

North Norfolk's Coastal Path

It's cold, freezing cold. Here on the coast of Britain's North Norfolk the fog drifts in from the North Sea in a billowing mass blanketing the countryside in a dense, eerie gray vapor. There is a bone-chilling dampness in the air which is way beyond invigorating and which no amount of layered clothing seems to keep at bay. The way to counteract the probability of hypothermia is to move, and move vigorously.

Since Britain is covered with a myriad of public footpaths, a.k.a. hiking trails, walking is one way to get physical and thus warm. The North Norfolk Coast Path designated an area of outstanding natural beauty, covers approximately thirty-five miles of scenic hiking paths between two cliff-hugging Victorian villages Hunstanton and Cromer.

Hunstanton, at the western tip of Norfolk's coast, sits atop sixty foot striped cliffs. A colorful spectacle to behold, I'd read, due to white chalk overlaying unusual red chalk with a base of ginger carstone and with all three layers visible creating a variegated natural phenomenon. It's a remarkable starting point to begin one's hike along the coast. However, peering over the cliff edge, down into the misty oblivion, a wall of fog frustrated any chance of glimpsing the colorfully striped sands of Hunstanton.

Setting forth with layer number five zipped and pulled in tight, my friend and I hike the path about a mile before fortuitously arriving in Hunstanton proper around noon. With the mist-cum-drizzle now a steady rain, Hunstanton's Lord Nelson Pub veritably screams at us, "Come in out of the cold." Inside an open fire blazes, as do the noses of the gents at the bar who down neat whiskeys after a soggy 18 holes. We try the same all the while listening to the golfers glib at the bar, and birders talk at the next table.

Norfolk's coastal region attracts birders like moths to bright lights. Its vast beaches, sand dune systems, salt marshes and wet grasslands are home to the largest natural bird reserve in Europe. Nurtured by the National Trust, the Norfolk Naturalists' Trust; the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), and English Nature, the area is teeming with

local and migrating bird life.

The capital of this bird land is the RSPB reserve at Titchwell, approximately ten miles east along the coastal path from Hunstanton. An important site for waterfowl and coastal birds, one can also catch a glimpse of soldier-like serious birders in camouflage hauling massive weapon-sized telescopes and fancy cameras through sodden undergrowth and teeming rain.

With dark-bellied, honky Brent Geese clearly audible, but barely visible in the white-gray precipitation above, the coastal path moves away from the marshes of Titchwell to undulating sand dunes held in place by clusters of Norfolk pines. Holkham Bay is fenced in by those towering pines and is a lively place on Saturday mornings. Londoners, down for the weekend, come in droves to walk their dogs along the blustery stretch of sand, which resembles a wet desert at low tide. If only I'd had knee-length rubber gummies, a terrier, and Range Rover to leap into after beach combing, I too could have been a member of the bastion of out-of-town poshness.

Just around the coast corner is Wells-next-the-sea. A charming fishing village with a quayside, the old original streets behind it, and a beach a mile walk directly north. The sea has receded from the quay, and at low tide boats lie sluggish on their sides in silt. Over the centuries the slowly growing marshes have choked off the harbors in fishing villages from Wells eastward. The mile walk to the beach is worth it simply for the fun of taking in the spectacle of a long line of multicolored beach huts.

The coastal path stretches toward Cley (rhythms with sky) beach. At high tide the thunderous crash of surf on beach at Cley vibrates ominously. There is no sand here, just miles of pebbles, which are cleverly and creatively used to construct the external walls of local cottages. At Cley the path is built atop an embankment of pebbles. If it weren't for the inclemency, the compulsion to follow the path to its westward end would be undeniable.

Inland from Cley beach is a sheltered public pathway with a Beatrix Potter-like name: Pudding Lane. Initially lined by thick, tangled bracken and brush, the path crosses private property alive with fat, red rooster pheasant which fly into the air squawking in a panic at the presence of danger, and then into the low-lying shrub of Kelling Heath and the Hundred Acre Wood. Muckleburgh Hill which Pudding Lane traverses, is nothing short of a Matterhorn compared to surrounding plains, hence the view from the top is well worth the detour from the coastal path.

Cromer is the end point of the coastal path. A faded Victorian resort, highly fashionable before the days of the British vacationing abroad, Cromer is nonetheless a fitting finale to a grand adventure along the North Norfolk coast. Whether you walk, bike or cheat and drive the coast road, remember, if the prospect of wearing a scarf and sweater in August, or at least five layers in November is not your cup of tea, then for goodness sake, stay well away in January!