

As I was walking from St Ives – by Lisa Hutchins



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Here we are, in the driving rain and laden with giant backpacks, on a stretch of footpath acknowledged as one of the toughest in Britain. Below us are granite cliffs dropping sharply to wicked rocks. The sea swirls around them, making the pebbles on the seabed scrape back and forth, back and forth - a noise said to be audible to the miners that once tunnelled out beneath the sea. Towering over us on the skyline are the bracken-covered tors of West Penwith. Up there, the few signs of man's presence seem transitory, superficial - as if the land could shrug them off in a second. And underfoot - a boggy mess of peat, ankle-twisting rocks and cow dung. We have been warned not to step in any puddles, unless we want to sink up to our thighs courtesy of some wallowing cow. I'd like to tell you a bit about the view ahead - but you're out of luck, because I can't see it. The mist came down somewhere around Clodgy Point and all we can see is the dim outline of the next headland.

It is September 2002 and my partner and I are walking the South West Coast Path, which is what we do for our holidays. Some lucky folk take eight weeks off and do it all, the rest of us cover a stage a year. Starting on the seafront in Minehead, this path follows the coast for more than 250 miles through west Somerset, north Devon and north Cornwall to Lands End. Then, after touring Mounts Bay and The Lizard, it takes off round south Cornwall, south Devon and Dorset to arrive, panting but smug, at Brownsea Island in Poole with a total of 630 miles under its belt. And excess baggage is the last thing you need when you carry your luggage on your back the whole way. We are on the bloodiest stretch of all, St Ives to Pendeen via Zennor. Everyone - other walkers, guidebook authors, guesthouse proprietors as far back as Bude - mentioned how tough it is once you shake off the warm embrace of St Ives, with its sandy beaches, Italian restaurants and banks. There is nothing - no shop, no accommodation, no toilet, no telephone - on the path for most of the 20 plus miles to Lands End. The terrain is gruelling - scrambling over rocks, trying to find places for your feet that will spare you a wrenched ankle. Your hands are sore from clinging to granite boulders as you haul yourself and your rucksack over each one. There is probably not 20 yards of continuous, straight, flat path between St Ives and Zennor. Then there is the weather - even if you are spared mist and rain, there is probably a lively wind coming in off the sea which can destabilise you severely on uneven ground with a frame rucksack.

So why on earth do it? Walking gives you lots and lots of time to ponder this sort of thing. Possible reasons include: because of the freedom; because it is good exercise and good for the soul; it is character building and a complete contrast to everyday life; because you see beautiful scenery that you couldn't see any other way. Well, all of those hold true. But the strongest seems to be "because it's there" (although I do admit

we might have borrowed this reasoning from someone else). We walk because we've done this every year since 1997, even though most other things including our choice of holidays have changed beyond recognition. I have always assumed that we would finish all 630 miles and now I'm locked into it, even though slogging up and down hills carrying heavy weights may not be quite as much fun as it once was now we can afford the odd trip abroad. So, should we give it up? Last year we passed the halfway point - a little settlement called Porthallow (P'ralla to the Cornish) just before Falmouth. Another reason we started was because we were very familiar with the area round Minehead and also spent a lot of time in north Cornwall. So we've spent six years walking in areas we know and like. But past the Lizard? We've only paid a few fleeting visits to the south coast - daytrips to Polperro, Looe, Lyme Regis and Swanage. From now on, it's into the blue again.

But for now, it's back to 2002 and that nasty slog to Zennor. We've had a late start, due to an unusually talkative guesthouse landlady. Actually, it had more to do with the fact that we weren't so very keen to be going when the alternative was chatting and drinking tea. St Ives can be hard to leave for lots of reasons, not least because the purist walker must go all round the outside of a coastal protuberance known inaccurately as The Island, midway between the harbour and famous Porthmeor Beach. The short-cut across the back would have taken us a fraction of the time, but we feel we must do it properly. All we need on a day like this. Up to Clodgy Point (from the Cornish for leper) and we feel like explorers waving goodbye to the everyday and setting off into the blue. There is a sign here, inscribed in granite, giving no hint of the ordeal to come: "Zennor 6½ miles". Other people have seen the error of their ways and are scurrying back down to the town in search of a nice glass of Semillon Blanc and a plate of seafood. The drizzle can no longer be mistaken for lowering cloud and it is a stiff, muddy climb to the top, only made worse by having to don masses of rustling waterproofs. Only a few hardened dog-walkers are in evidence. We begin to realise why this section is rated so difficult as the path twists upwards over slippery rocks and through spiteful clumps of gorse.

