

 **GRAND TOUR**
Coast-to-coast

 **Duration**
7 DAYS

 **AUTO-SLEEPER**
TOPAZ

A cross- country run

Inspired by Wainwright's famous coast-to-coast walk, JEREMIAH MAHADEVAN tours in our Topaz from east to west and finds a new route to remember

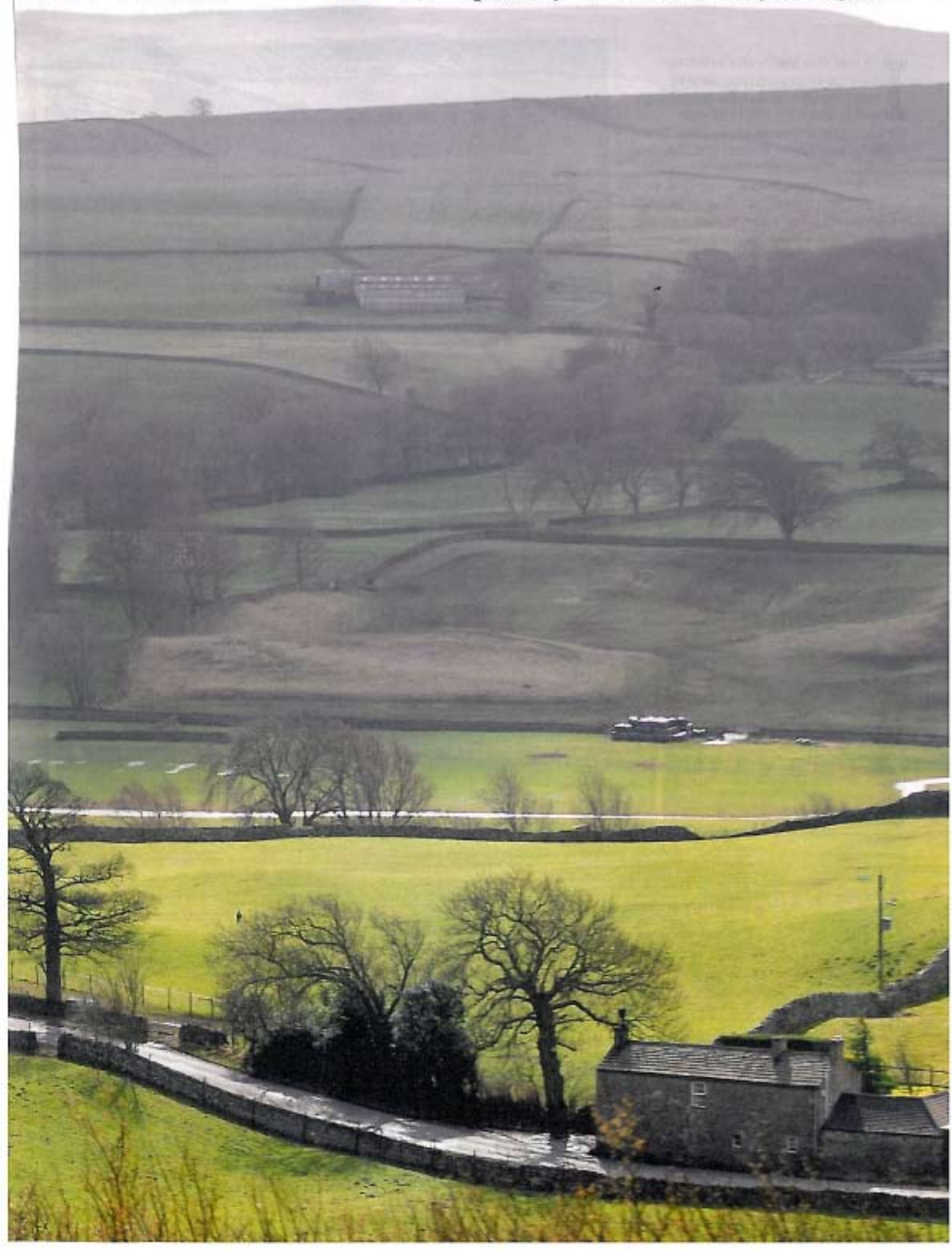
ALAMY/STOCK MARKET
The Auto-Sleeper Topaz on an unnamed road near Hardraw in the Yorkshire Dales, where lush green scenery is criss-crossed by remarkable dry stone walls



Total distance
950 miles



Sea and moor, hill and dale, mountain and
lake – possibly the finest scenery in England





The River Esk is one of the main arteries of the North York Moors, and a famed destination for anglers seeking salmon and trout.

