

Dartmoor at your own pace



Lucy Higginson loads up her mare for a brilliant girls' weekend of guided moorland exploration

There's little need to ride on tarmac on a guided Dartmoor ride

I wasn't Steven Spielberg's *War Horse* panoramics that alerted me to Dartmoor's beauty. I found out by hunting there and swiftly became a Dartbore, returning every year since with my family and horse.

So I was intrigued to learn about a young business called Liberty Trails offering "adventure rides" over the moor, either on your own or its horses.

Before long, I was rumbling along the M4 with two friends from my yard who signed up at the first whiff of moorland adventure.

Liberty Trails owner Elaine Prior is a Dartmoor girl, former endurance rider and well-travelled businesswoman who spotted a gap in the market three years ago.

"I knew there was a well-established trekking market on Dartmoor," she says. "But I felt there was scope to offer more adventurous rides."

After securing the backing of Dartmoor's National Park authorities, 14 landowners and selected hotel partners, she was in business, with her first client a Qatari royal.

Visitors ride in exclusive groups — never lumped with others they don't know — and stay at the ultra-gorgeous Gidleigh Park, the renowned fishing hotel the Arundel Arms, or, as in our case, the plush Saddle Tor Cottage, high on the moors near the village of Widecombe-in-the-Moor.

How it works

EACH billet has a yard nearby — ours was barely 70m from our cottage — where the horses (whether yours or not) are stabled during your stay. Thus, even non-horse owners enjoy the experience of "owning" a horse. But less authentically and rather brilliantly, a "horse au pair" is supplied to feed, muck out and groom for you. This is a holiday after all.

A three-night stay like ours, involving two days guided riding, is a popular option. After a short solo hack on arrival to stretch our horses' legs, we mustered next day (in many layers) for our first big ride.

Guiding us was Phil Heard (as opposed to leading — there's no need for any nose-to-tailing), a Dartmoor farmer who also breeds quarter horses used by Liberty Trails and has hunted every cranny of the moor.

With his Western saddle and 10-gallon hat he looked every inch Marlborough Man and proved as nifty opening awkward gates as a Prince Philip Cup finalist, despite the fact he'd been up all hours lambing.

We were off-road almost immediately, weaving between granite boulders, gorse and heather. Part of the pleasure is exploring not only Dartmoor's landscape but its history.

We soon passed Jay's Grave — the resting place of a poor girl who killed herself centuries ago. It is a well known and intriguing Dartmoor landmark, for no one knows who it is that ensures the grave is never without fresh flowers.

On we rode to Hameldown, with its memorial stone to four airmen lost there when their plane crashed in 1941 and along whose ridges you can still see half-rotten posts erected in the war to stop enemy aircraft from landing.

For a time, we joined the Two Moors Way that links Dartmoor to Exmoor and passed the high-altitude Warren Inn — which is quite used to being snowed in, sometimes with only its chimneys visible.



First-time Dartmoor rider Kimberley Julius grins in the wind

The lovely Saddle Tor Cottage, near Widecombe-in-the-Moor



Above Fernworthy Reservoir we found a quiet forest cutting and met up with Elaine's husband Bob, AKA the lunch man. We dismounted, loosened girths and munched, the horses enjoying their packets of mints.

Bob meets rides at various points throughout as a safety check — mobiles being useless on much of the moor.

A 22-mile epic

WE had glibly requested a "longish" ride on day one and were taken at our word, tackling a 22-mile, 7hr epic that encompassed every variant of Dartmoor terrain — and weather. In late March, we experienced four seasons in one day, with plenty of sunshine amid the odd burst of hail and wind so strong on some tors that smiling made your teeth throb.

For a bunch of Windsor wusses, as we branded ourselves, we were shaping up well, though by mile 18 I began to question my bravado. Twenty-two moorland miles is possibly a tad more than any hour-a-day working rider needs.

But my mare was loving it, ears pricked throughout as we passed hairy, in-foal Dartmoor ponies, Neolithic stone circles, cantered over squelchy peat, crossed rivers and navigated bleak moorland summits or daffodil-



Dismounting for lunch by Fernworthy Reservoir



Guests have exclusive use of this yard close to their cottage

dotted Devon hamlets.

