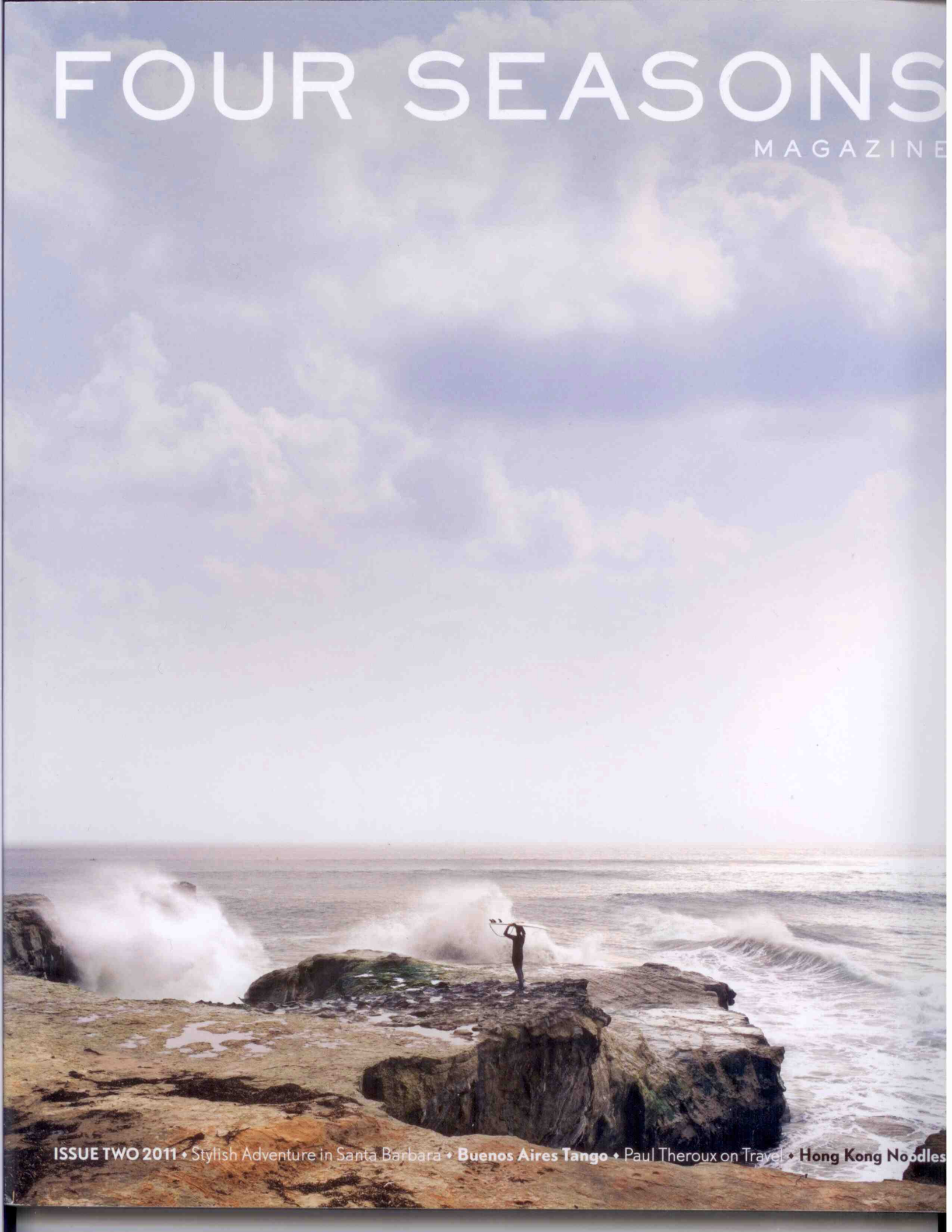