Visit <http://bit.ly/9dVr0x> to learn more

It's said that long walks in Britain are best attempted from west to east; apparently then the prevailing winds and rains will be at your back and you'll have an easier time. This is why, when Alfred Wainwright, the famed Lancastrian fellwalker, decided to concoct his ultimate walk - one that, as he said, "puts the Pennine Way to shame" - he planned it from west to east.

Wainwright's brainchild was first revealed to the public in his 1972 book *A Coast to Coast Walk* (you can still buy the Second Edition, £13.99, Frances Lincoln, ISBN 9780711230637). Remarkably, this route is still an unofficial path, despite its popularity. It runs through what is arguably the best countryside in England: the Lake District, the Yorkshire Dales and the North Yorkshire Moors. Seeing as this month's *Practical Motorhome* is devoted to adventuring in the great outdoors, I finally had a fitting excuse to take a stab at

“I would start at Robin Hood's Bay, but travel further south, ending the journey in Ravenglass”



Whitby Abbey sits on a high cliff and overlooks the North Sea

this famed coast-to-coast journey, albeit on wheels rather than on foot.

I also chose to travel from east to west, in defiance of Wainwright's sage advice. The one problem with Wainwright's sensible approach is that the Lake District, clearly the most fitting climax for the route thanks to its dramatic scenery, ends up being the starting point instead. I also decided to depart from Wainwright's exact route - I would start at Robin Hood's Bay, but travel further south, ending the journey in Ravenglass. There were two main reasons for this: the first is that it made better use of the road

network, and the second - well, we'll come to that later.

