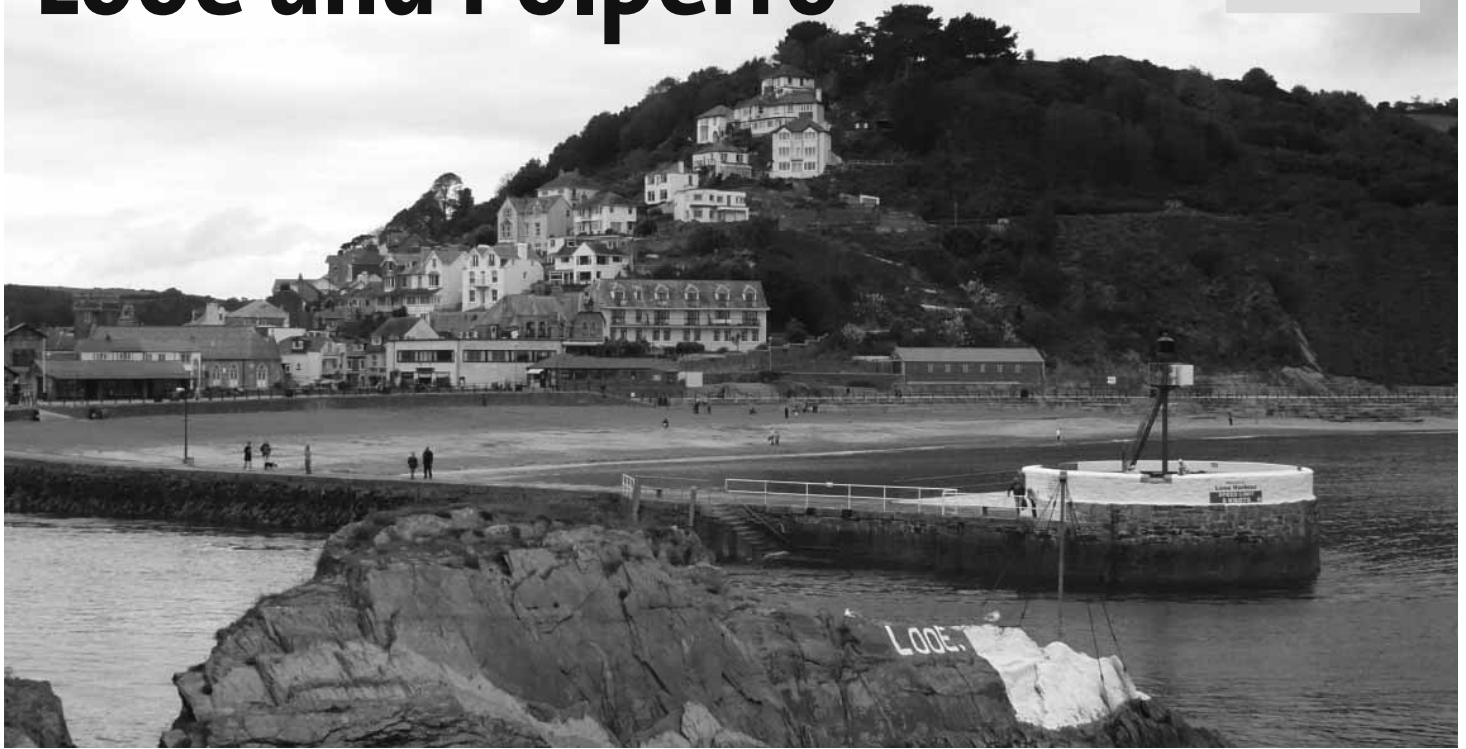


Exploring Looe and Polperro

Level
B1
Intermediate



South East Cornwall is perhaps the least spoilt of all the county, with pretty towns and villages still surviving as working ports all along the coast. Looe and Polperro are typical Cornish harbours, and are very popular with visitors.

Cross the River Tamar from Devon and you enter the county of Cornwall. The county is famous for its heavy industries of tin and china clay mining, but the south-east of the county always focused on a much older trade: fishing. Looe and Polperro remain excellent examples of the Cornish fishing town.

The town now known as Looe was, for most of its history, two separate towns of East Looe and West Looe, separated by the estuary. East Looe is the larger of the two, and is home to the fish quay as well as most of the town's shops and houses.

The harbour was the source of the town's wealth for centuries. Fishing has been the longest lasting trade, but Looe once exported copper and stone from

mines and quarries to the north, and there used to be a canal to transport goods to the port. This didn't last long after the railway arrived.

Trade declined in the 20th century, leaving only the trawlers bringing fish and seafood to the market on the harbour. There may well be fish on sale when you visit, but most will have been sold almost as soon as it was landed in the early morning because Looe is still one of the most important fishing ports in the county and its fish is very popular.

Fishing is not the only sea-bound activity popular in Looe. The town's sailing club is well known for its races and international sailing competitions take place regularly. Indeed, a unique sailing boat, the Redwing, was designed



The Old Guildhall, Looe

especially for racing in Looe Bay. All this activity on the water can be dangerous and next to the pier are two lifeboat stations, one old and one new, where the charity Royal National Lifeboat Institution houses rescue boats funded entirely by public donation.



