



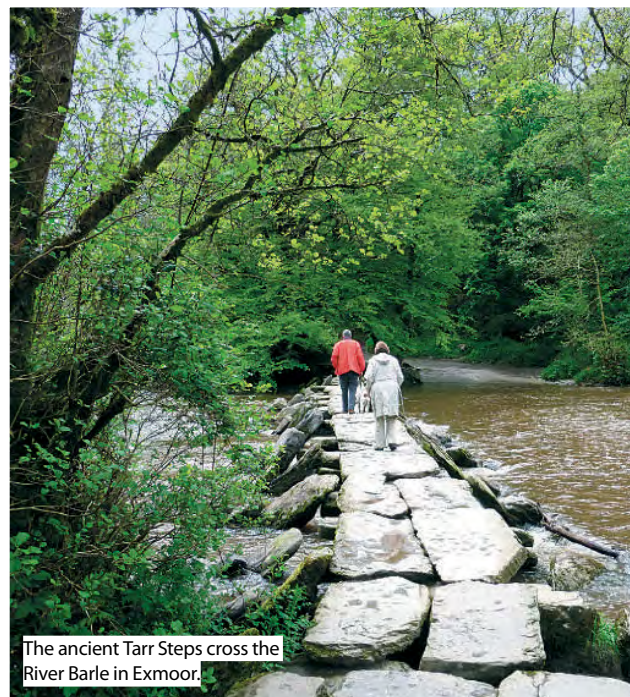
Combe Martin harbour

THE SCENIC route

Tess Paterson went exploring and found some of the most enduring countryside in South West England where Devon, Somerset and Exmoor converge

The whole trip began with a wedding invitation to the North Devon hamlet of Combe Martin. It's not often you can use the word hamlet without sounding like the Brothers Grimm, but there really is no better way to put it. Fans of ITV's *Doc Martin* (filmed at Port Isaac in Cornwall which has a similar allure) will know what I'm on about. Not only is Combe Martin reputed to have the longest, most winding high street in the country, its picturesque coves and glimpses of Wales make it an excellent bet for an outdoorsy weekend.

Driving from London we'd headed due east in the direction of Cardiff but with a horseshoe dip down to Exeter and back



The ancient Tarr Steps cross the River Barle in Exmoor.

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS TESS PATERSON



The site of Arthur's tomb at Glastonbury Abbey.



French formality at Rosemoor.



Spring colour at the Rosemoor gardens in Devon.



TESS'S TRAVEL TIPS

MUST-SEE SITE: Glastonbury Abbey for its spacious, tranquil grounds and connection to King Arthur.

NEED TO KNOW: Travelling distances may look short compared to SA, but the abundance of small towns often makes trips far longer than anticipated.

ESSENTIAL ITEMS TO PACK: A brolly and waterproof jacket, whatever the season.

SHOP UP A STORM: At the National Trust shops which have superb, high-quality products from books and stationery to art prints and kitchenware.

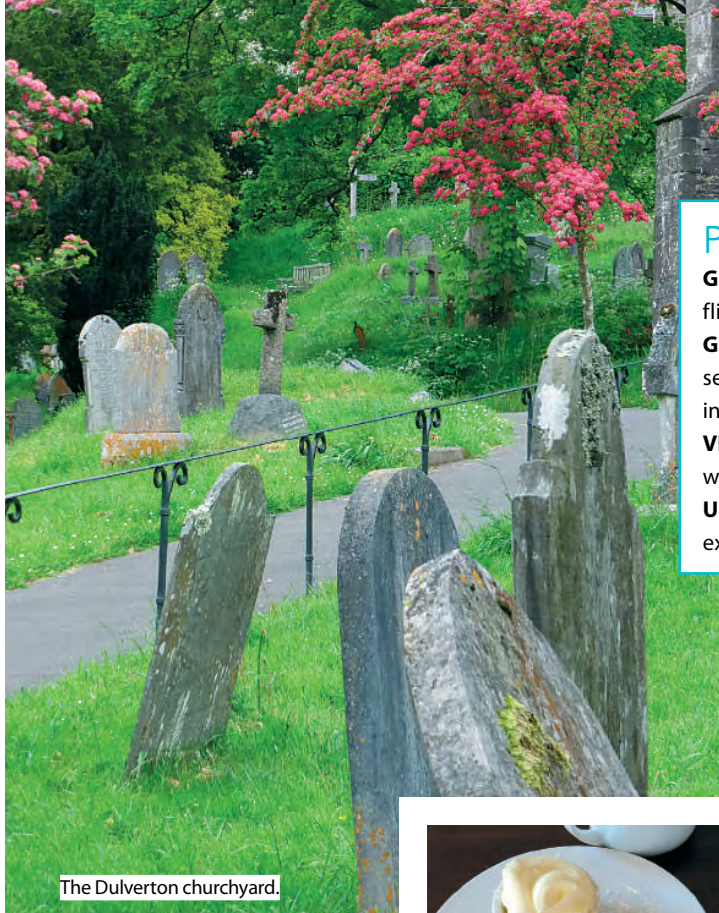
up north towards the Bristol Channel. Marlborough is the first stop, predictably for Carphone Warehouse and airtime, but more importantly for a bacon buttie breakfast. "Any sauces with that?" is the anthem of the English eatery. It's safest to reply in the affirmative before choosing from HP, Branston Pickle or good old brown sauce. Sheer heaven with that bacon – farm cured and thick as a pocket Berlitz guide.

