



DARTMOOR NATIONAL PARK

LOCATION
Devon

DRIVE TIME FROM LONDON
Four hours



FREE WHEEL

NEED TO KNOW

WHEN TO GO Year round, but the weather can turn ugly in winter.

GETTING THERE With Devon Mountain Bike Holidays you're picked up by minivan in London on Friday and dropped off again late Sunday. To get to Dartmoor on your own, take the M4 from London, then the M5 and the A30 to Okehampton.

GETTING AROUND Your guide drives you to the start of each route. From there, it's all pedal power.

ACCOMMODATION Bunk room accommodation at the local pub is included in standard trips. Free camping in Dartmoor National Park is also permitted.

VITAL INFO There are bike routes for all levels, but a bit of training and fitness work beforehand is a bonus. Getting to the top of some of the tors is well worth the effort.

SEE www.dartmoor-npa.gov.uk; www.legendarydartmoor.co.uk.

Thrills, spills, majestic scenery and Iron Age history crammed into a weekend mountain biking escape

WORDS TREVOR PADDENBURG PHOTOS BRENDON BISHOP

There are some things in life you just can't control — the weather, going into labour, Sunday sessions that spiral out of control and, apparently, mountain biking. "It's about letting go — you've got to accept the fact that you're out of control," says my guide, Devon Mountain Bike Holidays owner and operator Caspar Hughes.

We've just finished a high-speed, heart-in-your-mouth dash down a steep rocky trail as part of a weekend mountain biking retreat in Dartmoor National Park. The 954km² moorland reserve in

Devon, four hours' drive from London, is full of sweeping vistas and exposed rocky tors — an endless landscape with a barren and lonely feel, more like the empty heart of Australia than the green countryside you'd expect in England.

Its lower reaches have some lush pockets of forest and swimming reservoirs, and it's packed with historical sites like stone rows and stone circles that date back more than 3000 years to the time of the druids, before Britain was invaded by the Romans.

Add to that quaint villages with centuries-old pubs

clustered around the main town of Okehampton, which sits on the fringe of the national park, and you've got all the ingredients for a weekend away from London that'll satisfy any desires for sight-seeing, fresh country air, exercise and the chance to have a pint of local ale with a few quirky locals.

Hughes, a former London bike courier and cross country competitor, has tailored the trips to those living in the capital. You're picked up in London by minivan on Friday evening and dropped back Sunday night, bikes are included if you need one, and accommodation is in the



DARTMOOR FACT

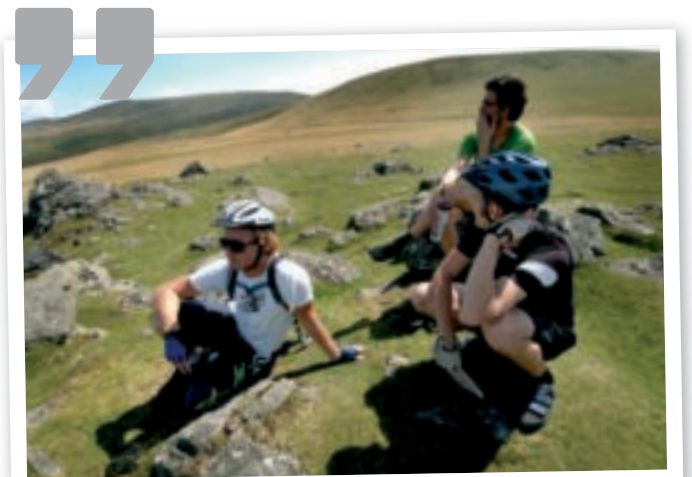
- 1 As large as London, it's the biggest moorland in England
- 2 There are stone circles and signs of people who lived on Dartmoor 3000 years ago
- 3 There's 450 miles of tracks and bridleways. If you biked them all, it'd be like doing the London Marathon 18 times
- 4 Dartmoor has wild ponies that look friendly but can bite and kick

AND FICTION?

- 1 About 1910 a series of ghostly mysteries happened on the road near Postbridge. Cyclists and ponytrap drivers felt their reins or handlebars wrenched out of their hands, often ending up in the ditch beside the road. Later, motorists suffered similar fates, sometimes with fatal results.
- 2 On the road to Hound Tor is the grave of Jay, a young woman who took her own life after getting up the duff out of wedlock. Fresh flowers appear on her grave daily, but no-one puts them there.



“It's a good feeling, and one way better than a Monday morning hangover”



charming Drewe Arms, which was run by Aunt Mabel, the oldest pub owner in the country until she passed away recently aged 101.

Although he lived in London, Hughes grew up in the moors, and he's also used satellite maps, a GPS plotter and plenty of hard yakka in the saddle to put together a bunch of really interesting routes, from beginner to advanced, that include plenty of thrilling downhill runs, climbs that'll have sweat pouring off you in buckets, stunning vistas and historical sites.

On Saturday morning it's the 25km Granite Way, ascending up Sourton Tor and coming back down on a narrow, high-speed track through Bluebell Woods. In the afternoon, it's back in the saddle for the 16km Okehampton Camp route, with a killer climb to 625m up Yes Tor and a downhill descent over boulders perfect for

launching airs. Sunday is slightly more relaxed, checking out stone circles around Fernworthy Reservoir and its peat bogs and conifer forests, followed by a scenic ride around the ancient village of Challacombe.

On the final downhill stretch, I stay off the brakes and hurtle to the bottom, trying to enjoy the speed and ride by instinct alone. Somehow, I manage not to crash and burn. I don't fancy throwing caution completely to the wind, but Hughes has taught me to give up a little control. It's a good feeling, and a better way to avoid a Monday morning hangover.

» Trevor Paddenburg biked around Dartmoor with Devon Mountain Bike Holidays (07747-041 596; www.dmbholidays.com). All-inclusive weekend trips are £223; bring your own bike and bedding and pay £170