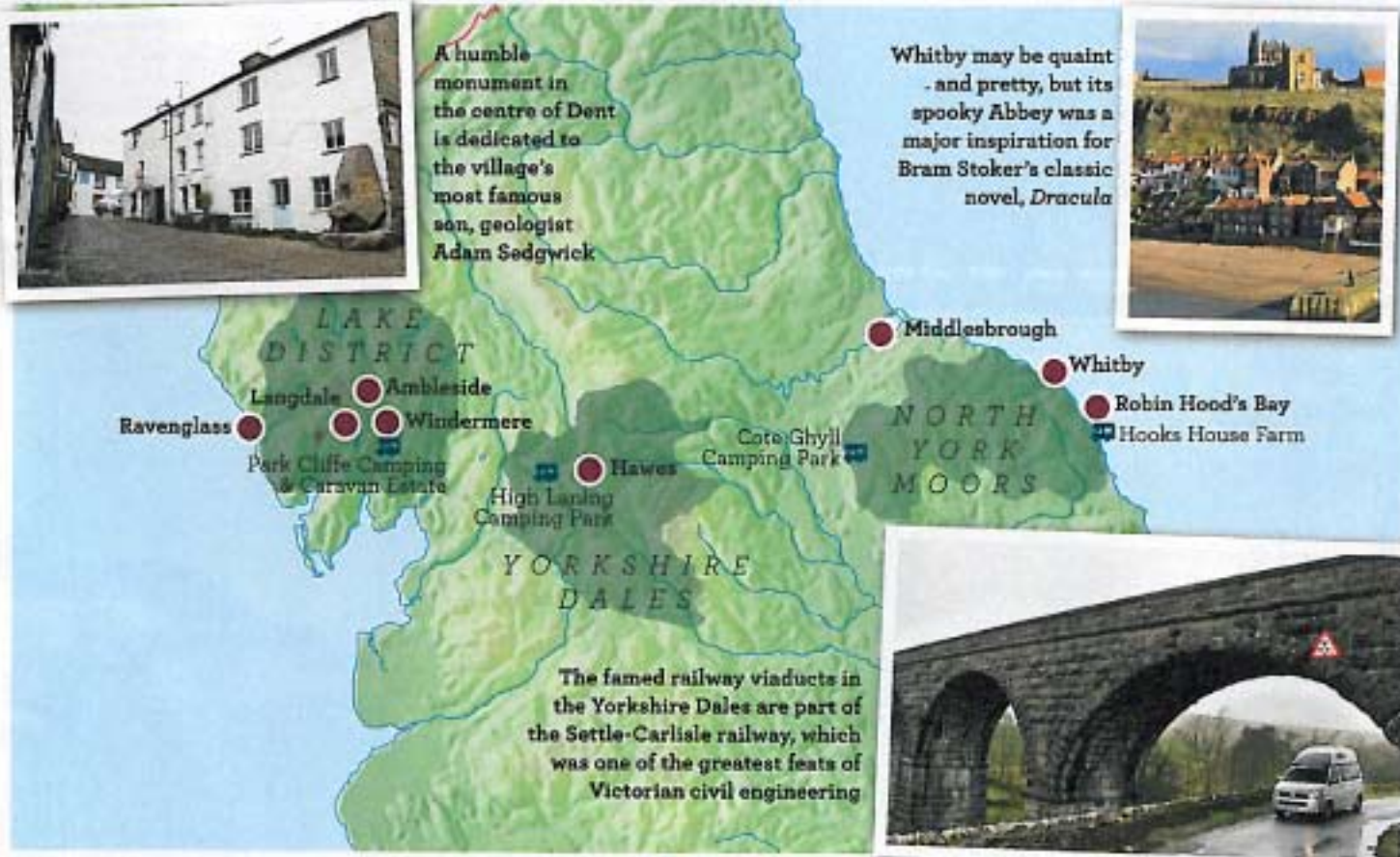
So, having stocked up our brand-new Auto-Sleeper Topaz long-termer, I travelled north on the M1 with my girlfriend Shaleni, who kept watch for spring lambs from the passenger seat. We drove to Robin Hood's Bay and pitched up at one of my favourite campsites in the country, Hooks House Farm, which perches on a hillside, basking in glorious views of the sea.

We enjoyed these views the next morning from the Topaz's cozy lounge, before taking a stroll down to the



A humble monument in the centre of Dent is dedicated to the village's most famous son, geologist Adam Sedgwick

