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The 8 best walking festivals in the British Isles

A guided stomp across some magical landscapes, followed by a rewarding pint in a cosy pub



Vincent Crump

Throughout this summer, people will be coming together to pull on hefty footwear and stomp across Britain's loveliest landscapes, then raise a toast in a pleasant little pub to the joys of the outdoors.

Walking festivals are all the rage, with more than a dozen planned between now and September, and the range of rambles on offer runs into the hundreds — often with children's trails, wildlife hunts, music nights and assorted inn-based merriment thrown in.

We've plucked the tastiest walk from the best of the fests: eight great strolls, with all the details of how to get involved — plus the map numbers and route notes, if you'd rather go it alone.

TWO GORGES

Peak District's Historic Border Country Walking Festival

In April 2003, archeologists digging at Creswell Crags in Derbyshire made an astounding find: the earliest cave art ever discovered in Britain. The deer, birds and bison on the walls of Church Hole cave were created by ice-age hunters 13,000 years ago. On Saturday (June 27) Sir David Attenborough will cut the ribbon at a new £4m visitor centre full of mammoths' molars and reindeer-horn spears.

The opening coincides with the Border Country Walking Festival, and the Creswell warden Jim Anderson will lead a seven-mile meander, probing its prehistory. From the visitor centre, you'll take the lakeside track through the limestone gorge, peeking into its warren of troglodyte chambers, then aim north alongside Whitwell Quarry. The route crosses the A616 to pick up a permissive path into Markland Grips, an even more beguiling canyon covered in steep woods, where bee orchids flourish and there's a Romano-British hill fort to investigate. The track takes you to medieval Elmton church, and then it's back

to the Craggs via Creswell Colliery, which closed in 1991, leaving a century-old “model village” of Arts and Crafts colliers’ cottages.

To tackle the walk independently, you’ll need OS Explorer map 28.

Rest of the fest: the festival offers 40 guided walks between now and next Sunday, including a “murder walk” exhuming the black history of Chesterfield (June 28). Call 01246 345777 or visit visitpeakdistrict.com/hbwf.

LETTERKEEN LOOP

Castlebar International Four Days Walks

Hike the Letterkeen Loop in Co Mayo, and you’ll see that bogs can be beautiful. The walk is part of the Castlebar International Four Days Walks, a festival with a true League of Nations feel — last year people from 21 countries gathered, including Aussies, Americans, even 14 Taiwanese chaps. The Letterkeen ramble (July 3, 6 miles) follows part of the Bangor Trail, an old sheep-droving track from the Nephin Beg mountains to market. From the Brogan Carroll Bothy, in Letterkeen Woods, you’ll begin alongside the spuming Altaconey River, as the bare, buxom summits of the Nephin Beg press in on each side. Soon you’ll bear right, following white marker posts, into the Sheep Pass, for a climb above Lake Avoher. On a sunny day in July, the views up here take on an almost hallucinogenic hue: the peat bogs burn shocking pink and acid green. The route circles back to the bothy via a stretch of the Western Way, following another rugged riverside. “One Canadian walker reckoned it reminded him of home,” says the festival guide Susie Fry. “You really do expect to see a grizzly lumbering out of the forest.” The walk will take about five hours, including a picnic stop.

To go independently, choose a good-weather day, and arm yourself with OS of Ireland Discovery map 31.

Rest of the fest: the Four Days Walks (July 2-5) is organised a bit like a music festival: you can register for all four days (£35.39, under-18s £13.27) or only for one. The weekend has a holiday atmosphere, with craic abundantly available at the Guinness-fuelled festival ceilidh. Call 00 353 94 902 4102 or visit castlebar4dayswalks.com

CALSTONE COOMBES

Wessex Walking Weekend

Wander the Wiltshire Downs this month, and you may stumble on a rather startling sight: what looks like an Argentine gaucho, rounding up cattle. The gaucho is actually a farmer, Andrew Brown, and his stable of 20 Criollo steeds have been imported from the pampas to chomp down the spikier grasses that threaten the orchids of Calstone Coombes.

