

Northumberland's WIDE SKIES

Come wandering in the heather-clad hills of the Northumberland National Park and the border country of the Cheviots

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY: Vivienne Crow



Vivienne Crow...

... After years of long-haul travel, freelance writer Vivienne is enjoying getting to know places closer to home in her campervan

RIGHT Hadrian's Wall crosses the Northumberland National Park

BELOW RIGHT Pennine Way fingerpost, near Bellingham



I'd not seen a soul for hours. All I could see right now were hills marching off into the distance, towards the sea.

In fact, from my seated position on top of the heather-clad hill of Deer Play in the Northumberland National Park, there were no signs of human habitation at all; no farmhouses, no electricity pylons, not even a dry stone wall. Indeed, the most intrusive items in this vast, empty landscape – apart from me – were the hilltop cairn and a fingerpost sign marking the route of the Pennine Way, which I had been following since Bellingham.

I was here to explore an area I'd passed through many times before – usually on my way to Lindisfarne or other parts of the England's northernmost coast. I'd seen these big skies and far-reaching views before, but only through the windscreen of my 'van. I wanted to get to know them better.

Northumberland National Park is the least populated of all the national parks in England and Wales, with a population of just 2,200; that's about two people per square kilometre. To put that into context, the Lake District has 18 people per square kilometre, while the South Downs has 74.

It stretches from Greenhead on Hadrian's Wall in the south to Wooler, on the edge of the Cheviots, in the north. This is the place to come to if you're looking to escape from busy lives in crowded, noisy places.

For centuries, this was a lawless, untamed place. The Roman Emperor Hadrian built his defensive wall along the southern edge of the region, delineating the northwestern boundary of the mighty Empire. He realised the futility of trying to persuade the 'Barbarians' of the north to accept the Roman way of life. The best remaining stretches of Hadrian's Wall,



running along the top of a ridge of volcanic rock, pass right across the National Park.

In later centuries, the reivers – marauding clans of rustlers and murderers – dominated these borderlands. While the English and Scottish Crowns fought bitterly, these ruthless families owed allegiance to neither side, bringing terror to the no-man's land between the two countries.

Like Hadrian's Wall, the age of the reivers and of the border disputes has left its mark in stone too. Fortified churches, castles, pele towers and bastle houses litter the landscape on both sides of the border. ➤

Our trip summary

OUR MOTORHOME

Known fondly as **Hamish**, our Peugeot-based Auto-Sleeper is just the right size for tucking into out-of-the-way camping spots



2002 Auto-Sleeper Symbol



THE JOURNEY We travelled from our home in **Cumbria**, taking just a couple of hours to reach **Bellingham**. Spending five nights on sites, we had five days' walking and touring before we returned slowly via **Hadrian's Wall**

THE COSTS

Fuel	£43
Average 30mpg	
Site fees	£99.55
Bellingham Heritage Centre	£8
(Non-National Trust members pay £15.85 for the house and gardens at Cragside)	

206 miles

Total £150.55





©National Trust Images/John Millar

TOP TIP

Several companies offer guided walks:

Footsteps  footsteps
northumberland.co.uk

Shepherds' Walks  shepherdswalks.co.uk

During the summer, the National Park also organises walks led by voluntary rangers  northumberland nationalpark.org.uk



“As I stood, **invigorated**, on top of Lord’s Shaw, a **rainbow** stretched across the **expansive** skyline ahead”

LEFT Cragside was a true wonder when it was built and still is today

ABOVE On top of the heather-clad hill of Deer Play

BELOW On a quiet back road in Northumberland

There are notable examples of bastle houses, a fairly common feature of the Northumberland National Park, at Black Middens, a few miles northwest of Bellingham, and Woodhouses, close to Holystone Grange. These two-storey, fortified farmhouses were characterised by extremely thick walls. While livestock were housed on the ground floor, the family would dwell in the upper storey, accessed only by an internal ladder which could be pulled up at night for security.

