

2. Morteheo and North Devon's Deadly Coast

Morteheo is a small hilltop village on Devon's northernmost coast. Despite its proximity to the holiday resort of Woolacombe it retains an old-world charm and a feeling of remoteness, accentuated by its location high behind the rocky headland of Morte Point.

This walk starts at Morteheo and cuts across country inland to the former smuggling village of Lee Bay, before returning along the South West Coast Path (here also the Tarka Trail) by way of Bull Point and Morte Point back to Morteheo. This is not an easy stretch of coast, although the views are rewarding; the path here includes several climbs and you will need plenty of time and energy to complete the walk. However, there are a number of short cuts back to the village.

From the village centre take the road opposite the car park, signed to Lighthouse and Lee (North Morte Road). This leads to a white gate at the top of the private road to Bull Point lighthouse. It is a public footpath, so go through the gate and follow the narrow lane ahead.

As the lane descends, views over the sea open up. If it is all clear, the coast of Wales should be visible on the horizon ahead.

Follow the lane for 600m/660 yards. At a sharp left turn look out for a signpost on the right, by some white posts. Turn right down the steps, signposted to Lee and Bennett's Mouth. At the bottom turn right to cross the footbridge (signposted to Lee). Follow the path to a gate and continue ahead and up to a field, then keep along the right hand edge of this field.



Baggy Point from Woolacombe

Towards the end of the field you should notice a small stone standing on its own in the field on the left.

This is one of three standing stones in the area. It is thought to be of prehistoric origin and of ritual significance. In more recent times such stones are rubbing stones for cattle.

At the end of the field cross the stile and turn right along the track. A short way along the track cross the stile on the left and follow the field edge downhill, signposted "Footpath to Lee".

Superb views over to Wales are obtained from this path.

Follow down to another stile. Cross and continue into a green lane. This leads to a surfaced lane. Continue ahead and downhill on this lane.

As the lane steepens and turns right, look out for the Coast Path sign at a wicket gate on the left. This is the route back, although it is well worth while continuing down the hill to Lee. The lane leads to Lee Bay. There is a hotel and bar here and buses to Ilfracombe. The bay is very attractive with superb exposures of rock strata around its edges.

To continue to Lee Village, turn right at the top of the beach, signed "Footpath to Lee Village".

There are toilets a little way along this path.

Lee Village is very picturesque and has a pub and a shop. There is also a craft shop and tea room.

Lee and its bay was very much regarded in past times as a romantic "smugglers' village". Because of the steep gradients all around it was very difficult to reach by road and was largely accessed from the sea. From here the walk follows the South West Coast Path.



Morte Point

If you have continued down the hill to Lee, retrace your steps up the steep hill to the Coast Path gate. Go through and follow the Coast Path as it rises then dips to cross a stream and rises again.

This second climb can be quite taxing and you may welcome the bench near the top. It gives panoramic views along the coast over Lee Bay and to the Welsh coast.

Another descent follows, to the small secluded cove of Bennett's Mouth, followed by yet another climb. There is a signed short cut back to Morteheo from Bennett's Mouth.

At the top of the climb out of Bennett's Mouth, Lundy comes into view on the horizon ahead, immediately followed by Bull Point lighthouse ahead and below.

There has been a lighthouse on this point since 1879, as a result of a series of shipwrecks on this length of coast. Bull Point features in Tarka the Otter as a place where Tarka, making his way along the coast on the trail of his mate White-tip, first picked up her scent.

Descend alongside the wall of the lighthouse compound, cross the access road (short cut back to Morteheo) and up the steps to continue along the Coast Path. After a short, sharp climb the path descends to the beach at Rockham Bay. After Rockham Bay is another short climb and then the path generally levels out towards the headland of Morte Point. There are further short cuts to Morteheo from this path.

At Morte Point the jagged rocks offshore, especially the Morte Stone off the end of the point, show why this coast had such a fearsome reputation.

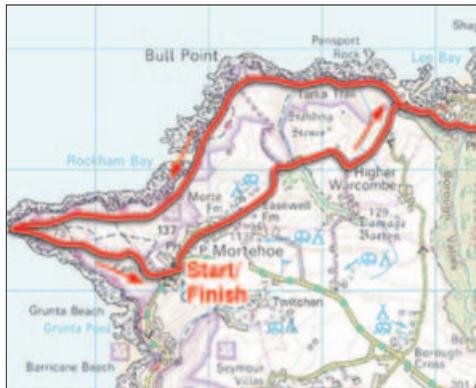
In one year alone during the 19th century, 1852, five ships went down here. The popular belief arose that the headland got its name from the French or Latin word "mort" meaning "death". Its actual origin is probably a Saxon word meaning "stumpy", referring to the shape of the headland.

Williamson also alludes to the dangers of Morte Point, referring to Tarka making his way through the rusted plates of wrecked ships which lay in pools here.

Continue on the path round the headland.

After rounding Morte Point the views out to sea change dramatically. As well as Lundy on the horizon, the view now encompasses Hartland Point, Devon's north westerly extremity, in the distance.

Follow the Coast Path from Morte Point as far as a bench at a fork in the grassy path.



Bear left here, inland and uphill towards some grassy gorse and bracken covered hills.

Go left at the next fork, to continue uphill.

The path is joined by another coming from the left and continues to climb towards a stone wall. Approaching the wall do not cross the stile but bear left, keeping the wall on your right. Follow uphill, past a National Trust cairn then go through a metal gate and pass Morteheo Cemetery. Continue on the tarmac path to Morteheo Church. Continue past the church to return to the centre of the village.

Facts & Features

Walk Length: 10km/6.25 miles; this can be shortened to 9km/5.5 miles by missing Lee Bay and Lee Village and to 7km/4.5 miles by missing Morte Point.



Morteheo has a summer bus service to and from Ilfracombe and Barnstaple. In addition, Lee Bay has buses to and from Ilfracombe. For timetable details contact Traveline on **0871 200 22 33**.

Facilities: Morteheo - pubs, refreshments, shops, toilets, buses, Heritage Centre; car park; Lee Bay - hotel/bar, toilets, buses; car park; Lee Village - pub, shop.

OS Maps:

Landranger (1:50,000 scale): No. 180 Barnstaple and Ilfracombe; Explorer (1:25,000 scale): No. 139 Bideford, Ilfracombe and Barnstaple.

For further information on the Tarka Trail and the South West Coast Path, see page 6. To order books and leaflets, see pages 32 and 33.