



Undercliff

Welcome to the jungle.

The air is sultry and the foliage lush. Tarzan could swing from all the hanging vines and tumbling creepers. In places, the vegetation is so thick, you wish you'd brought your machete and dressed like Indiana Jones. Birdsong echoes under the forest canopy, snakes slither among the seemingly tropical ferns and creepy crawlies lurk in the luxuriant grasses. Blur your vision and this could be the Amazon or the Congo; it's actually genteel Dorset. Yet the Undercliff – an eight-mile forest trail along the Jurassic Coast into Devon – has been dubbed Britain's only jungle, and it's not much of an exaggeration. This leafy tunnel combines Brazilian-style greenery, snow-white chalk cliffs and the odd tantalising glimpse of sea through cracks in the twisted branches.

A place for intrepid explorers, then. But the Undercliff is also for romantics. It was immortalised as a Victorian lover's lane in John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. In the novel, a scarlet woman lures a respectable gentleman to his downfall amid 'the inviting little paths' and 'shielding bracken and hawthorn coverts', features that typify this wild and overgrown English Garden of Eden.

Dorset/Devon

Morals are not the only things that fall around here: cliffs do too. Described by Fowles as a land of 'deep chasms and strange bluffs', the Undercliff was created by landslides of the ancient cliffs above — an unstable mix of Jurassic, Triassic and Cretaceous rock. These crumble after being lashed by rain or destabilised by underground springs, leaving behind fossils on the beaches below, along with newly formed ravines that soon resemble what Fowles dubbed 'dewy green vaults'.

As the author explained it, all the landslips 'tilt [the soil], and its vegetation, towards the sun; and it is this fact, together with the water from the countless springs... that lends the area its botanical strangeness.' Hence the towering ashes and beeches, overgrown chasms 'choked with ivy and the liana of wild clematis', bracken that grows eight feet tall, and flowers that bloom a month early.

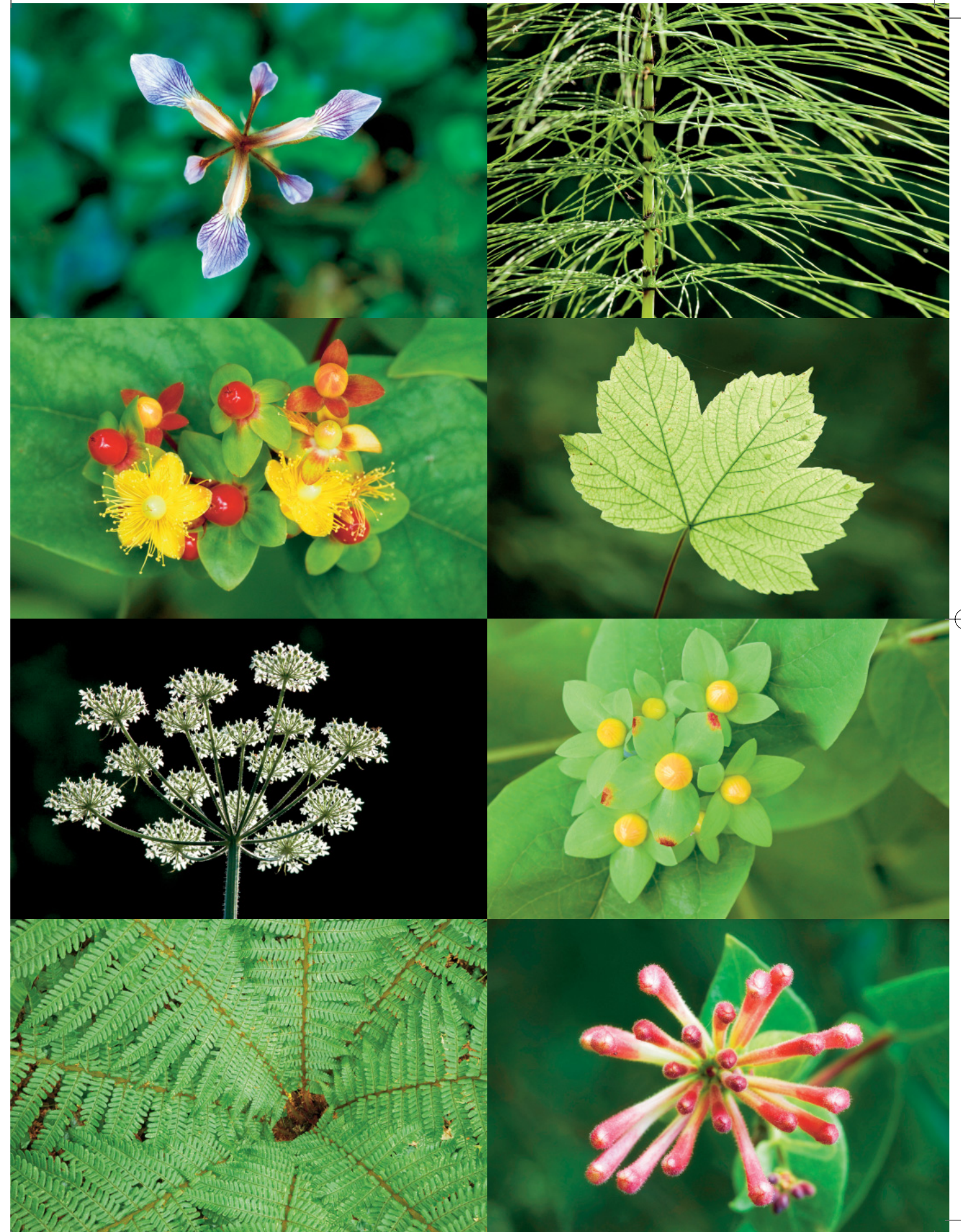
This fecundity is astonishing: it's as if the Kew Gardens hothouse exploded on the Dorset coast. In spring, the brilliant green is polka-dotted with colour: from anemones to orchids; honeysuckle to primroses; foxgloves to viper's bugloss. The grasses and herbs could stock an apothecary's shop: there's St John's Wort (nature's Prozac), Woundwort (once used as a styptic and sedative), madder (from the coffee family, a species of which is used to make quinine).

