

INSYNC

BRITAIN'S BEST BIKE RIDES

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PREFACE

As cyclists, our bucket lists are laden with picturesque routes across the Italian Riviera, through cloud-topping French Alps and over savagely cobbled roads of Flanders. We dream of these fabled bike rides and read all about those lucky enough to complete them. But what about those sauntering roads of dear Old Blighty? Will they ever garner a spot on your intrepid bucket list of adventure?

I'm here to make sure they do, detailing the routes of ten of the best, quintessentially British bike rides. For what they may lack in cloud-topping cols, or golden sun-baked beaches, they more than make up for with vast swathes of rolling countryside – the landscape that delivers Britain's classic, alluring charm that we all know and love.

Growing up in the foothills of the Pennines, I discovered my love for all things two-wheeled on the roads that straddle Lancashire and Yorkshire – the sombre, rolling moorlands and gruelling climbs humbling my once youthful ego.

I've since expanded outwards, sampling some of the UK's most infamous, jaw-droppingly beautiful and utterly clandestine cycling routes. From the remote Applecross Peninsula in the Northwest of Scotland, to the urban buzz of Richmond Park in London, this lyrical tour of Britain's Best Bike Rides serves to stoke the fires of wanderlust and give you the encouragement to get out there, discovering Britain in the best way possible – on your bike.

THE FRED WHITTON CHALLENGE

LAKE DISTRICT, ENGLAND



Named after a local club legend, this ride is as infamous as the mountain passes that line its route.

From the sheltered sanctuaries of Grasmere and Keswick, to the remote ruins of some of the most northerly outposts of the Roman Empire, you'll be tackling a route that legions of riders attempt, but very few complete.

IN THE HEART OF THE LAKES

Described as one of the most difficult road cycling routes that the UK has to offer, the Fred Whitton Challenge is a 180km (112 miles) road cycling sportive that traverses much of the Lake District and its characteristic hilly crags. The route features six of the hardest, most gruelling climbs from Simon Warren's original '100 Greatest Cycling Climbs' guide and tackles a colossal 3900m (12,795 feet) of climbing – enough to make even the most seasoned of pros quake in their bib tights.

Starting and finishing in the quaint town of Grasmere, the route heads through Ambleside, Waterhead and Troutbeck – taking in a short, peaceful tour of the Lake District's villages as it warms you up for the hell that is to come. The first climb of Holbeck Lane hits just as you leave the comforting arms of Troutbeck, but even this ascent is mere preparation for the big climbs yet to come. The cloud-topping Kirkstone Pass rears its ugly head immediately after, a foreboding 3.1km mountain pass with an average gradient of 8.8%. The final ramps steepen to a lung-busting 15.4%, leaving you to crawl your way to the summit. Pore over the rolling vistas at your own peril, this is the highest point of the route and no doubt the most susceptible to the wrath of Mother Nature.

A winding, poorly surfaced descent then takes you into the remote havens of Patterdale and Glenridding before slinging you straight up and out of the adjacent valley – this time climbing the tamer ascent of Matteredale end, a 2.1km climb that averages 6.7% with its steepest ramps at the bottom. From here, the route winds its way to Borrowdale and then Keswick. This is the Lake District's unofficial capital and the perfect place for your first café stop.

The warmth and welcome of Keswick will soon fade as you head out of the village and make your way to Seatoller – the lonely, narrow roads foreshadowing the looming mountain pass to come. Honister Pass is deceptive, the shallow ramps at the start a stark contrast to the 20% ramps approaching the summit. At 3.8km in length, this is one of the true brutes of the Fred Whitton Challenge, made even worse if a headwind courses its way down the valley. Make sure you've packed some crampons, you may just need them for this climb.

A steep descent takes you into the lonesome Buttermere Valley where you'll tackle another tough climb – Newlands Pass – before making your way to Braithwaite and the start of the next, uphill epic. Whinlatter Pass is one of the Lake's most infamous climbs and a regular feature on the Tour of Britain pro cycling race. It's not as steep as Honister Pass, but at 3.5km and an average 6.6% gradient, it's almost just as hard. The route then snakes its way to Loweswater, where the short, but incredibly steep climbs of Scale Hill and Fangs Brow will no doubt leave a lasting sting in your legs.

