



Trail

A gorge with a view

Discover the loveliest gorge
in the the Mendips

Time: 2 hours

Distance: 2 miles

Landscape: rural

Along with nearby Cheddar Gorge, Wookey Hole is one of the most visited spots in the Mendip Hills. Just beyond a huge car park are the Wookey Hole Hotel, gift shops, a theme park, mini golf and a host of other family attractions.

They are all here because of a large network of underground caverns which in the 1920s were turned into 'show caves'.

On this trail we turn our back on the tourist hype to walk through Ebbor Gorge, the "loveliest and most unspoilt gorge in the Mendips".

Find out why this area is famous for caves, caverns and gorges and discover how people have used and exploited them from the Stone Age to the present day.

Location:

Ebbor Gorge, Wookey Hole, Somerset

Start and finish:

St Mary Magdalene Church,
Wookey Hole High Street, BA5 1BR

Grid reference:

ST 53218 47580

Keep an eye out for:

Wicker sculptures of Ice Age animals
in the woods

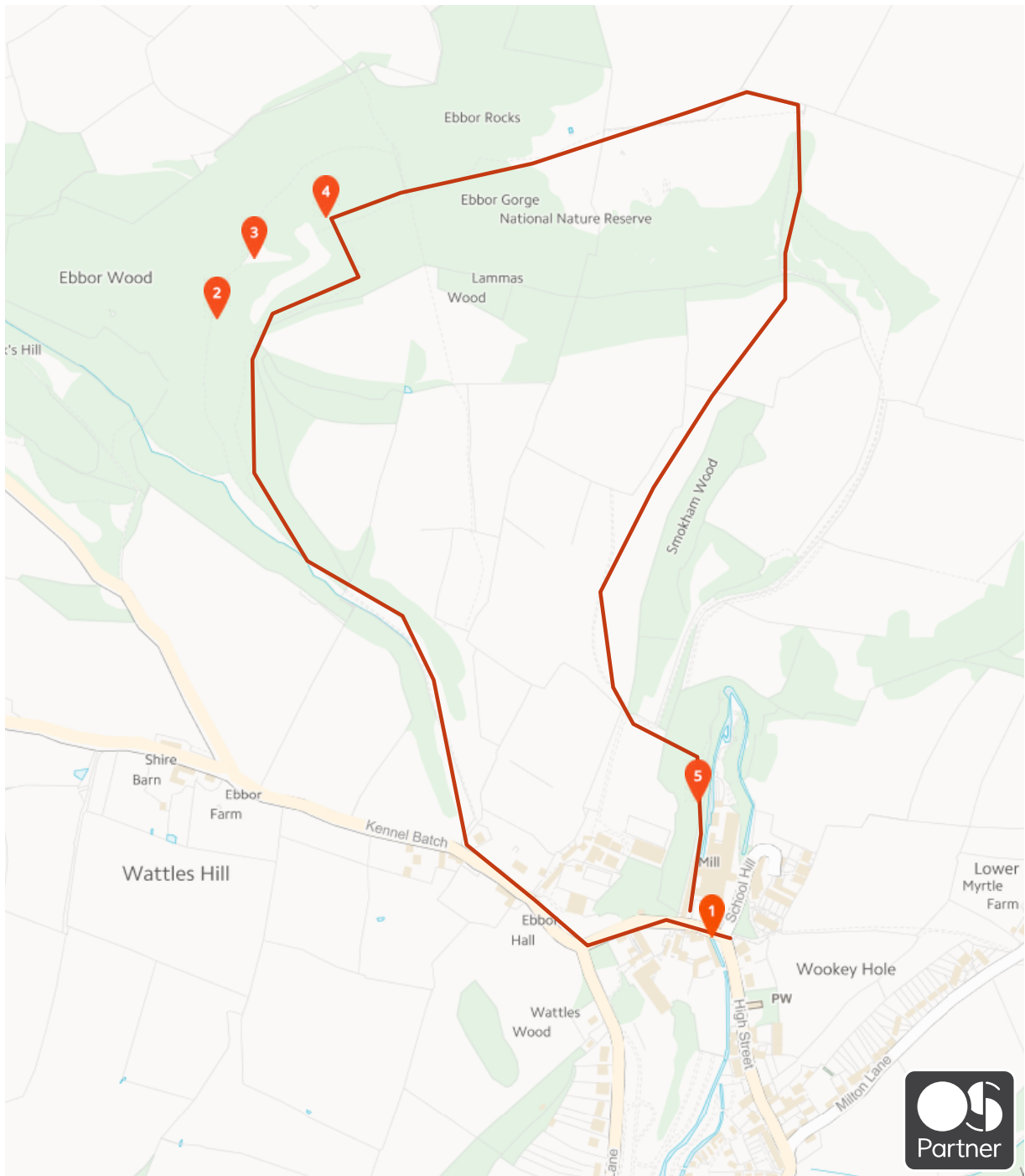
Directions



Park outside the church. With the church on your right, walk along the High Street until you reach an arched stone bridge over a stream on your left,. Stop here alongside a group of buildings.



Route and stopping points



- 01 Stone single arch bridge over the River Axe
- 02 Limestone wall
- 03 The narrows
- 04 Viewpoint over Ebbor Gorge
- 05 View into the Wookey Hole attractions

01 Stone single arch bridge over the River Axe

This pretty arched bridge spans the River Axe, which runs for 22 miles from here out to the Bristol Channel. This stream is our first clue to why this area is so riddled with underground caves and gorges. The source of the River Axe is actually inside the caves. Later on we'll see where it gushes out from the mouth of a cave.

Unlike most rivers which begin as a spring (like the Thames) or as snowmelt in the mountains (like the River Clyde), the Axe is formed from rain water which enters the gorge through holes in the porous rock. It drains down through the rock to form underground caves and caverns before emerging at the surface as a stream.

In the 11th century the River Axe was fast and strong enough to power a corn mill which was later converted to a paper mill. You can still visit the paper mill today. As well as a museum, it now houses restaurants and gift shops as part of the Wookey Hole attractions.

Directions

