

Ringstead Bay. A Hidden Gem of the Dorset Coast

The Dorset coast, also known as the Jurassic, is a World Heritage Site, and includes some unique geographical features.

There is Lyme Bay, including the 18 mile long Chesil Beach. There's the Isle of Portland, where the world famous Portland Stone has been quarried for many centuries, to build some of the most spectacular buildings around the world.

Poole Harbour is the second largest natural harbour in the world after Sydney harbour. Much of it is given over to nature reserve, making it a fabulous place to walk, spot rare species of wildlife, and for those who like the water, it is a superb and safe place to explore in a sailing dinghy or canoe.

The South West Coast Path stretches from the north of Somerset, along the north coast of Devon and Cornwall, then along the south coasts of Cornwall, Devon and Dorset. The Dorset stretch of coast path takes in some spectacular cliff top and beachside paths.

Nestled in between the cliffs, just to the east of the holiday resort town and fishing port of Weymouth, is Ringstead Bay.

It is a small hamlet, with no more than 20 private houses, one small shop and a small chapel (which is halfway up the cliff to the east). You can drive to the bay, taking a narrow track that heads down between the cliffs. There is a car park, only 50 yards from the beach. You can pay your car park fee to the shop, and then spend the day exploring on foot.

The beach, which is mostly shingle, but with some patches of sand, stretches around the bay in both directions. The part nearest the car park is sheltered by a reef that protects it completely from the waves for most of the day, except for an hour or so either side of high tide.

This makes the water especially safe for swimming and messing around in boats or inflatables, and has the added bonus at low tide of being a bit warmer than the usual sea temperature.

If you have access to a boat, a short trip off the beach, especially early in the morning or late afternoon, gives you good access to some great mackerel fishing.

If walking is your thing, head east from the car park, and you will quickly begin the climb up White Nothe, one of the highest cliffs along the Dorset coast. Just below on your right hand side as you ascend, is an area called "burning cliff". The composition of the soil here is such that it is flammable, and on rare occasions it has been known to catch alight.

If you are a brave walker, then instead of heading along the coast path, walk along the beech, right around Ringstead Bay. At the end of the bay, you can pick up a path that then winds right up the front of the cliff. Don't take this route if you don't like heights !

At the top of White Nothe there is are some old coast guard cottages, and a World War Two look out point, offering superb views across to Portland and Weymouth.

If you continue the walk eastwards, up and down hills and cliffs, eventually you will be rewarded with a view of Durdle Door, a huge natural archway, and just afterwards you will reach the picturesque village of Lulworth Cove.

To the west of Ringstead Bay, a shorter and slightly more gentle walk of about a mile, will take you to Osmington. The Smuggler's Inn is a good place to stop for a lunchtime beer, an afternoon tea or an evening meal. Remember though that walking back to Ringstead Bay along the cliff paths after a beer, or in the dark, can present some challenges !

In summer, Ringstead Bay can get quite busy, but you only have to venture 50 yards or so away from the main part of the beach, and you'll find plenty of privacy.

In winter the beach is usually deserted, with just a few brave kite surfers or windsurfers for company.

Some of the houses in the Bay are Holiday Cottages, and make a superb base for a longer holiday. There is also a holiday park in the Bay, with caravans for rent, and occasionally for sale. Otherwise, there are plenty of places to stay in the surrounding towns of Weymouth, Dorchester and the surrounding countryside.

About the Author

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