



Exmoor explorer

Stay overnight in Porlock and finish a mountain bike ride on moorland trails with a dip in the sea and a cream tea. **Max Darkins** is your guide

Exmoor National Park covers an area of 700 square kilometres, with 71% in Somerset and the remaining 29% in Devon. With around 700km of bridleways and many more unclassified tracks and permissive bridleways, there are plenty of trails to keep you entertained here.

This route starts by heading south, up onto Doverhay Down. It then uses one of the permissive bridleways to link you to Ley Hill, where you join Granny's Ride. This fun and challenging singletrack trail drops you steeply down the first of the many steep-sided combs around these parts into the heart of Horner Wood. If you thought the descent inappropriately named, just wait until you attempt the tough push back up the other side!

The ancient oak trees here add an eerie ambience to this quiet nature reserve. Both flora and fauna flourish, and you could easily spend some time exploring and playing in the babbling river here. Next comes the big climb to the highest point in Exmoor: Dunkery Beacon, which sits at more than 500 metres. Big views out across wild and expansive moorland, and even over the Severn Estuary to Wales, reward your efforts.

In autumn you will be further treated with bright yellow gorse, while July and August have vibrant purple heather. It's also a good place to spot wild ponies and deer roaming the open moor. There is, of course, also a great



The descent from Dunkery Hill is worth the climb

downhill section from here. You descend the open moor on a wide and rocky trail, and with no real hidden surprises you can enjoy a clear run. At the bottom, a cruise back along the foot of the moors leads you to Horner, where the pull of a cream tea may delay proceedings for a while.

The second loop takes you west of Porlock, climbing to just over 400 metres this time, to Hawkcombe

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Head, where you turn and head back down to Porlock. This track is a classic, starting with a flowing trail across the open moorland before it drops into the dark, wooded valley, splashing through streams and bumping over rocks and roots as you go. You could stay along the valley floor all the way back into Porlock. Alternatively, if you have the energy, follow the route for one last 'little' climb and finish with a flourish, before plopping back to Porlock for a well-earned pint.

The upland moorland area provides some majestic views but starting at sea level you do have to work pretty hard to get yourself up to the top. The journey back down rewards you with some exhilarating riding, and the double-bubble shape of the route enables it to be tackled as two rides if required. ●