

Southern England Long-Distance Paths

This chapter covers two of the longest and best-known long-distance paths (LDPs) in southern England – the South Downs Way and the South West Coast Path. These sharply contrasting routes have their own chapter simply because they do not fit neatly into any other chapter in this book.

For most walkers, the South Downs Way takes around a week. It starts in historic Winchester, winding gently at first through farms and woodland then gathering pace and confidence as it leaves the trees behind to stride across rolling, grassy hills, with great views and big, dramatic skies, to finally plunge to the English Channel at the seaside resort of Eastbourne.

At the other end of southern England, the South West Coast Path is the longest national trail in Britain – a whopping 630 miles – easily taking a couple of months to complete. In this book, we've described the most popular two-week section, taking in beaches, cliff tops and fishing ports along the way. One walker we heard from who'd done both routes said he 'loved the contrast between the neat hills of the posh Southeast and the wild coast of raggedy Cornwall'.

For all you mile-eaters out there, the South Downs Way and South West Coast Path are by no means the only long-distance options in southern England. Other LDPs described in this book are the Ridgeway (p83), the Cotswold Way (p109) and the Thames Path (p64 and p88), and further ideas are given in the More Long-Distance Walks section on p148.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Wandering the atmospheric main street of **Alfriston** (p131)
- Watching the waves crash around the **Beachy Head lighthouse** (p133)
- Stopping for a quick dip at any one of the north coast's fabulous golden beaches on the **South West Coast Path** (p133)
- Turning the corner at **Land's End** (p143) and then heading along exhilarating granite cliff tops

THE SOUTH DOWNS WAY

Duration	8 days
Distance	107 miles (172km)
Difficulty	moderate
Start	Winchester (p76)
Finish	Eastbourne (p124)
Transport	train, bus
Summary	Follow the ancient chalk and flint highway along the ridges of rolling downs, past picture-perfect villages and prehistoric sites.

There's something quintessentially English about the South Downs Way (SDW). From high on the ridges of the downs (grassy chalk hills), Albion's pastoral idyll stretches out as far as the eye can see. It's difficult to resist the word 'quaint' when describing the villages strung along the route, nearly all with their own Norman church, 500-year-old pub and cottages of flint, wood and thatch. And as if the Shire-like surroundings weren't Tolkein-esque enough, the place names compound the impression – Long Bottom, Cheesefoot Head, Ditchling Beacon, the Rivers Arun and Adur, Big Bottom, Devil's Dyke, Cocking, Didling and Fulking.

This ancient route was first used by Neolithic people, keen to avoid the marsh and dense forest below the downs. Later settlers all left their marks, including Bronze Age burial barrows, Iron Age hillforts and a Roman road, now part of the track. As you leave Hampshire and head into Sussex the views become increasingly panoramic, over chequerboard farmland to the north and south to the sea.

Waymarking is generally good, although there are a few points where signs are missing and vigilance is required. At any branch of the trail, look around for either the wooden signs or the plastic disks marked with an acorn. There are also disks pointing to bridleways, public footpaths and other walks, so always check that you're following the right path. Where there are no SDW markers it's generally safe to assume that you can keep marching straight ahead on the most obvious trail.

Walkers share much of the route with bicycles and the occasional horse, although there are large segments where nonwalk-

ers are diverted away from the main path (including the whole of the last leg from Alfriston).

ENVIRONMENT

The South Downs fall within two official Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty – East Hampshire and Sussex Downs – and there have been moves for a number of years to have the area designated as a national park.

This is farming land, where crops and livestock have coexisted for centuries. Grazing plays an important part in preserving the downland environment, keeping back the scrub and allowing wild flowers such as orchids and bluebells to bloom. However, intensive farming methods, involving the use of fertilisers, herbicides and the introduction of imported ryegrass, continue to threaten the native turf. The National Trust has been trying to turn the tide by reintroducing sheep grazing on its estates along the SDW, while a **Sustainable Development Fund** (www.southdowns.gov.uk) seeks to encourage other landowners to do the same.

There are a few wild patches of woodland along the way, some dating back to the Iron Age. If you're lucky (and quiet) you might spot deer. Keep an eye out for peregrine falcons and fulmars along the cliffs on the last day.

PLANNING

Finding accommodation along the SDW can be a problem. Campers will struggle to find an official site every night and there are few hostels. B&Bs may be your only option, but it pays to book early, as even these are thin on the ground. If there happens to be a wedding or major polo game on, you might find all the available beds booked up in villages for quite a radius.

While you can follow the path in either direction, our description goes west to east, with prevailing winds propelling you from the more enclosed part of the trail to open and dramatic scenery, with a spectacular cliff-top finish.

There are no baggage services along the SDW so you'll have to be your own mule.

Cycling the route should only take three days, but be sure to bring a puncture kit, as the sharp flint can be murder on your tires.