

Level
A2
Pre-Intermediate

The South Hams

Stretching from the border of Torbay to the edge of Plymouth, and from the sea to the edges of Dartmoor, the area known as the South Hams covers some of the most unspoilt countryside in Southern England, and includes an amazing variety of landscapes. It seems a peaceful farming area, but its history includes volcanoes, heavy industry and fierce warfare.

If you start at the edge of Dartmoor, the South Hams begins as steep hillsides full of huge, hard granite rocks left over from ancient volcanoes. Dartmoor's bleak open spaces are not far away, but the South Hams soon becomes softer, with woodland and lush fields bordered by tall hedges laid out like a tapestry as you travel south. Here the volcanoes have been softened by millions of years of rain and wind leaving rounded hills and sheltered valleys. As you approach the sea the valleys fill with water and become estuaries full of waterside villages and once-busy harbours. The hills above suddenly end in dramatic cliffs that tumble down to pretty beaches.

Inland countryside

Many parts of England are famous for farming one thing: East Anglia for wheat, Somerset for apples, Yorkshire for wool and so on; much of England has seen the countryside switch to factory farming and the landscape changed to vast open fields stretching for miles with just one type of food. The South Hams has always produced a great mix of goods, and still looks like a perfect painting of English countryside. The fields which are too steep to plough are full of cows, producing the rich milk and cream for which Devon is famous, or sheep which provided local mills with wool. The rich red soil also grows good

wheat, but the hills and narrow roads have made it too difficult to convert to mass production. Sheltered valleys are ideal for apples and other fruits or vegetables.

All this farming needed many men in the days before tractors, and the area is full of small villages which grew up around farms. Most are just a collection of houses with perhaps a pub or shop. Every village has its own church, and these often give an interesting insight into the village history. Many of the churches are far larger than you would expect for the villages they serve; many have very tall towers which can be seen for miles. It is said that the villages competed to have the biggest and best churches so that they could show everyone how religious they were. It was not unusual for villages to send architects round Devon to copy the best bits of other churches – St Mary's in Totnes has parts copied from at least three other towns, for example. Churches were not only places of worship: the towers were good places to hide illegal, smuggled goods too.

A typical Devon lane - narrow with high hedges



Don't be fooled by their sleepy appearance, because these villages often have industrial histories. Lodiswell, for example, was a centre for copper and ochre mining, while Tuckenhay's paper mill supplied the paper for British banknotes until the 1960s. Even today these small villages can be surprisingly busy, and there are lots of small industries tucked in odd corners, from plastic moulding to engineering and even a vineyard.

Between the villages and fields run Devon's deep lanes, with high hedges (which are actually overgrown walls) blocking the view. Not all the old lanes were converted to hard roads, and there are 180 miles of 'green lanes' for walkers as well as attractive footpaths to explore.

Where's the bacon?

You probably know that ham is a type of meat made from pigs. On the south Devon coast you'll also find the Pig's Nose, Ham Stone and Gammon Head. But the name 'South Hams' has nothing to do with pigs: 'Hams' is short for 'Hamlets'. Hamlets are groups of farms and houses that are smaller than villages and have no churches. There are hundreds of hamlets in South Devon, and this gave the area its name.

The shingle bank and road separating the freshwater lake and sea at Slapton



The coast

The South Hams coast has beautiful beaches and rugged cliffs, which are perfect for a lazy day or a pleasant walk along the coast path which runs all along it, but it is the deep estuaries that have most distinctive character. These were formed after the last ice age when the sea level rose and valleys flooded. Ports and harbours have been built in their sheltered waters, and towns like Dartmouth, Salcombe and Kingsbridge were once major trading ports as well as fishing bases. Even Totnes, which is in theory miles away from the sea, can be reached from the English Channel. Along these estuaries there are pretty villages such as Dittisham, South Pool and Stoke Gabriel which have the benefits of the water without the danger of the sea. Of course, for some people danger means excitement, and beaches such as Bantham are magnets for surfing in winter waves. Close to Bantham is Burgh Island, which has a famous hotel where Agatha Christie used to stay and which appears in two of her books. You can walk across to the island at low tide, or take the unique 'sea tractor' when the tide is in.

