



THE OTHER WILD WEST

SOME OF ENGLAND'S FINEST COASTAL SCENERY IS SEASONED WITH
SOME SERIOUSLY SALTY HISTORY AND A DASH OF DANGER THAT
CREATES AN UNPARALLELED CRUISING EXPERIENCE

BY ALAN HARPER

Scenic Salcombe. Previous page: Fidget, the author's Orkney 20, in Anstey's Cove.



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Five shillings an hour, I think, was the cost of hiring a small wooden row boat. That was a fortune to me at the age of 10, but my father was happy to pay and equally happy to watch me row myself around among the fishing craft in the inner harbor at Torquay, in southwest England, learning the ropes and inheriting his love of messing about in boats. I was down there every day for the length of our holiday and secretly proud of the callouses that formed on my palms.



Fast forward 50 years: I don't come down to this part of England for holidays anymore because I don't have to—I live here. I'm still floating around in that old stone harbor, but now on my own little outboard cruiser.

A sense of perspective is useful for understanding this place. One's personal history might be a perennial source of wonder, but arriving in some of the ancient ports of Devon and Cornwall can make you feel like Carmela Soprano in that episode when she goes to Paris and is confronted by the futility of all human endeavor in the ruins of a Roman bath house.

Torquay, at the eastern edge of England's most scenic cruising area, makes a good base camp for an exploratory expedition. Head west from here and things get progressively wilder as the modern world recedes and the long peninsula ventures out into the Atlantic.

The town sits at the top of a wide, east-facing bay, sheltered from the prevailing south-westerlies, and it is not without its own attractions when the weather precludes more ambitious exploits. The old quarries at Anstey's Cove, which have been so long disused they look like natural geological formations, are just a hop away. They create a spectacular if rather deep anchorage. Close by are the civilized comforts of the Cary



Braving the waves outside the Dart. Far left: Alf Resco, Dartmouth's premier breakfast spot. Center: A local resident, near Salcombe.

Arms in Babbacombe, whose visitors' moorings offer a secure night's sleep at a discount if you go ashore for dinner. One evening we were sitting outside with our drinks when we noticed a disturbance on the water near the boat—a huge gray seal, had come up to investigate. On the edge of Torquay lies ancient Torre Abbey, whose tithe barn was used as a prison for captured Spanish sailors after the failed invasion of 1588. It's still called the Spanish barn.

Strike out of Torbay around towering Berry Head, and the River Dart estuary soon appears to starboard, guarded by a 14th-century castle on the west bank which was still in use as a military fortification when the D-Day invasion fleet departed the river with the U.S. 4th Division, bound for Utah Beach. Motor in beneath its ramparts and one of the jewels of the South West opens up—the twin towns of Dartmouth, famous for its Naval College, and Kingswear, which climbs the slopes across the river.

The college dates back to Victorian times, but this deep-water harbor has naval connections that stretch back to the Middle Ages. John Hawley, shipowner, parliamentarian and town mayor, was reputedly the inspiration for Chaucer's shipman in *The Canterbury Tales*. He was a licensed privateer, and



apparently not averse to a little private piracy on the side.

It seems to have been a local specialty. When Sir Walter Raleigh captured a Portuguese East Indiaman in 1592 and sent her ahead to Dartmouth, the half-million pounds of treasure in her hold had been so thoroughly pillaged by the time he followed her in that there was just £140,000 left. Opportunities were taken as they arose. A gallery in St. Saviour's church was made out of timbers from a captured Spanish galleon. A short walk down Lower Street, close to the visitor pontoons, Café Alf Resco makes the best breakfast in town. No booking ahead—you get there early, or take your chances.

If you have time, or the weather at sea is looking a bit dubious, ride the tide 10 miles up the oak-clad River Dart to Totnes. It is a beautiful trip that requires a bit of planning and some careful navigating, but when you get there you'll find an engaging little market town which retains something of a reputation for seventies hippiedom, even though it's now full of jaded newcomers like me. There is a pretty Elizabethan high street that leads up from the bridge, an excellent 15th-century church and a Norman castle, which is as small and primitive as you might expect any 900-year-old fortification that was hastily erected to assert an invader's shaky authority over a far flung outpost.

