



WHAT TO DO

Stay at The Crown, and the whole of Exmoor is on your doorstep, because Exford sits right in the middle of the moor. One great walk from the door is a perfect six miles in length (directions available at The Crown) and gives height by climbing over both Road and Room Hills, and then dropping down to follow the picturesque River Exe back to the village. Another day, you might head for the coast and the twin towns of Linton and Lynmouth. Park at the Valley of the Rocks, and take a 30-minute walk along the coast path into Lynmouth. After lunch there (try the Rising Sun, a 14th-century former smugglers' inn) and shopping, catch



THE CROWN

Somerset

It's not a bad idea to arrive at The Crown, slap in the middle of Exmoor, in a filthy temper – it makes the place feel even more of a haven than it is, like something out of that great Exmoor novel, *Lorna Doone*. The navigation app on my iPhone having picked up owing to lack of signal, I had resorted, in my attempt to get us there in pitch dark and thick fog, to a combination of road atlas and crazy seven-pronged signposts, all of which appeared to point to places that didn't exist on my map. My efforts were not successful, and the husband, gripping the steering wheel with mounting fury, morphed into the wicked Carver Doone, while I, the fair Lorna, covered in the corner, afear'd for my life. The Crown,

when it finally appeared, was more than a haven – it saved me.

But who can stay cross for long when faced with The Crown's owner – along with her husband and father – lovely, cuddly Sara Whitaker, beaming from behind the reception desk? Not me, and not even Carver. There are several inns on Exmoor very similar to The Crown: proper, old-fashioned places that look after locals, holidaymakers and shooting parties in equal measure, but I bet none of them has a secret weapon like Sara, or if they do, I'd like to know.

At first I was confused ("everyone is") because she greeted us in a broad Lancashire accent, until she explained how the three of them had decided to change their lives nine years ago by swapping their two Spar convenience stores in a built-up part of Lancashire for this 17th-century coaching inn in one of Exmoor's prettiest villages, surrounded by nothing but moorland, ponies, red deer and birds of prey. "We were looking for another family business," she told us. "Now Exmoor is home; we love the peace."

As I mentioned last week, I've been

longing for "proper" country inns, and here I had found one, recommended by friends. It's like stepping back in time, not because it's stuck in the past, but because it hasn't bowed to the dictates of modernity. What do I look for on Exmoor? Warmth of welcome; physical warmth; comfort; food that makes you clean your plate: they are all here. "A stylish modern place here on Exmoor?" said Sara. "It would never work."

The Crown is no beauty, with a messy façade (though a pretty riverside garden) but it is genuine. There's a comfortable, gracious sitting room with open fire, and

a smart red and black dining room where a generous breakfast is served, as well as dinner. It's more fun, though, to eat in the plain bar where my slab of steak pie and Carver's roast chicken were the business, accompanied by an interesting bottle of Côte Roannaise.

There are 17 bedrooms and neat new bathrooms. The bedrooms' grand furnishings made me smile: reproduction marble-topped chests of drawers, Regency-style chairs and so on. How so? They were bought by the previous owners at a closing down auction of the old Churchill Hotel in London. Our room was cosy; others are elegant: I particularly liked Room Three.

The Crown is a simple place, but it has great heart.

● Park Street, Exford, Somerset TA24 7PP (01543 831554; crownhotalexmoor.co.uk). Doubles from £95 per night. Not suitable for guests using wheelchairs.

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HOW IT RATES

LOCATION (OUT OF 10)	8
STYLE/CHARACTER	8
SERVICE	9
ROOMS	6
FOOD & DRINK	7
VALUE FOR MONEY	9
OVERALL RATING	8

the funicular railway to Linton, and after exploring there, take the 20-minute walk back to the car park. Exmoor National Park is now also termed a Dark Sky Reserve, a designation celebrating our starry skies. To find out more about Exmoor, head for Dulverton and the Guildhall Heritage and Arts Centre (dulvertonheritagecentre.org.uk). Current exhibitions celebrate the life and work of the Exmoor author and painter Hope Bourne, who died in 2010, and the history, life and beauty of the magnificent Exmoor Red Deer. Between May 4 and June 22, Simonsbath Festival (simonsbathfestival.co.uk) offers a programme of concerts, opera, talks, walks, workshops and family activities in several venues, including the newly renovated church of St Luke's. In the charming village of Dunster, the much loved Doll Collection (dunstermuseum.co.uk) has expanded and moved to the ground floor of the Dunster Memorial Hall. Dolls on display include the spooky Plague Doll.