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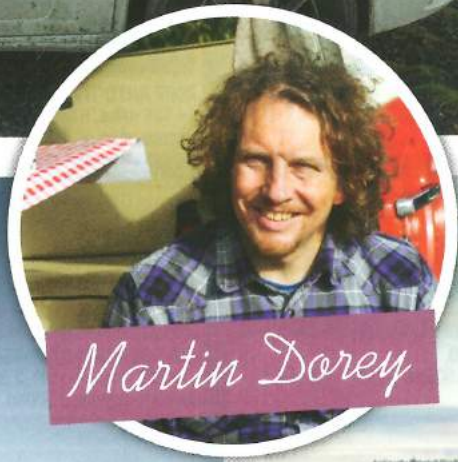
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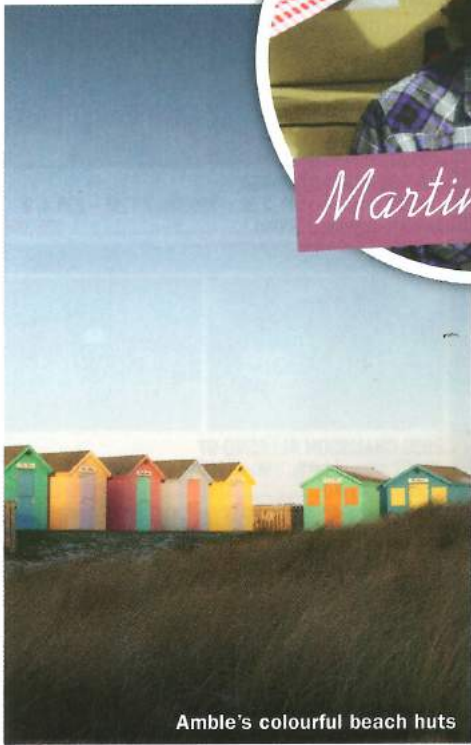




Bamburgh, from the best spot in the car park



*Martin Dorey*



Amble's colourful beach huts



A snowy walk behind Redesdale Arms gave us some lovely views



St Mary's Island and lighthouse

# Our glorious NATIONAL PARKS

Join author, chef and campervan fanatic, Martin Dorey, as he explores the UK's national parks during the winter months

## THE NORTHUMBERLAND NATIONAL PARK AND COAST



### Northumberland National Park

#### The journey

Northumberland is a big place, but the national park has few roads, so we had to skirt around it, firstly following Hadrian's Wall from Newcastle along the B6381, the old Roman road. This gloriously straight and easy-to-drive road follows the wall for about 40 miles until you get to Greenhead in the most southwesterly corner of the park. From there a detour to Kielder Forest through Bellingham will take you to the Scottish border. This is another great road with lovely views.



**W**e are chasing the sun. It is mid-January and we are deep in Kielder Forest, as close as we can get to the Scottish border, riding our mountain bikes on a fast and free-flowing single track through the pine trees. It is cold – around 1°C – and my ears are stinging. But they are also ringing with the last words of my editor – "Get sunny pictures!" – before I set off on this fantastic slow road adventure to England's most northerly and least populated county.

It hasn't been easy, finding those golden patches of light. While we are snug in our motorhome at night and wrapped up warm in thermals and Merino wool during the day, we have seen some weather on this trip. It's been cool and windless, yet cloudy, with occasional moments of blue sky brilliance offering tantalising glimpses of sun. But the sun's not why you come on a camping trip to England's extremes, is it? You come to Northumberland for space and peace and a little adventure: walking, cycling and stargazing...when the sky clears.

I have one eye on the sky as I round a corner and see a beautiful clearing in the

forest, a carpet of bright green moss and the single track snaking between the trees. Beyond that I see the rest of the forest, almost hidden behind a bright, backlit mist. I stop, pull my camera out of my backpack and wait for Lizzy. I know that any second she'll come hurtling down the track behind me, with a big smile on her face, mud splattering in her wake. I prepare the camera and she flies past, as predicted, into the clearing and out onto the hillside, her coat flapping and her hair lit by the sun. I click the shutter and remount my bike to chase after Lizzy down the track. I think I got the shot. Even so, cycling is a great way to spend a winter afternoon, haring about in the forest surrounded by beautiful scenery, hardly seeing another soul.

