

Walking on the Moon

In the late 18th and early 19th centuries fortified towers were constructed around Jersey's coastline as defences against the French. One of the earliest, Seymour Tower, is perched on a granite rock one-and-a-half miles offshore – but the sea only surrounds it for some of the time. Jersey's 30–40ft tides are amongst the highest in the world. They're so big that the island almost doubles in size at low tide, revealing a remarkable marine environment of sand bars, gullies and reefs around Seymour Tower that can be explored on foot.

This strange, unearthly no-man's-land shared by shore and sea is reminiscent of the moon's surface. 'Moonwalking' has become something of Jersey speciality. In the company of a guide you can take a three-hour trip into a watery wilderness that, for several hours a day, is covered by 40ft of Atlantic Ocean. But my Moonwalk was even more special since it included spending the night at Seymour Tower. It's in a unique spot. The area around the tower is a RAMSAR site, a wetland designated as being of international importance based on a treaty signed at Ramsar, Iran in 1971.

My advance briefing with walk leader and guide Derek Hairon from Jersey Kayak and Walk Adventures left me in little doubt that one of us had been touched by madcap lunar influences. I just wasn't sure if it was him or me as we stood by the sea wall at La Roque an hour or so after high tide, looking out towards a distant square tower jutting tooth-

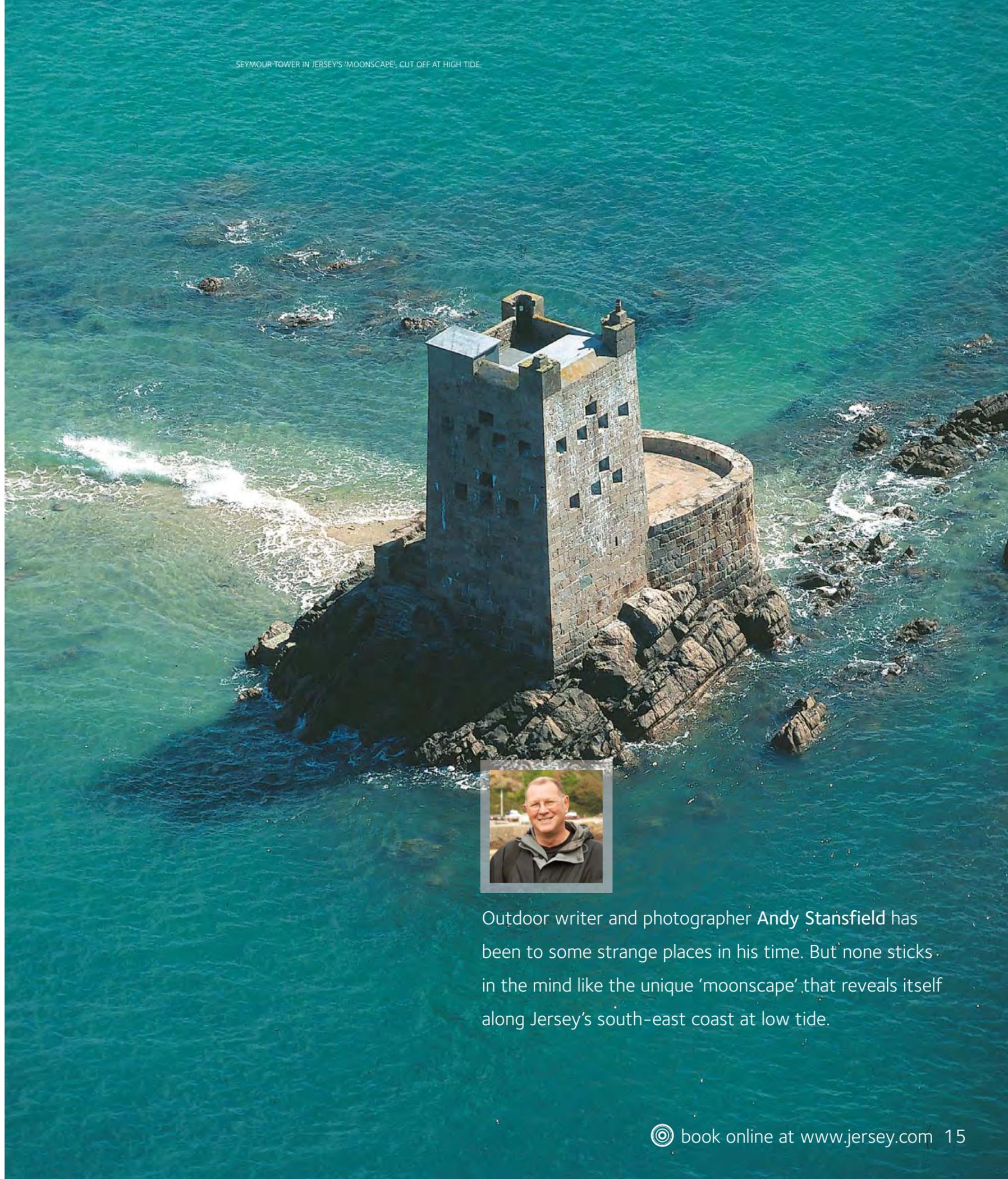
like from the waves. Between it and us it lay one thing: a million gallons of salt water.