Hor Point, Pen Enys Point and St Ives is already out of sight. The waves crash against the cliffs and we are surreptitiously listening for the siren song of the famous Zennor mermaid. Perhaps this isn't as bad as we thought, we remark as we pick our way through a boardwalked bog towards Carn Naun Point and its Ordnance Survey pillar. We look for badger setts and stop to take photographs of ourselves that could be anywhere - it's pretty foggy now. Offshore, we think, are the Carrack rocks, home to basking seals. Up ahead is Mussel Point and Wicca Cliff with its pool cut into the rock. A few breathless minutes and we are straining our eyes trying to see what's coming. Zennor Head is a very distinctive shape, as is Gurnard's Head, the next headland along. We can, unmistakably, see both of them. This is not part of the plan. It's still early afternoon. We will be in Zennor in time for a cream tea at this rate, should such a thing exist in Zennor (which actually it doesn't - it's an eccentric pub or go hungry).

Famous last words. Perhaps best to draw a veil over the next three hours, except to say it was the most difficult, gruelling, dispiriting walking I have ever done, and remember that this adventure started more than 240 miles ago. Tregerthen and Tremedda Cliffs aren't much to look at, but the path along the top of them is exhausting; more twisty, undulating and rock-strewn than anything we have yet come

across. It is evening before we fall across the back of Zennor Head, elbowing our way through waist-high bracken, because we are too fed-up to hunt for the path going round the edge. Unfortunately, we are not stopping in Zennor but pressing along to the next hamlet, Boswednack. Neither are on the path, both require a diversion inland. After the Zennor turn-off, on the far side of the headland, we encounter a most extraordinary valley, Pendour Cove. It is, more properly, here that the mermaid dwelt. The path into it is precipitous - so much so that someone has installed a metal handrail that looks incongruous but is damned useful. The valley is as beautiful a spot as you will find in this wild outpost of Cornwall - lush, full of giant Gunnera, fuschia running wild and a fleshy green spike-leaved plant that seems to grow the length and breadth of Cornwall. It is a beautiful place, and not without its mysteries. Why, for example, is there a garden gate with a 'Private! Keep out!' notice to one side of the path, leading seemingly nowhere? This amuses us, and is a welcome moment of light relief.

Next day, the terrain after Gurnard's Head poses different challenges - a bit easier underfoot, but the switchback climbs and drops are back - huge valleys that see you climbing to 600 feet or more, walking half a mile, dropping abruptly back to sea level then crossing a tiny trickle of a stream bridged by a couple of planks. Next you climb another 600 feet, often up a path so steep it requires steps to be cut into the hillside, and do it all again. In one stretch between Hartland Quay and Bude, this happens 10 times in the space of nine miles and it's said that by the time you reach Poole, you have climbed three times the height of Everest. We're used to this - but the drops and climbs here are epic. We are still bundled up in waterproofs and gaiters, sweating more profusely with each successive climb. No-one has made breathables that can stand this punishment and, by our journey's end in Botallack, we will be as wet as if we hadn't bothered. Still, the rugged cliffs are magnificent on a scale not often seen in England - the bones of the country poking through the skin. It is wild, beautiful, and probably worth the effort it has taken to see it, actually. The lighthouse at Pendeen Watch is a bit of an anticlimax after all this drama, but we are in celebratory mood now this dreadful stage is behind us. Mining country approaches, with engine houses on the skyline and signposted threats to walkers to watch every booted step for fear of plunging down a disused shaft. It also means tea, cake and an inside toilet at Geevor mining museum café, worth every step of the detour you must make to visit it. Magical Cape Cornwall will be followed by Whitesands Bay and Sennen Cove, then Lands End and the corner turned.

And, we discover, we have found our limit - about 14 miles tops while carrying the rucksacks and over reasonably challenging terrain. It's certainly less on strenuous ground and it isn't a comfortable stroll - that means coming in late and very tired, and couldn't be done in bad weather. Here we have learned something that we possibly set out to learn. And there is no doubt that the walk has changed us. Before we started, we were more naïve, more accepting, more likely to do what was expected. Now, 320 miles later, we are more adventurous, ask more questions, care less what people think. We had jobs when we left Minehead in 1997. We'd shed those in favour of self-employment by 2000, round about Port Isaac. Now, with Falmouth behind us, we're well on our way to being a flourishing small business. Whether this is down to the walk, or whether deciding to do the walk is part of the process that effected the change, is open to debate. Either way, it's a 75-mile trek from St Mawes to Plymouth in a couple of months, plus a trip inland at the end to Ivybridge where the Two Moors

Way starts. That's one for the future. Look, I can't stand here talking. I've got 10 days of bed and breakfast accommodation to sort out, plus some tricky train connections...