We meander on towards Glastonbury – a town I've always wanted to see – not least for its association with the annual musical mud-fest, but for its legendary connection to King Arthur, ley lines and moon-gazing hares. Glastonbury is actually some 11km from Worthy Farm – the pristine slice of Somerset that's besieged by New Age revellers for five days each June. While the 2015 line-up is still under wraps, last year's Glasto-goers bopped and weaved to the diverse outpourings of Metallica, Dolly Parton, Jake Bugg and Lily Allen. Less mainstream wellie-stompers ranged from the Peatbog Faeries and Rainy Boy Sleep to my personal favourite, Fat White Family.

Glastonbury itself is an ancient market town, and while full of charm, has long been the outpost of all things truly hippie. Each shop is more alternative than the next, a commingling of crystals, incense, complex tattoos and jester-like twirly-toed footwear. The high-street fashion channels a sort of beskirted druid in dreadlocks; even the dogs look as though they've taken a long, slow drag of something interesting.

What we're really after though, is the abbey and its 37 acres of rolling green parkland. It's the perfect place to retreat with a picnic and a book, while pondering on how it must have looked in the 11th century when it was the wealthiest monastery in the realm. Camelot fans will know that King Arthur and Queen Guinevere are reputed to be buried here. Small wonder that the town's dress code has such a Merlinesque bent.

Several hours and a few detours later, we're finally braving the narrow Devon lanes. Our destination is the Sandy Cove Hotel at Combe Martin on the western edge of the Exmoor National Park. With its breakneck staircase and offbeat managerial approach, ▷



The Dulverton churchyard.

PLANNING YOUR TRIP

GETTING THERE: SAA, Virgin Atlantic and BA all have regular direct flights from Jo'burg to London.

GETTING AROUND: Car hire from Heathrow Airport is best for sight-seeing. On the return trip we dropped the car at Exeter and took a train into Waterloo Station.

VISAS: South Africans need a general visitor visa for touring the UK which costs £83 (about R1 500).

USEFUL WEBSITES: northdevon.com, visitcombemartin.com and exmoor-nationalpark.gov.uk



Dahlias on sale at the South Molton market.



Clotted cream tea.

the hotel is a wooden-panelled replica of *Faulty Towers*, albeit with exceptional views and jolly good chips. As wedding weekends go it turns out to be particularly special – a South African girl marrying a Devonshire guy on a perfect day in spring. Calm as a millpond the Bristol Channel stretches out ahead and the weather's so warm that all the Jo'burgers are huddling in the shade.

Combe Martin is full of the dramatic cliffs and inlets best favoured by pirates. In fine weather the sandy bays are perfect for kayaking, and judging by the number of cheerful, stick-carrying ramblers, the walking routes are spectacular. From this winding, pretty spot, we take the coastal route to Lynton (The Oak Room tapas restaurant here is a must), before stopping at Dunster with its impressive Norman castle that's reputed to have had the first plumbed-in bath in Somerset.

Our base near Exmoor is the village of Dulverton – a gorgeous spot on the southern tip of the national park with an old stone bridge and an excellent pub. It sets the tone for the rest of our stay with genuinely friendly people and a sense of community that's all but gone from city life. A morning's shopping may start at the bakery with an important discussion on how Eccles cakes differ between here and the north. Then a gentle potter at the grocers before stopping for tea and fruit scones at The Copper Kettle.

Next, it's a browse at The Wardrobe where the summer jerseys have just gone on sale. No pounding music and manically texting sales assistant, just the serene owner Melanie Deeley who dispenses helpful advice and seems unfazed that it may take an

