

The Walk Across England

Day 7

Kirkby Stephen to Keld

After a delicious full english breakfast, which included oatmeal, granola, fresh fruit, eggs, tomato, mushrooms, wheat toast, freshly squeezed orange juice and, of course, tea, we set off from our cozy inn to the much feared walk through the infamous peat bogs along the start of Pennines.

As we weaved our way through the narrow cobblestoned lanes leading out of the village of Kirkby Stephen, Cynthia and I strategized on how we were going to navigate our way across one of the most talked about sections of the entire walk. We had not only been warned of the boot sucking, waist deep paths of muddy peat from our guidebooks and fellow walkers but also from the locals in the last few villages. During breakfast our B&B host added to the lore of these quicksand-like bogs. “Just a few weeks ago, after a heavy rain, they had to helicopter up a rescue team to pull a tall hiker out of the bogs,” she exclaimed. “By the time they got to him he was stuck up to his chest and they ended up pulling him out with ropes.” Ouch!

After a few miles of steady switch-back climbing up a winding quarry road, we eventually picked up the steep wide grass path leading to the Nine Standards and the notorious peat bogs that outstretched over a long eight mile spanse along the ridge of the western end of the Pennines. As we crested the top of the hill, we drew within the shadows of the nine towering ancient cairns, that were thought to have been built countless centuries ago to define the border of Cumbria and Yorkshire. And as we looked back from the stone pillars, our horizon-hike rewarded us with yet another stunning view, this time of the dozens of miles that we had covered over the last few days, outstretched for as far as we could see to the west.

We then turned our attention to the booby-trapped task that lay ahead, as we could see tall wooden posts embedded in the deep muck, spaced every quarter mile to define the way. We had been warned to only use the posts as a guide but to never follow a straight path to the next one, as that route might very easily be land-mined with deep peat. Thank goodness the day was sunny for I simply couldn't imagine navigating this challenge on a rainy day or, worse yet, in the fog.

After covering less than a half mile of moving at a snail's pace, cautiously using our poles to check the depth and softness of each tip-toeing step, a tall young woman quickly came up behind us. Marica was from the Netherlands and was walking the Coast to Coast alone and we noted her confidence with each bold but intentional long stride she took from one tiny dry section to the next. “The key is to avoid the bright green tufts of grass as that's where the quicksand is,” She warned as she came alongside us. “Want to do this together?”

Her friendly invitation was just what we needed, although “together” turned out to be a kind way of interpreting what actually took place, as for the next three hours our ‘guardian angel’ pathfinder led us on a zig-zag, yet mostly dry walk across this soggy bod laden moor. It was as if we were following Indiana Jones through a maze of booby traps and, in doing so, our much dreaded walk turned into a fun filled adventure.

Upon reaching the end of our video game-like eight mile walk, our fearless Dutch leader stopped alongside a stream to have her lunch. Still running on fuel from our breakfast feast, we bid Marica farewell and kept on our way.

Bit by bit we noticed that the vegetation and terrain were changing, as the now rolling landscape had taken on a deep green hue with miles of stone walls, bordering fields of sheep lay out ahead of us. We had finally entered the west end of the famous Yorkshire Dales and the second National Park of our journey.

The final leg of our thirteen mile day brought us into the Swaledale region, which took us through beautiful farms, across lush grassy fields and over stone bridges above rushing streams, as we worked our way to the tiny village of Keld and the official halfway point of the Walk Across England.

The Keld Lodge, our beautiful bed and breakfast for the night, was ideally situated along a roadside knoll, overlooking lichen covered stone walls and rolling pastures full of grazing sheep. After settling into our second floor room, we went downstairs to the lodge’s cozy pub for a pint and were delighted to see our friends Sue and Graham and a muddy pawed Neo, who looked like he had not been as successful at avoiding the peat bogs.

After a delicious meal with them, we joined other fellow Coast to Coasters in the pub for a fun time of recounting and laughing about the miles and personal ups and downs challenges of the first half of our walk. And as we climbed the narrow stairs, after saying good night to everyone, it struck me that we weren’t alone in our deep love and appreciation for the beauty, serenity, history, peace and magic of this amazing walk.

We drifted off to sleep with the calming sound of sheep calling out to one another, in the field across the lane from our upstairs window, and filled with excitement about starting the second half of our two hundred mile journey.

WALKING TIP of the WEEK: One of the most underrated pieces of walking equipment is our socks. These seemingly unimportant cloth liners have the huge task of keeping our piggy wiggies dry, comfy and blister free. Two key rules:

1. Never, ever wear cotton! Yep, you heard right, as this once beloved but now dreaded natural fabric, moves, slips, retains moisture and, in doing so, commonly causes friction and blisters on your now damp feet! Today’s technical poly fibers keep you dry and cozy by wicking moisture away from your skin, snugly supporting your arch and wrapping comfortably around your foot.
2. The wider the foot, the thinner the sock...and so it goes, that the narrower the foot, the thicker the sock.

LOCAL WALKING VENUE of the WEEK: One of our most popular city walks is the flat paved path that runs north from Riverview Park for two miles along the Rivanna. But what is less known but equally beautiful as this heavily traveled flat path, is the dirt path that meanders along the banks of the opposite side of the river in the County. There are two ways to access this gentle three mile soft surfaced path: Park at Towe Park off of Route 20 or park at Riverview and trek 1.5 miles along the paved path to Free Bridge, where you will cross over to pick up the dirt path. Text me at 434-962-1694 for a map to these two “in-town” gems.

Mark and Cynthia Lorenzoni averaged 15 miles/day on their 200 mile Coast to Coast walk across England last September and invite you to cover the same journey, but right here locally, by walking 15 miles each week on the beautiful paths and roads of Central Virginia.