Calstone is a very special bit of scenery, and on Saturday’s picnic walk with the warden Keith Steggle (4 miles, June 27), part of the National Trust’s Wessex Walking Weekend, you’ll discover why. It begins in Cherhill village, climbing south on the White Horse Trail to the blustery pinnacle of the downs. Up ahead, the Cherhill White Horse canters across its hillside, freshly groomed this spring with sparkly chalk.

Commanding the summit is Oldbury Castle, a bronze-age hill fort — breathe in the views across the downs, then gambol down the other side into the coombes, an unearthly maze of intimate green valleys, folding in upon themselves. The route back retraces your steps to the fort.

To go independently, take OS Explorer 157.

Rest of the fest: next weekend’s festival features a dozen walks, including two red-squirrel hunts on Brownsea Island (June 27 & 28) and a picnic evening at Prior Park in Bath (both June 27). Call 01672 539167 or visit nationaltrust.org.uk/walkwessex.

RANSCOMBE FARM

North Kent Walking Festival

Hairy mallow, ground pine, broad-leaved cudweed — they may not sound terribly glamorous, but these botanical rarities have turned Ranscombe Farm into plant-hunting heaven. Smuggled away in the North Downs, Ranscombe has been declared Britain's first "plantlife reserve" for endangered flora, and in June it becomes a carnival of eye-catching wildflowers.

Next Sunday's festival walk (June 28, 7½ miles), led by the botanist Martin Hall, begins at Ranscombe's car park, near Cuxton. First, you'll head west along the North Downs Way, with big downland views springing open above a foreground of petal-pricked cornfields. The route then veers north into Great Wood, where more surprises wait. A curious neoclassical temple glows whitely in a clearing — the recently restored Darnley Mausoleum — and from there, the track arrows west to Cobham village, a charming compendium of olde English buildings. Charles Dickens loved walking here, and the Leather Bottle is still every inch the "commodious village alehouse" from the *Pickwick Papers*. The route back skirts the north edge of Great Wood, and then south across Ranscombe again.

To tackle the walk independently, you'll need OS Explorer map 148.

Rest of the fest: the festival runs until July 18. The 25 walks take in the cherry orchards at Doddington (July 10) and barn-owl spotting on the North Kent Marshes (June 28). Call 01634 338191 or visit medway.gov.uk/leisure/walks.

VIOLET'S LEAP

Conwy's Walking Week

Back in 1909, Violet was a celebrity — "she had the X factor". So says David Bathers of Stori Pen Cyf, which organises the Violet Charlesworth walk. Glamourpuss and con woman, she charmed cash out of several rich Edwardian suitors, then faked her own death by pushing her Mercedes over the cliffs of Penmaenbach. It's a gripping story, which will be brought to life again on the Penmaenmawr walk (July 4, 4 miles), a highlight of Conwy's Walking Week.

Penmaenmawr is a classic Victorian seaside resort, its grandiose arcades newly restored to their original pomp and circumstance. William Gladstone often holidayed there, and Bathers will point out his haunts before striking east on the quiet back road to Dwygyfylchi, squeezed between the Snowdonian foothills and Conwy Bay. From there, lanes squiggle picturesquely down to the sea, where a balcony footpath clings precariously to the foot of the fateful cliffs, and Charlesworth's violent tale will unfold.

What became of her? The denouement involves a chauffeur, a tam o'shanter and a vanishing act — Bathers will reveal all, before strolling back to Penmaenmawr along the beach.

To tackle the walk independently, you'll need OS Explorer map 17.

Rest of the fest: the festival runs from July 1-8, with 41 walks, including a Nordic walking adventure in Dolwyddelan (July 1) and a "moonlit safari" at Hiraethog (July 3). Call 01492 576012 or visit www.conwy.gov.uk.

BLOOMSBURY TRAIL

South Downs Society Festival of Walks

"The route is straightforward, but the relationships are tangled" — that's how Brenda Mann previews her Bloomsbury Group pilgrimage in the South Downs, part of a summer-long celebration of Britain's newest national park.

