



# WALK ON THE WILD SIDE

The National Parks of Great Britain are protected areas of mountains, meadows, moorlands, woods and wetlands. A recent addition to the National Parks is the South Downs, an area of outstanding natural beauty. Tracey Davies pulls on her walking boots to visit her old stomping ground.

As the warm buds of spring nudge away another white winter, why not embrace the kinder weather and enjoy the fruits of our natural heritage in one of "Britain's breathing spaces". This March sees the grand unveiling of Britain's 13th accolade, the South Downs National Park. Already an area of outstanding natural beauty, the glorious Downs stretch from the Victorian resort of Eastbourne in East Sussex 90 miles west to the cathedral city of Winchester in Hampshire.

As a youngster living on the Sussex coast, my weekends were spent either by the sea or roaming the bosomy hills of the South Downs: from hikes around the chalky outline of the Long Man of Wilmington to spring walks with a frisky spaniel through the leafy canopied paths of Friston Forest. Even back then as a growling teen, the natural beauty of the area did not fail to make an impression on me.

Each year our school made its annual pilgrimage to Cuckmere Haven, an area of flood plains and oxbow lakes (see, I did listen in geography) where the River Cuckmere would wind and wend its way down to the sea. As I got

older I became a groupie to the dozens of hang-gliders who'd leap off the grassy slopes of Ditchling Beacon and gracefully soar over the chequered landscape I grew up in. It's for these reasons that it gives me such great pleasure that the South Downs has been awarded National Park status. It's a true appreciation of its beauty, splendour and extra-specialness.

## My way or the highway

The South Downs Way is one of my most favourite walks. To me it's England in a nutshell, where the faded patchwork hills of the Downs meets the dark swathe of the English Channel. This long-distance footpath officially starts in Winchester and stretches for almost 100 miles finally curving round the outskirts of Eastbourne.

However, as a Sussex girl I like to start at the tiny village of Exceat, near to the coastal town of Seaford, 10 miles west of Eastbourne. From Exceat, head towards Cuckmere Haven where you can walk along the coast to meet the stern white cliff faces of the Seven Sisters.

The route then descends into the most heavenly of Sussex villages, East Dean. The eternally esteemed Tiger Inn overlooks the village green and serves locally brewed ale with names like Legless Rambler and Parson Darby's Hole. It's an old family favourite and an ideal place to stop for a pub lunch before embarking on a steady march over the cliffs towards Beachy Head.

Local farmer and brewer, Charlie Davies-Gilbert, has a fond connection with this footpath. "Having walked the South Downs Way in three days, raising £25,000 for charity, as well as farming and growing up here I have a great appreciation for the Downs," says Charlie. "Although you'll

feel exhausted, you'll be exhilarated and you'll have seen some of the most spectacular views in England, of which the best are left to the end as you approach the Seven Sisters and Beachy Head," he beams. "There is something special about knowing that as you walk the South Downs Way you are walking in the footsteps of Neolithic man, Saxons, Romans, pedlars, mariners, smugglers, modern hikers, lovers, pleasure-seekers, and now you". So proud of this glorious route, Charlie's brewery – the Beachy Head – brews the award-winning local ale Legless Rambler, which is dedicated to all those who regularly grace this footpath.

After imbibing some breathtaking views from the peak of Beachy Head, it's an easy romp down towards the seafront at Eastbourne. It's here, generally with ice cream in hand, that I look back retracing my footsteps by sight and with aching legs and a happy heart, I savour my splendid land.

## Where to stay

Serious hikers who want an early start should stay at the Foxhole campsite and camping barn (open 1st April to end of October) at Exceat village in the heart of the Downs ([www.sevensisters.org.uk](http://www.sevensisters.org.uk)). Telephone 01323 870280 to make a reservation (booking ahead is advised). There is a £1 discount per person per night for anyone arriving by sustainable means i.e. walking and cycling.

For those who like a little more comfort, The Tiger Inn in East Dean is the perfect mid-way stop for lunch, dinner, a well-earned jar of Legless Rambler or even a bed for the night. The Tiger's accommodation has been recently updated and there are five brand new en-suite rooms available from April (again booking ahead is advised): Tiger Inn, East Dean BN20 0DA; telephone 01323 423209; [www.beachyhead.org.uk](http://www.beachyhead.org.uk).

JOHN TYLER ©SOUTH DOWNS JOINT COMMITTEE

Listed here are just a handful of the National Parks that Great Britain has to offer. To find out what your nearest park can offer you, visit [www.nationalparks.org.uk](http://www.nationalparks.org.uk)

## CAIRNGORMS, SCOTLAND

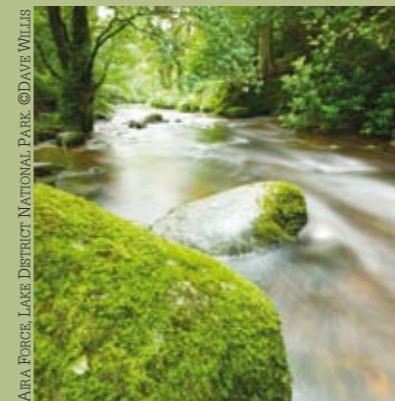
The Cairngorms (pictured right) is the largest National Park in the UK and one of three that are in Scotland, the other two being Loch Lomond and the Trossachs. This is the park you need to head to if mountain-climbing is your thing. The Cairngorms is home to four out of five of Scotland's highest mountains. The rangers lead guiding nature walks from March onwards. For more information visit [www.cairngorms.co.uk](http://www.cairngorms.co.uk).



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## THE LAKE DISTRICT, CUMBRIA

You can't have a feature about the UK's National Parks without mentioning the most famous one of all, the Lake District (pictured right). With its dramatic landscape of fells and lakes, the Lake District dedicates itself to outdoor life. Climb Scafell Pike, England's highest mountain or sail on one of the dozens of vast glassy lakes. For a beginners guide on walking in the Lakes log on to [www.lakedistrict.gov.uk](http://www.lakedistrict.gov.uk).



AREA FORCE, LAKE DISTRICT NATIONAL PARK ©DAVE WILLIS

## NORTH YORKSHIRE MOORS

The North Yorkshire Moors has been a National Park for more than 50 years. It stretches from the seaside resort of Scarborough on the east coast up to Whitby before turning inland towards Helmsley and Thirsk. This area is a walker's dream with more than 1400 miles of pathways and tracks. Pickering, to the south of the moors, is an official "walkers are welcome" town. This National Park's official website is [www.northyorkmoors.org.uk](http://www.northyorkmoors.org.uk). It will give you plenty of ideas on what to do and where to stay.

## PEAK DISTRICT, DERBYSHIRE

The Peak District is the UK's oldest national park and home to more than 38,000 people. Its traditional English landscape attracts walkers, cavers, climbers and cyclists from all over the world. In April, the Peak District Walking Festival celebrates its unique beauty with more than 100 guided walks from rangers, ecologists and even ghost hunters. For more information visit [www.visitpeakdistrict.com](http://www.visitpeakdistrict.com).