

# THE BEAUTIFUL SOUTH

## CAMPERVAN MAN



Chris Haslam drives the final, triumphant stage of his round-Britain adventure, taking in the delights of the south coast. Overleaf, he picks out his 10 highlights of the 4,666-mile journey



**T**he last week of The Sunday Times's search for Britain's best beach is a journey of surprises, with more ups and downs than a seaside rollercoaster.

We had low expectations for the final 350-mile stretch from the mouth of Devon's River Exe to the Kentish shoreline — the dramatic splendour of the West was always going to be a hard act to follow — but, as the Mystery Machine rolls into pretty **Exmouth**, the family falls silent, like sceptical diners stumbling across a truffle in their gruel.

After knocking up a quick castle on the splendid two-mile beach, we drift onto the lovely Esplanade, where the low-key attractions — crazy golf, miniature railway, adventure playground — could amuse the kids for hours. But time is pressing.

So, on to **Budleigh Salterton**, who I always thought was a troubled yet brilliant jazz trumpeter, but turns out to be **Aldeburgh's** twin sister, right down to the

steep shingle beach, the smacks, the loitering watercolourists and the art galleries. Finding an exhibition of Kandinsky's woodcuts in the excellent Brook Gallery (01395 443003, [www.brookgallery.co.uk](http://www.brookgallery.co.uk)) is an unexpected delight.

Just over the hill lies **Sidmouth**, a Regency resort with a curiously Alpine air — steep hills clad in meadow and woodland fall sharply to a rough shingle beach — and clearly home to a powerful muse. Elizabeth Barrett Browning lived here, Betjeman wrote about it and, in August, it hosts an annual Folk Week — a kind of Glastonbury for people with longer beards. In our first pass along the normally sedate seafront, we spy three clowns, half a dozen milkmaids and the Jolly Green Giant. Among them, wearing windcheaters and baseball caps, and frantically cross-referencing their guidebooks, stand a quartet of bemused American tourists.

**Beer** boasts the busiest beach I've seen in six weeks — a hectic

ammonites 10 times the size of yours in the shop," she says. Ah, yes, we reply, but at what ludicrous prices? "Fifty pence," she shrugs.

**Lyme Regis** is another good spot for old fossils, but there's plenty here for younger people, too. The main attraction in this bustling resort is the Cobb, the seawall I believe was built by John Fowles for Meryl Streep. Come rain or shine, this evocative harbour wall is crowded with ladies looking wistfully seawards for their French lieutenant as their husbands hover nearby, gazing wistfully pubwards for their English pint. Such is the draw of the Cobb that the splendid sandy beach, backed by a bustling prom of bucket-and-spade outlets, is rarely mentioned — though, as reader Heloise D' Souza notes, it's "fantastic for small kids".

From here, past the towering yellow cliffs at West Bay, the B3157 offers another of Britain's great coastal drives, with magnificent views of **Chesil Beach**, a

geological wonder that, says reader John Kettanayeh, is like Table Mountain: "better admired from afar than experienced close up".

The sun has broken through as the Mystery Machine rolls into **Weymouth**, where Anna-bella has a date with a donkey and Benedict a contract to recreate Windsor in the resort's famous sands (see beach of the week, right). From there, we motor to the twin geological art installations of Durdle Door and Lulworth Cove. The former, an instantly recognisable limestone arch, is spectacular, but the latter is a disappointing tourist trap with all the mystery and charm of a seaside retail park. Frederick, smarter than his dad, takes one look at the crowds and announces he's not leaving the van. "Too many shops," he says.

There are no shops at **Tyneham**, a deserted village half a mile from Worbarrow Bay. Evacuated in 1943 following the expansion of the Lulworth artillery range, it is open to