A Day on the Moor

England’s quintessential rural landscape

I am riding across Dartmoor on a rented bike, along what the British call a “disused railbed,” bouncing over rocks and roots and stealing quick looks out over the moor at the misty patchwork of fields in the valley far below. My bike tires hum suddenly over some granite paving stones, remnants of an old Roman road. Around me, the ancient upthrusts of granite tors break through the scrubby heather and patches of sodden grass. Ahead lies the crumbling shell of a prehistoric stone hut, tucked half into a hillside. Echoes of Catherine’s plaintive cries for Heathcliff reverberate through my head. Emily Bronte’s moor is far to the north, in Yorkshire, but this one could be a dead ringer for what I imagined when I first read “Wuthering Heights”: wild, empty, remote. And oh, by the way, it is raining.

My friend Marion and I are in Devon, a part of the West Country that is quintessential rural England: woolly sheep grazing on neon-green hillsides, thatched cottages, small fishing villages, friendly country pubs — and at its heart, rainy, fog-engulfed Dartmoor. We have rented our bikes at Peek Hill Farm in Dousland, on the southwest edge of the moor.

After walking the bikes up through steep pastures of slippery mud and grass and through a series of gates, we lifted them over a stile, then rode among flocks of black-faced sheep and herds of cows to the juncture of the railbed. I was closer than I’d ever been to that many ruminating animals, and one particularly large black-and-white steer looked anything but friendly. He watched me intently as I passed, so close to the trail that we were almost nose to nose, close enough for me to catch the warm, grassy smell of his breath.

Out on the moor, we leave the animals behind, nor do we see any sign of human beings for the next two hours. When we started out, the sky was clear, the sun bright. Without warning, in a typical Dartmoor sudden change of weather, clouds rolled in and a light mist began to fall. It has quickly changed to a steady downpour. Rain drips off our helmets and slides down our rain jackets. My hands become cold and cramped from gripping the handlebars and brakes. Visions of hot soup, hot coffee, and a hot shower dance in my head.

Somehow, though, the exhilaration of riding across this wild stretch of moorland takes over. The huge granite tors that stand on the crests of the hills, the mysterious standing stones of a lost prehistoric people, the vastness of the views reduce minor physical discomforts to the trivial. We two are but a tiny afterthought in one of nature’s more grandiose landscapes.

By Dorothy Stephens
This is the largest upland area in Britain, an area never scraped clean by the moving ice of the glaciers, which stopped just north of here, leaving 241 square miles of exposed granite after other rock eroded away. Bronze Age inhabitants used the granite to build their circles of huts and ceremonial stones, and today it is still the material of choice for barns and walls and farmhouses on the moor.

A National Park since 1951, the 365 square miles of Dartmoor are managed by the Dartmoor National Park Authority. The Authority has the delicate job of preserving the moor, with the help of the 30,000 inhabitants, mostly foresters and hill farmers, and their animals — cows, sheep, and the famous wild Dartmoor ponies — who make the moor their home. Without the animals to crop the grass, much of the landscape would become covered with scrub, hiding the views and destroying the open spaces. Without the moormen to manage the animals and land, controlling livestock numbers, reducing fertilizer and pesticide use, preserving rich hay meadows, restoring and maintaining stone walls and hedgerows, farms and forested areas would disappear. The Dartmoor of the future would be a quite different place.

The rains have let up. I stop cycling and step off my bike to take some pictures. The grass is thick and spongy, like a giant waterbed. And no wonder — the 100 inches of rain each year leave this foggy land permanently waterlogged, with tangled masses of decaying vegetation compressed over thousands of years into the thickly layered peat deep beneath my feet.

The field in front of me looks like nature’s rock garden. It is an enormous expanse of almost painfully green grass, rivulets of water channel through it, and tall pink lances of foxglove spike it with color. No sheep are in sight, but I know they have been here: my shoes are encrusted with fresh yellow-green dung. Several magpies, large and dramatically feathered in black and white, quarrel nearby over a magpie’s food. Our photocopied map is slanting across gold and green fields, and the sun is slanting across gold and green fields in the far distance, beyond the stark stretches of moorland.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle set his spooky tale, “The Hound of the Baskervilles,” on this melancholy moor, and Richard Blackmore’s “Lorna Doone,” though it took place on nearby Exmoor, contains echoes of events on Dartmoor. Blackmore reportedly was inspired by stories of a red-haired band of thieves who inhabited a Dartmoor gorge and who have become known as the Doones of Dartmoor. He also probably heard the story of a young woman named Mary Whidden, who in 1641 was shot on the steps of a village church on Dartmoor immediately after her wedding, as Lorna was, in another church on Exmoor.

The rains and mist, it is easy to believe some of the strange tales that are told about this haunting place. Ghosts of the victims of thwarted romances, suicides and murders allegedly roam the moor, doomed to wander for eternity. Cutty Dyer, a malicious water sprite, and whisthounds, perhaps the prototypes for that Baskerville hound, menace the unwary traveler and frighten small children. A local man remembers his grandmother’s warning that “you’d best behave or the whisthound will get you tonight!”

Even more threatening are the Hairy Hands, said to suddenly appear on the road to Two Bridges and wrench the steering wheel out of a driver’s hands, forcing the car off the road. Vixiana the Witch, described as “an evil old hag,” was another ghostly inhabitant of the moor. She derived her pleasure from conjuring up a thick fog, then luring passersby to their deaths in a swamp, cackling with delight as they sank out of sight in the mire. Fortunately, she was vanquished by a brave young moorman, who flung her from the top of the highest tor.

