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The Cleveland Way

To mark the 40th anniversary of the Cleveland Way national trail, **Graham Barker** escapes from London for a week to walk 108 miles around the North York Moors. Along the way, he discovers it has something for everyone - whether you're a keen twitcher, fossil-hunter or you just enjoy wonderful walking, fresh air and stunning views.

Walking a long-distance path offers some special rewards. You follow the ‘story’ of the trail and enjoy a sense of achievement with each day’s progress.

Look eastwards out of the train window, during the 28-minute run between Eaglescliffe and Thirsk, and you'll catch sight of the North York Moors on the horizon. Sometimes warm and welcoming, sometimes sombre and forbidding, the moors are undoubtedly amongst the most beautiful landscapes in Britain. It was whilst I was admiring them from the cosy comfort of a train seat, rising dramatically in the distance, that I resolved to have an adventure up there. I would tackle the Cleveland Way, a 108-mile national trail around the North York Moors.

The Cleveland Way celebrates its 40th anniversary this year, making it Britain's second oldest long-distance path after the Pennine Way. It's easy to see why it was designated a national walking route. "The heathland is unenclosed, uninhabited, remote from industry and noise and free from traffic. It is a magnificent territory for the walker: open country like the Pennines and the Cheviots yet more handsome and colourful – and friendlier by far." enthused the coast-to-coast author Alfred Wainwright.

Shaped like a horseshoe, the Cleveland Way falls into two distinct halves. The first half starts from the bustling market town of Helmsley, crosses over the limestone heathland of the Hambleton and Cleveland hills, and hits the coast at Saltburn-by-the-Sea. From there, the second half heads southwards along the windswept coastline, taking in the seaside charms of Staithes, Whitby and the Victorian splendour of

Scarborough, before finishing at Spittal Rocks near Filey. There are strenuous climbs and descents, but most of the time you are high on the moorland plateau or cliff-top, with exhilarating views across the Vale of Mowbray, Teesside and the Yorkshire coastline.

Each year around 2,300 walkers complete the entire Cleveland Way. In places, you might also meet coast-to-coast walkers or even super-fit enthusiasts tackling the 24-hour Lyke Wake Walk. Unfortunately, the area's popularity with long-distance walkers – and with 300,000 or so day trippers – has contributed to heavy erosion. To reduce the impact of all those pounding feet, nine miles on the moors have now been protectively surfaced using traditional limestone slabbing and pitching techniques. But on the coastal path, diversions are sometimes necessary to avoid getting too close to the crumbling cliff edge.

The skies are alive with siskins and skylarks, gulls and grouse. "We're not so worried about the view from Captain Cook's monument" said a couple of bird-spotting women I met climbing to Easby Moor one misty morning, "we really come for the beautiful birdsong." Even if you can't distinguish the chirruping of a skylark from the 'tseep, tseep' of a meadow pipit, you don't need to be a twitcher to recognise the startling 'get back, get back' cries of red grouse as they scurry into the heather. And on the coast, stop and marvel at the fulmars and herring gulls elegantly floating on the air currents like sleek gliders. The views must be spectacular up there, especially in the autumn when the



moors are transformed with a haze of purple flowering scotch heather.

If geology is more your thing, then head for the lustrous pebbles at Runswick Bay and the fossil-rich sandstone reefs by Boggle Hole. I spent a contented hour sifting through the fallen rocks, as excited as the nearby group of children from Bingley whenever I unearthed a star-shaped crinoid stem, a pointy bellemite or a swirling ammonite segment. The devil's toenails I found looked as bad as my own toenails, by this stage battered and bruised from the trek.

Amateur archaeologists should look out for the cairns, barrows and burial mounds of earlier settlers. Even more remarkable are the standing stones you'll encounter on the moor tops, markers mostly carved in the 18th century to designate boundaries and direct travellers. These days the route is clearly way-marked with national trail acorn signs – less impressive than the standing stones, but more reliable for getting you safely home if the mists descend.