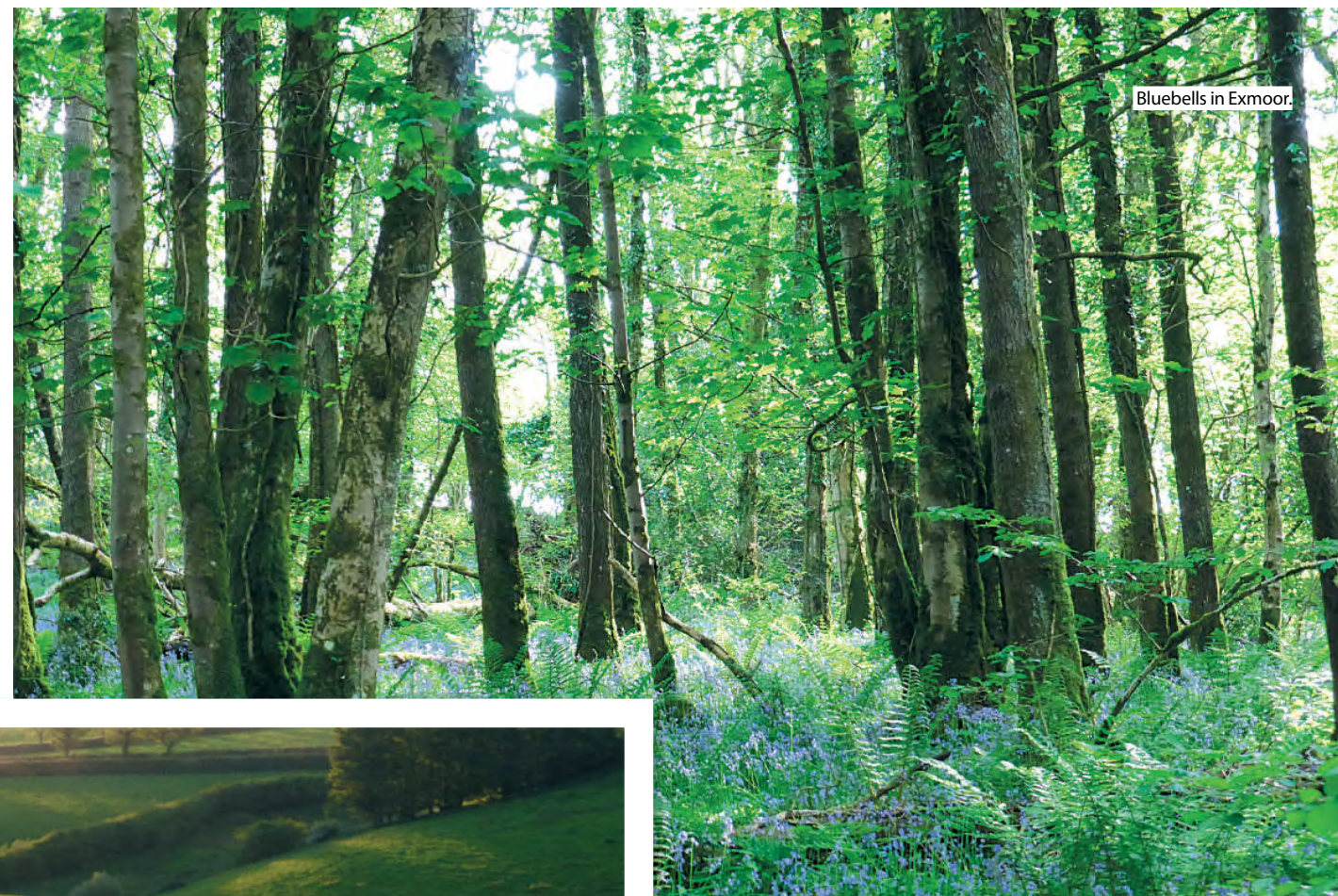


Rosemoor was originally owned by Lady Anne Palmer.

hour to choose a jumper. It's pounds to rand after all. Lastly, we totter down to the Bridge Inn and recuperate over a pint of cider before heading home for a lie-down. Village life at its finest.

A happy series of day trips follows, including a visit to the weekly South Molton market – a roomy hangar filled with everything from Sharpham Rustic cheese and '80's vinyl to fresh flowers. "Don't miss the gardens at Torrington," advises a lady who's selling the lightest blueberry tarts, so that's where we head to next.

Officially the RHS Garden Rosemoor at Little Torrington, this gem epitomises the English country garden – interspersed with some snappy French formality and Japanese-inspired calm. To see it



Bluebells in Exmoor.



Timeless fields in Exmoor.

in spring is unforgettable, and in true English style, there's a mix of pale, diluted sunshine and monsoon-like squalls.

Back in the Exmoor National Park which overlaps both Somerset and Devon, we head to the Tarr Steps. Accessed through winding woodland which descends into the Barle River Valley, this Grade 1-listed clapper bridge is a triumph of medieval engineering. Vast flat stones of at least a tonne each span the river like colossal vertebrae. Hiking back up the hill, a sign on the gate reads 'Dogs on leads, sheep in field,' which if you think about it, is quintessentially English. Their approach to information is tirelessly polite, pragmatically dissuading the public from driving off cliffs or stumbling into boggy fens. The 'Queues likely' road signs still tickle me pink.

At our little cottage on Exmoor's edge, we're surrounded by the persistent, mournful wail of new lambs. Criss-crossed by hedges and dotted with sheep, these fields epitomise the rolling green loveliness of unspoilt England. The nights here are blissfully dark, in fact, the Exmoor National Park has been designated as an International Dark Sky Reserve – the first site in Europe to achieve this accolade. It's the antithesis of the illuminated billboards that relentlessly pump light pollution into the city skies. And long may it last.

This corner of South West England is largely unchanged. It's a place where steady, pink-cheeked butchers wear little white hats and talk about your dinner. Where clotted cream teas and sausage sandwiches are treated with due reverence and where people genuinely understand the art of conversation. It's also a wonderful place for a wedding. **GH**



Three lovely locals at the South Molton market.