The next section of the route – down into the Ennerdale Valley and back up to the moors, before another descent into Calder Bridge – is enough to induce vertigo, the rolling roads really starting to take their toll. Just past Gosforth you'll reach the fabled climb of Irton Pike, a hill Alfred Wainright has described as "near perfect solace for reminiscences of past happy days on the higher fells." There is no solace to find here, the route's former climbs doing enough to render your body a mere husk of the sprightly form that left Grasmere just hours before.

Blinded by fatigue, the route begins to enter its final section, which would be music to the ears of most, but not if you know the roads that are yet to come. As the distant echoes of Roman war drums barrel their way down the mountain sides surrounding Eskdale, you'll spot the winding, mountain path on the horizon. This is Hardknott Pass, the cruellest, toughest and most agonising climb of them all. It may only be 2.2km long, but most of the ramps climb up to 22% with the inside line of the hairpin bends teetering on 35%. It's almost impassable by motor vehicle, let alone one that's pedal powered.

A short, sharp and quite dangerous descent then takes you to the final climb of the day – Wrynose Pass. If Hardknott is the King of the Lakes, the Wrynose is definitely the Queen. At 2.5km with an average gradient of 11% and ramps hitting 22%, this is almost an exact replica of the climb that came before – one final blow to your already empty legs. Once over the summit you can let out a sigh of relief, the pain is over and only a handful of rolling roads through Elterwater and Ambleside lie in your way of the finishing line in Grasmere.



ONE FOR THE MASOCHISTS

It's not called the 'Fred Whitton Challenge' for nothing. This is the perfect bike ride for those that enjoy putting themselves through both the physical and emotional ringer. Even the most diehard of roadies will quiver at the thought of embarking on the Fred Whitton Challenge, it's a ride that takes quite a lot of training and preparation.

Low gears aren't just a preference for this part of the country, they are a necessity. Compacts are a must, as are 30-tooth and 32-tooth sprockets – there's no way you'll clamber up Hardknott and Wrynose without them. As the route is tarmacked, a road bike is preferable, but it can equally be done on a cross or adventure bike, these machines often pre-equipped with low gears and reliable disc brakes, making them ideal for this kind of route.

If the distance and sheer amount of climbing is a little too daunting for you, but you'd still like to conquer some of the Lake's most foreboding mountain passes, then there are several, smaller 'Lakeland Loops' that you can undertake. Ranging from 40-69 miles, the Lakeland Loop sportive is an easier option than the Fred Whitton Challenge, embarking on a slightly tamer course starting and finishing at the New Dungeon Ghyll Hotel.

There's also options for mountain bikers too, this region boasting over 240km (150 miles) of untamed, truly wild single-track. The route is split into several stages with most participants taking up to a week to complete. With 7,000m of climbing in total and handfuls of death-defying runs to conquer, it's no wonder most riders opt for a week-long holiday to this neck of the woods.

IT'S NOT ALL ABOUT THE LAKES

Yes, the Lake District is famed for its vast, open lakes – particularly Lake Windermere which plays host to multitudes of water sports and lakeside attractions – but it's not just these natural features that give the area its unique character. With a rich volcanic history, the Lake District has seen some of the world's most violent eruptions take place right on its doorstep. Many of the valleys that you'll ride through have been carved by giant glaciers, cutting their way through rocks once thrown up by colossal supervolcanoes.

Equally as tumultuous as its natural history is its cultural history, the Lake District acting as one of the Roman Empire's most remote, militarised fronts in the 2nd century. Remains of an ancient outpost can be seen atop Hardknott Pass, the views from which leaving no doubt as to why the Romans erected their outpost on the mountain. Another Roman fort can also be found in the village of Ambleside, which also happens to be the final stop before the finish in Grasmere – another quaint, quintessential Lake District village famed for its delectable, homemade gingerbread.