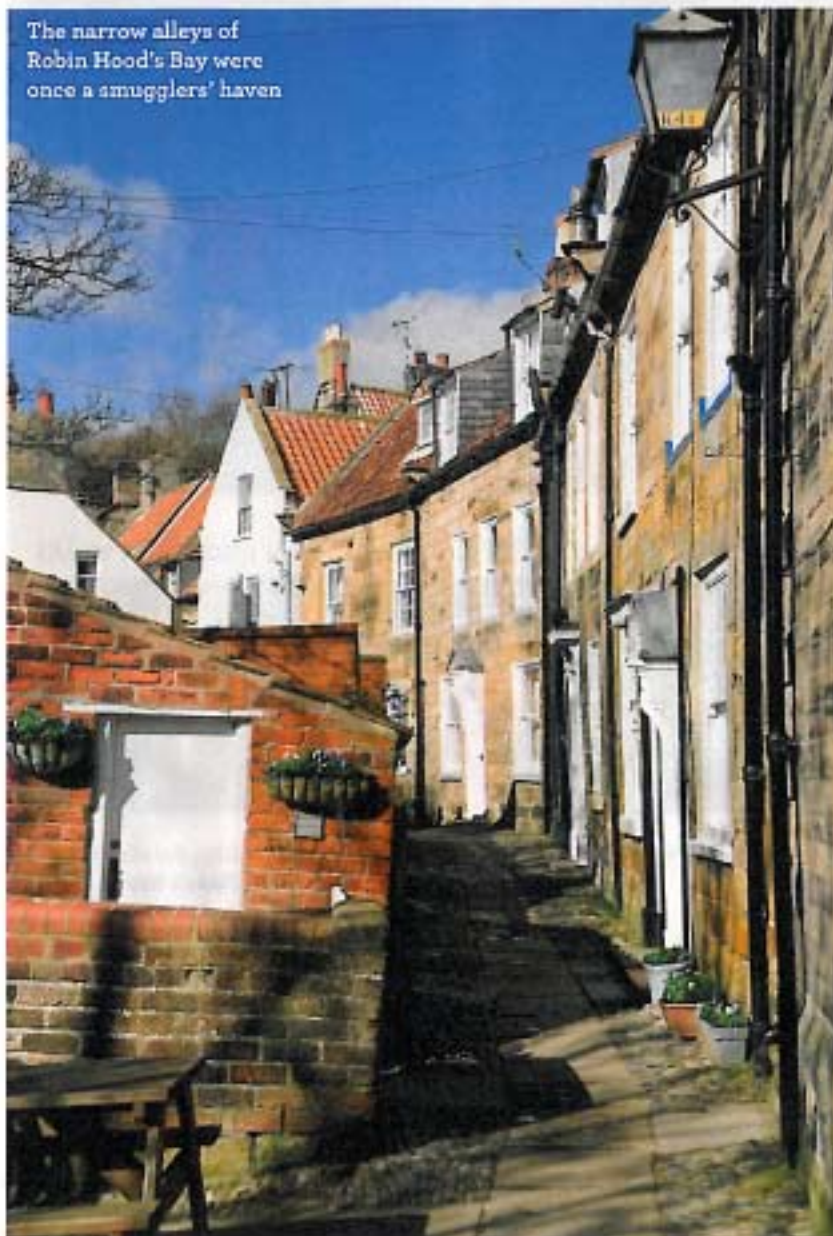
Whitby may be quaint - and pretty, but its spooky Abbey was a major inspiration for Bram Stoker's classic novel, *Dracula*



Robin Hood's Bay, bounded to the south by Ravenscar's promontory



The narrow alleys of Robin Hood's Bay were once a smugglers' haven



Jeremiah and Shaleni at The Old Bakery in Robin Hood's Bay (above); the River Esk at Leaholm (below)





The Green Dragon Inn may be the gateway to Hardraw Force, but this characterful 14th-century pub is well worth a visit for its own unique charms. Visit www.greenragonhardraw.com to learn more

village. Robin Hood's Bay is one of the prettiest spots along the North Yorkshire coast – a tiny, tangled village nestled in a narrow bay. The cluster of buildings descends steeply before spilling out alongside the wide-open bay.

After a mid-morning cuppa at the quaint Old Bakery Tea Rooms, we puffed back uphill, each of us heavier by a delicious slice of cake. We headed north along the coast, until we saw the skeletal remains of Whitby Abbey glowering in the distance. We parked in one of the many bays on Whitby's West Cliff, and took in views of the harbour and town.

FOLLOWING WHITBY'S RIVER ESK

Whitby's harbour is at the mouth of the River Esk, which arrives at the North Sea after wending its way through 28 miles of the North York Moors, from its source

“ We stopped at Leaholm, where Shaleni spotted irresistible stepping stones spanning the waters ”

near Westerdale. The valley that the Esk cuts through the moorland is named Eskdale, and we soon left Whitby to follow it through.

We roughly followed the banks of the Esk, through seemingly endless, mournfully beautiful, heather-tufted hills, along winding roads that took us from one welcoming-looking village to the next. We stopped at Leaholm, where Shaleni spotted a set of irresistible stepping stones spanning the waters. Once crossed we drove through Danby and Castleton, where we cut south and uphill onto the high moor. We parked up along a road not far from Westerdale,



Hardraw Force is spectacular after periods of rain

IN THE KNOW... Boating, the Cleveland Way and great walks



Arlene Lovatt, Windermere

“There's so much to do around the Lakes, but the pleasure boating is possibly the best in the country – you just can't beat the tranquility of the Cumbrian lakes. My favourite spots are Fellfoot Country Park and Bowness Bay, where you can rent a rowboat to take onto the waters of Windermere to enjoy the peace and quiet.”