Such fantasies are dispelled when a weak sun struggles through the clouds. The track has become almost invisible among the rocks and stubble. Our photocopied map is no use. By now it has disintegrated into waterladen shreds.

“‘There’s only one trail, you can’t go wrong,’” we were told by Justine, the farmer’s wife who rented us our bikes.

Nevertheless, we fear we have somehow strayed off the path and are lost on the high moor, where a dense fog can come in so fast it is impossible to find your way. Walkers and cyclists have been known to wander in circles for hours, looking for the trail.

I’m wet, cold, and possibly lost, but I’m feeling close to euphoric. It has something to do with finding that I’m able to over-
Nuts and Bolts

GETTING THERE: By bus from Heathrow Airport to Reading every half hour or so, then by train to Exeter and Okehampton. By train about every half-hour to an hour from London’s Paddington Station to Exeter and Okehampton. By car: Car rentals available at Heathrow and Gatwick airports, and in Exeter.

MAIN ACCESS POINTS FOR DARTMOOR: Okehampton, Tavistock, Yelverton, and Plymouth.

CYCLING ROUTES ON THE MOOR: Go to Information Centres in Okehampton, Tavistock, and Ivybridge.

OTHER CYCLEWAYS: The Plym Valley Cycleway linking Goodameavy on the south-western edge of Dartmoor with Laira Bridge on the edge of Plymouth. The Millennium Cycle Route that skirts the western edge of the moor, linking Plymouth in the south and Okehampton in the north, then connecting with the Tarka Trail to Barnstaple in North Devon. A bike bus is planned to allow one-way trips, and the train from Exeter to Okehampton already carries bikes.

BICYCLE RENTALS: Peek Hill Farm, Dousland, Yelverton 01822 854808; Tavistock Cycles, Paddons Row, Opp. Goodes Cafe, Brook St., Tavistock 01822 617630

ACCOMMODATIONS: The Plume of Feathers Inn, Princetown 01822 890240; Old Duchy Hotel, Princetown 01822 890414. Also, there are hotels, inns, and B&B’s in any of the villages that ring the moor. You’ll find them listed in the Dartmoor Visitor newspaper. There are more than 20 campsites around the edge of the moor, also listed in the free Dartmoor Visitor newspaper.

ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY: A Moor Care Program stresses careful use of the moor to prevent damage to the fragile environment. Bikers are urged to stay on the trails, and motorists to park only in designated parking areas. All visitors are asked not to remove stones or rocks.

CLIMATE: Windy and wet, with sudden, dangerous fogs. Summer temperatures range from mid-50s to mid-60s; winter temperatures dip into the 40s. Bring foul weather gear.

TELEPHONE CALLS: From the U.S., dial the international code 011, then the country code 44, then the four-digit area code and the local number. In Devon, dial 0 before the area code. To call the county of Devon is five hours ahead of Eastern Standard Time.

WHAT TO SEE: The High Moorland Visitor Centre at Princetown offers information, exhibits, audio and visual presentations, and a schedule of guided walks and events on the moor. Walks include: Easy Walks, Walks featuring Wildlife and Natural History, Legends and Folklore, Children’s Activities, Photography, Sketching and Painting, and Evening and Picnic Walks.

FOR MORE INFORMATION: About activities on Dartmoor: write or call the High Moorland Visitor Centre, Tavistock Road, Princetown, Devon, PL20 6QF, UK. Tel. 01822 890567 (24 hours) About accommodations: write or call The Dartmoor Tourist Association, The Duchy Building, Tavistock Road, Princetown, Devon, PL20 6QF, UK. Tel. 01822 890414

Dartmoor Prison

hundred of them died at Dartmoor), it is now a high security prison for criminals.

During Victorian times it became known as the toughest of British prisons, earning the nickname “Halfway-to-Hell.” Prisoners were cruelly flogged, restrained by chains, leg irons, and straitjackets, and restricted to a diet of bread and water. Though attempted many times, escape has rarely been successful, largely because of the forbidding nature of the moor, especially when the mists close down, and the difficulty of getting off it without help.

The excellent High Moorland Visitor Centre and museum at Princetown is housed in the former Duchy Hotel, where it is said Arthur Conan Doyle began his tale of the Baskerville Hound. Knowledgeable guides and several rooms of exhibits detail the history of Dartmoor, from the earliest Stone Age tribes who wandered the moor 10,000 years ago and the Bronze Age people whose stone relics remain, to the Roman invasion, the medieval villages, and the miners who for centuries quarried for granite, mined for lead, iron, and copper, and worked the streams for tin.

We forego the railbed for our return journey and instead follow the paved road back to Dousland, swooping up and down rolling hills, the wind drying our damp clothing. A herd of Dartmoor ponies, a sturdy breed that has been here since medieval times, grazes near the road. Toy-sized foals trot after their mothers as they move farther away at our approach. We coast down the final lane to Peek Hill Farm, and I begin to dream of a Cream Tea: warm scones smeared with clotted cream (an inspired concoction the consistency of whipped butter but creamier) and homemade jam, accompanied by a pot of hot, strong, milky tea.

We take quick showers at our B&B, hand over our wet clothes to our obliging host to be laundered, then head for the nearest tea room. I am warm, dry, pleasantly tired — and the Cream Tea awaits.