Devon Delights in a Suzuki SX4 S-Cross 1.6 DDiS SZ4

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Kim Henson waxes lyrical about a long weekend touring in south Devon.



Our Suzuki S-Cross test car is seen here posing for this photograph just above the beautiful beach at Hope Cove in south Devon. The coastline in this area is both rugged and attractive in equal measure.

You may already have seen and read the Wheels-Alive Road Test elsewhere on our website, covering the Suzuki SX4 S-Cross 1.6 DDiS SZ4. We rated the model as an attractive, practical and fuel-efficient ‘crossover’ (for more information on the vehicle itself, please have a look at our separate Road Test, by clicking HERE). However, as well as driving the test car on a mixture of ‘local’ town and long-distance country roads, the Wheels-Alive team also took this Suzuki to south Devon for a long weekend visit.

We enjoyed the drive down to Devon in the S-Cross; it cruised smoothly and quietly, and returned well over 60 miles per gallon. It also made light of the various steep hills encountered on our route.



We were aiming for the pretty village of Shaldon (well-known for fishing), on the western side of the River Teign estuary, and facing the town of Teignmouth across the river (which flows down from Dartmoor, and is tidal from Newton Abbot to the coast).

Shaldon is very easy to reach from the M5/A38/A380, being positioned just to the north of the Torquay/Paignton conurbations. This means that you don't have to queue through these areas in order to reach this delightful village.

We stayed at the attractive Potters Mooring guest house (Tel. 01676 873225; www.pottersmooring.co.uk), a homely place within a 17th Century building in the heart of Shaldon, within easy walking reach of the coast, also several pubs and eating establishments. Teignmouth is a pleasant 15 minute walk away, across the river bridge, or alternatively via the small, pedestrian-only ferry which operates between the estuary beaches of Shaldon and Teignmouth; the crossing itself is fun, and takes just a few minutes.

We tucked the S-Cross into a corner of the guest house car park (note; if you have a large vehicle, care is needed when entering and leaving the car park – as with most streets in Shaldon, the road running past the Potters Mooring is very narrow). For a change, we planned to exercise our legs more the next day…

Shaldon and the surrounding areas are well worth exploring on foot. The village features a famous ‘smugglers’ tunnel’ to the beach, and a fascinating zoo, set in an acre of woodland above the village. Open all year round, the Shaldon Zoo is the home of the Shaldon Wildlife Trust, and aims to look after and help to preserve some of the world’s most endangered species; there’s more information at www.shaldonwildlifetrust.org.uk.

We enjoyed the pleasant walk from the Potters Mooring through the Homeyards Botanical Gardens (high above the village and with elevated views across to Teignmouth, also to the Jurassic Coast further to the east), then to the smugglers tunnel and back to Shaldon along the sea-washed beach. Here we marvelled at the varieties of life to be seen in the rock pools at low tide. (On the way there, we were fascinated by the ‘Shaldon Castle’ – a folly built in the grounds of the Botanical Gardens).

As we walked along the beach back to Shaldon, the sun came out and we enjoyed a tasty sandwich while sat in the waterside garden of the Ferry Boat Inn (incidentally, I can thoroughly recommend the local ‘Shaldon Shag’ beer), enjoying views across the estuary. We then took the small ferry to Teignmouth, and spent some time exploring the small town’s promenade and shopping streets, before walking back to Shaldon. The footpath between Teignmouth and the bridge to Shaldon runs parallel with the estuary. On sunny days, views of sunsets over the water here are amazing…

TORQUAY AND PAIGNTON

The ‘English Riviera’ encompasses the towns of Torquay, Babbacombe, Paignton and Brixham, all of which lie a few miles to the south of Shaldon, and have much to offer visitors – including a wide range of hotels and guest houses, some beautiful beaches and many shops. However, it is worth noting that first-time visitors to this area can be surprised at just how busy the roads through this area can become, especially in the summer months. Even so, it is worth visiting these places to enjoy the attractions they provide – especially for families.

We decided to spend an evening driving southwards along the coast into Torquay and

Paignton, and enjoyed some lovely views across the coast and the towns, as the sun set.

Just one important and enjoyable visitor destination within this area is Paignton Zoo Environmental Park, open all year round and dedicated to looking after around 2,000 animals, including lions, gorillas, cheetahs, crocodiles, giraffes, rhinos and kangaroos. You need to allow plenty of time to see all these wonderful creatures, many of which are endangered species; this is a fascinating place for all ages. There's more information at www.paigntonzoo.org.uk.

FURTHER SOUTH…

South of Torquay and Paignton, there is still a great deal of Devon to explore. Leaving these built-up areas behind, it's just a short hop south-eastwards to the fishing town of Brixham, and beyond that, rolling countryside and the sea. It's not far across-country from Brixham to Kingswear, and a short ferry crossing from here takes cars and people across the River Dart to the tourist destination of Dartmouth.