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You'll see reminders too of the area's industrial heritage – the tracks of old mineral railways, scars of exhausted iron workings and jet spoil heaps, all now abandoned and overgrown. It's difficult to imagine that these wild hills were so extensively mined for coal, iron, jet and alum. At one point, over 50 jet workshops flourished in Whitby thanks to the Victorian fashion for wearing black jet as mourning jewellery, made

popular in the 1860s by the newly-widowed Queen Victoria.

There are other Yorkshire gems to seek out along the way: visit the majestic Cistercian ruins of Rievaulx Abbey, take a bracing stroll along the kiss-me-quick seafront at Scarborough and climb the 199 steps to the ghostly gothic of Whitby Abbey. For sustenance, sample the scrummy fish and chips by Saltburn pier or pop into the sea-battered Cod and Lobster Inn at Staithes for a rewarding pint.

With stirring skies and panoramic views, it's an artists' paradise. At Sutton Bank visitor centre I meet Chris Ceasar, a photographer from nearby Tollerton. He finds endless inspiration on the moors throughout the year. "The skies, clouds and heather can produce a strong mix of colours and dramatic views, which make photography here very rewarding" he explains. Even with my basic camera I capture some memorable views.

Walkers can be assured of a warm welcome on the Cleveland Way.

During my seven-day trip I enjoyed friendly Yorkshire hospitality at each overnight stop: a cosy country pub, two former mills and a Georgian mansion now all converted into youth hostels, a comfortable B&B jam-packed with antiques, and even one night in a not-so-comfortable camping barn surrounded by bleating sheep. What's more, it didn't cost me the earth – I managed to keep my travel, accommodation and meals within a tight all-in budget of £300, perfect for these credit crunch times. And of course it's a 'green' low-carbon choice of holiday.

Walking a long-distance path offers some special rewards, unfamiliar to Sunday strollers. You follow the 'story' of the trail and enjoy a growing sense of achievement with each day's progress. There's time for quiet reflection. There's camaraderie too, as you share stories with fellow walkers in the pub, at the youth hostel or as you meet on the path. If the prospect of walking it in one stretch is daunting, or your time is limited, then consider spreading it over three



or four long weekends or just explore sections by day trip. "We live in Stockton, only 8 miles away, so we're often out here for the day" explain Jed and Sue when I get chatting with them on the summit of Roseberry Topping. And on the approach to Robin Hood's Bay recently-retired Mick and Kate from Maidenhead tell me they're rambling sections of the Cleveland Way over several trips, some with their grandchildren in tow.

Thankfully, with several other long-distance trails already under my belt, I know a thing or two about boots, backpacks and blisters. Of course, 108 miles takes its toll. The going is often tough underfoot, the ups and downs can sometimes feel like a never-ending rollercoaster. But I still managed to have a spring in my step on the final stretch, with Filey Brigg now in sight. Phew – I've made it, and without getting lost on the moors, falling off the cliff or being pooped on by a flock of seagulls. My Cleveland Way walking challenge has been an uplifting experience. And as I relax on the Grand Central train home, staring out of the window, I begin to plot my next walking adventure.

Graham Barker is an independent publisher, writer and walking tour guide with a particular interest in how people relate to their heritage. His current projects include a book on how to write your family history and a guide to London's peaceful green spaces. graham@greenbeanbooks.co.uk

How to get there

Travelling from London, I took the Grand Central train to Thirsk. The Moors Bus picks up from the station drive and drops off at Helmsley, the Cleveland Way starting point. Return trains run from Filey station, two miles from the finish. Sections of the Cleveland Way can also be reached from stations at York, Malton, Northallerton, Middlesborough, Saltburn, Great Ayton, Whitby and Scarborough with bus connections where appropriate.

Want to find out more?

'Cleveland Way' by Ian Sampson, published by Aurum Press, ISBN 1-845513-248-3 is the definitive guide, with Ordnance Survey maps and handy notes on what to see along the way. Visit www.nationaltrail.co.uk/clevelandway and www.northyorkmoors.org.uk for help with planning your visit, accommodation and baggage carriers.