But as we chatted about the kit required for the walk, I suddenly became aware of new patterns in the seascape. Already, 20 or 30 pinnacles of rock had become visible. Then, in what seemed like a matter of moments, a whole new landscape appeared. I now found myself looking at an emerging mass of shingle banks and gullies, giant rock outcrops and water-filled pools. The speed with which the tide was receding was barely credible.

Derek explained that the tide drops by around 20ft in three hours. No wonder the vista before me was changing so rapidly. The penny dropped too: it dawned on me that the reverse is also true – that an incoming tide can rise at the same rate. This rock-strewn maritime moonscape is not a place to be meddled with in a sea mist in the hours after low tide. I didn't need to ask Derek for confirmation. He could see from the look on my face that I had understood. He just nodded.

And pointed. A couple of hundred yards to the left of the tower stood a tall pole with a small platform at its summit, ladders on two sides and the whole structure anchored by steel cables. It's a rescue beacon that's high enough to allow you sit out a 40ft tide – but only just, although you may get your feet wet. Despite the spring sunshine, I shivered at the thought.

SEYMOUR TOWER IN JERSEY'S 'MOONSCAPE', CUT OFF AT HIGH TIDE



Outdoor writer and photographer Andy Stansfield has been to some strange places in his time. But none sticks in the mind like the unique 'moonscape' that reveals itself along Jersey's south-east coast at low tide.

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Calamities are, thankfully, very rare due to plentiful warning notices and an immense local respect for this tidal phenomenon. That didn't stop two ladies out horse riding in the bay who, despite years of local knowledge, were suddenly enveloped in sea fog as the tide turned and nightfall approached. Luckily, they came upon Seymour Tower and rode their panic-stricken horses up the granite steps. All survived, but not without a complex rescue mission as the horses weren't inclined to leave the tower at low tide.

When we set off it soon became obvious that walking in a straight line to Seymour Tower is impossible. From the shoreline at La Roque picking out a route looked straightforward enough, but the reality was very different. Our guide took us on a winding route through gullies and pools, some still knee-deep in water, picking his way through a complex, confusing maze of rocks and reefs. Down here it was all too easy to see how you could be cut off by an advancing tide as it swiftly filled one gully after another.

We walked across rocks still glistening wet and poked around in rock pools brightened by red granite, scallop shells and varieties of slippery seaweed. Derek stopped from time to time to explain everything from the mating habits of limpets to the history

behind the occasional letter 'P' found on rocks (it denoted the ancient fishing and seaweed-collecting rights of the Payne family). When we reached the rescue beacon, 20ft above us there was seaweed snagged on its supporting cables, a stark reminder of the forces at work here every 12 hours.

We were soon approaching Seymour Tower. Home sweet home for tonight at least. The tower, which sleeps 10, mightn't boast all mod cons but it came with essential safety equipment including a radio transceiver, flares and lanterns, plus a range of basic amenities: a chemical toilet, gas cooker, crockery and cutlery, and lighting powered by two solar panels on the roof.

Estate agents would describe the accommodation as having 'rustic charm' but it was a far cry from the comfort of the Samarès Coast Hotel and its attentive staff who were my hosts for the 'mainland' portion of my stay in Jersey.

But the views were more dramatic, the company excellent and the food wholesome. All supplies must be taken with you along with a sleeping bag and toiletries. We managed splendidly, concocting a wonderful evening meal of stuffed red peppers with Derek's home-grown Jersey Royal potatoes, followed by an assortment of cakes and biscuits plus a few bottles of beer.

And who needs a TV when the early evening's entertainment was provided by the encroaching tide washing over our footprints until, at around 7pm, it reached almost to the top of the steps to the tower? As darkness fell it was time to retreat inside to enjoy the rich camaraderie that such experiences tend to foster. Upstairs were the bunk beds for when the evening's tales of local history and childhood adventures finally dried up or eyelids got too heavy.

But there was one last surprise. Thirty minutes before the witching hour Derek set off back towards the shore in the dark. His mission? To escort daughter Krista over to the tower during the night's low tide, laden with bacon, eggs, mushrooms and fresh tomatoes for breakfast.

When they appeared half an hour or so after midnight Derek called me down to the shingle bank below. Pitch black and my night vision being slow to attune, I couldn't see a thing. Then, suddenly, I picked up a tiny phosphorescent glow, almost like a permanent soft blue spark. Then another, and another. Five minutes later, my eyes now adjusted to the dark, I could see that I was surrounded by the tiny flickering blue-white lights of bioluminescent plankton as if the wet shingle were lit up for Christmas.



VIEW FROM SEYMOUR TOWER



HOME COMFORTS AT SEYMOUR



SEYMOUR TOWER