Mendip magnificence

SIMONE STANBROOK-BYRNE revels in her surroundings as a newly re-launched route takes her through some of the most dramatic and varied terrain in the country.

HISTORY AND BACKGROUND:

During the course of the last couple of years Somerset has rediscovered one of its gems. Thanks to the efforts of a number of hard-working individuals and groups, including the Mendip Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, the fabulously varied Mendip Way has been re-launched. This is splendid news for walkers.

The Mendips are a range of limestone hills stretching across Somerset. This long-distance route is split into two distinct sections, The West Mendip Way (which first opened in 1979) and The East Mendip Way. The whole route covers a fabulously varied 50 miles, with some 7,000ft of ascent, stretching from the coast near Weston-super-Mare (you can start with a stroll on the beach) and travelling all the way to Glastonbury.

It is a route rich with history, legends, wildlife and some spectacular geology. It traverses some of the most dramatic terrain in the country, including the superb Cheddar Gorge, as well as passing along paths less-travelled through pastoral farmland.

There are options to detour up Glastonbury Tor and plenty of places to explore along the way such as the ever-popular caves of Cheddar and the beautiful city of Wells.

Away from the more populous spots the route often makes the most of tucked-away paths, threading its way off the beaten track through places where wildlife abounds and broad-leaved woodlands cascade with birdsong. I had one of my most memorable wildlife encounters ever whilst walking a section of this route.

The Mendip Way is a superb showcase for the tapestry of landscape and culture that makes up Somerset. Grab boots, grab binoculars – go!
THE ROUTE

There’s nothing quite like a stroll on the beach to get your legs going and with The Mendip Way starting its western journey at Uphill, at the south end of Weston-super-Mare’s beach, a walk along the sand is a good start.

Once a busy port, Uphill is an historic place that also boasts a nature reserve renowned for its spring cowlips and excellent birdlife. From here the Way heads east following a Roman road towards the viewpoint on Bleadon Hill, before ducking south to Loxton then heading east again.

It is wonderfully airy ridge-walking across Wavering Down with its thirst-quenching panorama across Somerset and to Wales. Lean on the trigpoint and drink it in. The route continues east beyond here, passing Shipham before curling round to approach Cheddar Gorge from its eastern end.

The Way follows a path across the plateau at the top of the Gorge – a place of spectacular views, semi-feral goats and knee-weakening drops if you decide to divert slightly and get close to the edge. The very circular Cheddar Reservoir is visible, served by the River Yeo that runs through Cheddar Village. Although the route doesn’t pass through the gorge if you have time it’s worth detouring into the chasm to experience the sense of being right at the bottom of that mighty rock face. Look out for stone monkeys. One of the busier places of the Mendips, there is plenty of opportunity in the village for refreshment and historic diversion – the caves themselves are worth a visit.

The Way heads south for a while to Draycott before continuing its eastward journey to Priddy and the poetically lovely area near the ‘lost-worldly’ Ebbor Gorge, formed aeons ago when a mighty cave collapsed. The viewpoint across the top of

There is a superb viewpoint from the top of Ebbor Gorge
EXTRA WALKING TIPS
The Mendip Way traverses an area rich in wildlife, so if wildlife watching is your thing make sure you are carrying binoculars and field guides or have appropriate phone apps. Keep a list – it adds to the sense of achievement if, as well as walking 50 miles, you’ve clocked up more than 50 different bird species (and they don’t have to be rarities).
the gorge makes for an excellent picnic spot. On one occasion here I shared my sandwiches with several wild wood mice who sat on my boots, nibbled my fingers and generally made themselves comfortable amongst the rucksacks. One of life’s extraordinary moments.

From here the Way passes well-known Wookey Hole, another village which also boasts caves, before arriving in historic Wells, England’s smallest city and somewhere to linger. I know cities and walking don’t necessarily go hand in hand, but Wells is not like most cities and should be explored and savoured; if your timing is right you may like to join a ‘stained glass walk’ around the cathedral.

If you plan to add to your journey with the trek up iconic Glastonbury Tor, it is at Wells that you can divert from The Mendip Way to do so. If you don’t climb it, you can at least see it from the main route, keeping watch over the Somerset Levels.

Between Wells and Frome you are now following the East Mendip Way and the countryside through which you pass is of a different, less strenuous and less populated flavour.

A good deal of woodland accompanies you on the leg towards Shepton Mallet – and, by way of contrast, an extensive solar farm is encountered. Concentrate on the wildlife-rich woods and think about clean energy! On the edge of Shepton Mallet is the arresting Charlton Viaduct, built in the 19th century to carry a railway. Just after this the Mendip Way crosses the ancient Roman Fosse Way before continuing the latter stages of its journey.

As the route passes the folly of Cranmore Tower, surrounded by its woodland, you are actually at the highest point of the Mendip Way, at around 280m above sea level, though the drama of the scenery during the earlier part of the walk makes those previous

Simone Stanbrook-Byrne is the author, with James Clancy, of ‘A Dozen Dramatic Walks in Somerset’ and other walking guides for the West Country. Some of the walks in the book incorporate sections of The Mendip Way as part of a short circular route.

**COMPASS POINTS**

**Pre-walk information:** The whole Mendip Way involves a good deal of ascent, so be prepared for strenuous segments. It passes many centres of habitation so walkers are well-provided for.

**Be prepared:** This may seem like stating the obvious but before embarking on any walk plan ahead thoroughly for what you will need: decent boots, wet weather gear, sun block, first aid, food and water supplies, phone etc.

**Long distance:** If you are planning to do the whole route in one go, rather than exploring sections, I find the best way to undertake a walk like this is to carry a day pack and use luggage transfers. To do this I would recommend the excellent Encounter Walking Holidays who can arrange everything for you, tailoring the package to suit exactly what you want and taking away all the organisational hassle (encounterwalkingholidays.com; 01208 871066).

Having done several long-distance routes in different parts of the UK (with and without such assistance) I really can’t recommend this system highly enough. Personally, I love to know that there is a comfy B&B with dry clothes waiting for me at the end of each day.

**Start points:** Both ends of the route, at Weston-super-Mare and Frome, are accessible by train.

**Maps:** OS Maps that cover the route are Explorer Maps 125 000, numbers: 153, 141 and 142