

Walk No. 49 SAUNTER UP SAUNTON DOWN

Saunton Down is a prominent ridge of high land forming a backdrop to the coast in North Devon. It overlooks two very scenic coastal features, Croyde Bay on one side and Saunton Sands on the other, and around much of its base there passes the South West Coast Path. Along this stretch of Coast Path also runs the Tarka Trail.

This walk explores Croyde Bay and passes close to Saunton Sands, joining the two features by crossing the top of Saunton Down and then returning to the start along the Coast Path and Tarka Trail. Perhaps the “saunter” of the title is slightly misleading, since to reach the top of the Down requires a substantial climb, but this is a long, steady climb rather than a steep scramble. In any event, the views from the top of the Down are without doubt among the finest in Devon and repay the effort.

Pick a bright day for this walk and reward yourself with some magnificent views of coastline and estuary, of Lundy and Exmoor and of a wide sweep of North Devon, all backed by the open sea.

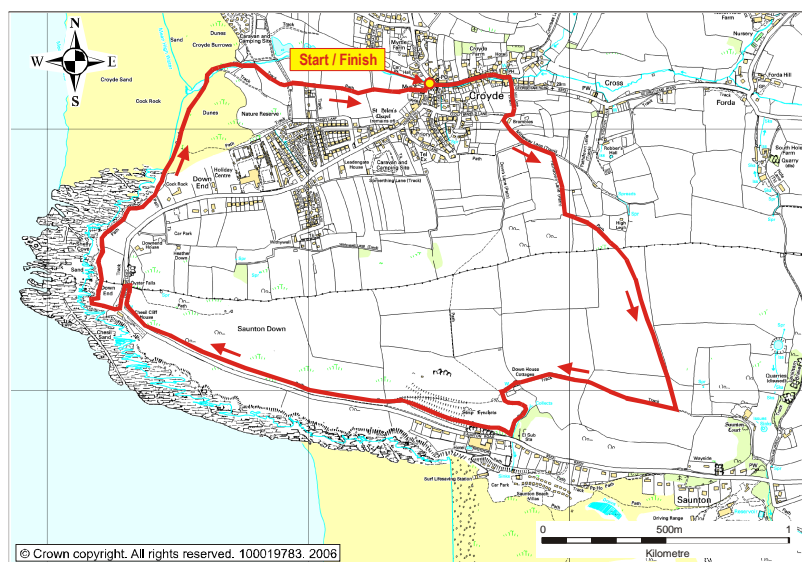
The walk starts and finishes at Croyde, which is served by a regular bus route from Barnstaple. For timetable details telephone Traveline on 0870 608 2 608 or visit www.traveline.org.uk

Fact File

Walk Length: 4.5 miles/7 km : one long steady climb of nearly 160m/520 feet; a short climb of 40m/130 feet; 4 stiles.

Facilities: All facilities at Croyde; none on route except for large hotel at Saunton Sands.

The Walk



Begin at Croyde outside the Brook Stores and the Post Office next door. These are in the centre of the village by the road junction. Walk along St. Mary's Road, signposted towards Georgeham and Woolacombe.

The walk soon passes the May Cottage Tea Rooms. The cottage, if not as tea rooms, dates back to the 17th Century, as do many of the cottages along this road.

A little further on is St. Mary's Church, or more accurately, Chapel. Croyde is not a parish in its own right, being part of the parish of Georgeham. St. Mary's was built in 1874 as Croyde's chapel to avoid the need for worshippers to walk inland to Georgeham. Just beyond the chapel is The Manor, now a pub. This originated as Croyde's Manor House in 1790.

After passing St. Mary's and The Manor, the road swings sharply right then left. At the left hand turn leave the road and follow the rocky track which climbs steeply to the right.

This is an old access road between the valley villages and the pasture on the Down. It may even have originated as a road from Braunton, since the modern coast road was not built until the 1800's.

The track emerges onto another track, this one surfaced. Turn left here, continuing uphill, though less steeply. Keep going ahead uphill as the surface becomes rougher, bearing left on arriving at a junction of paths, signposted to Lobbhill.

There is a good view back over Croyde from here, the village framed by the two highlands of Saunton Down on the left and Middleborough Hill on the right.

Continue uphill and just before the next right hand bend a narrower path goes off to the right. Follow this path, which can sometimes be a little muddy in winter or after heavy rain. The path leads into a field. At this point leave this path and continue up the even narrower path continuing uphill in the same direction.

This length may be a little overgrown and in places a little uncomfortable for those wearing shorts because of the nettles in the hedges.

The narrowest length is soon past and the path bears left and continues to climb, eventually to emerge at a stile at open downland. Cross the stile and continue ahead to the top of the down.

