

Dorset

And yet the gentle geography is punctuated by bursts of drama: the jagged limestone stacks of Old Harry's Rocks, say, or the majestic rolling hills of Ballard Down.

The most striking feature, though, is the eerie interior dunescape. Behind the grassy mounds where nudists build their sunbeds, the outlook is a carpet of greenery: heather, gorse, moss and lichen. A path meanders through the evocatively named brush (golden samphire, sea lavender and cat's ear). This otherworldly interior is frequented by bird watchers (who get their kicks from ringed plovers, curlews, oystercatchers) and body watchers (mostly gay men, who get their kicks from looking at each other). The former are in their element in the autumn, when thousands of waders descend on Studland to feed before flying off to Africa; the latter seem to show up any time, any season.

But the most ardent twitchers head further inland to Little Sea – a natural wonder. This freshwater lake was part of the sea until it became landlocked by the shifting dunes in 1880. Now it's the most crowded section of Studland, albeit with winged inhabitants: teal, mallard, little egrets, mute swans and herons and 20 different species of dragonfly.

Mother nature gives way to mothers and children at the southern tip of Knoll Beach, by the National Trust Visitor Centre, where the nudists cover up and the families let their hair down. Indeed, the area positively hums. In summer holidays, the sea here teems with (sporting) life: windsurfers, sailboats, canoes, banana boats, waterski boats, all hired from a kiosk. Families stake their claim in the sand with deckchairs and sunbeds. And the entire beach descends on Knoll Beach Café, which sums up Studland: a tasteful log cabin, with a noticeboard of butterfly sightings and a menu that serves paninis instead of hot dogs.

Ironically, though the busiest stretch of Studland, this is its least beautiful: the beach is narrower, the sand less pure and civilisation encroaches. And yet, even the beach huts at Studland are elegant: a string of painted green wood blending into a forest backdrop.

In stark contrast, Old Harry's Rocks stand out like a sore, if beautiful, thumb. These characterful, jagged chalk stacks underscore the area's geological interest: Studland marks the gateway to Dorset's Jurassic Coast, where rock fossils date back millions of years. They are the climax of a scenic path that veers through trees and clifftops, and reaches its zenith at a sublime lookout point – Dorset's answer to Beachy Head.

From the sublime to the respectable: behind Middle Beach lies the local metropolis: sleepy Studland village. Supposedly the inspiration for Toyland, the setting for Enid Blyton's *Noddy*, it still has a bourgeois 1950s vibe and a whiff of English nostalgia, although, apart from a Norman church and some thatched cottages, the architecture is more suburban than chocolate box. But its leafy surroundings ensure Studland's natural spell is not broken. And, with the exception of a couple of beer gardens, or a visit to the stables (you can go riding on the beach on summer evenings or in the winter), there's no reason to linger here. So once you've quenched your thirst and armed yourself with provisions, it's back to the beach, Studland's *raison d'être*, and the desert island fantasy.

A crowd-pleaser without the crowds, Studland draws sports enthusiasts, nature lovers and families.

OTHER BEACHES

Bournemouth, just to the north of the Isle of Purbeck, is Studland's city cousin. The raw materials are the same: miles of immaculate white sand and safe swimming. But the ambience provides a sea change. By the pier, it's vintage seaside kitsch: a heaving