

Get your kicks on the South West 660

Never mind Route 66, England has its own spectacular coastal driving route for motorists with a sense of adventure. Lucy Shrimpton gets behind the wheel



We seem to call practically every car journey a 'road trip' these days, as if the clicking of the seat belt alone made it qualify. It left me wondering what *does* define a road trip, and thankfully the one I'm undertaking – the South West 660, hugging the coastline of Dorset, Devon, Cornwall and Somerset – is the very essence of one.

The 660-miler, from Poole in Dorset to Watchet in Somerset, is newly devised by a collaboration of West Country organisations which recognised that, while the south-west coast is a destination of choice for many, we can't all head to the same honeypots at the same time. Those narrow country roads just weren't designed for it.

Instead, by providing motorists with an incentive to experience the south-west coast off-peak – spreading the spend and easing congestion – the tourism industry can better sustain itself and provide year-round jobs rather



ON THE ROAD Weymouth beach huts (inset); Polgoon wines (right); Lula Shack, Hayle (bottom); Fire School at High Grange, Dalwood (far right)

than just seasonal ones. Road trippers can make further responsible tourism gains by hiring an electric car and using the charge points en route. The incentive for people visiting between September and June is plain to see, as I drive through crowd-free, blue-sky spring days on go-slow coastal routes far from trunk roads, reminding me how satisfying it is to take the road less travelled.

Motorists can tackle the adventure in one marathon trip or in 12 digestible sections, using South West 660's website – a curation of accommodation and experiences to assist with your planning, whether it's food, active, arts, history or wildlife.

JURASSIC PARKING Dorset, route #2

If the ultimate travel brag is to have the place to yourself, experience Weymouth's quayside early doors, where colourful seafarers' houses



WEST WAY Ilfracombe harbour (left); Tudor fort at Bayard's Cove (below); Hive Beach Café's seafood platter (bottom); Porlock Bay oysters (inset below)



are punctuated by a fish store, e-bike café and galleries. Then head west to the wild, rugged, coast-road-hugging Chesil Beach. After fossil hunting at Charmouth or Lyme Regis, High Grange in Dalwood is worth a detour. It's where, after leaving London's Borough Market behind, Sara and Luke Vandore-Mackay set up their fire cookery school for guests to gather produce, cook on open fires and enjoy the results. **Eat at:** The informal Hive Beach Café, for locally caught crustaceans. Staff will enlighten the uninitiated on how to use seafood tools. **Stay at:** Original Cottage's Seafathers in Weymouth. Having a self-catering base helps if you like to cook what you've purchased locally. **Pitstop:** Head off-piste towards Ford Farm and stock up on cave-aged goat's cheese and Cheddar.

SCONE RIVALRIES South Devon and south Cornwall, routes #5 and #6

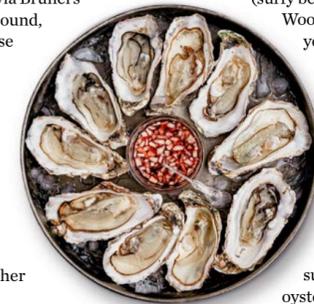
Hats off to south Devon for Agatha Christie, the English Riviera, Coldplay, the ubiquitous scone (cream first) and Dartmouth. Ogle Foss Street's galleries, grab *Sauveurs'* croissants for the road and seek out Bayard's Cove – a concealed quayside little-changed since the *Mayflower* left in 1620, with an inviting namesake restaurant. Wend your way west on the vista-rich route, stopping at Med-like Blackpool Sands for a dip, Slapton for D Day history, and Kingsbridge – if there's a formula for the perfect leg-stretcher

(coffee + wander + boutique + cake), this town is the sum.

Enter Cornwall (jam first) via Brunel's Tamar Bridge (toll-free westbound, one good reason for a clockwise road trip) then, after driving to Fowey via the short ferry from Daphne du Maurier's Bodinnick, press on to St Austell Brewery for a tour, a lick of zesty pale-ale Tribute, and to shoehorn one or 12 into the boot.

Eat at: The Ship Inn, Noss Mayo, one eye on exceptional beer-battered haddock, the other on the car park-gobbling tide. **Stay at:** The Dart Marina Hotel in Dartmouth for luxury, terrace drinks from a vintage Citroën van and a world-class gallery of nostalgic photography.

Pitstop: A naval narrative as rich as Plymouth's merits a stop. Glossy, new cultural space The Box tells stirring stories, from the ships' figureheads display (King Billy, giraffe-height) to the Blitz.



BEYOND THE PASTY Cornwall, route #8

Flitting between vines, shop, tours and brunchers with the enviable glow of someone who spends plenty of time in Cornwall's great outdoors, Kim Coulson at Polgoon tells me she never set out to become a wine producer – the vineyard-shaped, sunny slopes of a sea-facing Penzance valley came with the house. Polgoon's still and sparkling range has been turning heads ever since, the first vintage awarded 2006's Waitrose trophy for Best UK Rosé.

In Penzance, experience the Jubilee Pool's geothermal waters or Chapel Street's boutiques, then get back behind the wheel to witness a scenery shift as south Cornwall becomes north. Drama and mystery take many forms – the extraordinary cliff-carved Minack Theatre, Merry Maidens stone circle, Geevor and Zennor – beware the seductive mermaid, says local legend.

Eat at: Lula Shack in Hayle, the midpoint of St Ives Bay, for casual eating, toes-in-the-sand flat whites and a chance to survey the map for route #9. Highlights include the lighthouse and seal sightings at Godrevy, and surfing or cocktails at Newquay's best-kept secret – Tolcarne beach.

Stay at: The Gurnard's Head, a cosy inn-with-rooms on the coast road from St Just to St Ives. **Pitstop:** If you only do one South West Coast Path walk, make it Sennen Cove to Nanjizal beach via Land's End, swimming gear about your person.

HOME IS WHERE THE ART IS North Devon and Somerset, routes #11 and #12

There's a new kid on the block at Kentisbury Grange's brasserie, where the chef's dislike of predictability has him adding Driftwood – a firm, ash-coated goat's cheese – to the usual suspects – Devon Blue, Cheddar, and Yarg.

Take your pick of Saunton Sands (supernatural dunes and championship golf), Croyde (surfy beach meets thatchy village),

Woolacombe (Lundy Island in your binoculars) and Morteheo village, then make your own judgement of Damien Hirst's divisive sculpture, *Verity*, in Ilfracombe. Drive on into Exmoor, all sea-peek valleys, brooks, velvety moss and sheep. Porlock Weir is a hidden haven, where you can park and pick up takeaway from Porlock Bay Oysters, a sustainable, community-funded oyster-farming initiative.

Eat at: Harbour Gallery, next door, for lunch. Paintings on the walls are available to buy, some by teenager Amelie, working in the kitchen. **Stay at:** Kentisbury Grange for luxury hotel rooms and cottage suites available for one-night stays. **Pitstop:** Valley of Rocks, as dramatic as it sounds and a contender for Britain's best bench, its view as restorative as any spa day.

HOW TO HIT THE ROADS Signing up at southwest660.com unlocks AA-approved GPS links, as well as membership perks. For e-car hire, visit co-cars.co.uk. South West 660 donates 10% of revenue to Hospitality Action, a charity helping those with physical or mental health problems who work or have worked in the UK hospitality industry.

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