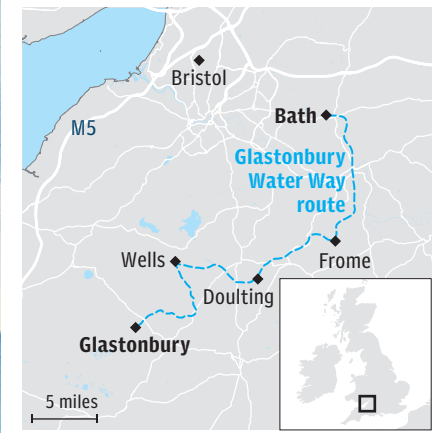


BRITAIN



STANDING TALL
Glastonbury Tor awaited Sarah Baxter, below, at journey's end



(like most churches on my route, it was closed due to Covid-19), but in the graveyard, where a fine old tree provided shelter from the squall.

If the elements seemed against me, so was Orchardleigh Lake. As I walked around it to reach the fairy-tale moated “island church” of St Mary’s, I sank deep into chocolate mud, was scratched by brambles and got shocked by an electric fence – ironic, given that the church itself is off-grid, services are candlelit and the organ is pumped by hand.

Stung, scratched and soggy, I shuffled along the river into Frome, feeling out of place with my big pack in a town setting. Then an old gent smiled at my old-school paper map – “You’re carrying one of those pictures!” – pointed me towards St John’s and the holy well, and wished me a good walk. Soon after I was at my campsite, tent pitched, fire made, the first stage successfully completed.

The night was full of rain and fury. And so it continued the next day, as I made my watery way to Wells. Sometimes it felt like madness: when I cracked my head on a branch, waded through chin-high nettles or got lost on the outskirts of Shepton Mallet. But then there was the cheery lady at the café in Mells – “Walking to Glastonbury? Beautiful countryside!” – the roses rambling around cottage doors, the trails hugging secret streams in mossy, magic-infused woods. It was a trial and a triumph and, yes, beautiful despite the weather. On the hills above St Aldhelm’s holy well in Doulling, I got a big view to Glastonbury Tor poking up next to an advancing angry storm.

As I squelched into Wells, there were glimmers of hope. At last, a little sunshine, fanfared by the bells of the magnificent cathedral. The BPT recommends laying on the floor in the cathedral’s chapter house to appreciate the vaulting. But I worried I wouldn’t be able to get up again, so headed to my campsite and lay there instead, transfixed by the dramatic sunset, a gift from the heavens. Indeed, my final day was blessed. I got lost in the wonderful Worminster Down woods but the sun warmed my way, showing off the Levels in all their sylvan glory. The Tor, preposterously prominent, beckoned me past the orchards and bee-buzzed meadows. Then, after a stiff climb, I was there.

A group of New Agers were inside the Tor-top St Michael’s Tower, drumming and twirling in the wind; tourists were admiring the view. I’d end properly down in Glastonbury (though poor timing meant the Abbey and Chalice Well were closed), but it felt like the proper finale, looking at the countryside in 360 degrees, tracing parts of my journey, feeling connected to those folds and field edges, hills and steeples. To realise that, for a few days, my worries about the future had lifted; I’d been forced into the present, one step at a time.

‘My worries about the future lifted’

TO BE A PILGRIM

Walking the new Glastonbury Water Way, Sarah Baxter puts life in perspective one step at a time

The Glastonbury Water Way really was watery. Holy wells, springs, streams, rivers, rivulets – not to mention the biblical rain, lashing in relentless waves. I’d not picked the driest of July days to make the pilgrimage from Bath to the Somerset Levels. But then pilgrimage isn’t meant to be a jolly, is it?

I’m not religious. Nor are many of those sparking the rise in popularity of pilgrimages. Such is the trend that the Association of English Cathedrals decreed 2020 the Year of Cathedrals and Pilgrimage. At times of crisis, peo-

ple want to reset and find a new path; no wonder pilgrimage – secular or otherwise – feels apt right now.

The 55-mile Glastonbury Water Way was created this year by the British Pilgrimage Trust, an organisation hoping to revive the tradition of walking to sacred places. Starting at the Thermae Bath Spa, the route is a mobile cleanse via natural water sources and churches, connecting walkers to both the land and those who have trodden it before.

I live in Bath; given current travel uncertainty, I was drawn to the simplicity of walking out of my door one midsummer morning. Beforehand I spoke to the BPT’s Guy Hayward, who encouraged me to: “Ask, what are you

searching for? Add flesh to the walk. Make it not so much physically but imaginatively demanding.”

