

Walk No. 17 Morteheo and North Devon's Deadly Coast

Morteheo is a small hilltop village on Devon's northernmost coast. Despite its proximity to the holiday settlement of Woolacombe it retains an old-world charm and a feeling of remoteness, accentuated by its location high behind the rocky headland of Morte Point.

This walk starts at Morteheo and cuts across country inland to the former smuggling village of Lee Bay, before returning along the Coast Path (here also the Tarka Trail) by way of Bull Point and Morte Point back to Morteheo. This is not an easy stretch of coast, although the views are rewarding; the path here includes several climbs and you will need plenty of time (and energy) to complete the walk. However, there are a number of cut-out points which allow for short cuts back to the village.

Fact File

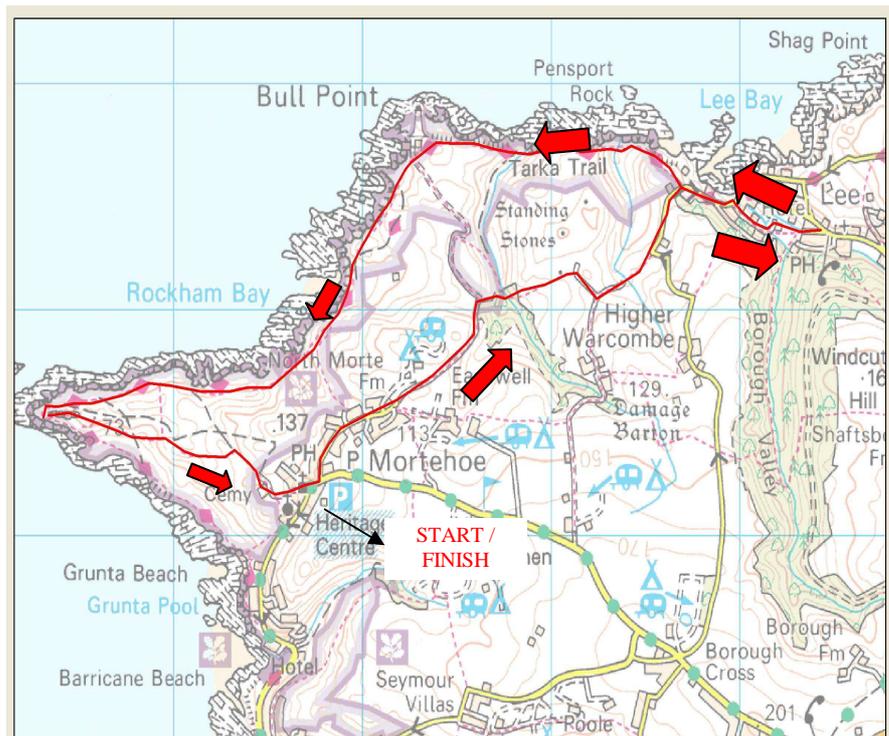
Morteheo has a summer bus service to and from Ilfracombe and Barnstaple. In addition, Lee Bay has buses to and from Ilfracombe. For timetable details contact Traveline on 0870 608 2 608.

Walk Length: 10km/6.25 miles; this can be shortened to 9km/5.5 miles by missing Lee Bay and Lee Village and to 7km/4.5 miles by missing Morte Point.
Stiles: 8 (3 of which are adjacent to gates usually unlocked); 5 climbs of average 50m/160ft.

Facilities: Morteheo - pubs, refreshments, shops, toilets, buses, Heritage Centre; car park;
Lee Bay - pub, shop, hotel/bar, toilets, buses; car park;

The Walk

From the village centre take the road opposite the car park, signed to Lighthouse and Lee (North Morte Road). This leads to a white gate at the top of the private road to Bull Point lighthouse. Although a private road, it is a public footpath, so go through the gate and follow the narrow lane ahead.



As the lane descends views over the sea open up. If it is at all clear, the coast of Wales should be visible on the horizon ahead.

Follow the lane for 600m/660 yards. At a sharp left turn look out for a signpost on the right, by some white posts. Turn right down the steps, signposted to Lee and Bennett's Mouth. At the bottom turn right to cross the footbridge (signposted to Lee). Follow the path to a gate. Go through and continue ahead and up to a field, then keep along the right hand edge of this field.

Towards the end of the field you should notice a small stone standing on its own over in the field on the left. This is one of three standing stones in the area. It is thought to be of prehistoric origin although the use and significance of these stones is unknown. They are thought to be of ritual significance. In more recent times such stones have served the purpose of being rubbing stones for cattle.

At the end of the field cross the stile and turn right along the track. A short way along the track cross the stile on the left and follow the field edge downhill, signposted "Footpath to Lee".

Superb views over to Wales are obtained from this path.

Follow down to another stile. Cross and continue into a green lane. This leads to a surfaced lane. Continue ahead and downhill on this lane.

As the lane steepens and turns right, look out for the Coast Path sign at a wicket gate on the left. This is the route back, although it is well worth while continuing down the hill to Lee.