At one time, the Undercliff was even more exotic, as foreign plants flourished in the balmy microclimate, among them cherry laurels, holm oak, pampas grass, buddleja, wild arbutus and rhododendron. These plants have been purged by park rangers in a bid to protect native plants and the wildlife that relies on them, from the rare butterflies (marble white, wood white, painted ladies, silver-washed fritillaries) to the resident avian chorus (blackcaps, whitethroats, thrushes, marsh tits, blackbirds and bullfinches).

There are no parrots and macaws — yet (though, with global warming, they can't be far off). And, as befits every jungle, there are reptiles and creatures that make many shudder: grass snakes, adders, great-crested newts and blood-sucking insects (ticks). There is also a hint of danger (ticks can cause Lyme disease; guides recommend that you tuck in your trousers, cover your head and wear long sleeves).

Just as jungles hold an air of menace, so too does the Undercliff. 'To some it is wet, overhung, claustrophobic and frightening,' said Professor Denys Brunson in the foreword to Donald Campbell's *Exploring the Undercliffs*. If you twist your ankle or come to grief on the tangled path, the only way out is by stretcher or helicopter, according to the wardens. Yet there are no mobile-phone signals to help you raise the alarm. Off the marked path, treacherous crevasses lurk in the undergrowth, waiting to trip you up. As Fowles put it: 'a man with a broken leg could shout all week and not be heard'. Which makes it a wonderful place to hide: two German POWs escaped from a local work camp in 1946 and hid here for months, drinking water from springs and raiding the larders of local farmhouses.

It's also a wonderful place to pretend. If you put on a panama hat and khaki trousers, you could be Rudyard Kipling. Those adders could be pythons, the brooks could contain piranha and Mowgli could be around the corner. Or you could be in a romance novel, and, as in the *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, stumble across a dashing gentleman or red-haired temptress in the undergrowth. That's the Undercliff in a nutshell — a place to let your imagination run wild, just like the landscape.



The lush and fecund Undercliff is dripping in ferns, foliage and curious plants and herbs.



Dorset/Devon



OTHER BEAUTY SPOTS

Lyme Regis is a genteel seaside town brought to life by Jane Austen in *Persuasion* and later by John Fowles, who lived there. Today, it remains elegant and atmospheric, with its quaint back streets, pastel terraces and chalk cliffs. The beach is sprinkled with fossils (this is the western stretch of the Jurassic Coast). The Cobb, an ancient stone breakwater, is a local icon. Snaking elegantly into Lyme Bay, it hasn't changed much since Austen's day, still dotted with courting couples, weekend strollers and fishermen.

