

Walk: SOC 10
Location: **Dunes of Merthyr Mawr**

Directions: South to J45 M4, left towards Cardiff, coming off as per sat nav, set it to find Merthyr Mawr but do not go into the village itself. Or go via Glynneath and the A465.

You come off the M4 on to the A48 and follow signs to Merthyr Mawr and Ogmore by Sea. There is a river separating Ogmore by Sea and Merthyr Mawr and the bridge across it is quite far inland, so do not get the wrong side of the river by going to Ogmore by Sea as I did originally unless you fancy a scenic route and drive. While you *can* cross the river on foot over some stepping stones, there are horses here which is not useful if you have dogs. To get to the sands, it is in theory better to be on the Merthyr Mawr side but there lies a story (we never did get to the beach).

Just beyond the handful of houses that is Merthyr Mawr you the lane dead ends in a woodland parking area, from where you can explore this most unusual area.

Distance (miles): 41

Time (hours): 0.55

Length of Walk: Allow a day if you want to get to the beach through this muddled Maze. Do not get lost in the dark here. If attempting to reach the beach, which is only accessible after finding your way through about two miles of very high undulating sand dunes, allow one hour to get through the dunes, an hour or two for the completely deserted stretch of beach and an hour or to get back.

Take note of any obvious land marks; consider making some arrows / crosses in the sand to sign your route back.

Dates Walked: 22/08/2009,

Parking: I think we had to pay £1.00 or something. Car park is locked at dusk.

Pop in to: Ogmore by Sea if you fancy a scenic drive. Not a lot in Merthyr Mawr, just a row of houses from what I recall.

Description: This is a most unusual place. It is on the coast between the industrial areas of Port Talbot to the South and Cardiff airport to the north, though neither impact on the area you are about to experience.

We stopped off first at the holiday chalet town of Porthcawl, which I was not impressed with, full of static caravans. There is a walking area overlooking the coast which we gave the dogs an hour on but Porthcawl was not impressive – probably OK on a sunny day though.

Visit Ogmore by Sea, like we did, if you wish, and as you drive along the B4524 leaving Ogmore behind you, you will look down on a completely deserted, very inviting beach, which you cannot actually get to because of the river and the sands. It was our attempt to get to this beach that led us to the incredible dunes of Merthyr Mawr.

We drove along the B4524 trying to find a way on to this beach, stopping briefly at a derelict castle ruin, where there were stepping stones over the river - not suitable for us with baby and pram. This probably would get you to the beach – try it yourself if you like.

We carried on inland for some miles before we found a bridge over the river, and then headed down the other side back towards the coast and elusive beach, following signs to Merthyr Mawr. The road eventually dead ended after a few houses dotted along a country lane, in a car park with paths leading from it into the dunes.

Merthyr Mawr is a little known secret, the highest and most extensive sand dunes in Wales. We made the mistake of taking the pram, assuming there would be a clear path to the beach. But there are these huge sand dunes to get through, before you get to the beach and no identifiable 'main' path.

The sand dunes themselves are like mini mountains, with thick sand in places that you sink into, and the occasional watery streams running through. There is no obvious route to the beach so you can, on account they are so high, get completely lost when in the troughs. You find a high dune, climb up a narrow, slippery sandy path, get your bearings on the river, from which you can deduce where the sea is, then strike out in what you think is the right general direction, into another deep trough. Climbing another dune after 20 minutes or so you try to work out where you are again.

Eventually you find yourself lost in these endless dunes, not quite able to reconcile where you came from. I had taken note of a distinctive tree pattern near the car park, but for which we would have got lost. There are no signs. As dusk fell, with no lights anywhere, this remote area could have seen us lost all night.

If you want an impression of being lost in a desert of dunes, I guess this is a reasonably close experience. If you want a real maze you can get lost in, this will do it. Consider a compass.

The pram became bogged down in the sand, I got annoyed because we could not find the beach, my wife got annoyed because I was annoyed, but the dogs had a lovely time charging off in the distance.

This is a dangerous area to allow dogs free run. Fortunately ours do keep an eye on where we are. One is an Alsation - a breed which watches where you are, never losing sight of you. The other is a Golden Retriever who, having lost us on twice on these sort of walks, is now very careful not to lose track of where we are. But you can certainly lose track of where *you* are in this amazing maze. Owners with less efficient 'homing' dogs could lose their pets here too.

We tried to get to the beach by finding our way to the river, having dumped the pram and resorted to carrying the baby in a harness. This route proved impassable due to a series of half mud half sand flat areas semi flooded with river water, so you sank in deep as you tried to walk across what I presume are tidal flatlands. The dogs loved it, chasing each other up and down and around the endless sand dunes. For a while we were half lost, and it was a relief in the growing dusk to come across our own pram tracks, which we followed back to the car. Returning after dark we found the gate was closed with the padlock and chain wrapped around gate and post. An adventure.

Pictures taken on 22/08/2009:

Not recommended with the pram and we never did get to find the sea. This place is like a maze! Eventually abandoned the pram and carried the baby! Tried again with baby harness, got lost, but eventually found our own pram tracks and so got back to car park, as dusk fell, only to find we were locked in.