Alternatively, heading westwards from Paignton will bring you to the market town of Totnes, from where you can travel by road south towards Dartmouth, then along the coast to Slapton, or to Kingsbridge and Salcombe with its river valley, steep hills and spectacular views.

On the day we visited the beach at Slapton Sands (in fact, despite its name it's a pebble beach…) the sea was calm and the sun was shining on a peaceful, idyllic day, and we enjoyed a picnic by the sunlit water. However, sadly during the Second World War the beach was the scene of tragedy, when American troops were secretly training here for the D Day landings. A 'friendly fire' incident, plus an attack by German E boats, resulted in the loss of many hundreds of men.

Today a Sherman tank, reclaimed from the sea, stands at the southern end of Slapton Sands as a memorial to those who perished in 'Exercise Tiger' in April 1944.

In contemplative mood, we next drove westwards via the village of Marlborough, then on towards Hope Cove, with its interesting, rock-lined sandy beach. In this vicinity, as elsewhere across south Devon, are many well-equipped camping and caravanning sites, in addition to a multitude of other places for visitors to stay.

The countryside and sea views all around this area are among the best that Devon (indeed England) can offer, and if you have time it is worth exploring 'off the beaten track' to find quiet corners with unspoilt beaches and clifftop walks.

DARTMOOR NEARBY



Just above the beach at Hope Cove is this old lifeboat station, ornately-decorated and with an outlook westwards across the sea, also with a

Another day trip we enjoyed from Shaldon was down again to Totnes, then into the quiet countryside (that's hardly changed for decades, if not centuries…) to the pretty village of Harberton, to visit friends. From there a group of us ventured north-westwards to Shipley Bridge, near South Brent and on the edge of Dartmoor.

Leaving the cars at the Shipley Bridge car park, we took the winding, climbing path to the Avon Dam Reservoir. It's a 3.5 mile walk, but the going is easy (the main track is tarmac-surfaced) and the route runs parallel with the babbling River Avon (which tumbles downhill from the moors).

The countryside here is beautiful and the air clear. Along the route we enjoyed birdsong and distant views across the country which, during the 410 feet ascent,

slipway from it directly onto the beach.

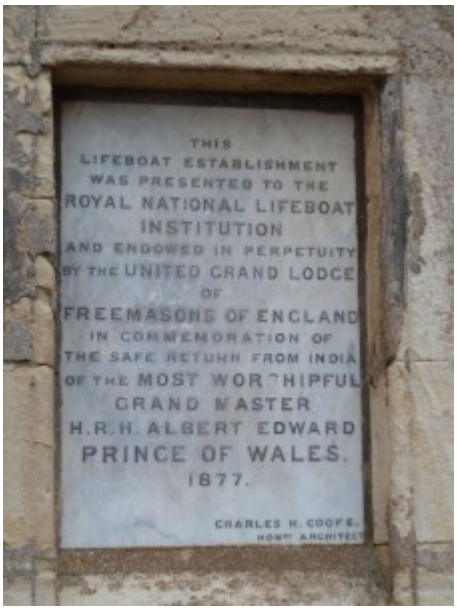
changed abruptly from woodland to open moors. The reservoir itself is a peaceful place too, and on a sunny day the sunshine glints off the water.

On our drive back to Shaldon we found a pleasant pub near Totnes (there are many in this area), where, despite it being fairly late, and extremely busy on the Friday evening we arrived, the staff found a table for us and ensured that we enjoyed a good meal. This seems to be typical in this area too; at the eating houses and pubs we visited during our stay, the proprietors and staff made us feel very welcome.

HOMEWARD BOUND

All too soon it was time for us to reluctantly leave Shaldon to return to the realities of everyday working life. However, the happy memories of the places we visited and the people we encountered during our stay will help to keep us cheerful for a long time! We have vowed to return to explore further in the future.

During our sun-drenched journey home, we chose to follow the coastline eastwards for some miles, before turning inland. So we drove through the seaside towns of Exmouth, Budleigh Salterton and Sidmouth, before pausing for lunch at the beautiful fishing village of Beer, near Seaton.



The Royal National Lifeboat Institution was established in the 19th Century to minimise loss of life due to shipwrecks. This plaque shows that the Hope Cove lifeboat station was presented to the R.N.L.I. in 1877 by the Freemasons.

Although we didn't have time to call on this occasion, 'The Donkey Sanctuary' at Sidmouth (Tel. 01395 578222; www.thedonkeysanctuary.org.uk) is highly recommended and worth visiting. Founded in 1969 by Dr. Elisabeth Svendsen MBE (who sadly passed away in 2011), the Sanctuary's stated mission is, 'To transform the quality of life for donkeys, mules

and people worldwide', and to achieve, 'A world where donkeys and mules live free from suffering, and their contribution to humanity is fully valued'. We have vowed to halt awhile there next time we're near Sidmouth!