Totnes has many more good pubs than its size might lead you to expect, from the Steam Packet Inn and Royal Seven Stars down at the wa-



Swimming spot in the lower reaches of the Dart. Left: All smiles at Fishcombe, near Brixham.



Stunning Landcombe Cove, between Dartmouth and Salcombe. Who pulled the plug? Salcombe Harbor at low tide.

ter and the Nelson, King William, Totnes Brewing Company and Bull on the steep main street, to my favorite, right at the top—the Bay Horse, with its garden, live music and colorful collection of locals. Market days in the town square are Fridays and Saturdays.

If the tide doesn’t suit or time is tight, a shorter trip up the Dart to the Maltsters Arms at the head of Bow Creek is a good adventure for the intrepid boater. Closer still to Dartmouth, you can pick up a mooring opposite the Ferry Boat Inn at Dittisham, an ancient inn with that priceless cruising asset: a waterfront window where you can sit with a pint and admire your boat. The tide sweeps through here, especially at springs—the trick is to choose a mooring which will be down-tide at closing time so the row back to the boat in the dark isn’t too arduous. Breakfast at the Anchorstone Café, right opposite the pub, is the perfect hangover cure.

Continuing westwards from the Dart, Salcombe Harbor is a wide lagoon protected by surrounding hills and a sandbar across the en-

trance which is not to be trifled with—don’t even think about it with a southerly breeze against the outgoing tide. Salcombe itself was once a busy port known for its boatyards and trading schooners but is now a summer resort. It retains a certain salty authenticity, however, as there is no marina—you anchor or pick up a mooring, then hail a water taxi or take a tender ashore. There are plenty of cafes and restaurants and no shortage of old pubs—the Fortescue on Union Street retains some of its old flavor and remains a favorite with locals, while the Ferry Inn has an excellent terrace where you can sit and watch yacht races on a sunny day.

Salcombe Harbor is a huge tidal basin with many creeks and tributaries to investigate. At its head lies Kingsbridge, a substantial market town with ancient origins behind architecture that is predominately Georgian and Victorian. There are plenty of places to tempt the traveler, but the best spot from which to watch the sunset is the Crabshell on the water’s

edge just south of the town moorings. You can tie up right outside. Be warned, though—at low tide in places like this, it’s like someone has pulled the plug out. At some point we have all come back from a rowdy evening to find the dinghy hanging vertically with no water left to float it in.

The further west you go, the wilder this region becomes. Inclement weather is an occupational hazard in these latitudes, even in the middle of summer. While on fine days anchoring off a spectacular beach like Lantic Bay might put you in mind of the Caribbean, Devon and Cornwall are so well-provided with perfect boltholes that you might find yourself wishing for an inconvenient gale—just a little one. Nobody goes on a cruise round here without a few good books to read. A lot of my fondest memories involve snug berths, high winds howling through the halyards, and the midnight shipping forecast on BBC long wave.

I first discovered Fowey in just this way, ducking in to avoid the worst

of an August blow that lasted three days. With no marina, we secured to the pontoon opposite the town, inflated the dinghy and by the time the wind eased off and the sun came out again, we had scoped out every pub in town. My favorite was the King of Prussia, just up from the quay. We spent hours in there as the rain lashed the windows like a fire hose. I didn’t want to be anywhere else.

Fowey might feel a bit like a smaller Dartmouth, but it gives a tangible sense of being more off the beaten track, further west and approaching Lands End, which isn’t called that for nothing.

Even on the finest summer mornings there’s an essential seriousness to the waters off Lands End. You might not be able to put your finger on it, but then you’ll notice that the sea, which seems so still, is breathing. A powerful swell, the ceaseless pulse of the vast Atlantic, is a constant companion down here—and a gentle reminder, when messing about in boats, that we are granted this indulgence only on nature’s terms. ♣