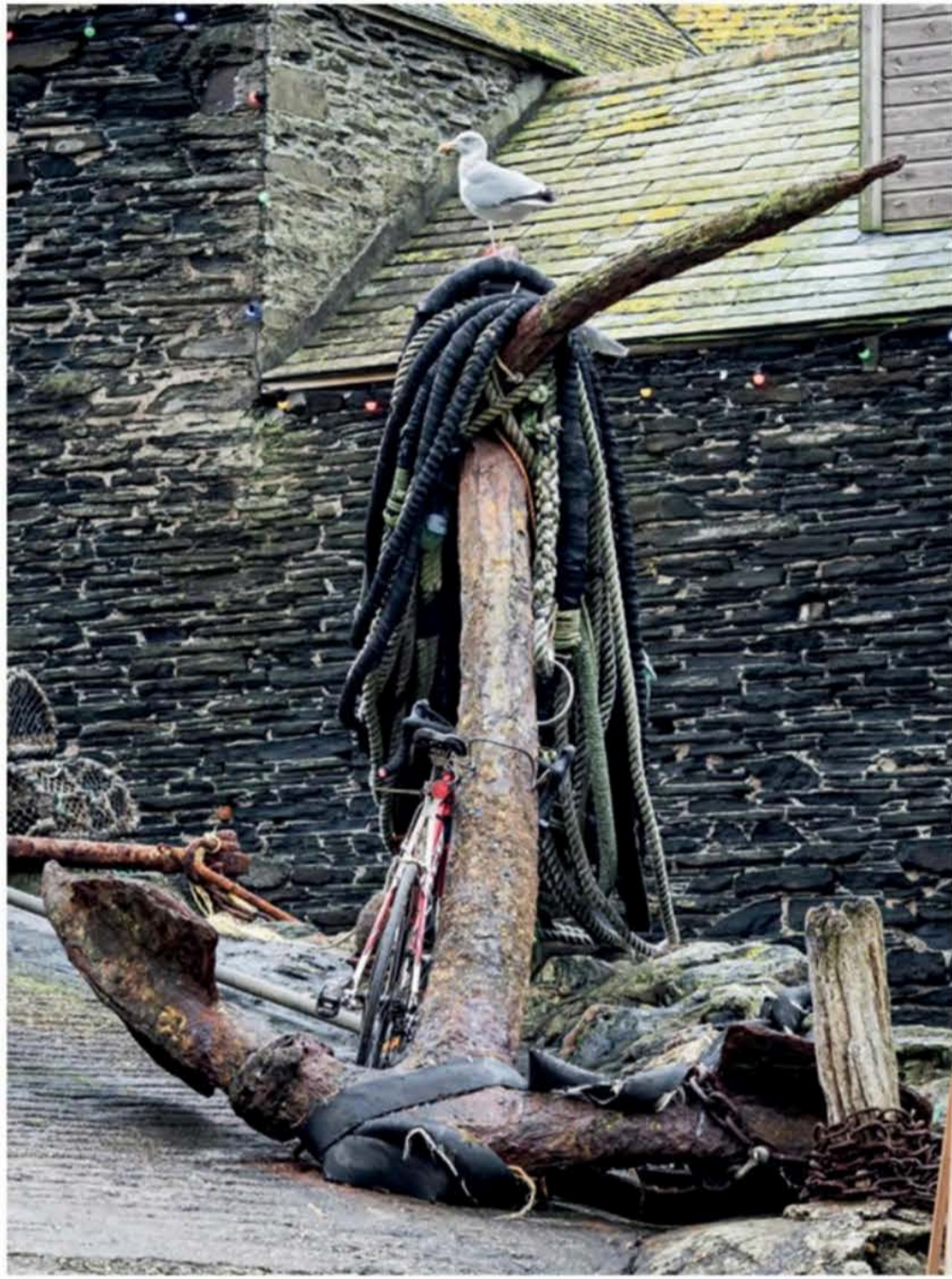
Author Paddy Dillon walked the entire SWCP twice to complete the first edition of

his excellent single-volume guidebook. He parcels out advice and crucial information in an unfussy style, maximising hikers’ freedom to explore the route and learn about it without having to pause too often.

The SWCP is lavishly well signposted, but Dillon offers almost step-by-step guidance for the whole route. This can come in handy in poor weather, a serious consideration on a route where I have found myself benighted, engulfed in sea fog, or blinded by squalls. Even a popular and well-maintained route like this can be a challenge to navigate in difficult conditions, and Dillon’s comprehensive walk notes mean bad weather or nightfall should not throw you off course.

Dillon makes an enjoyable and knowledgeable walking companion too. Few points of historic interest go unmentioned. I found this especially handy around Lizard Point during a two-day walk. Lizard Point – the southernmost point in Great Britain – had been my goal and made for a memorable visit.

The headland is spectacular even by the



NEED TO KNOW

Cicerone Press (cicerone.co.uk) publishes about 400 outdoor activity guidebooks covering trails across the UK, Europe and worldwide. *The South West Coast Path*, by Paddy Dillon is available in Australia from woodslane.com.au. (RRP: \$48). Three companion volumes give detailed Ordnance Survey maps for the entire route (sold separately). Cicerone offers free GPX files covering the entire route to readers who create an account and register their book.

