Walk - Ilfracombe and the Torrs

3.2 miles (5.2 km)

Ilfracombe Quay - EX34 9EQ ➔ Ilfracombe Quay

Challenging - On pavements, lanes, tracks and a stretch of fairly rugged coastal path, with some steep gradients both up and down.

Once a fishing village, dating from Saxon times, Ilfracombe’s particular popularity as a fashionable seaside resort was established in 1874, when the railway arrived. Although recent innovations such as the Landmark Theatre and Damien Hirst’s ‘Verity’ statue have won it international acclaim, the Victorian flavour remains. Any walk around the town features steep gradients, but the magnificent cliff scenery towering above the picturesque harbour makes it worth the effort. This route travels through a long wooded valley to The Torrs, a rugged area also known as ‘The Seven Hills’ with tremendous views across the Bristol Channel.

Heritage (/walksdb/tags/heritage/)  Culture (/walksdb/tags/culture/)
Route Description

Start the walk at the pier beside the harbour. Walk along the Quay towards the town, past the Royal Britannia Hotel. Bear right after the hotel and then immediately left, along Capstone Road. At the end of the road continue ahead along the tarmac path, then bear left down to the broad esplanade at the foot of Capstone Hill. Continue along the top of the beach to the Landmark Theatre.

On the pier, Damien Hirst’s ‘Verity’ statue is a ‘modern allegory of truth and justice’, according to its creator. The 66-ft bronze-clad statue, based on Edgar Degas’s ‘Little Dancer of Fourteen Years’, arrived on a 20-year loan to the town in 2012. You pass Hirst’s small gallery, flanked by his restaurant, as you walk along the Quay.

Ilfracombe featured in the 1086 Domesday Book as Alfriencoma, ‘Alfred’s Combe (Valley)’, when it was a fishing village. Its harbour was well-established by the fourteenth century. In the twelfth century it was an embarkation point for the Normans in their wars with Ireland, and ships and men were sent from here during the conquest of the Spanish Armada in 1588. Until its tourist boom in the mid-nineteenth century it was an important local naval port, and many skirmishes against the French were recorded offshore here.

With the railway in 1874 came the pleasure steamers, carrying passengers the length of the Bristol Channel, to and from Minehead, Bristol and South Wales. Today the world’s last sea-going paddle steamer, the Waverley, still visits and there is also a lively campaign by volunteers to keep her sister ship Balmoral on the water. Lundy Island’s supply and passenger ship, the MS Oldenburg, sails from Ilfracombe several times a week in the summer (as well as from Bideford). Other large passenger ships occasionally visit, and there are numerous small pleasure craft, as well as the town’s fishing fleet.

The jetty and promenade pier was built in the 1870s at the start of the Victorian tourist boom. The small round hill above is Lantern Hill, named after the light that was kept burning in St Nicholas Chapel, at the top, to warn sailors of the rocks below. The chapel dates from the 1300s, but the present lantern tower was not added until the start of the nineteenth century. It can be reached by means of a small path that winds up behind the harbourmaster’s office.
One of the locals who frequented the bar of the Royal Britannia was author Henry Williamson, who towards the end of his life lived in a cottage on the left-hand side of Capstone Road. Williamson, who also lived and worked in Georgeham, is best known for his novel 'Tarka the Otter', following the journey of an otter through various North Devon rivers. An 180-mile walking and cycle route was later devised, based on the animal's travels, and the Tarka Trail joins the South West Coast Path along this part of the coastline.

The Landmark Theatre - combining pavilion, restaurant and tourist information office as well as a theatre - provoked considerable controversy when it was built in 1997. The two white cones, providing seating for 480 in an auditorium with stunning acoustics, were contemptuously likened to cooling towers, and locals dubbed the theatre 'Madonna's Bra'. The plate-glass windows, with spectacular views over the beach and cliffs below Capstone Hill, are decorated with lines of poetry penned by the late Poet Laureate Ted Hughes, who lived in North Devon. Also on permanent display at the Landmark is The Ilfracombe Tapestry, designed and sewn between June 1996 and April 1999 by ladies, and some gentlemen, of Ilfracombe. It depicts life in Ilfracombe in its Victorian heyday.

On your right as you walk along Granville Road, the Tunnels beaches are reached through tunnels cut by Welsh miners in the 1820s. Immediately below you is the gentlemen's beach, with the ladies beach to the right, beside the tidal pool which was the town swimming's pool until the new pool was built at Hillsborough.