This was a time of great fear when people lived in constant terror of the reiver gangs; an era that gave us the word ‘blackmail’, a sinister corruption of ‘greenmayle’, the word used to describe the rent paid for farmland. ‘Blackmayle’ was an ‘insurance’ collected by reivers under cover of night – a form of protection money.

Although it is peaceful and stable now, this once ‘debatable’ land still has a wild, unpredictable feel about it. As I sat innocently delighting in the views from Deer Play, I became aware of a dark presence over my shoulder. I turned round to see a vast curtain of showers racing towards me. Time to move!

I hurriedly donned waterproofs, packed my camera away and prepared for the onslaught. As I headed northwest, the rain came, then the sleet, then the hail... I turned

my face away from it, lessening the sting of its blows. For 20 minutes it hammered down. The pleasant moorland path I’d been walking up until now turned into a slushy mess of mossy slime. My confidence in the route ahead, so obvious and so benign before, was shattered. Then, as suddenly as it had begun, the downpour passed and, as I stood, invigorated, on top of Lord’s Shaw, a rainbow stretched across the expansive skyline ahead.

This was my second day of walking the Pennine Way through the national park. Taking a long, linear route through this spacious landscape seemed like the best way to get a sense of its scale and emptiness. My partner, Heleyne, had agreed to drop me off and pick me up at the start and end of each day, using Bellingham as a base for the first part of our trip.

Bellingham is an attractive little town sitting on the banks of the North Tyne. A Heritage Centre, which also provides tourist information, tells the history of this community, with sections on its long-gone mining industry and the reivers.

The old train carriages in the car park, now converted into a lovely little café, also tell of the area’s rail heritage. Even if you’ve no interest in trains, it’s hard to resist the aroma of bacon butties drifting from the Carriages Tea Room. ►





PARKING

We didn't experience any problems in the National Park. There was plenty of roadside parking in Bellingham and at many of the smaller sites. Large pay and display car park on the edge of Rothbury. Motorhome parking at Craggside is limited to car park near the formal gardens. National Park car parks along Hadrian's Wall charge £4 per day, but tickets are transferable between sites

Towns, or, more accurately, large villages, are few and far between in this part of Northumberland. The next one of any size that we visited was Rothbury, which, like Bellingham, is just outside the National Park's boundaries. With its blossom-bedecked pavements, pretty old church and independent shops, this is a lovely place to while away an hour or two on a sunny spring day. The main car park sits just south of the town, beside the River Coquet, but a pedestrian bridge and narrow lanes provide easy access to the main street.

The high, heather-covered sandstone ridge here is traversed by ancient drovers' routes that pass Bronze Age burial mounds, boulders engraved with mysterious, 5,000-year-old 'rock art' and rock outcrops carved into unusual shapes by the elements. It's hardly surprising this enigmatic landscape has given rise to stories of malevolent elves and fairies. The most famous of these is the duergar, who likes to lure travellers into bottomless bogs or over the edge of crags.

Tamer and with less likelihood of meeting creatures intent on evil, the National Trust's Craggside property lies just to the east of Rothbury. Forty miles of waymarked

footpaths enable visitors to explore the enormous, largely-forested estate.

On our arrival, the woman at the gate took one look at our 'van and directed us to the car park near the formal gardens. With height and width restrictions in place, motorhomes don't have access to the six-mile estate drive or car parks closer to the house. A regular bus shuttles back and forth between the parking areas and the house, but we decided to take a leisurely stroll along bubbling becks and beneath towering pines before visiting the grand property.

Craggside was built in the 1860s by the Tyneside industrialist, William Armstrong. A lawyer by training, but an engineer by nature, he created five artificial lakes across his 1,729-acre estate and used them to provide electricity to light his home, the first hydro-electric scheme in the world.

Inside, the décor and contents of the house reflect the ostentation of the Victorian *nouveau riche*.