The South West Coast Path website (southwestcoastpath.org.uk) offers a list of good tour providers and a wealth of other info including campsites, holiday cottages and places to eat and drink.

Dillon's notes had warned me of a challenging day, marked by arduous ascents and descents near the village. Almost done in towards the end of the day, I spotted a seal from a cliff top, and made my way steadily down to a rocky headland, blackened by a wild and surging sea.

The seal had slipped from view, and I paused to enjoy the simple thrill of resting at the edge of the Atlantic. Then the seal reappeared a few metres offshore, rising and falling sedately in the water – 'bottling', I later learned, a behaviour carried out when the seal rests. It was entirely oblivious to me. But for a few minutes, it was my entire world as I paused to recover, and to enjoy my encounter.

For the other species, I return to the Minack Theatre. Behind the stage, just off Porthcurno, white birds dropped like darts from the darkening sky into that tortured seascape. The next day, I looked back at the Minack from a cliff top, and watched them again: gannets, streaking across the waves in neat rows and diving for fish.

Gannets are a constant companion for much of the SWCP, often so numerous they almost fade from view. But after Porthcurno, they came to mean much more to me than just an enjoyable sight. Their athletic flight and easy plunges into the waves called me back again and again to those uncounted moments around the Minack, where everything I had come to love about the SWCP lay spread out before me: wildlife, culture, the endless sea and that seemingly endless path, weaving a long and much loved story through my hiking life. 🌿

“THE SEAL REAPPEARED OFFSHORE, RISING AND FALLING SEDATELY”

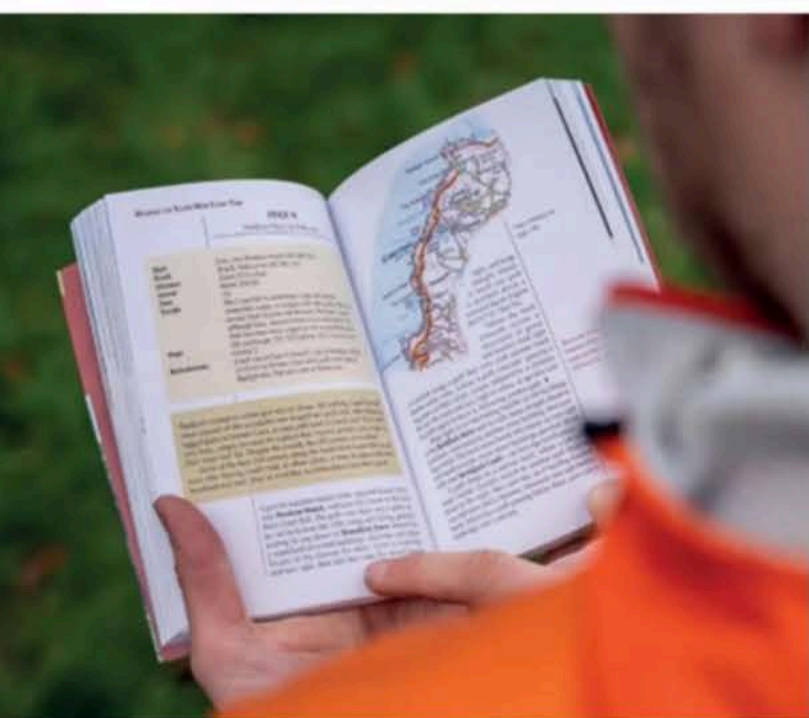
SWCP's standards. A wild wreck of shattered rock, crumbling lifeboat installations and the ever-changing sea make for a dramatic scene that begs to be explored by day and night. I based myself in Henry's Campsite, the "quirky campsite" mentioned in Dillon's notes – a wonderful spot full of colourful sculptures and bright flowers – and took a stroll under a pure dark sky to watch a meteor storm over the lighthouse.

But the thing that really gripped me lay further northwest, and had appealed to me since I read about it in Dillon's guide: Poldhu Point, the site of the first transatlantic radio transmissions. The scenery was as magnificent as Lizard Point. But, as I gazed out across the Atlantic, this morsel of history added something intangibly powerful to the seascape: here, people had learned to communicate across the ionosphere, even before powered flight.

Natural attractions

As much as I have been drawn back to the SWCP often to enjoy its scenery and heritage, its wildlife is a significant attraction too. Cicerone's guidebook offers plenty of advice on places to see some of the route's birds and animals, ranging from plovers, turnstones, avocets and other waterbirds to birds of prey – buzzards, kestrels and sparrowhawks – hunting their quarry over wind-tossed fields and high cliffs.

Any *Great Walks* reader able to tackle the SWCP might feel a pang of homesickness when they see black swans in Dawlish, as Dillon invites his readers to pause and enjoy the town's variety of waterfowl. But two other species really stand out for me, for quite different reasons. The first is the grey seal; a common species in the UK's coastal waters, but I had never enjoyed the kind of close views I had around Port Isaac, a tiny fishing village in northern Cornwall.



Clockwise from above:

The guidebook's maps and walknotes are detailed and informative.

A sea anchor in Port Isaac.

The SWCP is marked by National Trails acorn signposts.

The guidebook and maps fit perfectly in your pack's side pockets.

