

Ditch the treadmill

No joining fee. No queues. No MTV. Who needs a gym to work off the festive excesses when you can go walking in the wilds of Dartmoor?

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Winter walkers ... granite crosses once marked the moor's parish boundaries.
Photograph: Lee Pengelly/Loop Images/Corbis

Squelch. My boot sank into the freezing peaty water. "Who's idea was this?" I shouted into the mist. "Yours!" came a chorus of voices from the gloom. So it was. Back in the autumn, a crisp winter walk across Dartmoor had seemed like the perfect antidote to festive-season over-indulgence, a more pleasant, healthier and cheaper alternative to the gym. I just hadn't banked on the biblical flood the night before our walk, rains that turned the paths into rivers, and the moor into a swamp.

The good news was that by Saturday morning the clouds had been wrung dry - and, this being a soggy day in December, we had the south west's largest stretch of wilderness to ourselves. The moor lay before us in all its wild glory. Mist obscured the valleys, but on the higher ground the wind-blown grass was the colour of burnt sugar; in the distance rivers and streams appeared like silver ribbons dropped carelessly across the land.

The Trans-Dartmoor Trek is a 22-mile hike organised by Spirit of Adventure, an activity company based in a former gunpowder factory slap bang in the middle of the national park. The route, from the village of Bittaford on the southern border to Okehampton in the north, takes you via designated paths with centuries-old romantic names, although there are off-country stretches where you have to pick your way through thick tufts of grass and scattered rocks.

It was hard going at times, but Steve, our guide, kept spirits high with nips of whisky and tales of the moor - like the Hairy Hands. Legend has it that a hapless and hirsute worker at the old gunpowder factory forgot to take off his hobnail boots when entering the granite-floored powder store; a spark flew off his shoe, causing the whole lot to

explode and all that was left of him were his hairy hands. Those disembodied hands now haunt the bridge near the old factory, grabbing the steering wheel from unsuspecting drivers and forcing them to veer off into a ditch. "Really," added Steve, seeing our sceptical faces. "Three people have been driven off the bridge in the last couple of years."

"Funny, they were all men, late at night," quipped his girlfriend, Hannah, who had joined us for the walk.

Spirit of Adventure is run by John Diplock, a climber and instructor. This year his adventures have included trekking to Everest base camp and a month-long exploration of an uncharted glacier in Greenland, armed with only an aerial map and a rifle to ward off polar bears. But he is as passionate about the wilderness in his backyard as he is about further flung destinations. And it's not hard to see why.

The landscape is wildly romantic and evocative. When we passed the granite crosses that once marked the moor's parish boundaries, and heard the spooky call of the ravens, I half expected a horse-drawn carriage to come thundering out of the mist. Other places seemed straight out of a fairy tale. Wistman's Wood, a copse of 400- 500-year-old stunted oaks, is the oldest of its kind on the moor. The trees are twisted and gnarled, dripping in old man's beard; the rocks coated in moss.

The first day ended at Princetown, the village that grew up around Dartmoor prison. Vast and austere, the 200-year-old jail is enough to give you goosebumps. We hurried past to the minivan and back to the bunkhouse next to Spirit of Adventure's office.

Supper that night was at the Warren House Inn. There is more than a hint of American Werewolf about its location on an empty stretch of ancient road, surrounded by pitch-black moor. But inside it was as cosy as you could wish for from a country pub, strewn with Christmas decks, and warmed by an open fire which, the story goes, hasn't gone out for 160 years. "Anyone who doesn't believe that has no romance in their soul," teased the barmaid. The Warren House Inn also happens to be one of the highest pubs in England - and does a fine line in winter pies, including, as you'd expect from the pub's name, rabbit.

We woke to a perfect winter's day - cold but gloriously sunny - and headed north, stopping for lunch sheltering on Lynch Tor. From this rocky perch we could see for miles: to the north-east was Fur Tor, the remotest point on the moor; to the west, St Michael's, a hilltop medieval church surrounded by the rumbled green quilt of Devon farmland.

The moor may be wild and empty now, but in centuries past it was dotted with settlements - the remnants of Bronze Age villages are there in the form of ancient circles; crosses erected by monks in the 12th century are still standing; more recently tin miners dug open-cast mines which now lie scattered across the north-west corner.

Our route took us along part of the Abbot's Way, cross country then on to the Lych Way, a 14-mile path used in the 17th and 18th centuries to carry coffins off the moor to the nearest consecrated ground. With a mile or so to go, the moor was bathed in almost celestial late afternoon sun, turning the heath a silvery gold. We walked the final mile or so along the whisky-coloured Tavy river to a farm, where John's partner was waiting with emergency rations of mince pies loaded with clotted cream.

So, forget your post-Christmas detox. Grab a pair of boots and head to Dartmoor - not only do you get amazing views while you exercise, you get to round off your workout with a well-deserved cake