Leaving the Victorians behind, we headed into the Cheviots to explore more of the lonely border country, crossing into Scotland to use Town Yetholm as our base for a couple of days. With sights set on another section of the Pennine Way, we ►

ABOVE CLOCKWISE Hen Hole in the Cheviots; Clennell Street, is a great way to get into the Cheviots; Carriages Tea Room in Bellingham



WE STAYED AT

Bellingham Camping and Caravanning Club Site, Bellingham, Northumberland NE48 2JY

☎ 01434 220175

📍 campingandcaravanningclub.co.uk

📅 March – mid-January

£ Two adults, pitch and electric: £18.85-£25.45 (non-members, £23.75-£32.65). Non-members admitted

Kirkfield Caravan Park, Grafton Road, Town Yetholm, Kelso TD5 8RU

☎ 07791 291956

📍 kirkfieldcaravanpark.co.uk

📅 April – October

£ Two adults, pitch and electric: £17

INFORMATION

📍 visitnorthumberland.com

📍 northumberlandnationalpark.org.uk

📍 nationaltrust.org.uk/cragside

📍 bellinghamheritage.org.uk

ABOVE On Clennell Street, the ancient drovers' route through the Cheviots

BELOW A road sign on the high border ridge between England and Scotland



managed to persuade a friend who lived nearby to give us a lift to Cocklawfoot.

Depositing us close to the farm at the road-end, he waved us off as we headed up Clennell Street to the border ridge. This ancient route would once have been used by drovers to move cattle around. No doubt, at night, reivers would've used it too, shifting stolen livestock from one valley to another.

In the twenty-first century, it makes for a great way to reach the high Cheviots. With close-cropped grass underfoot for much of the time, it eases its way up through the rolling foothills, passing earthwork remains of at least two Iron Age forts en route.

On this cool, clear and bright morning, the colours seemed particularly vibrant. The moorland grasses were showing their first hint of something more flamboyant and skylarks sang energetically in the sky above. It's hard not to be enthused by these signs of reawakening and I was practically skipping along by the time we reached the ridge.

The border gate is just that, a wooden farm gate. The only indication that it's a boundary between two countries is a notice explaining the differences in access rights north and south of the border.

We crossed back into Northumberland to head north along the Pennine Way, but not before we'd taken in the views. The sense of excitement I felt walking the hills around Bellingham seemed totally misplaced now as I tried to work out what I was looking at. Was that misty outline to the southwest the Lake District? Could I see snow to the north? Could that be the Southern Highlands? Between Hadrian's Wall and Byrness on the edge of Kielder Forest Park, I'd barely reached the 1,200ft contour, but

this ridge would take us to almost 2,500ft above sea level.

We walked north for hours, keeping almost exclusively to the highest ground in the Northumberland National Park. At first, the ridge is boggy and featureless, but at Auchope Cairn we got our first view of Hen Hole, a dramatic, rocky cleft in the otherwise smooth hillside. Here, the headwaters of College Burn come thundering through the spiky andesite. Tor-like formations of this volcanic rock are found again on the summit of The Schil.

Helter-skelter-like, we follow the apex of the high ridge. A very basic emergency shelter, damp and smelly, gives an indication of how serious an undertaking this exposed place can be in bad weather; you'd have to be desperate to spend the night on one of its narrow, wooden benches. But purists walking the Pennine Way without the aid of lifts from friends and partners have 25 miles to walk and 5,000ft to climb between Byrness and Kirk Yetholm on this final day of the long-distance route. After climbing above the forest at the start of the day, there's nothing but high, open hillside, so desperation has probably driven a fair few walkers into the shelters.

Beyond The Schil, the Pennine Way crosses into Scotland before one final flourish along the grassy crest of Steer Rig and on to the top of White Law. In all directions, the views were spectacular.

It's here I say farewell to the land of big views and even bigger skies. Before long, we were heading west, dropping away from the ridge – the promise of a hearty pub meal in Town Yetholm putting a spring back in our steps after a long day on the hills. **MMMM**