The Suzuki S-Cross proved to be the perfect automotive companion for our short break, and performed perfectly. It returned just shy of 65 miles per gallon overall, and its torquey, 'good-natured' performance was ideal on both the main roads and the hilly, winding lanes so prevalent in this part of the world.



We arrived in the Teignmouth/Shaldon area as the sun was starting to set, and this shot (taken on the Teignmouth side of the Teign estuary) shows the boats on the beach catching the evening sunlight.



The base for our Devon explorations was the homely and immaculately maintained Potters Mooring guest house in Shaldon, where we were made very welcome. We enjoyed a hearty Devon breakfast on each morning of our stay…



The Potters Mooring faces the village green in Shaldon, where bowling events are frequently held. There are several pubs within easy walking distance (including one next door!). The village is a peaceful and pleasant place to stay.



Standing at one end of Shaldon’s village green is the clock tower visible in the background here, with a multitude of spring flowers prevalent nearby, when we visited. The beach on the Shaldon side of the estuary is just a short walk from here.



This is ‘Shaldon Castle’, a folly built in the grounds of the Homeyards Botanical Gardens, located on the hillside just to the south-west of the village. We walked through these gardens on our way to the famous smugglers’ tunnel.



From the Homeyards Botanical Gardens there are views across the estuary towards Teignmouth, and very close to where this photograph was taken is the Shaldon Zoo, home of the animal-conservation-minded Shaldon Wildlife Trust.



From the beaches on both sides of the Teign estuary, this small ferry carries pedestrians from Shaldon to Teignmouth (or vice versa) and back again. The journey takes just a few minutes and costs only £1.50 per adult for each trip.



This is the view across the Teign estuary from the garden of the Ferry Boat Inn. We sat here in the warm sunshine for some time, taking in the view and enjoying a sandwich washed down with the local ‘Shaldon Shag’ beer. Bliss!



It only takes 15 minutes to walk back from Teignmouth to Shaldon, along the northern bank of the estuary and parallel with the main railway line. To the right of this shot is the road bridge linking Shaldon (in the distance) with Teignmouth.



As we crossed the bridge over the Teign estuary, on our way back to Shaldon after a day exploring on foot, the sunset was spectacular. This shot was taken looking inland towards the source of the river Teign.



We found that the S-Cross was the perfect vehicle for our ‘Devon Delights’ adventure, and is seen here pausing in the twilight during an evening run, on the coast near Torquay.



I’m often told that most of my photographs seem to feature a car (or two!). Well, here’s one that doesn’t; it simply shows the coastline near Torquay, taken as the evening light was beginning to fade…



The day we visited Slapton Sands (in fact a pebbly beach), could not have been more tranquil. However, this beach was the scene of preparations for the Normandy landings in 1944, and tragedy in April that year (please see main text).



Today Slapton Ley is a national nature reserve, with a variety of walks and trails in the vicinity. The sea views from this point are spectacular too. The shingle ridge near the village of Torcross accommodates rare and important plants.



This memorial, at the northern end of Slapton Sands beach, was presented by the United States army authorities, and pays tribute to the local people of the area, who helped so much to provide a battle practice area for the D-Day landings. Our Suzuki S-Cross test car is seen here posing for this photograph just

above the beautiful beach at Hope Cove in south Devon. The coastline in this area is both rugged and attractive in equal measure.



After departing from Slapton Sands, we headed westwards to Hope Cove, through pretty villages and wooded valleys. The local countryside is unspoilt, thankfully having changed very little over many years.



Looking west from Hope Cove, the Devon coast towards Plymouth can be seen on the skyline; mist and rain clouds were gathering when I took this photograph, and within an hour it was raining!



Driving westwards along the Teign estuary's southern bank, there are lovely views of the Teignmouth (north) side of the river Teign. Eventually this narrow, twisty and fascinating road reaches Newton Abbot.



Even on a dull day by the Teign estuary, our Suzuki's striking white paintwork stood out and made the most of the available light. Incidentally, the car proved to be particularly easy to keep clean…



There's an enjoyable walk (albeit uphill!) from Shipley Bridge to the Avon Dam Reservoir, and this signboard in the car park advises visitors of what to expect on this excursion, as well as more generally on Dartmoor.



If you have time to explore the local area, it's worth visiting the nearby village of South Brent; again there's plenty of information about this village to be found on the signboard in the car park at Shipley Bridge.



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After a 3.5 mile walk, we reached the tranquil Avon Dam Reservoir as mist was beginning to form over the surrounding hills. Birdsong on gentle breezes filled the air as we made our way back down the path to the car park.



On our way home we stopped for lunch in the fishing village of Beer, near Seaton. Generations of fisherman have used the shingle beach here for launching their boats (and in the summer, holidaymakers can hire self-drive boats in the bay).