Torrs Park was laid out in the 1880s, with cliff walks and large detached villas. Ilfracombe's imposing many-storeyed terraces were built around this time, their bow windows providing well-heeled gentilefolk with magnificent sea views. Every year the town celebrates its nineteenth-century splendour with its 'Victorian Week', held at the beginning of June. Visitors flock here from all over Britain, many of them in period costume for the week, to participate in numerous events recreating the festive atmosphere of the seaside resort in its heyday.

The long, low building in the centre of the view below as you walk along Upper Torrs is on the site of Ilfracombe's old railway station. The railway line is now a footpath and cycleway and continues up the valley at the foot of the woodland on the far side.

Current Conditions

19°
Cloudy skies
Wind 22 mph S

Tomorrow
14° - 19°
Cloudy skies
Wind 23 mph S

Next day
14° - 19°
Patchy rain possible
Wind 24 mph WSW
Stay on the heavily wooded lane at Upper Torrs. It drops and then climbs again, past an ‘Unsuitable for Vehicles’ sign and onwards, eventually reaching a National Trust sign to the Langleigh Valley.

Go through the gate beside the sign. Ignore the track to the left, instead staying beside the wall on the right, going over a stile to rejoin the Coast Path. Stay on the main path, generally parallel to the coast, ignoring all the smaller paths running away from it at you rise and fall over The Torrs - also known as ‘The Seven Hills’, and you understand why as you walk back above towering cliffs to the town.

Descending from the hilltop, turn left through a gate to follow the Coast Path steeply down the cliff face in a series of zig zag bends. Carry on at the steps as the Coast Path turns inland, returning to Torrs Walk at 3. From here retrace your steps along the concrete path to the left, and on to the lane at the right, turning left into Torrs Walk Avenue. Carry on back down Granville Road, going through the metal gate at the hairpin bend.

In the ornamental gardens take the path to the left, descending behind the Landmark and down the steps to the seafront.

The mosaic set in the ground on the seafront celebrates Jonathan Edwards's astonishing men's world triple jump record of 18.29m, set in 1995 and still in place 18 years later in 2013. Edwards lived in Ilfracombe as a teenager, when his father was vicar at ‘Pip and Jim’s’ Church.

The zigzag paths up Capstone Hill were constructed in the 1840s by unemployed labourers. It is said that when the town’s men were at sea fighting the French, their womenfolk climbed to the top of Capstone Hill, wearing red petticoats, in order to convince the enemy that there was a brigade of redcoats ready to take them on if they landed.

The Landmark Theatre was built to replace the Pavilion, which once stood at the base of Capstone Hill. In finest Victorian tradition, the old venue ran a programme of music-hall style entertainment throughout the summer season until, already semi-derelict, it was partially burnt down in the 1980s and subsequently demolished.

As you walk along the Quay with the harbour on your right, the Lifeboat Station can be seen at the head of the slipway. The first lifeboat was stationed in the town in 1828 and the present station was opened in 1996. The first motor lifeboat at Ilfracombe was placed on station in March 1936. This was a 32 feet Surf lifeboat, a type that was designed for work close inshore. It was replaced in 1945, which allowed the Surf boat to be sent to the Netherlands where there was an acute shortage of lifeboats at the end of World War II. Today the station operates an all weather boat and an inshore lifeboat.

Places of interest

http://www.southwestcoastpath.org.uk/walksdb/119/
Ilfracombe Tourist Information Centre (http://www.visitilfracombe.co.uk/)

For further local information, there is a National Trust Leaflet on walks between Ilfracombe and Croyde, available from normal Trust outlets including the Ilfracombe Tourist Information Centre, price £0.75. The Centre also has leaflets describing Ilfracombe Town Trails and half day walks from the town.

For information on the wider network of walking trails in Devon visit the website VisitDevon (http://www.visitdevon.co.uk).

Ilfracombe Lifeboat (http://ilfracombelifeboat.org.uk/)

**Nearby refreshments**

Ilfracombe has all facilities; there are none on the walk outside the town.

**Public transport**

Ilfracombe has a good and regular bus service from Barnstaple. For timetable information, zoom in on the interactive map and click on the bus stops, visit Traveline (http://www.travelinesw.com) or phone 0871 200 22 33.

**Parking**

There are numerous car parks signposted from the edge of Ilfracombe (Postcode for Sat Navs: EX34 9EQ).