The danger of the sea is illustrated best close to Start Point, the southerly tip of the South Hams. Here a lighthouse warns ships off the sharp

rocks, but those are not the only dangers. Just along the coast an entire village has disappeared: Hallsands was washed away in bad storms in the last century, following the removal of millions of tons of gravel from the sea nearby for use in construction.

A little further east is a truly extraordinary stretch of coast at Slapton. Here there is a huge freshwater lake (Slapton Ley) just yards from the beach. The lake is protected from the sea by a 2.5 mile (3.5km) shingle bank, with a road running almost straight along the top (it's well known as a place where people, illegally, see how fast their cars can go on quiet evenings!). The lake and swamps provide a unique habitat for a huge range of wildlife and is a site of Special Scientific Interest. Its future is under threat, because the council are not sure that they can maintain the road and sand bank if sea levels rise again. In the meantime you can see many species of birds, butterflies and dragonflies. If you see smoke beside the lake, it may just be thousands of harmless midges. In the evening it is common to see glow-worms.

Be aware that if you stray too far along Slapton beach, naturalists give way to naturists, as the beach furthest from Torcross is the only (unofficial) nudist beach in South Devon.

Slapton – or France?

Slapton Sands looks remarkably similar to parts of the French coast used for the invasions of D-Day in 1944. Much of the South Hams was emptied during the war so that the British and Americans could use the area for secret training. Exercises went horribly wrong: real ammunition was used to make the training more realistic, but ended up killing hundreds of soldiers, and a German E-boat attacked, causing chaos. The whole incident was made secret, although locals knew that something had gone wrong – there are still rumours of human bones being dug up in fields. In the 1980s a tank was discovered in the sea off Torcross and a local man, Ken Small, battled to have it brought out of the water. In the process the terrible story of the training exercises finally came to public attention, and the tank is now a well-known memorial beside the beach.



Market Towns

Bigger than the villages, but smaller than most towns in Britain, the South Hams' main trading points are its market towns. In general South Hams towns have escaped the big chains of shops and have lots of interesting independent stores and cafés in which to pass the time. Nowadays there are few cattle or sheep markets but there are often good general markets selling everything from fresh local food to furniture. Dartmouth is an interesting town at the end of the River Dart which has a naval college and an excellent regatta and, like Salcombe,

attracts a lot of people in boats. Both are extraordinarily expensive places to live.

One small town, Modbury, has had more than its share of excitement in its history. During the English Civil War not just one but two battles were fought in the town, with the King's and Parliament forces each winning a battle. There have been reports of horribly vivid, ghostly repetitions of these battles in the area, but a stranger story still is the mass hallucination of 1211. During the Sunday mass people heard a crash from outside the church and rushed outside: they saw a huge anchor catch on a tombstone, attached

to a strange ship floating in the sky. Suddenly one 'sailor' jumped out of the ship and started swimming in the air, while others from the ship cut the anchor rope and the ship sailed away.

Such 'visions' might be more expected in Totnes, a town which has a long history of alternative, new age or 'hippy' inhabitants. It has an outstanding range of independent shops, from the practical to the eclectic, and the town remains one of the most unspoilt in England.

» Visiting the South Hams

We always recommend taking an LAL excursion, and in the case of the South Hams we strongly recommend you do. The roads are narrow (too narrow for cars to pass in many places) and public transport limited. The next LAL Excursion is on 23rd July.

The most frequent bus routes for the South Hams, which run roughly once an hour, are: Stagecoach 111 - Torquay to Dartmouth (1 hour 45 mins) via Totnes (1 hour) First 93 - Dartmouth to Plymouth (2 hours) via Torcross (30 mins), Kingsbridge (1 hour) and Modbury (90 mins) First X80 - Paignton to Plymouth (1 hour 20 mins) via Totnes (20 mins), South Brent (40 mins) and Ivybridge (1 hour) A Stagecoach one-day Explorer ticket costs £6.50. A FirstDay ticket costs £6.80. Stagecoach tickets cannot be used on First buses, nor First tickets on Stagecoach buses.