Helen Hill, Osmotherley

“This village is set in the Hambleton Hills, and the best outdoor activity around here is definitely country walking. Hambleton Hills are beautiful, and the Cleveland Way runs right through the village. My favourite walk is probably the 45-minute stroll around Cod Beck Reservoir, a very pretty man-made lake around a mile from the village centre.”



Bob & Olga Bainbridge, Robin Hood's Bay

“There are so many great walks to be had around here, we wouldn't know where to begin. Our favourite, if we had to pick just one, would probably be the walk from here to Ravenscar in the south. It's nearly nine miles in total, which is quite a trek, but on a sunny day it seems to take no time at all.”



The Topaz bearing Jeremiah and Shaleni into the second of the three national parks



The Dent Brewery is a real gem for ale lovers, and the list of awards garnered by its brews is very impressive indeed. Thankfully there's a campsite within walking distance... To learn more visit <http://www.dentbrewery.co.uk>

and went for a walk across the heather, following a public footpath that we'd happened upon by chance.

On the moor you can get lost in a walk and your own thoughts, and we proceeded in silence, as though not wanting to disturb the melancholy scene around us. Only our footsteps and the rustlings of the wind – which, as expected, gusted in from the west – disturbed the peace.

WILD WEATHER ON THE MOORS

When we felt we'd ventured far enough, we doubled back and fired up the Topaz, driving straight to our overnight stop at a campsite in Osmotherley, on the western fringe of the National Park. The next morning saw rain clouds rolling in on the easterly breeze, but we set forth undeterred, towards the A684, a road that links North Yorkshire's Moors to its Dales, via some unassumingly pretty and rolling countryside.

The landscape of the Yorkshire Dales is unmistakable: rich green hills criss-crossed resolutely by an impossibly neat network of drystone walls. The A684 happens to be the main route through the Dales, and for much of its length it follows the course of the River Ure. Our first stop was Aysgarth, to pay a visit to the three levels of Aysgarth Falls, where the Ure tumbles over rocks worn into curious right angles by its flow.

The Yorkshire Dales are famous for their waterfalls, and while Aysgarth is probably the most scenic, the most spectacular is undoubtedly Hardraw Force. Getting to this waterfall proved interesting. We drove to the hamlet of Hardraw, then sought out the Green Dragon Inn. Once inside, we approached the bar, paid £2 each, then walked through a back door. ●



“ The Yorkshire Dales are famous for their waterfalls, and while Aysgarth is probably the most scenic, the most spectacular is Hardraw Force ”



Jeremiah and Shaleni contemplating Aysgarth Falls (above); enjoying the cheesy delights of the Wensleydale Creamery (right)





Grange-over-Sands, a great end-point for this tour if you're avoiding Hardknott. Be sure to visit the duck pond and the nearby Hazelmere Café.

Visit www.hazelmerecafe.co.uk for more information.

The owners of the Green Dragon also own the waterfall, you see, and the fee helps to shore up the fiercely eroded paths that lead to it. The sight of the waterfall is indisputably worth more than £2. Falling from 100 feet and emitting the most ungodly roar imaginable, Hardraw Force has to be seen to be understood.

After gawping at the waterfalls and enjoying a delicious pub lunch at the Green Dragon, we meandered on to our campsite for the evening, in the village of Dent. The small road that leads there from Garsdale Head, via Cowgill, is one of the finest in the area. It offers great views of some of the Dales' great railway viaducts - which are such inspiring feats of Victorian engineering - then ducks into a narrow valley and travels parallel to the lively little River Dee.

Thanks to numerous stops made along the way to enjoy views and embark on short walks, it was nearly nightfall by the time we rode into the charming cobbled centre of Dent. We found our site and pitched up, then walked into the village for dinner at the George and Dragon, the tap house for the very local Dent Brewery, which creates absolutely stunning ales.