I am here, in mid-winter, to explore the northern national parks for a book about taking slow journeys through England. Northumberland is our first destination, a conscious choice to begin as far away from home as possible. It's a good time to come as it's at its quietest. There are few people about, few places open and the countryside is quiet and lonely. Snow is forecast and >

### THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW

- Don't miss the coast and castles of Northumberland. Bamburgh is magnificent, but others are just as dramatic
- Craster is another great stop for freshly smoked kippers, but do not approach from the south if your unit is tall. There is a very low, narrow bridge in your path
- If you travel by campervan and don't mind a bone-rattling ride, you can make a circular route out of Kielder by taking the forest track to the A68. It is only open in summer, though
- There are campsites all over Northumberland, but most are only open in summer, so check before heading off
- Kielder Water is a fabulous place for watersports in the summer. You can waterski, wakeboard, sail and kayak





*Motorhome*  
**Benimar Mileo 243**  
 It has a rear fixed bed that can be raised to create a huge garage that can easily carry two mountain bikes



*Costs*

|   |                |
|---|----------------|
| Fuel from Newcastle to Whitley Bay via Hexham, Bamburgh and Northumberland coast, 230 miles at 24mpg... | £56.25         |
| Food Sunday lunch at the Hadrian Hotel .....  | £25            |
| Site fees (Brit Stops).....   | £0             |
| Attractions Bamburgh Castle £10.95 per person .....   | £21.90         |
| Parking Kielder cycle trails, Craster .....   | £7             |
| <b>TOTAL.....</b>   | <b>£110.15</b> |

the sky is heavy but fast moving, offering those all-important patches of blue we've been craving.

Northumberland National Park covers almost a quarter of Northumberland, an area of some 400 square miles. It contains the largest man-made forest in Europe and the largest area of protected dark sky in Europe. It was designated an International Dark Sky Park in 2003 because of the lack of light pollution so, if you're going to see celestial happenings, you'll see them best from here. It's also far enough north to witness, on the right night, the aurora borealis.

If you don't mind driving north then I recommend it as a brilliant place for a motorhoming trip, even in winter. The countryside is open, roads are good and there is space for all. The B6318, which runs along the southern edge of the park and alongside Hadrian's Wall – or the remains of it – is a pleasure to drive because the views are so fantastic. It's straight

too, in many places, which means you go up and over the hills rather than around them, and this also means you get to see the countryside.

There are lots of places to stop and marvel at the effort it took to build a wall across a country but one of the best places is Steel Rigg, where there is a visitor centre and dramatic dolomite rock edge and loch. The climb up Cat Stairs rewards with 360-degree views of some of the finest sections of 'wall country'.

It's beautiful, even on a cold January day, and we clamber up the crag as the light disappears on our way to overnight before hitting the trail at Kielder. We imagine what it must have been like to be a sentry on the wall, in the depths of January, far from home at the northernmost outpost of empire. It must have felt like a punishment. It doesn't for us.

After our forest cycle at Kielder we head northwest on the A68 north to continue our journey northeast.

We stop at Rochester, at a Brit Stop at the Redesdale Arms, where we have a big dinner by the fire while

snow swirls all around outside. Although there's no light pollution, the skies are heavy with the weight of winter, so we miss the Northumberland light show. In the morning we wake to find there's been a dump of a couple of inches of crunchy, squeaking snow so we take a walk through the nature reserve that's behind the pub. In the blue before dawn it is eerily silent, glowing faintly with reflected light. A few birds flit about in the trees while livestock stand still, as if waiting for the sun to warm them. We feel privileged to have seen this as a touch of orange colours the clouds to the southeast.

With caution, we think, there is no need to fear snow, especially in a motorhome. We have heating, water, food and we have good cold-weather kit. We'll be fine, proving winter is no reason not to camp.