The lane leads to Lee Bay. There is a hotel and bar here and buses to Ilfracombe. The bay is very attractive with superb exposures of rock strata around its edges.

To continue to Lee Village, turn right at the top of the beach, signed "Footpath to Lee Village".

There are toilets a little way along this path.

Lee Village is very picturesque and has a pub and village shop. There is also a shop and display of local crafts and a tea room. Lee and its bay was very much regarded in past times as a romantic "smugglers' village". Because of the steep gradients all around it was very difficult to reach by road and was largely accessed from the sea. It began to grow with improvements in the roads in the 19th century, when the church and school were built.

From here the walk follows the South West Coast Path. In this stretch the Coast Path is also used by the Tarka Trail, a walking route following the wanderings of Tarka the Otter in the famous book by Henry Williamson.

If you have continued down the hill to Lee, retrace your steps up the steep hill to the Coast Path gate. Go through and follow the Coast Path as it rises then dips to cross a stream and rises again.

This second climb can be quite taxing and you may welcome the bench near the top. It gives panoramic views along the coast over Lee Bay and to the Welsh coast.

Another descent follows, to the small secluded cove of Bennett's Mouth, followed by yet another climb.

There is a signed short cut back to Morte Point from Bennett's Mouth.

At the top of the climb out of Bennett's Mouth, Lundy comes into view on the horizon ahead, immediately followed by Bull Point lighthouse ahead and below.

There has been a lighthouse on this point since 1879, as a result of a series of shipwrecks on this length of coast. The present lighthouse was built in 1972.

Bull Point features in Tarka the Otter as a place where Tarka, making his way along the coast on the trail of his mate White-tip, first picked up her scent.

Descend alongside the wall of the lighthouse compound, cross the access road (short cut back to Morte Point) and go up the steps to continue along the Coast Path. After a short, sharp climb the path descends to the beach at Rockham Bay. After Rockham Bay is another short climb and then the path generally levels out as it goes out to the headland of Morte Point. There are further short cuts to Morte Point from this path.

Approaching Morte Point the jagged rocks offshore, especially the Morte Stone off the end of the point, show why this coast had such a fearsome reputation. In one year alone during the 19th century, 1852, five ships went down here. The popular belief arose that the headland got its name from the French or Latin root "mort" meaning "death". Its actual origin is probably a Saxon word meaning "stumpy", referring to the shape of the headland.

Williamson also alludes to the dangers of Morte Point, referring to Tarka making his way through the rusted plates of wrecked ships which lay in pools here.

Continue on the path round the headland.

After rounding Morte Point the views out to sea change dramatically. As well as Lundy on the horizon, the view now encompasses Hartland Point, Devon's north westerly extremity, in the distance and nearer, from right to left, Baggy Point, Putsborough, Woolacombe Sands and Woolacombe Village.

Follow the Coast Path from Morte Point as far as a bench at a fork in the grassy path. Bear left here, inland and uphill towards some grassy gorse and bracken covered hills.

Go left at the next fork, to continue uphill. The path is joined by another coming from the left and continues to climb towards a stone wall. Approaching the wall do not cross the stile but bear left, keeping the wall on your right. Follow uphill, pass a National Trust cairn then go through a metal gate and pass Morteheo Cemetery. Continue on the tarmac path which takes you past Morteheo Church.

The basis of the church is Norman, dating from 1170. Some of the doorways date back to this time, although much of the church was rebuilt around 1300. It is a simple church of great charm and includes a tomb chest, probably of the rector William de Tracey, who died in 1322. It also features a 15th century roof and bench ends carved during the reign of Henry VIII.

Continue past the church to return to the centre of the village.

Further Information

A range of information is available on the South West Coast Path; especially useful is the guide book and accommodation list produced by the South West Coast Path Association, price £6 and available locally. Alternatively, it may be obtained from Discover Devon Information Service, Westacott Rd, Barnstaple EX32 8AW, telephone 0870 6085531, price £7.50 including p and p (cheques payable to Devon County Council). Quote reference DP33.

Information on the Tarka Trail is available from the same address - an introductory leaflet is free (quote reference DP101), while the Walkers' Guide costs £3.50, also including p and p (quote DP102).

For further local information, there is a National Trust leaflet on walks between Ilfracombe and Croyde, which includes Morteheo, available from National Trust outlets price £0.75. A booklet "Coast and Country Walks in Morteheo and Woolacombe", published by the Morteheo Heritage Trust, is also available locally price £2.75.

For information on the wider network of walking routes in Devon, obtain the free leaflet "Discover Devon - Walking" from local Tourist Information Centres or from the address above. Alternatively, visit the website www.discoverdevon.com which has all the walks information and an order form.

OS maps for this walk:

Landranger (1:50,000 scale) no. 180 Barnstaple and Ilfracombe;

Explorer (1: 25,000 scale) no. 139 Bideford, Ilfracombe and Barnstaple.