As both the start and finish location of this route, Grasmere is the perfect spot to set up base, especially since it's awash with cosy B&Bs, rustic hotels and a cheap but incredibly cheerful YHA (Youth Hostels Association). Rail connections are quite poor to these more remote villages within the heart of the Lakes, the nearest being in Windermere. For that reason, a car with one sizeable bike rack is recommended; you'll certainly be bringing several friends along with you for this trip.

For a detailed description of the route, [click here](#)



“The Lake District is home to some of Britain’s most feared and fabled climbs, ride them if you dare. For a detailed description of the route, [click here.](#)”

THE CAMEL TRAIL

CORNWALL, ENGLAND



The perfect route for a Sunday saunter, family ride or simple day of care-free cycling, the Camel Trail is a two-wheeled pilgrimage for those with a taste for traditional, tasty Cornish treats.

STICK TO THE TRACKS

Running on a mixture of disused railway lines and largely traffic-free lanes through the Cornish countryside, the Camel Trail takes a rather scenic, 29km (18 mile) route from Wenfordbridge, through Bodmin and Wadebridge to the coastal finish in Padstow.

Starting in the tiny hamlet town of Wenfordbridge, the route joins the popular Camel Trail almost immediately, but not before a quick stop at the Snail's Pace café – a cosy find that has more than ample car parking space and the facilities to hire a bike tailor-made for plodding along the Camel Trail.

Topped up on traditional Cornish pastries and fully charged with your caffeinated beverage of choice, make your way onto the well-signposted Camel Trail that begins to meander south of Wenfordbridge towards Bodmin. On the way you'll pass Poley's Bridge, the former site of a famous railway station that used to transport granite and china clay from the local quarries to the bustling coastal town of Padstow. Constructed in 1834, the disused railway lines underfoot are some of the oldest in the world.

Approaching Bodmin, one of Cornwall's oldest towns, you'll pass through some spectacular, natural scenery as you skirt the border of the vast Bodmin moor. Massive granite outcrops pierce the landscape as small streams trickle in and around the obstructions, creating one impressive sight worthy of a photo stop. The trail itself doesn't enter Bodmin and instead turns west towards the tiny railway station of Boscarne, marking the start of the National Cycle Route 32 and second half of the trail towards Padstow.

The Camel Trail tea garden can be found just metres from the route in Boscarne, marking the perfect spot for a mid-ride rest and refuel. Set in the beautiful apple orchard that lines the river, this café is one of Cornwall's best kept secrets, the scones topped with traditional Cornish cream impossible to pass up on.

From Boscarne the trail then hugs the River Camel as it saunters its way to Wadebridge, a Cornish town aptly named after the bridge that lies in the centre, crossing the river. Restored since its original construction in medieval times, this bridge is rumoured to have its foundations laid on giant sacks of sheep wool.

As you leave Wadebridge and head deeper into the upper Camel Valley, the trail begins to run alongside vast swathes of wetland. This area on the outskirts of Padstow is a designated SSSI (Site of Special Scientific Interest) and home to a number of rare, wetland species including otters, kingfishers, little egrets and grey herons. Be sure to peer among the reeds as you cross the numerous steams and inlets that punctuate the trail, you may just catch a glimpse of a nest and huddle of chirping chicks.

It's easy to spend a day in these wetlands, losing yourself among the reeds, but soon you'll arrive in Padstow, the final stop on your tour of the Camel Trail. The finishing straight takes you along the marina before dropping you off right outside Rick Stein's award-winning fish and chips restaurant – it would be rude not to stop, wouldn't it?



AN ADVENTURE FOR ALL ABILITIES

Following the River Camel and traversing disused railway lines, the Camel Trail takes the path of least resistance towards Padstow without a climb in sight. The route is almost entirely traffic-free, aside from when it passes through Wadebridge and a short section of road near Hellandbridge – just outside of Wenfordbridge – making it perfect for beginners and family groups.

