

Treasure-hunting on England's Jurassic Coast

Fossils on a conveyor belt



Sep 16th 2024| THE ECONOMIST

Along a stretch of England's southern shoreline, gangs of small children roam the beaches wielding hammers and searching for remains in the rocks. This is not some post-apocalyptic scene, a day at the seaside via Cormac McCarthy, but the mark of an increasingly popular pastime.

The hammering hordes are scouring the Jurassic Coast for fossilised ammonites that swam in a shallow, tropical sea hundreds of millions of years ago. The fossils are often preserved in pyrite, a mineral also known as fool's gold. And for prehistoric prospecting, this particular stretch of the coast is paradise. Not only does it have a near-perfect geological record from the Mesozoic era (some 66m-252m years ago), but frequent landslides bring the cliff and its contents down to the beach. "Fossils on a conveyor belt" is how Paul Davis, a curator at Lyme Regis Museum, describes it.

Those remains are drawing more and more people. The Charmouth Heritage Centre, where visitors can learn about local finds and identify their own fossils, claimed record turnover in 2023, largely as a result of expert-guided fossil walks. Social-media videos fuel enthusiasm. They often show rocks breaking open to reveal perfectly formed fossils after one or two taps with a hammer. If only it were so easy, says Lizzie Hingley, a professional fossil-hunter who spends days carefully chiselling remains from rocks. She puts the popularity of fossil-hunting down to a mixture of therapy ("everything else melts away") and thrill ("it is treasure-hunting").

The treasure can lead day-trippers astray. Emergency services on the Jurassic Coast occasionally rescue fossil-hunters from cliff edges and mudslides. Stuart Godman, a fossil warden, is employed by the local councils and Jurassic Coast Trust to persuade people to hunt on safer ground. Although he says that the vast majority of rule-breakers are polite, occasionally someone "throws a wobbly". Mr Godman has been told to "go away", using language "not as polite as that".

He puts the rudeness down to the rewards. The bounty may be encased in fools' gold, but the returns are real. In August fossils advertised as from Lyme Regis were listed on eBay for an average price of almost £100 (\$131); some were on sale for as much as £1,650. That may explain some of the more egregious behaviour on the British coastline. In November 2023 police apprehended two fossil-hunters on a protected beach in south-western England who were attempting to break boulders using a rock saw and angle grinder. In Scotland one landowner restricted fossil-hunting "to an absolute minimum" after the area was "attacked by fossil collectors".

As long as everyone follows the rules and stays safe, Ms Hingley is passionate about sharing the excitement of fossil-hunting. More searching also saves specimens that would otherwise be lost to sea. In 2017, she and a fellow fossilist, Paul Turner, found a prehistoric crocodile that had previously been unknown to science. They came across it "sitting sunbathing in front of the landslide", no cliff-climbing required.

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