Veer left past the entrance to Wookey Hole Caves. Continue uphill towards the black gates of Wookey House, passing the junction with Titlands Lane on the left. When you reach a house on the right called Elm Batch take a hard right to go through a metal gate past the house. When the track splits take the lower left path on a broad track.

Continue to a wooden gate, over the stile and past a Natural England board. Continue ahead ignoring a sign on the right directing you to Priddy. In winter or after heavy rain you might notice a small brook on left of the path. Continue ahead turning right at a sign into the gorge. Stop at the exposure of the rock face on left.

02 Limestone wall

Take a good look at the face of this rock. Up close you can see how it is cracked and indented. It's full of holes and fissures and looks crumbly like cheese. It's even soft enough for people to scratch their initials into.

Can you see moss growing around little damp holes? If you look to your left you will spy a deep cleft in the rock. This indented rock face is limestone, which is soft and permeable. This means water is able to seep through it.

Bones, tools and ornaments have all been uncovered here suggesting that these very caves and fissures worn by rainwater were used as shelters by our Stone Age ancestors who lived in the gorge about 3,000 BC.

Though not quite on the scale of the Wookey Hole amusement park, it shows us how people have found ways to use the gorge for their own devices since prehistory!

Directions

Continue ahead till the gorge narrows and becomes inaccessible (experienced scramblers can scramble ahead and reach the viewpoint – not advisable in wet weather when slippery).

03 The narrows

As you go further in, the gorge gets deeper and more dramatic. Look ahead to the narrowest point of the ravine and try to imagine water cascading down onto your head. Now it's a dry valley but there was once a waterfall here that dropped down into a plunge pool just below.

To find out about the origins of the gorge we need to go back in time to the end of the last Ice Age, approximately 10,000 years ago. It was so cold that the ground was frozen, sealing the rock (rendering it impermeable) and preventing water from draining through. In summer, when temperatures rose, rivers of melting water cut through the soft limestone and created the deep cleft of the gorge

It's hard to imagine a thunderous river of ice water so powerful it could cut through rocks, but that's what happened.