While an aero road bike and full-suspension mountain bike may be a tad overkill on this kind of route, there's nothing stopping you from bringing your prized, two-wheeled possession along. A standard town or hybrid bike is the perfect option however and the most-available machine from the numerous bike hire points located along the route.

The surface varies and some sections do encounter some relatively coarse gravel. It's not tough enough to warrant a fully-fledged gravel crusader, but it may be a good idea to pack some spare inner tubes and puncture repair kits with impromptu bike maintenance in mind.

The route can be ridden in either direction, with Padstow as the starting point, or extended – throwing in a few extra loops to ensure you make the most of your trip to the incredibly scenic Cornish countryside. From Padstow, head on up the 5km-long, well-surfaced coastal path towards Stepper's point to feast your eyes on the fantastic views across Padstow Bay and beyond. For a slightly longer excursion, carry on the National Cycle Route 3 from just outside Bodmin until you arrive at the Eden Project, the world's largest indoor rainforest. The route is fairly flat and follows 18km (11.1 miles) of virtually traffic-free roads all the way there.

“Satisfying a keen appetite for food, views and cycling itself, there's no better place than the Cornish countryside for a relaxing weekend jaunt.”

THE CORNISH CULINARY TOUR

This route is as much about the local foods as it is the cycling, cosy cafés and traditional restaurants lining the route from Wenfordbridge to Padstow. Some of the region's top eateries have already been mentioned, but for those yearning for the most traditional fare that Cornwall has to offer, look no further than the Chough Bakery in Padstow. Winners of the 2013 and 2016 World Pasty Championships, this bakery is internationally renowned for their delicious, golden bakes – so popular that they even offer a mail order service for the prized pies.

Padstow is also home to a multitude of independent B&Bs, each one of them providing the perfect base camp for a long weekend cycle touring in the Cornish countryside. With a bed, comes breakfast – a traditional Cornish breakfast no less. As well as your usual bacon, sausage, eggs and tomatoes, you'll be treated to some local hog's pudding and homemade Cornish potato cakes – enough food to feed a whole party of hungry cyclists.

While Padstow may be the best location to set up camp, Bodmin is the most accessible regarding transport links. Hop on a train to this centrally located town and you'll soon be a stone's throw from most of Cornwall's must-see landmarks. A lot of Cornish history can be experienced in Bodmin itself, the town famous for the mustering of 15,000 Cornishmen during the 1497 Cornish Rebellion, as well as Bodmin Jail – the safe house for national treasures such as the Domesday Book and the Crown Jewels during the First World War.

For a detailed description of the route, [click here](#).



THE CAUSEWAY COAST CYCLE ROUTE

COUNTY ANTRIM,
NORTHERN IRELAND



Following in the footsteps of giants, the Causeway Coast Cycle Route takes you on an intrepid tour of 13th century ruins, ancient fissure volcanoes and boozy distilleries as it meanders its way along the Antrim Coast of Northern Ireland.

STAY AWAY FROM THE EDGE

As you cautiously pedal your way along the sheer clifftops that line the Antrim Coast, you'll bear witness to one of the most powerful oceans in the world, the North Atlantic waters savagely carving the serrated coastline beneath your wheels. The journey starts, however, at the base of the cliffs in the seaside resort of Castlerock, a popular tourist hotspot that lies close to the border between County Londonderry and County Antrim.

Home to one of the most photographed scenes in Northern Ireland, Castlerock is famous for its Mussenden Temple, an old library that balances precariously on a loose, basaltic clifftop. As you leave Castlerock behind and head inland towards Coleraine, you'll bid a swift farewell to the Antrim Coast before it really even began. Fear not however, the coastal route resumes as you head north from Coleraine towards the seaside town and popular surfing spot of Portstewart, following the traffic-free National Cycle Route 93 all the way to the shoreline.

This is the point where the ragged Antrim coast really begins, the numerous headlands and coves forcing the roads to duck and dive as they amble further eastwards towards Portrush – another small, idyllic seaside resort to add to your journey's collection. From Portrush, the coastal route continues to plod eastwards, skirting by the former ramparts of Dunluce Castle – a 13th century ruin that teeters on the edge of a steep cliff face where only time will tell if it is to become a victim of the ravenous waters below.

