THE CHAMBER OF SECRETS

Malham Cove and Gordale Scar are twin Yorkshire icons. But one of them hides a secret world — and with a little bit of daring, you can make it yours...

WORDS: HANNAH JAMES   PHOTOS: TOM BAILEY
All the subtle shifts in the landscape and all the canopy of Wedder Wood.

Lush green fields until we enter the sun-dappled path eastwards out of the village, cutting across places in Yorkshire, if not the world (just ask Bill itself, which is almost certainly one of the loveliest you've already done.

And that’s how I came to live here. The adventure starts in the village of Malham and Gordale Scar, those neighbouring icons of the Dales, but give it a twist. And because I like a bit of an adventure now and then, we settled on a twist to set the pulse racing: a mission into the upper chamber of Gordale Scar.

Normally, walkers on the classic Malham circuit will experience the great limestone chasm of Gordale Scar by wandering the half-mile path that leads to its lower waterfalls. When they get there, they gasp, they boggle, they take photos. And then they turn round and walk out again, because any further access appears impossible. To continue the classic loop you have to travel back out of the Scar, sweep round to the west and take up the steep flank of New Close Knotts. Having done that, if you want to get into the upper chamber of the Scar and discover its awesome secret world, it’s another sizeable detour (with a big descent), on top of the one you’ve already done.

But it doesn’t have to be that way. The waterfalls aren’t impassable. If conditions are right, and you’re prepared to put your hands on the rock and take a few short, scrambled steps, the entire upper chamber of the Scar is yours. Doing it this way means no doubling back at all – and a thrilling ride all the way. That’s what we did.

And now it all starts to happen. The sides of the gorge steepen and gain height rapidly. The falls get louder. Scale becomes immense. And there we are, the heart of the Scar, marked by the lower falls – a chockstone in the throat of the canyon, past which few walkers ever venture. But today, we do.

Ignoring the stares of the crowds around us, we clamber over to the base of the falls. Wading through the low water, we make it to the base, where the falls split in two, leaving an outcrop of rock in between that is our route into the upper world. It looks worse than it is, which is why so many turn away here. But if you get up close and set hand to rock, it starts to feel doable – even with the waterfalls splashing away either side. (At some times of the year the waterfalls really will be impassable – this adventure is best saved for a comely spring or summer’s day).

It’s a short, sharp scramble: no more than four upward movements, using the well-worn indentations of previous adventurers’ boots. And here we are in the upper chamber. A place of real magic. It’s a rough place, where water tumbles haphazardly and boulders litter the ground. The biggest spectacle of all is the upper falls, powering their way through a natural arch in the upper wall (an arch which they themselves created, of course). Geologists are divided as to how Gordale Scar was formed. Some believe it’s the result of glacial meltwater gouging its way through the porous limestone of the hillside. Others think it was once a huge underground cavern, which collapsed in on itself leaving this spectacular limestone gorge.

The adventure of Janet’s Foss, alleged home of a fairy who lives in the small cave behind the curtain of water.

The steel blue of the water, the green carpet of alpines, the bluebells and wild garlic carpeting the floor. Sensations overloaded, we follow the riverside path to reach the first of Malhamdale’s wonders: the small but powerful cascade of Janet’s Foss. The foss (Nordic for ‘waterfall’) is where Gordale Beck runs over a sharp-limestone outcrop and tumbles down into a surprisingly serene pool. It is utterly charming. Janet was a fairy queen who was said to live in the small cave that lies hidden behind the water curtain. Surrounded by knotted tree roots and crystal clear water, it’s the perfect home for a mythical sprite.

And after the foss comes Gordale Scar. You can’t get a clear idea of just how big or impressive it actually is before you walk up inside it; it twists and turns, keeping its inner sections dark and obscure until you’re right up close. Sound gets sucked into the Scar, creating an eerie silence punctuated only by the distant murmur of waterfalls and the cawing of the jackdaws that make their home here. And now it all starts to happen. The sides of the gorge steepen and gain height rapidly. The falls get louder. Scale becomes immense. And there we are, the heart of the Scar, marked by the lower falls – a chockstone in the throat of the canyon, past which few walkers ever venture.

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very new residents. Water voles were reintroduced to the tarn by the National Trust in 2016. They are thriving in their new home – and helping the tarn’s ecosystem in the process.

“The water voles are already changing the look of the tarn-side streams,” says National Trust ranger Roisin Black.

“By burrowing into the banks, the voles have created much more natural-looking streams with shady pools that should be really good for invertebrates and small fish.”

And now it’s time to head south to the final star of the show. Joining the Pennine Way, we head into the narrow hanging valley of Watlowes. Here, all of a sudden, the stream we’ve been following from Malham Tarn disappears into the ground.

It means we’ve left behind the Horton Formation and stepped back onto limestone country. Water always seeks the easiest path in its obedience to gravity, and as soon as it’s able to drop through the rock, it does. From here on, the stream runs through the labyrinthine cave systems beneath our feet. And if that’s not a walk with a twist, then I don’t know what is.

Finally we head back towards Malham, getting a good view of the tarn-side streams,” says National Trust ranger Roisin Black.

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DESCENDING TO THE UNDERSIDE OF THE COVE

A huge overhang that lures rock-botherers from across the globe. On most weekends you’ll find them scaling its testing lines. The moments when they fall away from the rock (either deliberately or by accident) are heart-in-mouth, even though you’re aware they are roped up and supported by a friend underneath. So they basically go ‘boing’ and dangle for a bit. Which is reassuring.

A geological schism running right through the Yorkshire Dales. The fault is thought to mark the divide between the rugged and impressive limestone uplands to the north and the much gentler landscapes to the south and west. As you stand on top of the Cove, the views out into the Craven Basin make that huge geographical switchover very clear.

Descending to the underside of the Cove, we wander over to the sheer wall and see water emerging from its basement. Logically, you’d think this would be the water from the stream we’d followed from Malham Tarn until it disappeared into the ground. But in fact dye tests have shown that the water of Malham Beck actually comes from a completely different subterranean system – further evidence of the complex maze of tunnels and sumps that lies beneath the skin of the Dales.

Finally we head back towards Malham, getting an unobstructed view of the Cove all its glory. Eventually we quit craning and just stop, turning round to take in the full spectacle of this natural wonder. It was at this point that I decided I had to come and live here.

A JOLLY GOOD COVE

Main image: Looking up at the sheer wall of Malham Cove from the beck beneath it. Next right: Wandering along the Catwalk, the climbers’ highway to adventure.

ON THE EDGE

The view from the limestone pavement atop Malham Cove, looking out into the Craven Basin that lies beyond the Yorkshire Dales.

Plan your trip

WHERE TO STAY

The Beck Hall Hotel (01729 830729, www.beckhallmalham.com) is situated on the banks of Malham Beck, a 15-minute walk downstream of Malham Cove and two minutes from the centre of Malham village. With a chic feel, good food and a dog-friendly policy, it’s an ideal place for walkers looking to add a little touch of luxury to their ‘classic with a twist’. Rooms start from £50.

WHERE TO EAT

Eat by the river or in the restaurant at Beck Hall Hotel (see above). Mains start from £12. Or situated more centrally is The Lister Arms (01729 830444, www.thelisterarms.co.uk), an ideal place for those looking to add a little touch of luxury to their ‘classic with a twist’. Mains start from £12.

MORE INFORMATION

Visit www.yorkshiredales.org.uk for more information on Malham and the surrounding areas. If you’re interested in learning more about the wildlife and environment around Malham contact Malham Tarn Field Centre, 01729 830331, www.field-studies-council.org/centres/malhamtarn.

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