



# The Ridgeway National Trail

Guidebook author **Steve Davison** leads the way along this ancient route past historic sites, picturesque villages and fab views



The Ridgeway National Trail: easy walking, pretty scenery

## WHAT IS IT?

The Ridgeway National Trail takes you on an 87-mile, week-long journey through 5,000 years of history.

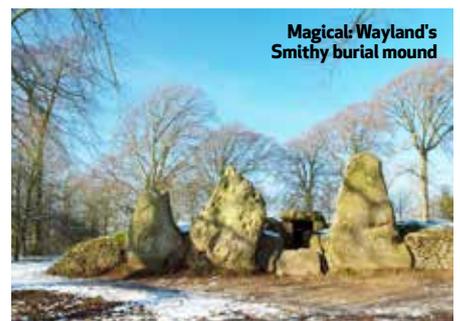
## WHERE IS IT?

In southern England, the route starts at Overton Hill near Avebury and meanders north-eastwards to finish at Ivinghoe Beacon. Mind you, it's just as interesting walking the trail the other way round.

## WHAT'S THE ATTRACTION?

The Ridgeway National Trail takes you on a journey through a landscape steeped in history, following trackways that have been used for thousands of years. Extraordinary sights our ancestors have left us include the Uffington White Horse, the magical ancient burial mound known as Wayland's Smithy, plus a number of Iron Age hill forts with commanding views. And don't forget to take in a detour to the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Avebury with its Neolithic stone circle and long barrows.

The Ridgeway takes you through two Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty: the rolling open chalk downland landscape of the North Wessex Downs and the more wooded, intimate environs of the Chiltern Hills, with a peaceful section alongside the



Magical: Wayland's Smithy burial mound



Five, six, seven, eight: walking over Steps Hill

River Thames in the middle. There are also plenty of distractions just off the route, from pretty villages with thatched cottages and cosy pubs, to historic churches and museums.

**DID IT LIVE UP TO ITS APPEAL?**

Without a doubt. From the historic sites to the sweeping views and from picturesque villages to tranquil woods, the Ridgeway was definitely worth walking.

As for the views, those from the chalk escarpment in the western section give a wide view out across the Vale of White Horse, while on the eastern section there are great viewpoints such as Whiteleaf Hill, Coombe Hill and Ivinghoe Beacon, the latter offering a panoramic 360° view – a fitting end (or start) to your journey.

The numerous prehistoric sites leave a lasting impression and it's hard to single out one, but for me, the most intriguing is the Uffington White Horse – why did our ancestors go to such lengths to make this hill figure (which is best viewed from the air) and how has it managed to survive for 3,000 years? Throughout the eastern section, the beech woods – a celebrated feature of the Chilterns – offer a vivid contrast to the open landscape of the chalk downs. Here in early summer the woods display a carpet of blue as a mass of bluebells come into flower, while later in the year, cooler nights herald a dazzling array of autumn colour.

If you have time to spare, take short detours to visit the Aldworth Giants, nine larger-than-life effigies of the de la Beche family hiding in an ancient church, or visit



Coombe Hill: a monument to Boer War soldiers



End point: Ivinghoe Beacon



Horsing around: the Uffington White Horse

Nuffield House – former home of William Morris, the man behind the Morris motor company.

The low points? In the populated south there are bound to be at one or two and they come in the form of the M4 and M40 motorways that cross the trail. But these are just fleeting moments along an otherwise great trail.

The routes that now form the Ridgeway National Trail have been here for thousands of years, so take your time and enjoy the journey. Rest a while and listen: high above the skylarks sing, far off a church bell rings and the wind rustles through the trees. Imagine the travellers that have been this way before, where they were going and why.

**I'M SOLD – HOW ABOUT THE LOGISTICS?**

The trail is well signposted and generally follows good tracks and paths so there should be little in the way of navigation problems and the walking is fairly easy. Accommodation, mostly located off the trail, ranges from campsites and youth hostels to pubs with rooms and B&Bs. The Ridgeway National Trail website has lots of useful information including transport links and details on places to stay ([www.nationaltrail.co.uk/ridgeway](http://www.nationaltrail.co.uk/ridgeway)), and once you've completed the trail fill in their questionnaire and they'll send you a badge or certificate.

As mentioned, the trail can be enjoyed in either direction and the guidebook describes both. If you don't fancy carrying a heavy pack each day, several companies offer to transport bags. **AT**

**FAST FACTS**

**THE RIDGEWAY NATIONAL TRAIL**

**Trail length:** 87 miles (139km)

**Start point:** Overton Hill near Avebury

**End point:** Ivinghoe Beacon

**How many days does it take?** Five to seven, more if sightseeing along the way

**What should you pack?** Normal walking gear. The route is fairly low, but can be exposed to the prevailing weather

**When should you go?** Any time, but conditions are best from spring to autumn

**The highlights?** Lots, including historic sites, panoramic views and picturesque villages

**Get the guidebook:**

*The Ridgeway National Trail*, Steve Davison, published by Cicerone. See also [www.nationaltrail.co.uk/ridgeway](http://www.nationaltrail.co.uk/ridgeway)



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**Three more picturesque paths in the UK**

**THAMES NATIONAL TRAIL**

A low-lying 184-mile walk alongside England's best-known river, from the Thames Barrier at Greenwich upstream to its source in the Cotswolds. The trail takes you through historic towns, picture-postcard villages and peaceful countryside.



**OFFA'S DYKE PATH**

This 177-mile trail, named after the dyke that King Offa had constructed in the late eighth century, travels from Sedbury Cliffs near Chepstow on the banks of the River Severn to the coastal town of Prestatyn on the shores of the Irish Sea. Along its length, the trail allows you to explore the history and landscape of the Anglo-Welsh border.



**SOUTH WEST COAST PATH**

Fancy something longer? Try the 630-mile trail around the coastline of south-west England, from Poole Harbour in Dorset to Minehead in Somerset (with a staggering total ascent of around 35,000m). This trail offers rugged coastal scenery, pretty villages and fascinating wildlife, history and geology.