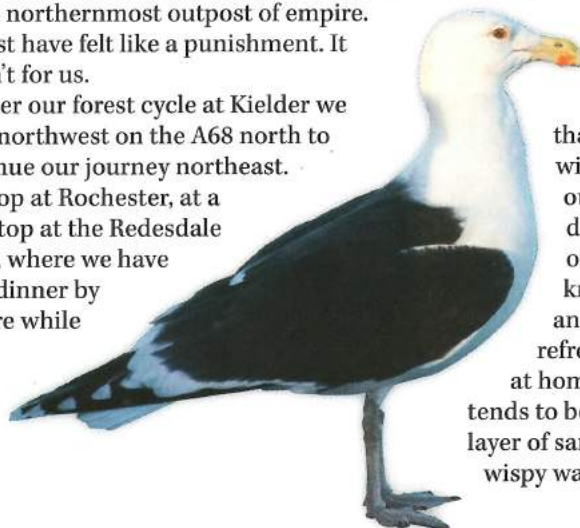
We chuck snowballs in the pub car park, wondering if we'll get out, and if we couldn't, would it matter?

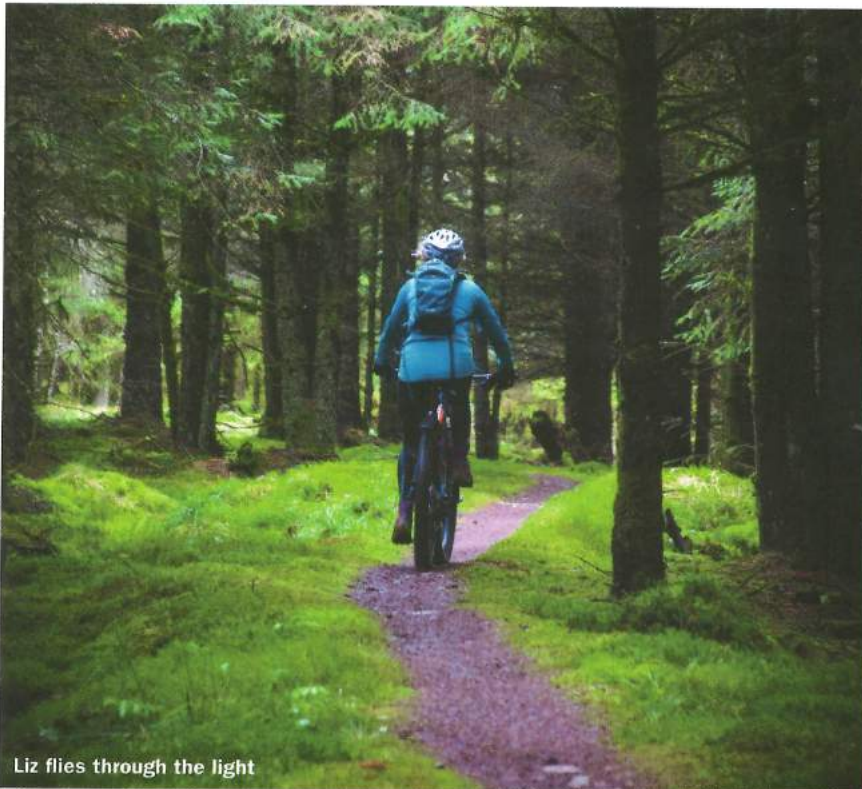
A bag of grit later we set off towards Bamburgh, cross country on the B6341. The snow thins the lower we get, which is a relief from a practical point of view, but we still miss it.

Coming out of the park and down from the hills we look back at the landscape as we continue on the A697 north. The Cheviots, white-topped and rolling in the distance, contrast with the wintery greens and greys of the fields in front of us.

Bamburgh is Northumberland's crowning glory, the beautifully situated castle sitting atop a rocky promontory overlooking the North Sea. There is evidence that the site has been occupied for over 10,000 years. Over the years many have come and gone and left their mark, however small, on the landscape. Bamburgh has seen saints, Iron Age people, Saxons, Christians, Romans, Normans and wealthy Victorian philanthropists. Bamburgh's final shape was determined by its great restoration that started in 1894 and cost over a million pounds.

