

Jurassic Coast Path (Exmouth to Poole Harbour)

The path along the Jurassic Coast itself is one of Britain's better long-distance walks, at a not-too-long 110 miles (175km). (Essentially, it's a sub-section of the absurdly long South West Coast Path.) Most of the way is, as you'd expect, on clifftops – but the cliffs themselves are as varied as the three geological periods that formed them. The red beds of Devon give generally easy going, with only moderate climbs and descents. In west Dorset the airy cliffs are constantly interrupted by little wooded hollows. The chalk of Lulworth is vigorous up-and-down that would feel like mountain ground if not for the sea swishing away on your right.

There are quiet beaches you may even have all to yourself, and the Lyme Regis undercliff could be Southern England's wildest bit of walking. But in between are the cheerful seaside villages, and the walk is well supplied with pubs and cafés. Especially if you like crab sandwiches and lobster.

A bonus of this coastal route is that some of it is actually inland. The former 'Inland South West Coast Path', renamed the South Dorset Ridgeway, cuts out much of Chesil Beach – the shingle spit is fascinating, but not fascinating enough to want the full 14 miles of it. It also bypasses Weymouth, and the rock-rich but over-developed coast of Portland. Instead you get a high downland ridgeline, good in itself and quite different from the clifftops before and after. For the last miles of the Isle of Purbeck, again a downland ridgeline can replace some of the seaside.

With its airy clifftops and gentler downland ridges, its black-shadowed little woods and hidden beaches, and its succession of old stone villages, the result is, for me, as good a week of walking as you'll get anywhere in these islands. It's a sad moment when you get on that ferry at Studland Beach and chug away across Poole Harbour. The consolation is, you can come back and take a closer look at all those intriguing rock formations while doing some of this book's circular day-walks.

This book of individual walks is, obviously, not ideal as a route description for the continuous expedition from Exmouth to Poole Harbour (one might prefer Paddy Dillon's *The South West Coast Path* also published by Cicerone Press). You could tear the book apart and paste it back again appropriately: or you could use the book for its mapping, and explorations of the geology, while memorising this compact route description: 'follow SWCP waymarks, while keeping the sea to your right.'

Jurassic Coast end-to-end: logistics

Transport to Exmouth is by train from Exeter (St David's or Parkway). Departing from the eastern end, take the very frequent ferry across Poole Harbour to Sandbanks (www.sandbanksferry.co.uk), and catch a bus to either Poole or Bournemouth to link into the rail network.

Along the way, frequent towns and villages offer accommodation and shops, as well as bus links with each other and into the rail network. Seaside camp sites are big, busy, and mainly aimed at caravans and families. There is no legal right of wild camping on beaches or in the countryside, and permission ought to be gained from the land manager: the National Trust, which owns much of the wilder coastline, does not permit camping. For me, small seaside B&Bs and inns (there is a handful of youth hostels) are part of the pleasure of a trip.

At least one baggage transfer service operates along the path: Luggage Transfers Ltd www.luggagetransfers.co.uk. (Their site also has a good accommodation listing.)

For the continuous coastal walk, the ideal map is Harvey's South West Coast Path 6 (Sidmouth to South Haven Point) at 1:40,000 scale, in durable plastic with the route line marked on it. (The map also covers some of the circular walks as they ramble inland, but is a bit short on detail for them.) Unfortunately it doesn't cover the first 12 miles Exmouth to Sidmouth: OS Explorer 115 (Exmouth & Sidmouth) fills the gap.

JURASSIC COAST PATH: EXMOUTH TO SEATON

From Exmouth, the Jurassic Coastal Path sets off alongside a mud estuary. But straight away, it offers splendid coral fossils – and never mind that they're from the Devonian period, 150 million years before our walk's rocky story officially starts... Descend steps to beach level, for a concrete pathway below the sea defence wall, built of striking limestone. Built in 1842, its Devonian limestone from Torbay.