The walk has now reached the summit of Saunton Down, at 159m or 520 feet, and the views are simply stunning. Behind can be seen Woolacombe Sands with Morte Point beyond. Nearer is the village of Georgeham and to the left, sheltering behind Baggy Point, is Croyde.

Looking ahead the view is dominated by the estuary of the Taw and Torridge rivers, with Braunton Marsh in the foreground. The village of Braunton is ahead and left. Ahead and right is the great expanse of Saunton Sands and, beyond, the coast sweeps away towards Hartland Point. This is a magical spot, well worth the climb.

Continue ahead over the down, descending now, the climbing all but over. While descending bear slightly to the left to come alongside a fence. Follow the fence to the bottom corner and cross the stile. Go straight ahead to join the obvious path and turn right along this track.

On the descent to the track, over to the left can be seen the roofs of Saunton Court. This is an old building, with medieval origins, and was extended in the 1930's by the famous architect Edwin Lutyens.

Follow the track as it climbs briefly to arrive at two gates. Go through the left hand gate and continue alongside the wall to the ruins.

These are the ruins of Down House Cottages, abandoned in the early 20th Century.

The panorama from here over Braunton Burrows and Saunton Sands is wonderful. Braunton Burrows forms one of the largest areas of sand dunes in England. The area was designated as a Biosphere Reserve in 2002 by UNESCO for its environmental and scientific importance. It is Britain's first Biosphere Reserve, a designation which gives it world status.

Pass through the gate at the ruin then, just beyond, turn left alongside the bank, signposted to Saunton Sands. The path bears off to the right to a stile then descends some steps to a stream. Follow to the right at the stream and continue to descend. Crossing a stile at the bottom, just before the main road, turn right along the signposted Coast Path.

The walk has now joined the main route of the South West Coast Path, waymarked with the National Trail acorn symbol, which here coincides with the line of the Tarka Trail. The last part of the walk, along the track and past the ruined cottages, has also followed an alternative length of the Coast Path, which accounts for the acorn waymarks there. This length avoids use of a stretch of the main road.

On the left is the Saunton Sands Hotel. This is a notable landmark in the area, visible from much of the coast from as far as Hartland Point. It was built in 1937 in the so-called "modernistic" style and ranks as a notable design for a hotel of its time.

Now keep to the Coast Path as it follows the bottom of the slopes of Saunton Down, giving magnificent views over Saunton Sands.

As the path continues towards the end of the down, the view ahead will soon include the outline on the horizon of Lundy (as long as the day is reasonably clear). Lundy lies 11 miles/18 km north of Hartland Point and about 18 miles/29 km from here. It is approximately 3 miles/5 km north-south and 0.5 mile/0.8 km east-west and reaches a height of 143m/471 feet. Settled by Vikings who named it "lundi-ey", or puffin island, it has been the haunt of pirates and recluses. Since 1969 it has been owned by

the National Trust and administered and maintained by the Landmark Trust. It is important for seabirds, although the puffins have severely declined in numbers, and the seas around form a Marine Conservation Area.

At the end of the down the path descends to the road. Take care on this length. Turn left, back along the road for approximately 100m then, at the bend, follow the narrow steps leading off to the right. Continue on the path along the top of the low cliff.

Ahead now can be seen Croyde Bay, with Baggy Point beyond.

The path descends steps to Croyde beach. Follow ahead below the cliffs, then below the dunes, along the beach as far as a stream flowing out of a gap in the dunes. The Coast Path is left behind here - cross the stream and turn inland up the gap, re-crossing the stream over a bridge to a footpath. At the first junction, by some information boards, bear left. Go through the next gate into the field, crossing it to a further gate at the right hand end of a row of pine trees. Go through onto another path.

All this area is managed as a nature reserve. Keep an eye open for the information boards along the route.

Follow the path until it arrives in Croyde village. Turn left to return to the Brook Stores and Post Office, where the walk started.

Further Information

For details of the South West Coast Path, an annual guide including an accommodation list is published by the South West Coast Path Association, price £6, and is available in local bookshops and Tourist Information Centres. It may also be obtained from the Discover Devon Holiday Line, Westacott Rd, Barnstaple, EX32 8AW, telephone 0870 608 5531, price £7.50 including post and packing - quote reference DP 33 and make any cheque payable to Devon County Council.

There is also an information pack on the Tarka Trail, price £2, available at local Tourist Information Centres and also a free introductory Tarka Trail leaflet. Both may also be obtained from the above address, price £3.50 for the pack including post and packing (quote reference DP 102), the introductory leaflet is free (quote reference DP 101).

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

OS Maps for this walk: Explorer (1:25,000 scale) no. 139 Bideford, Ilfracombe and Barnstaple

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