Mann's walk (July 7, 11 miles) begins among the dapper estate cottages of Firle village, once home to Virginia Woolf. From there, you'll strike steeply up to Firle Beacon, on the grassy rooftop of the South Downs. The hike eastward is over archetypal downland: breezy, chalky and full of sky. The views to Lewes and the sea are mind-expanding.

At Alfriston, leave the South Downs Way and bear north on field paths to Berwick, a sleepy hamlet with a surprise in it. Not the Cricketers' Arms (perfect for lunch), but the church, with dazzling murals by Bloomsbury behemoth Duncan Grant. From Berwick, a path aims west to Charleston Farmhouse, where Grant, Vanessa Bell and their Bloomsbury pals gathered to party, paint and play musical beds. They decorated every inch of wall and stick of furniture, and on open days you can take a tour (charleston.org.uk). It's an easy mile back to Firle.

Use OS Explorer map 123 to walk it independently.

Rest of the fest: it runs to the end of July, and ranges from the heights of the Seven Sisters (July 16) to the depths of Meon Gorge (July 30). Call 01798 875073 or visit southdownssociety.org.uk.

PIEL ISLAND

Barrow & Peninsula Walking Festival

“If I had my way, Piel Island would declare independence from Britain,” says the walking guide John Murphy — and spiritually you feel this sliver of grass and shingle, adrift in Morecambe Bay, already has. Piel has its own monarch — King Steve I, who doubles as the landlord at the Ship Inn — and order of tipsy knights, who must pledge to be “a free drinker and smoker and lover of the female sex”. It has a 14th-century castle, a whitewashed pub, a fleet of friendly seals... and that’s it.

The appeal of Piel, however, is not merely its strangeness. The low-tide walk across the sands from Snab Point is gorgeously evocative, with sunlight shimmering across the shallows, thousands of gulls cawing on the sandbanks of South Walney nature reserve, and the romantic ruins of Piel Castle beckoning on the horizon.

The estuary can be treacherous, however, so it’s best to go with Murphy — last summer, Moses-like, he led 300 walkers across to Piel, many of them barefoot. This year the walk is scheduled twice (July 12 and 18; 2 miles). It will include an hour for free-range exploring on the island, lively in summer with yellow-horned poppies, hallucinogenic henbane and maybe a smiling seal or two. Don’t miss a pint with King Steve at the Ship.

Rest of the fest: 20 or so walks stretch throughout July, including toad-hunting at sunset on Walney Island (July 9) and family beachcombing at Roan Head (July 23). Call 01229 876505 or visit www.barrowtourism.co.uk.

CRAIGLUSCAR HILL

Fife Outdoor Access Festival

“A touch of the Highlands down south.” That’s how the ranger Lyn Strachan describes Craigluscar Hill — a mere 227m high, but delivering vast views across the Fifeshire plains for only half an hour’s huffing and puffing. Lynne’s guided climb (August 8, 4 miles) starts at the Craigluscar car park, three miles northwest of Dunfermline, and darts straight for the summit on a track through the woods.

Ahead brood Luscar Crags, where prehistoric Picts built a fort to look out for Norse raiders sailing up the Forth. It was a wise choice, because up here you’re rewarded with a cracking panorama: Edinburgh to the south, the Ochil Hills to the north, and the William Wallace monument at Stirling, stabbing the sky like a skean dhu. Meanwhile, Strachan will be scattering gems about fauna and folklore: how to find true love by picking wild yarrow, for example; or how to ape the bloodcurdling cry of the Craigluscar buzzard. Stand well back. Obvious tracks loop clockwise around the hilltop, returning eventually to the iron-age fort site.

To tackle the walk independently, take OS Explorer map 367.

Rest of the fest: the festival runs August 1-9, packing in not only walks, but cycles, hacks, kayak expeditions, even cliffside scrambling among the caves and columns of Kinraig Point (August 3). Call 01333 329793 or visit fifeoutdooraccessfestival.co.uk.

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