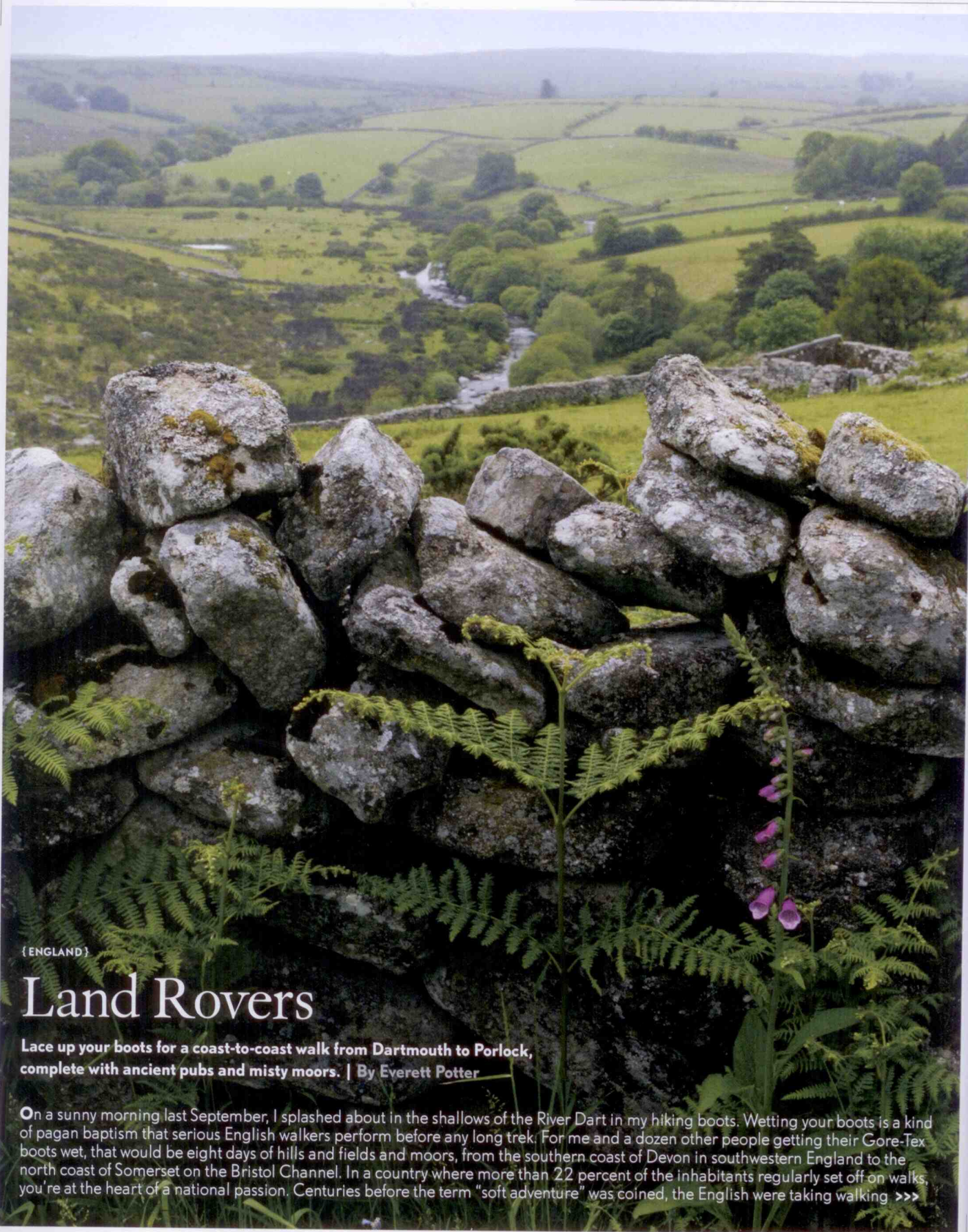