The River Dee tumbles along very close to the road in Cowgill

The next morning, after taking a long walk through Dent and the surrounding hills, we picked up the Topaz and drove north, to rendezvous once more with the river Ure. The Ure is the architect of the most renowned Dale of them all, Wensleydale, which has gained fame because of the piquant, brittle cheese that bears its name. This delicacy is best experienced at the Wensleydale Creamery in Hawes. I don't

need any encouragement when cheese is involved, and Shaleni is always obliging enough to play Gromit to my Wallace, so we drove to Hawes to spend some time taste-testing (or, as far as I was concerned, face-stuffing) in the Creamery's excellent visitor centre. We left with a fridge full of cheese - my favourite was the Wensleydale with candied ginger, in case you're wondering - and made our

“ The sight of the waterfall is worth more than £2. Falling 100 feet and emitting the most ungodly roar, Hardraw Force has to be seen to be understood ”



Jeremiah and Shaleni enjoy a cuppa near Cunsey, on the shores of Lake Windermere



Ambleside in the Lake District isn't just a great place to visit for the scenery – it's also an excellent place to shop for well-priced outdoor gear. Visit <http://bit.ly/fYy4pR> for a directory of shops

The road from Great to Little Langdale is narrow, but offers lovely views of the Pike of Stickle



Local outdoor enthusiasts hang around close to Lakeland roads – be cautious when driving

a lovely view of Windermere across the water. Eventually we rounded the lake and arrived at our campsite for the evening, a few miles south of Bowness.

We rose the following morning to find that the bad weather had departed, leaving the hills and lakes dappled in sunshine. We wasted no time in hitting the road, because we were intent on completing our crossing in spectacular fashion. We drove northwest towards Langdale and some of the highest of the Lake District peaks, past Elter Water, which wouldn't seem out of place in a scene from Tolkien. We arrived in Great Langdale and parked near the New Dungeon Ghyll Hotel, to stroll for a while in the shadows of the Langdale Pikes.

The scenery around Langdale is a complete contrast to Windermere, being rugged and spectacular, rather than pretty and tranquil, and by venturing out into the Lake District's more rugged

reaches we escaped the multitude; although it never felt as isolated as far-flung corners of other national parks.

After an hour or so around the Langdale Pikes, we returned to the Topaz and drove towards Little Langdale. Here the roads started getting narrower and steeper, and the scenery became more and more breathtaking. Just before Little Langdale we made a sharp right turn, onto a road watched over by a stern warning sign. This was the way to the Wrynose and Hardknott passes, which lift vehicles across the mountains and deposit them by the sea on the other side.

way back to the campsite. Dinner was this time taken in the 'van, with a generous cheese platter to follow.

THE FINAL LEG: THE LAKES

The clouds still hung low overhead the following morning, when we set off on the final leg of our journey. The A684 was once again our guide, leading us through Sedbergh, over the M6 and into the Lake District. There isn't much to say about the Lake District that hasn't already been said more eloquently, by far more capable writers than I; it combines everything that's great about the English outdoors in one place, with dazzling lakes, rivers, mountains and fells all jostling for your attention. We skirted the eastern shores of Windermere, up to Ambleside, where we stopped for lunch. Then we drove around the northern tip of the lake and back down along its western shore, stopping to break our journey at a spot near the Cunsey ferry terminal, which commands

“The scenery around Langdale is a contrast to Windermere, being rugged and spectacular rather than pretty”



A warning not to be taken lightly – in some spots the gradient climbs to 40 per cent



The pond in Grange-over-Sands' Ornamental Park is home to a charming company of rare wildfowl, including this Carolina duck, an American species. For more, visit www.grange-over-sands.com

Jeremiah and Shaleni gazing out over the Irish Sea at Grange-over-Sands



I would never have attempted this route if it weren't for the compact dimensions of the Topaz and its sparing kerbweight, which helped it remain sure-footed on the vertiginous hairpins. However, it still struggled up Hardknott pass - one of the steepest roads in England - where the weight of the kitchen and washroom over the rear axle caused the front wheels to lose purchase and scabble for grip. Avoid these passes if you're driving anything larger than a van conversion, and even then supreme care is required.