We park in the car park below the castle only to find that it's only open at weekends in winter. But no bother. We pull on our boots and walk through the dunes to the beach, eager to seek out the view of the castle we all know. The wind is blowing hard and it's cold but sunny (such a refreshing change from the weather at home in Cornwall in January, which tends to be wet and miserable) and the top layer of sand is blowing across the beach in wispy waves around our ankles. The ►





Liz flies through the light


## THINGS YOU SHOULD DO

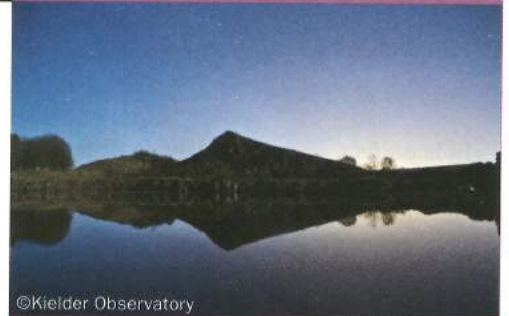
### The Kielder Forest cycle routes

Kielder Forest is a fantastic place for off-road cycling. There are easy routes for all the family that circumnavigate the reservoir, as well as some serious off-road stuff for more daring single-track adventures.

The Blue 'Osprey' route is one of the toughest, but most rewarding routes, of its type I have ridden. It dips and dives through the forest, taking you to incredible viewpoints, throwing you down steep hillsides and giving back with berms and curves that will make you feel like you are 10 again. The only downside is that you might have to climb a bit to get to the downhill.

However, if you fancy something more sedate you can always hire an electric mountain bike from The Bike Place and whizz along. Even if you don't hire, go see them as it's a great shop and the guy who runs it is full of useful info. Pull on the lycra and go!

 [thebikeplace.co.uk](http://thebikeplace.co.uk)



©Kielder Observatory


### CHECK OUT STARRY SKIES AT KIELDER

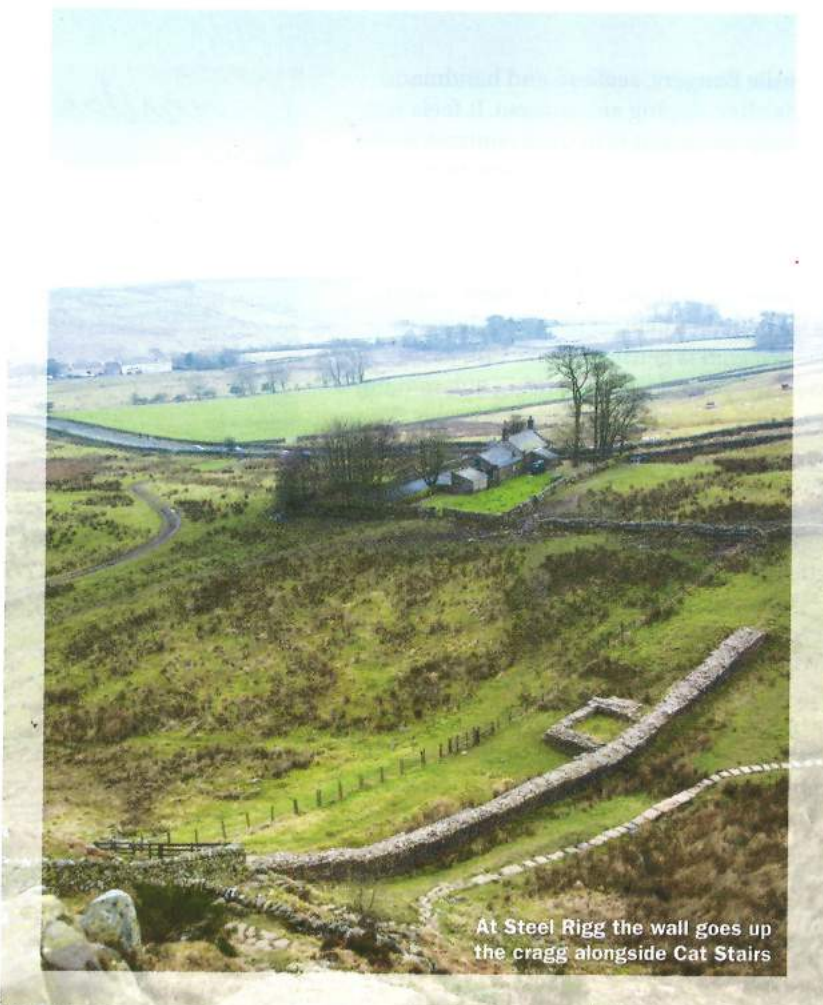
Northumberland is an International Dark Sky Park with the largest area of protected skies in Europe. That means it's one of the best places to go stargazing in England. The vast and empty landscape has little light pollution so, on clear nights, you can marvel at all kinds of celestial beauty. Sadly, for us, snow-laden clouds meant we couldn't enjoy the heavens as we'd have liked. But don't let it put you off. Winter is the best time to go, too – as you'll get long dark nights.