Nelson

Cross the bridge, or take the 40p ferry, from East Looe to West Looe and you can find an unusual statue by the edge of the estuary. Nelson was a large seal with only one eye, who used to be a regular sight in Cornwall's harbours. Eventually he settled among the rocks on Looe Island, just off the coast, but came into Looe harbour to feed on the fish. Visitors loved him – and he loved being fed by the visitors and fishermen. When he died in 2003 he was sadly missed, and this statue was unveiled in 2008.



The RNLI lifeboat station in Looe

The 'banjo' pier at the end of the harbour separates the estuary from East Looe beach, a lovely stretch of sand that draws summer visitors to the water. At the far end, through a gap in the rocks, is the Second Beach which has plenty of rock pools to explore at low tide.

Looe harbour looking from West Looe to East Looe



Polperro harbour at low tide

Away from the harbour, Looe has plenty of shops and cafés, as well as restaurants where you can try the local seafood. There's a museum in the Old Guildhall which will tell you more about the town's history – but you can see the old pillory (a board with holes for hands and heads which was used to punish criminals) at the end of the roof outside the museum.

Looe is very popular with tourists, and not just in summer. In the winter the town is famed for its Christmas lights and for its New Year celebrations, with the town ranked as one of the best places in Britain to be at midnight.

Along the coast from Looe is

Polperro, another town famous for fishing. However, while Looe has a wide estuary, Polperro is crammed into a narrow, steep valley, with colourful fishermen's houses seeming to tumble right down to the tiny harbour.

The first thing to note about Polperro is the narrowness of its streets, which were built for the horse and handcart rather than the motor car. The maze of streets offers some surprising secrets: a house decorated with shells, bridges that claim to date from the times of the Saxons and Romans, and a model village. As well as the story of the town's daytime fishing trade, the Heritage Museum of Fishing and »

Polperro's narrow streets are a magnet for tourists - and a nightmare for drivers. One delivery lorry was stuck for 14 hours!



« Smuggling (£1.75) will tell you about the night-time, illegal trade in brandy and tobacco that used to provide welcome income when times were hard for the fishermen. The coves around Polperro were ideal landing places for illegal goods, and the village's maze of cellars good hiding places.

We don't know about the smuggling, but fishing is still carried out from Polperro, although the tiny fishermen's cottages are frequently owned by very wealthy people as holiday homes – a one-bedroom house will cost you an extraordinary £220,000 today. The men who built these practical houses with a store room at ground level and tiny house above would have been astonished at the prices, and that almost an entire village could become too expensive for the kind of people who built it. Significant wealth may come in handy in some rather smart restaurants, but there are plenty of cafés where you can get a reasonable snack. Perhaps you might like to try a traditional Cornish pasty - a meat pie with

The Shell House in Polperro has hundreds of local shells pressed into the concrete on the front of the house in patterns and pictures.



a thick crust.

The pretty village is, not surprisingly, popular with artists and there are plenty of galleries, as well as an exhibition in the village hall at the top of the hill. There are plenty of craft shops too, and the town's Fishermen's Choir is well-known for its evening concerts on the quay.

You can explore further by taking a cruise from the harbour, including trips to Looe, or walk along the coast path (see right).

So why not discover Looe and Polperro for yourself? There is plenty to explore, and the towns offer a real insight into Cornwall's history and heritage.

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The coast path

You can stretch your legs and get in touch with another side of Cornwall's history by exploring the old smugglers' paths along the coast. There's a well-marked path between Polperro and Looe which takes about two hours to walk (4.5 miles or 7km). You'll need good shoes, because the path is narrow and steep and can be slippery.

The path leaves Polperro on the east side of the harbour (to the left as you look out to sea) behind the houses up a lane. Follow the signs to Talland Bay or Talland, and you will come to Polperro's war memorial high on the cliffs. The path continues to Talland Bay, which was a favourite with smugglers and just around the corner is the Smugglers Rest which offers snacks daily.

From Talland Bay take the road past the public convenience, then turn right along a side road before you reach the phone box. The footpath leaves the road at the next junction, then carries on along the cliffs past The Hore Stone, Bridge Rocks and Portnadler Bay with views of Looe Island, before reaching the outskirts of West Looe. From here the road will take you to the town centre.



» LAL runs regular tours to Looe and Polperro.

You can travel to Looe by train every Monday to Saturday, and on Sundays in the summer. A return ticket from Paignton costs from £10.50. See www.nationalrail.co.uk for times.

If you want to visit Looe on a Sunday, you can take the train to Liskeard and a Western Greyhound bus 573 to Looe. A return ticket costs from £10 for the train and £2.60 for the bus.

A single bus ticket between Looe and Polperro costs £1.80 on Western Greyhound service 573, and a return ticket costs £2.60.

You can also buy a Looe Valley Ranger, allowing unlimited use of the railway and buses between Liskeard, Looe and Polperro for one day for £3.50. See www.westerngreyhound.com for info.