And in 4km you're on the red sandstone cliffs. The Geoneedle was raised in 2002 to mark the start of the Jurassic Coast world heritage site. A first climb to West Down introduces the sea views and airy clifftops that'll be the theme of the next 100 miles. First highlights are Budleigh Salterton with its Pebblebed cliff, then the sea-stacks of Ladram Bay leading up to Peak Hill and the start of the Great Unconformity.

From Sidmouth to Salcombe the cliffs are topped with chalk. **Route 6** continues through the Hooken Landslip to Beer (or there's an easier route along the clifftop above). **Route 7** has notes on the high-tide route into Seaton – which should not be confused with Seatown, another 14 miles (23km) into the following section.

JURASSIC COAST PATH: SEATON TO BRIDPORT (WEST BAY)

From Seaton, the linear **Route 12** passes along the wild, wooded Undercliff to Lyme Regis. Here only those totally bored by the last 200 million years won't pause to find a fossil.

From the east end of Lyme's seafront the signed Coast Path is diverted from its original clifftop route onto roadside pavements and a golf course. At low tide, you can instead follow the foreshore with its ammonite fossils – see **Route 8**.

The exit from Charmouth has again been diverted onto a little lane, but then follows an exhilarating section over Golden Cap's clifftops and then Thorncombe Beacon to West Bay, the harbour zone of Bridport.

JURASSIC COAST PATH: BRIDPORT TO OSMINGTON

From West Bay the path runs along the top of the magnificent tiered yellow cliffs of the Bridport Sandstone: tide permitting, you could also trudge along the shingle below to enjoy the cliffscape. Things flatten out at Burton Beach, and soon you lose sea views as you pass along the back of the shingle bank of Chesil Beach.

The 14 miles of Chesil are more pebbles than anyone really needs. Taking a break from the seaside for the green paths of the ridgeway makes for an even better walk overall, not to mention swerving the urban sprawl of Weymouth. The South Dorset Ridgeway (older signs say 'Alternative Coastal Path') leads you up through West Bexington onto the high ridgeline. This gives easy and almost level walking, though you may want to descend to the cafés of Abbotsbury. The grand ridgeline continues past the Hardy Monument to cross the A354 in its deep chalk cutting.

After dodging down through Bincombe, the 'inland coastal path' takes to a different ridge, the one of Portland Limestone, over White Horse Hill, then drops to Osmington and the sea.

JURASSIC COAST PATH: OSMINGTON TO LULWORTH

From Osmington Mills, the coastal path soon leads to the challenge of the smugglers' path under White Nothe – see Route 23 – though the signed Coast Path takes the easier clifftops above.

From White Nothe, there's a strenuous and exhilarating section along the chalk cliffs and above Durdle Door. The many dry valleys in the chalk cut it into steep dips and ridges, so that the cliff path to Lulworth and through the MoD ranges beyond involves over 1000m of ascent.

JURASSIC COAST PATH: LULWORTH TO POOLE HARBOUR

West of Lulworth the path passes through fine, caravan-free country of the Lulworth Ranges. (If you've arrived when the ranges are closed, walking around them, mostly on roads, is unpleasant. Take a bus to Corfe Castle and use the Purbeck Circuit and then Route 26 to backtrack to Kimmeridge.)

From Kimmeridge the Coastal Path continues from the bay corner below Clavel Tower (Route 27 in reverse) but better is to follow Route 27 forwards, along the ridgeway by Swyre Head; either way arriving at Chapman's Pool. Assuming you don't need an inland diversion to charming Worth Matravers, the rim of the Portland Stone leads around St Alban's Head, and on by Dancing Ledge to Swanage.

Then it's chalk again, over Ballard Down to the official end of the Jurassic Coast at the sea-stacks of Old Harry. After the 100-mile challenge to the feet, the face must now be kept straight and blush-free through Studland's nude beach before you reach the ferry at South Haven Point.