Now as you retrace your steps, enjoy a landscape that seems unchanged for thousands of years. The damp woodland deep in the gorge is rich in ferns, mosses and fungi. It looks like a lost world that hasn't much changed from prehistoric times.

Directions

Retrace your steps away from the narrows back to the path junction signposted Priddy. Follow the steps uphill and take the path through woods. At the path junction go left emerging at a flat area with wide rocks to sit on and enjoy the panoramic view.

04 Viewpoint over Ebbor Gorge

Sit down here on one of the flat rocks and take in the view. We're now at the top of the gorge we looked up at from down in the narrow ravine.

Straight ahead (looking south) you should be able to make out a perfectly rounded hill with a cone shape on top. This is Glastonbury Tor (6.5 miles away) which rises up from the flat vale of Avalon. Just in front of the tor, the flat low-lying land is the Somerset Levels, one of the lowest parts of the British Isles and often prone to severe flooding. Over to our right, the line of dark hills is Exmoor National Park.

First of all look straight ahead and in the middle distance you'll see three hills which punctuate the flat landscape. From left to right they are Hay Hill, Ben Knowle Hill and Yarley Hill. But other than these few areas of high ground it's mainly a flat landscape.

Yet here on top of the gorge we have tremendous views. The reason for this is down to massive movements in the earth. At the end of the Carboniferous Period, approximately 270 million years ago, two massive landmasses collided with each other. As a result, layers of rock were compressed and folded up into a series of hills. This period of mountain building created the Mendips.

Since then much of the uplifted rock has been eroded away by wind, rain and snow, leaving behind a series of 'whaleback' hills which we can still see today. It's certainly something to contemplate as you enjoy your lunch and the stunning views!

Directions

Retrace your steps and continue ahead (ignoring the path downhill). Go up to a wooden gate, over the stile and uphill toward gorse bushes. Pass a cattle pond on the left. Go up to a wooden gate, leaving the National Nature Reserve. Walk across the top of a field with a hedgerow on your left.

Cross a stone and wood stile then turn immediately right downhill through gorse bushes. Continue on the obvious path downhill. When you reach a metal fence go through it and then bear left across the top of a field (enjoying a view of Glastonbury Tor) towards a wooden stile into woods. Stop when you reach the path overlooking the fibreglass dinosaurs of Wookey Hole Caves.

05 View into the Wookey Hole attractions

From this walkway look left and see if you can spot the mouth of a cave from which water emerges. This is the source of the River Axe which we saw at the very beginning of the trail. If you look to the right you'll see something rather less natural. Fibreglass dinosaurs and a huge King Kong-like gorilla suggest another exploit.

Today the caves at Wookey Hole make up just one part of a large tourist complex which boasts 20 attractions including a 4D cinema, adventure golf, a circus show and a witch. When the caves were first developed in the 1920s it was the allure of the subterranean world – dark, dangerous and home perhaps to giants, ghosts and witches that caught the public imagination and guided tours of the 'show caves' first began.

At various times there has been a restaurant, swimming pool and even shops inside the caves. The first ever cave dives in Britain took place here in the 1930s when intrepid divers began exploring the system of chambers from under the water.

Recently the old tradition of ageing cheese in the caves has been brought back to Wookey. Four hundred years ago there was no refrigeration and the caves were the ideal place to mature cheeses. The temperature in the caves is a constant 11°C all year round making it ideal conditions. The cave-aged cheddar is a top seller in the gift shop and another example of how these natural wonders have been used and exploited by people for millennia.

The combination of water and porous limestone rock created Wookey Hole, which is now packaged up as an unmissable tourist attraction, yet, just a few minutes walk away is one of the loveliest and most unspoilt gorges in the Mendips. Though people have used the caves as homes, shelters, theme parks and even film locations, Ebbor Gorge is still untouched, peaceful and full of its own natural riches.

Directions

Continue along the path downhill before bearing right to walk alongside the former paper mill. On reaching the road turn left back to the High Street and church.