 [kielderobservatory.org](http://kielderobservatory.org)

### WALK THE WALL WITH HADRIAN

The Hadrian's Wall Trail covers 84 miles but, of course, you don't have to do the whole lot. The countryside around the wall is vast and wild and you could easily walk sections like the crags at Steel Rigg. There is parking at The Sill where it has designated motorhome spaces and you can walk up to one of the wall's most dramatic viewpoints and get some cake afterwards.

 [thesill.org.uk](http://thesill.org.uk)



At Steel Rigg the wall goes up the cragg alongside Cat Stairs



The beach at Whitley Bay is beautiful, even in January

Craster and Dunstanburgh Castle

light is perfect, warm and deep, casting long shadows due to the time of day and year. I am in raptures and clicking away. The castle, reflected in the thin film of water left by the receding waves, looks perfect.

We continue south to explore more castles and the coast. The road (the B1340) skirts the coast through Beadnell on its way to Craster, passing beautiful stretches of beach at Beadnell Bay and Howick. In Craster we buy freshly smoked kippers for our breakfast, although I'm not sure it's the best choice for a motorhome. We sit on the sea wall and take pictures of the ruins of Dunstanburgh Castle that's framed beautifully by pillars on the pierhead.

The following night we stay at a Brit Stop in Amble, a café called Artique @ the Marina (they really are lifesavers at this time of the year when few campsites are open). In the morning we wake up to another bitterly cold, but beautiful dawn, so pull on our cold weather gear (again) and take a walk down to the harbour. Liz once swam with peripatetic visitor, Freddie the dolphin, here in the late eighties so she's thrilled to be back. It's a lovely little village with cafés, beach huts and a cluster of small businesses near the dock, a sign that tourism is making headway. If we were wandering around at a more sensible time we'd be able to buy

Geordie Bangers, seafood and handmade cards after sipping an espresso. It feels very cosmopolitan, but is in total contrast to the man we meet on the beach a few minutes later: he's looking for sea coal to put on the fire. We fall into conversation and he tells us how he's been doing it for over 50 years. He's the last one who still bothers – even though he has central heating – because the sea coal is getting scarce. But, as he says, the point is about getting out, making an effort and refusing to buckle under the weather or winter. He looks like he's in his seventies, but he tells us he's 80 years young. We can believe him. We can only hope that motorhoming in winter will have the same effect on us.

We cruise down the coast towards Tynemouth, enjoying more of that wonderful, low winter sun as it streams in through the windscreen. One of our final stops is St Mary's Island, a tidal outcrop topped by a quintessential lighthouse-style lighthouse. With just enough time to stroll over before the tide covers the causeway, we marvel at the location. It's just lovely and I am so glad we made the effort to come here now, at this time of the year. The sky is an incredible blue and the sun lights up the lighthouse at a perfect angle. I snap away, thinking of my editor's last words. **mmmm**

## Campsites

While Martin used Brit Stop facilities, here are two alternative campsites for those who prefer them. Martin particularly recommends Boe Rigg, just outside Hexham, which he describes as "his kind of place".

**The Boe Rigg Campsite**  
Charlton, Northumberland  
NE48 1PE

☎ 01434 240663

📍 theboerigg.co.uk

📅 All year

£ Two adults, pitch and electric: From £21

**Bellingham Camping and Caravanning Club Site**  
Brown Rigg, Bellingham,  
Hexham, Northumberland  
NE48 2JY

☎ 01434 220175

📍 campingandcaravanningclub.co.uk

📅 March 1 - Jan 5

£ Two adults, pitch and electric: From £15.20 (members) £20.55 (non-members)