The following town of Bushmills is home to a world-famous whiskey distillery, the intoxicating, smoky aroma powering you through the slow drag from Portrush to the town's outskirts. From the centre of Bushmills, an old disused railway path takes you back towards the coast and ever closer to the Giant's Causeway – the focal feature of this cycling route. The path takes you right to the entrance of the visitor's centre where a guided trail then makes the final leg to the ancient volcanic fissure.

As you stand on 60 million years of volcanic history and gaze out across the rough Atlantic, it's time to make a decision. The official, 37km-long (23 miles) Causeway Coast Cycle Route ends here, on the Giant's Causeway itself, but there is an option to extend your coastal jaunt and continue to cross even further, stunning swathes of the Antrim Coast.

Continuing to follow the coast eastwards, make your way through the quaint villages of Dunservick and Ballintoy. The second of these smaller villages, Ballintoy, is perfect for a mid-ride café stop at the Red Door Cottage Tea Room and Bistro – their freshly baked scones and slow-stewed clam chowder impossible to pass up on. Fuelled for the final leg of your journey, the roads continue to follow the coast towards the next seaside town of Ballycastle, but not before you've sauntered past the world-famous rope bridge and National Trust site on the tiny island of Carrick-a-Rede.

The rickety wooden bridge hangs some 30m above the Atlantic waters, the sounds of choppy waves below enough to turn your legs to jelly as you attempt to make your way across the 20m long structure to the tiny island. The views from the isolated rock are well worth it however, the seascape dotted with flocks of rare and dazzling seabirds – cormorants, shags, redshanks and razorbills all spotted from Carrick-a-Rede.

As you enter the town of Ballycastle and head down towards the harbour to complete the ride, you'll spot the hazy outline of Scotland's Mull of Kintyre on the horizon, a lonesome locale that has been immortalised in the 1977 hit song "Mull of Kintyre" by the Beatles legend himself, Sir Paul McCartney. Voted as the best place to live in Northern Ireland by The Sunday Times in 2016, it's only fitting that Ballycastle hosts the finish of this wandering ride – its streets awash with countless restaurants, cafés, guest houses and armour-clad warriors queuing up to access one of the many Game of Thrones filming locations here, in Northern Ireland.

A BEGINNER'S TOUR

Travelling across traffic-free coastal paths and narrow countryside lanes, the Causeway Coast Cycle Route is one of the best for family groups looking to explore the hardened, salty shores of the Northern Irish coast. It is easily adapted with several, further legs along the Antrim Coast able to follow on from the aforementioned route. Whether there's a few in your party fading, or perhaps soldiering on without you, the route can be altered accordingly.

Aside from a small section of gravel towards the Giant's Causeway, the route is well-surfaced with smooth tarmac – a stark contrast to the otherwise raggedy coastline you'll be following. The smooth surfaces make this route a perfect option for touring bicycles and road bikes, as well as hybrid bikes with thinner, slicker tyres.

This isn't a ride that you'll want to rush in one day and with a countless number of possible detours to some of the quainter, inland villages, you'll soon have a long weekend of cycle touring on your hands. With very few long climbs to speak of, you needn't worry about the weight of your bike so be sure to strap on the panniers – leaving a little extra space to store the trinkets that you'll pick up along the way.



A GIANT'S PLAYGROUND

Northern Ireland's Antrim Coast is perhaps one of the most fascinating stretches of coastline in the whole of the UK, landmarks lining the coastal path all the way from Castlerock to Ballycastle. However, the Giant's Causeway is without a doubt the main attraction, visitors flocking from all over the world to come and see this natural wonder.

Made a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1986, the causeway was created in an ancient volcanic fissure eruption some 60 million years ago during the Paleocene Epoch. The eruption created 40,000 interlocking hexagonal columns that resemble giant stepping stones – the tallest of which extends to a towering 12m. Only recently, however, has the creation of this fascinating site really been understood – many choosing to believe the local Gaelic legend instead. The story goes that the Irish giant, Fionn mac Cumhaill, was challenged to a fight by the Scottish giant Benandonner. In true Irish fashion, Fionn didn't back down and took up the challenge, building the causeway across the North Channel so that the two brutes could meet for one gigantic brawl.

