

Walking from East London to Northumberland

The plan

I'd often thought, on weekend trips to places within easy distance of East London, how much there was to learn about my own country, rather than explore abroad. After 12 years living in London, 5 as a medical student at Barts and the London, I decided that my last summer holiday would be spent walking from the end of the Central line, Epping, along the East coast of England to Northumberland. I'd take all I needed on my back, and see what an expedition was really like.

The trip

Daydreams of the walk had kept me going through the long slog of the penultimate year at medical school. It allowed my imagination to run free, I could be studying in the library, but part of me was soaring over Essex salt marshes, or rounding Sussex martello towers.

I'd condensed life into 20 kilogrammes that fit into a backpack, and I'd found a poncho that doubled as a shelter. On a rainy Monday morning, I took the trip from Hackney to the end of the Central Line, a strange fish swimming against the commuters who I'd often been part of when I'd been on placement in a GP practice in the area. There was a real freedom and sense of adventure knowing that I was independent, with no timetable, guidelines, expectations.

I started the Essex Way, an official path that takes walkers from Epping to Harwich on the Essex coast, where I planned to get a ferry over to Sussex, and finally join the coastline proper. It was drizzling, but I was full of excitement that powered me through the monotonous dropping off of suburbia into wheat fields.

That first lunch, I cooked pasta by a stream, tired and content, beginning a book on English history and reflecting on my sense of place. London has become home for me, where I've spent most of my adult life by choice, rather than where I was going to, my childhood home in rural Northumberland.

My walk was a chance to reflect on my time as a medical student on the cusp of becoming a doctor. The next few days, as I wondered along green lanes farrowed deep into the earth by centuries of journeys before me, allowed me the breathing space

to catch up with myself in solitude. I was happily discovering Essex: places like Juxta-Ongar with the oldest wooden church in Europe; the dark green woods that had Pagan wooden effigies hanging from the trees. And, it was true, as a second-hand car dealer told me as I hitched a lift: white cars are still really popular.

My first night I slept in the woods, slightly terrified and woke up stiff as the branches that had been rattling all night against the wind. The second night got easier, and I was covering a good 16-20 miles a day, needed in order to arrive home before the end of the holidays. In Dedham Vale – Constable country – the countryside becomes very ‘private’. Signs saying that you are allowed, but not welcome. Inns, forever in my mind *the* place for a weary traveller were full of Nimbys, casting glances. I fulfilled my hobo ambitions though, by sleeping underneath a railway bridge.

A lot of this trip felt like the realization of childhood fantasy. Running away from responsibilities, being free, but being old enough not to freak out sleeping in the woods. I could read a map, and there was no stopping me.

For a boy from the wilds of Northumberland, the Essex countryside was beginning to become tedious, but the Essex coast came just in time. I’d looked longingly at the Maldon coastline from across the bay, at Southend, and now I was here. Manningtree led to Harwich, where the Mayflower set sail from, and where you will get the best fish and chips and fried whiting from Pieseas that I have tasted south of the Humber. And they will never taste as good as when you have walked from Hackney.

One of the many, but unknown foot-ferries that traverse England’s crannied coastline took me to Sussex. The morning started well, with the first sun in nearly a week, and the promise of finally falling asleep to the sound of the sea. I discovered Aldeburgh, on the first day of the Benjamin Britten festival. Throngs of crowds visited wasp-ridden tearooms.

I struck out along the marshes, eager to get to the sea. And that’s when I slipped. My pack took me over fast, and hard. My outstretched wrist took the brunt and I heard a snap. I carried on, suspending belief, but when my wrist began to swell, I turned around, back to the pub I’d just passed. I knew that my trip was over.

As the rest of my summer was spent explaining why I wasn't on my walk, and fretting about beginning my final year with my arm in a sling, I stopped, and did nothing for the first time in years. Ironically, I went on more of a 'voyage of self-discovery' by being forced to stand still and not keep on going, as I had been doing, pushing myself through medical school.

I look back on my trip wistfully, but fondly. It sometimes feel that only the exotic, the epic will do, but the things I found on my walk through Essex reminded me to focus on my surroundings, to be curious and open-minded. I caught up with myself too. It was maybe the last little adventure for a while, but I know now that there will always be that bridge to camp under, and that makes me smile.