I can’t say I did that, entirely. Covering the route in three days, with camping kit, was tough and not the more Zen, take-it-slow approach the BPT advocates. But I did have a why. My life, like so many people’s right now, has been tossed about by this virus. I don’t know what the future holds, or how I’ll navigate it. So I wanted to see if I could at least navigate this. Alone. I’m the most indecisive person I know (I think...); a solo walk-camp would force me to fend for myself. Every pilgrim will bring their own purpose. This was mine.

My mettle was tested only a few miles from home when, striding along the Kennet and Avon Canal, my rucksack strap snapped. A metaphor, maybe, for my spiritual burden being too heavy? Mostly, though, it felt like a failure. I rang my boyfriend, who ran to meet me with a replacement bag. So much for self reliance. But as I continued past woodsmokey narrowboats and flashes of kingfishers, I felt the waterway work my spine like a massage. Annoyance became gratitude, and an acceptance that the path ahead – on pilgrimage as in life – does not always run smooth.

And so, onward. Through the hamlet of Friary, where the lay brothers of nearby Hinton Charterhouse once lived, and past the ruined castle of Farleigh Hungerford. I sought sanctuary at the church in Tellisford – not inside



SARAH BAXTER: ALAMY; CECITY IMAGES

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THE PILGRIM’S PROGRESS: THREE OF THE BEST HOLY ROUTES IN BRITAIN

ST BEGA’S WAY, LAKE DISTRICT

Route: St Bees Priory to St Bega, Bassenthwaite
Distance: 40 miles
Duration: 4 days
Saint Bega was an Irish princess, who once lived a hermit’s life on the windswept coast of Cumbria. This route connects the two churches in the Lake District dedicated to her. From St Bees, below right, you travel inland before reaching the simple 12th-century chapel of Bassenthwaite that has inspired literary figures including Wordsworth and Tennyson. Along the way you will see the Cumbrian coastal plain; Lakeland fells such as the Scafells, Ennerdales, Great Gable, Skiddaw and others; the rewilded lands of Ennerdale Water; lakes such as Derwentwater and Bassenthwaite Lake; and, of course, the beloved Herdwick sheep.

ST MAGNUS WAY, ORKNEY

Route: Egilsay to St Magnus Cathedral
Distance: 51 miles
Duration: 5 days
This route across mainland Orkney was inspired by the life and death of Magnus, Orkney’s patron saint. A flat landscape with gentle hills leads to the high cliffs of the west coast. The route



follows the procession of Magnus’s body after his mother pleaded for it to be returned from Egilsay (where he was martyred) for a Christian burial in Birsay, as well as its later journey to Kirkwall Cathedral. The first stage, from Evie to Birsay, follows the coast with breathtaking views. Be warned, the walking along this section can be affected by storms and tides – Orkney is subject to the full force of Atlantic weather. The St Magnus Way website recommends planning extra days into your schedule in case of unpredictable weather. The second stage follows the journey of Magnus’s bones to Kirkwall Cathedral 20 years later. At Finstown the focus of the journey shifts to Hakon, Magnus’s cousin who ordered his death so that Hakon could rule the Earlskip. From the Round Kirk of Orphir (maybe inspired by Hakon’s pilgrimage to Jerusalem) the

final leg to Kirkwall Cathedral follows the gentler waters of Scapa Flow, the largest natural harbour in the northern hemisphere. After that, you reach the magnificent St Magnus cathedral (above).

THE NORTH WALES PILGRIM’S WAY

Route: Holywell to Bardsey Island
Distance: 140 miles
Duration: 2 weeks



A long time ago, pilgrims in their thousands were finding their way to Bardsey Island, drawn to where the sun sets over the watery horizon. Today a route has been waymarked there from Holywell in Flintshire, which has a large holy water swimming pool in which you can kneel underwater on St Beuno’s Stone, submerged in miraculous holy water. The route goes via prehistoric stone circles, ancient churches, thousand-year-old stone crosses, sacred springs and waterfalls. You will pass through magical woodlands and across great rivers, up mountains and along coastal paths spattered by salty air. Tiny stone churches provide shelter and rest along the way, much as they would have done in the past. Gerard Manley Hopkins, RS Thomas and several great Welsh poets have taken inspiration here, as you may do too. If you’re lucky, you may even experience the most poetic pinnacle of all, the tricky crossing to Bardsey Island in a simple boat, like so many seeking transcendence have done before you.

Extracted from the book *Britain’s Pilgrim Places* by Nick Mayhew-Smith and Guy Hayward, available to buy from the British Pilgrimage Trust (britishpilgrimage.org) at £16.05

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