Bridport, east of Lyme Regis, is a handsome town with wide streets that host antiques stalls and farmers' markets. West Bay, Bridport's harbour, is a proper Dorset fishing village, known for seafood restaurants and a pretty shingle beach with sandstone cliffs.

Chesil Beach, further east, is the heart of the Jurassic Coast. The romantic shingle beach is sprinkled with fossils and inspired an Ian McEwan novel. It is also a refuge for swans, which live at the Abbotsbury Swannery, a moody and marshy nature reserve.

WHERE TO STAY & EAT

The Alexandra Hotel (01297 442010, www.hotelalexandra.co.uk), the local *grande dame*, is a Georgian mansion gussied up with boutique-hotel luxuries. The cliff-top gardens overlook Lyme Bay; the restaurant ticks all the boxes for posh, country-house dining. Next door, Hotel 1 Lyme (01297 442499, www.hotel1lyme.com) is a playful, stylish B&B that combines low prices, Designers Guild wallpaper and themed rooms, from swans to chinoiserie (one room even has a leather-belt motif).

The cosy Mariners Hotel (01297 442753, www.hotellymeregis.co.uk) has pink stucco walls, beamed ceilings and narrow passageways. It's all very Beatrix Potter (in fact, the author stayed here in 1904 and the building makes an appearance in *The Tale of Little Pig Robinson*). But there's nothing twee about the contemporary decor. The restaurant does quality pub food, roasts and local seafood; meals can be eaten in the garden.

On the waterfront, the Harbour Inn (01297 442299) is an elegant pub with an emphasis on fresh seafood. Hix Oyster & Fish House, a fashionably minimalist restaurant,

is run by the celebrity chef Mark Hix (01297 446910, www.hixoysterandfishhouse.co.uk). The seafood (Lyme Bay fish soup, grilled Dorset blue lobster) is top notch, as is the sea view. There's no sea view at Jurassic Seafood Wine Bar (01297 444345, www.jurassicseafoodrestaurant.com), but the prices are down-to-earth, the fish is straight out of the water, and the kitsch decor – plastic sharks and dinosaurs – raises a smile.

For an atmospheric mix of rustic and right-on, the Town Mill Bakery (01297 444035, www.townmillbakery.com) has communal wooden tables, copies of Naomi Klein's *No Logo* and worthy, wholesome food: quiches, pizzas, salads and focaccias.

Foodies should try the River Cottage canteen in Axminster (01297 631862, www.rivercottage.net) for organic and local fare. In West Bay, the Riverside Restaurant (01308 422011, <http://thefishrestaurant-westbay.co.uk>) is a local seafood legend.



HOW TO GET THERE

The Undercliffs National Nature Reserve runs above the coast between Lyme Regis in Dorset and Axmouth in Devon.

By car Take the M5, then the A358 to Axminster; A35 east for 1.5 miles, followed by the B3165 to Lyme Regis. Turn right on the A3052 (Pound Street) and then left into the car park past Cobb Road. **By train** Axminster station, then taxi 01297 34000 (£15) or bus (National Rail Enquiries, 08457 484950). **By bus** The No.31 from Axminster (0870 0106 022, www.firstgroup.com) goes through Lyme Regis. At the end of the Undercliff walk, buses X53 and X54 from Seaton return to Lyme Regis, but times are sporadic (phone First Group). Beer & Seaton taxis (01297 23366) will take you back for £15. **On foot** The Undercliff is a

seven-mile path that takes four to five hours to walk. In the corner of the car park on Pound Street, follow the footpath across Ware Common until you reach the entrance to the Undercliff. Warning: do not stray from the main path as you could injure yourself in hidden fissures. To protect yourself from ticks, cover up and tuck your trousers into your socks. Sturdy walking shoes advised. **Map** Ordnance Survey Explorer 116, Lyme Regis & Bridport; grid ref SY345925.

FURTHER REFERENCE

Lyme Regis Tourist Office (01297 442138, www.lymeregis.org). Natural England (0845 600 3078, www.naturalengland.org.uk). See also www.jurassiccoast.com and *Exploring the Undercliffs* by Donald Campbell.