FOUR SEASONS

MAGAZINE



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{ ENGLAND }

Land Rovers

Lace up your boots for a coast-to-coast walk from Dartmouth to Porlock, complete with ancient pubs and misty moors. | By Everett Potter

On a sunny morning last September, I splashed about in the shallows of the River Dart in my hiking boots. Wetting your boots is a kind of pagan baptism that serious English walkers perform before any long trek. For me and a dozen other people getting their Gore-Tex boots wet, that would be eight days of hills and fields and moors, from the southern coast of Devon to the northern coast of Somerset on the Bristol Channel. In a country where more than 22 percent of the inhabitants regularly set off on walks, you're at the heart of a national passion. Centuries before the term "soft adventure" was coined, the English were taking walking >>>

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holidays in the Cotswolds, the Yorkshire Dales and the Scottish Highlands. They still do, in droves. You'll see teenagers and octogenarians on the same paths in the Lake District used by the 18th-century Romantic poet William Wordsworth.

I have walked all over England, and I find that a 2-miles-per-hour pace is the perfect way to soak up a countryside rich with history and visual beauty. Still, walking 8, 10 or 16 miles a day is a physical challenge, especially when you do it for a week. Walking does not offer the thrills of speed or danger. But it leaves you at day's end with a great sense of accomplishment and a physical sense of well-being. It is, in short, the perfect soft adventure.

This trip was organised by The Wayfarers (1 401/286-5251 or www.thewayfarers.com), an English company that has perfected the art of the walking holiday. The promise was that we would get as close as possible to the glories of rural England, walk on medieval roads, see cottage gardens filled with roses and dahlias, and take in views worthy of 18th-century landscape paintings.

Our boots duly wet, we set off from Dartmouth, a busy harbour town of half-timbered buildings along the Dart. Once a haven for pirates, it's home to the Royal Naval College recently attended by Prince William. The blissful landscape offered no clue that the massive D-Day invasion forces were assembled on the gravel beaches of Slapton a few miles away.

Our walk leader was the gentle, soft-spoken and scholarly Muff Dudgeon, a woman steeped in the history, plant life and customs of the county. Her counterpart was the high-spirited and humorous Jamie Daniell, a retired army colonel who ferried our luggage from inn to inn in a white van. Twice a day, we'd encounter him magically around the bend, with his welcome van filled with Eccles Cake and granola bars, fruit and drinks—"Lemon barley water, anyone?"—to keep us going.

We carried on to Greenaway, Agatha Christie's summer home, a sprawling mansion that's now run by the National Trust.

More Dartmoor

Five additional reasons to visit



• THE DARTMOOR PONY

Look for foals of this rare breed between May and August.

• BRONZE AGE ARCHAEOLOGY

Dartmoor National Park features the country's largest concentration of Bronze Age remains, including those of more than 5,000 hut dwellings.

• THE TEN TORS CHALLENGE

This gruelling trek for 14- to 19-year-olds covers a distance of 35 to 55 miles across Dartmoor each May.

• LETTERBOXING

This pastime, similar to a treasure hunt, began on Dartmoor in 1854.

• WIDECOMBE FAIR

To be held this year on September 13, the fair showcases activities such as bale rolling, sheep shearing and terrier racing.

Sitting next to the blue Aga stove in her kitchen, we enjoyed slices of Delicious Death, a chocolate cake heaped with clotted cream. We had been promised 10 to 12 miles a day on foot, and this sugar rush kick-started us on to narrow "green lanes" that have been in use for hundreds of years.

The rewards for walking through this landscape became evident in time. There were sweeping views across sheep-filled fields to the edge of distant Dartmoor, a chance to wander around the overgrown ruins of an Augustinian abbey, and a ramble through the village of Cornworthy, where a vintage Morris Minor might well have been driven by Miss Marple herself.

There was a riverside lunch at a rambling old pub called The Maltsters Arms, followed by a river crossing on smooth stepping stones that appeared to have done their job for centuries. We ended the day with dinner in Totnes at The Royal Seven Stars, an eccentric architectural pastiche in the heart of a New Age town that prints its own currency, the better to keep the spending local.

The next morning, we walked along the thickly wooded banks of the River Dart into Dartmoor. Dartmoor was the foreboding setting for Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. It's a stark, hilly place covered with bright yellow gorse, and it's frequently enveloped in thick fog.

The mist and fog were gathering midday when we met up with Tom Greeves, a local archaeologist and historian who describes himself as a "cultural environmentalist."

Our destination was Hound Tor, a large outcropping of stacked boulders below which sit the remains of Hundatora, one of the best examples of a medieval village that has ever been found in England.

We walked on slippery, undulating grass fields and then plunged into the shoulder-high bracken, weaving our way along a steep slope. We followed Tom as he crashed through the bracken, and when we finally emerged onto a boulder-strewn field, he looked around and then threw up his hands.

A walk is a bit like a floating cocktail party, where you pair off and talk of life and work and relationships, and clear your mind with the changing views.

"I can't believe it—we missed it!" he said, laughing with exasperation. "I've been here scores of times and we missed it. It was the pixies!"