The rewards, however, are sublime. Hardknott Pass is particularly remarkable

and we indulged in the utterly spellbinding panoramas all round as it carried us higher and higher. At some point after passing between Hard Knott Fell and Harter Fell, the road began descending towards the sea, and then converged with a river which, strangely, is a namesake to the river that we followed from Whitby, right at the start - it's also known as the Esk. And like North Yorkshire's Esk, Cumbria's version led us down into a valley named - you guessed it - Eskdale. We drove through the achingly gorgeous valley and finally met the Irish Sea in Ravenglass. After brewing

“Hardknott Pass is particularly remarkable and we indulged in the utterly spellbinding panoramas all round”

up tea with a view of the calm waters, we hit the A595 - one of the finest A-roads anywhere - and returned to the campsite the long - and less hair-raising - way around, stopping at Grange-over-Sands for another cup of tea.

We may not have stuck rigidly to Wainwright's coast-to-coast route, but having discovered these mirrored valleys, we just had to travel from one to the other. Wainwright introduces his book by saying that he wishes to "encourage in others the ambition to devise... their own cross-country marathons and not be merely followers of other people's route: there is no end to the possibilities for originality." So, while I hope that after reading this you'll try what I now consider England's best road trip - 'From Eskdale to Eskdale' (not quite as catchy as 'Coast-to-coast') - I also hope you'll make it even better. The possibilities of the great outdoors are limitless, so follow Wainwright's lead and get out there, discover, and make it your own.



Our travellers met the sea at Ravenglass (pictured) with Muncaster Fell in the background



This is a surprisingly spacious 'van, with an impressive kitchen; there's even enough worktop space to prepare meals

Why the Topaz is a little gem



One of my favourite games at the moment – yes, I should definitely get out

more – involves asking people to have a look at our long-term Auto-Sleeper Topaz and guess how much it costs. Invariably the figure is too low, and they end up surprised when I explain to them that it costs more than a Swift Voyager.

Now that's not to take anything away from the Topaz's actual performance as a camper; in fact, it's one of the best I've ever used. There are two key factors to the appeal of the Topaz – its full-size rear washroom and the 'van's minuscule length of 5.29 metres (17ft 4¼ in). No other 'van this size offers as accomplished a washroom, and when I took it out on my coast-to-coast tour (p24) it proved very useful indeed. Even though the water heater performed intermittently, and after a while stopped firing altogether, the Topaz's washroom was a welcome

space in which to freshen up, and it was great to have a proper loo, not a Porta-Potti.

The kitchen is impressive, too, with a spacious fridge and sink, and sufficient workspace to prepare meals without too much hassle. I'm also a big fan of Auto-Sleepers' integrated

- +** **LIKES**
The luxurious washroom; the impressive kitchen equipment and worktop
- **DISLIKES**
Unreliable water heater; squeaky blinds on an otherwise peaceful drive; lack of storage capacity

crockery set which is classy and slots into dedicated spaces in one of the kitchen lockers, and produces no rattles while on the move.

Sadly, other portions of the Topaz – I suspect the culprits are the cassette blinds – are vocal in motion, and result in more squeaking than I'd have expected in a 'van at this price level. It was odd because this 'van is so well put together – every join and surface speaks of careful craftsmanship.

The double bed is made up using the side-facing sofa, the front-facing rear passenger seat and the swivelled cab

seats, with the aid of a few fill-in cushions. It seems complicated at first, but once I got the hang of it, I managed to get it done in minutes. The resulting bed is tolerably flat and comfortable, except for the very tallest folk.

Besides the road squeaks, the other main problem is that any couple sharing this 'van will have to be frugal with storage. There's decent space for everything except clothes and sheets. If you're going on a longer tour, pack carefully.

Despite this, there are many alternatives to the Topaz on the market: a comfortable, luxurious, compact camper for two, with a full washroom. Since it's going to be with us for a few months, we'll see how well it justifies its formidable price tag.

JEREMIAH MAHADEVAN



Careful craftsmanship is evident in the cabinetry and upholstery

Auto-Sleeper Topaz
Price £53,495
Mileage 1348
Economy 28.3mpg
Faults Water heater not firing
Expenses None