My fellow traveller Kimberley felt thoroughly at ease on her Liberty Trails hunter, but Lucy, the third in our group, was having her stomach muscles tested by her eventer Gio, who belied his 16 years by piaffing the whole way ("Thank you for inviting me along," she wrote later. "I hope Gio hasn't earned himself an ASBO.")

To cover such a distance, mostly off-road, a guide is indispensable, especially after last winter's rain: some areas were boggy for the first time in 30 years. Phil reads the ground like the rest of us read road signs.

"We gauge the ground based on the recent weather and the plantlife," explained Elaine.

"There is one distinctively coloured grass you find on really wet ground; on the other hand, you know if there's heather, it'll be firm."

Each ride has two accompanying guides, so if any rider has a horse or problem, one can take them home or wait to be collected while the other takes the remainder on.

Presents from the 'food fairy'

WE dismounted somewhat gingerly on our return to the yard. After settling the horses in deeply bedded boxes, we found a "food fairy" had visited. I must apologise here for the stampee I caused the day I spotted freshly baked scones and clotted cream waiting on the kitchen table.

Oddly enough, we still found room for a three-course supper later — smoked salmon, local Devon beef stew with mustardy croutons, lemon posset and chilled bubbly — devoured

with indecent haste after a loosening bath.

Our trip had many of the rhythms of a ski weekend: fresh, adrenalin-filled days followed by pre-bath tea and cakes. One evening we dressed up and went out for a quite exceptional supper at Gidleigh Park's Michelin two-star restaurant and admired the Arts and Crafts hotel's stunning 24 bedrooms.

A gourmet Liberty Trails trip based here would be wonderfully romantic, but for our "girls weekend", we found Saddle Tor Cottage an ideal billet, with huge comfy beds, en suite bathrooms, a hall for muddy boots and even an AGA top for drying gloves.

Since we did not have to cook, we even had time to go for a pre-ride riverside hike one morning, or to stock up with local beef at a nearby farm shop.

Our second day's guided ride was, sensibly, shorter. We gave the horses a couple of hours' turnout first in the most scenic paddock I've ever encountered, against the backdrop of Hound Tor and what must be England's most



The two Lucys cross a stream on their Windsor wuss' eventers

COSTS AND INFO

- A three-night stay with two days' guided riding like ours would cost from £350 per head (based on eight sharing Saddle Tor Cottage and using their own horses), to £750 for four sharing and using Liberty Trail horses. All food is supplied — and is first rate
- These rides are suitable for anyone competent at all paces on varied terrain. They are popular with parents trying to wear out energetic children and ponies
- Liberty Trails can organise other activities for any non-riders in your group, or if you would like a day off riding in the middle of your stay. This would also give you some flexibility if you had a day of really dire weather, such as thick fog
- Our equine accommodation was as good as our own — fabulous groom, stables, turnout — even heaps of room in which to park and turn the lorry. Bedding and forage of your choice are supplied, as are hard feeds, though we opted to bring our own
- Pack at least two more layers than you think you could possibly need. Then you'll be fine on the moor
- Visit www.libertytrails.co.uk, email: info@libertytrails.co.uk; tel: 01822 748788 or 07967 823674



Navigating a bridleway near the landmark Jay's Grave

sensationally sited cross-country course. It was built by the South Devon branch of the Pony Club on a 100-acre adjoining site it bought in 2000 with the help of Lottery funding.

"They're swaling today," announced Laura later, our lovely on-site groom, who had fed and mucked out while we'd lain in.

Elaine looked at our nonplussed faces and explained this is the annual burning of moorland gorse and scrub in order to allow new grass shoots to grow. An ancient practice, no doubt, since its name derives from the Anglo Saxon word "swælan", meaning to burn.

Our Windsor wusses, by now acclimatised to Dartmoor sights and smells, ignored the distant smoke and strode out again for a ride no less lovely than the first.

You never quite know how well a new holiday will match up against its website promises. This one definitely exceeded hopes, to the degree that I'll be back with a larger group of yard friends in late summer.

Hunt followers have long enjoyed other countries, but it rarely makes sense to drive your own horse long distances for a single day.

For a trip this long, it does. And, for me at least, the fun of exploring somewhere so beautiful is doubled on my own well-schooled horse. Do go. Dartmoor is a must. **H&H**