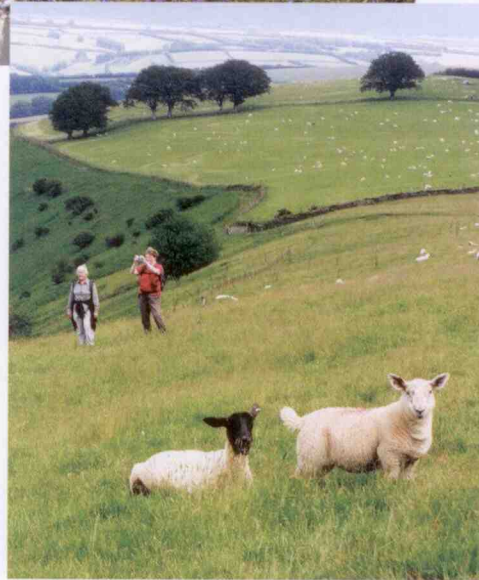
That was as plausible as any explanation, so we pressed on through the cloaking mist, and 20 minutes later we saw the 700-year-old longhouse foundations of Hundatora peeking through the bracken, a lost medieval world momentarily found again.

From the Middle Ages, we flashed forward the next day to 1930s England at Castle Drogo. Welcoming us in the cavernous drawing room was a lively woman named Bunny Johnston, who threw her arms out and said, "Oh, gosh, it is a bit of a house and garden, isn't it?"

Finished in 1930, the castle was designed by Edward Lutyens and is as baronial as any family might have wanted. Pointing to a large oil portrait of a great-uncle lost in the Great War, she said, "My brother shoved a Champagne cork through it." It was one of many reminders that for a child in a great house, the Chippendale chairs, Venetian chandeliers and painted chests were merely the backdrop for fun and games.

Later that day we met the "cobb ladies," Jackie Abey and Jill Smallcombe, who have brought back the dying art of making cobb, an earthen material that most venerable Devon houses are made of. That night dinner was accompanied by the songs of Bill Murray, a portly man with an encyclopaedic knowledge of local folksongs who runs the Dartmoor Folk Festival (held in South Zeal, this year August 5–7).

The sage words from Muff on the following day were "a rather long walk." She was not inclined to exaggeration, so I laced up my boots a bit tighter. We entered the gentle countryside of Exmoor and it made me reflect that a walk is a bit like a floating cocktail party, where you pair off and talk of life and work and



Pastoral Pleasures
from top: A rambling cottage garden in Dartmoor National Park; strolling amid the sheep with The Wayfarers.

relationships, and clear your mind with the fresh air and changing views.

The days tended to blur pleasantly into one another. We moved from pastoral river bank to yet another village straight out of a Merchant Ivory movie. A place where the flower boxes hang with fuschia and tuberous begonias, where the 15th-century church had a square bell tower, and where the Land Rovers were mud-splattered and had a springer spaniel in the back seat.

But on Exmoor, it was the sudden appearance of a stag and six female red deer that gave us pause behind a hedge, as we whispered and took photos. The stag was magnificent, with a broad chest and a single antler. He appeared as though he were posing for a coat of arms.

The stag was under discussion that night at dinner as we sampled fresh Dover sole and local lamb. The wildlife sightings continued on Exmoor the next day when we spotted a handful of wild ponies, which Muff assured us were "rarer than the giant panda."

Our final day was a brisk uphill walk past hundreds of squawking pheasants. As we crested a hill, we had our first sighting of the Bristol Channel and the coast of Wales a few miles away. It was 9 more miles over moorland to Porlock, a picturesque village that could well be the setting for a Margaret Drabble novel (she lives nearby), or perhaps an Evelyn Waugh satire (he lived nearby). Or

maybe a remembrance of "In Xanadu, did Kubla Khan / A stately pleasure dome decree": Yes, Samuel Taylor Coleridge lived nearby, as well, and was famously interrupted by "a person from Porlock" while writing these opium-induced verses. He loved to walk and may well have taken the same path, along blackberry-filled hedges, through sheep-filled fields and down to the stony beach, where Muff stripped off her shoes and socks with the enthusiasm of a schoolgirl and gamely raced into the surf. We, too, re-baptized our boots as the rocks clacked in the gentle waves. **AS**

Everett Potter is a frequent contributor to National Geographic Traveler, Virtuoso Life, Forbes Life, Ski and Travel + Leisure.