The presence of giants on the Antrim Coast may be a myth, but the promise of classic, Irish blended whiskey certainly isn't – the small village of Bushmills home to the world's oldest whiskey distillery. Granted a license to distil back in 1608, by the royal decree of King James I, the Bushmills distillery has been honing its craft for a little over 400 years. Run by the same family and friends for close to 20 generations, the tiny distillery has always hand crafted small batches of their trademark whiskey – believing a small batch is the secret to producing the finest, smooth-tasting whiskey in the whole of Ireland.

Lying near the start of the route, Coleraine is the ideal town to build your base camp. With excellent rail connections right from the centre of Belfast and Belfast airport, it's the perfect place to head to on the first day of touring before ambling your way towards the starting village of Castlerock. As one of the main railway hubs in County Antrim, you can easily head to a number of the seaside towns by train from Coleraine, perhaps even making a detour west and towards Derry, soaking up all the fascinating history along the way.

For a detailed description of the route, [click here](#).

“This route along the raggedy Antrim Coast of Northern Ireland is perfect for anyone looking to get into cycle touring, or perhaps just spend a long weekend absorbing classic Northern Irish history amongst friends and family.”



RICHMOND PARK

LONDON, ENGLAND



This cycling oasis lies right in the centre of the capital, offering up a shred of countryside for those otherwise confined to the metropolitan boroughs of central London.

MIX IT UP A LITTLE

Living in London while pursuing a hobby in cycling may sound difficult at first, but once you discover all the small, relatively traffic-free routes that pockmark the city, you'll soon be out on the bike every weekend – if not also midweek! The Surrey Hills may only be a stone's throw away, but for those strapped for time and looking for a quick evening fix of two-wheeled fun, then there's no place better than Richmond Park.

One loop around the park equates to around 12km (7.5 miles), but most riders try to fit in at least two or three laps to really get the most out of the park's rolling roads and scenic views. Whether you ride the loop clockwise or anticlockwise depends on which climb you want to tackle. Both hills go up the same, sloping mound of earth – Broomfield Hill ridden on the clockwise route and Dark Hill on the anticlockwise route.

Broomfield Hill is the slightly shorter one of the two at only 300m, but with an average gradient of 9.1% and a steep middle ramp of 14.8%, it's a real leg-breaking climb. Starting just after the mini roundabout by the Robin Hood Gate entrance, the path meanders to the foot of the climb, giving you a short but speedy run up to help clamber your way to the summit.

Dark Hill is a little longer at 500m, but with no run up to speak of, the 6.6% average gradient and ramp of 12% near the mid-section seem to bite a whole lot more than the ramps on Broomfield Hill. Ridden anticlockwise or clockwise, you'll be treated to a swift descent after the summit, building up a load of momentum to carry on with the rest of your loop around the park.

Mixing up your direction around the park is encouraged, but it's worth noting that the majority of riders choose to tackle the anticlockwise route, making for a much safer left turn at each of the park's five mini roundabouts.

As well as alternating direction, there's also an option to cross through the centre of the park. Riding on the grass is forbidden, so try not to attempt any impromptu cross-country as you try to locate the several road cuttings that bisect the park.

From the Robin Hood Gate, a path meanders towards the middle of the park, passing the central Pen Ponds car park on the way. Two paths then split off from this car park, one heading past White Lodge towards the Sheen Gate, and the other a narrower track back to the outer road and the Ham Gate exit. These roads are sparse with traffic, taking you on a surreptitious tour through the heart of Richmond Park and some of the best locations to spot the endemic Red and Fallow deer that have been roaming this landscape since 1637.

As a National Nature Reserve, the park has some strict rules for both drivers and cyclists alike.

There is a 20mph speed limit throughout the park and while this is primarily aimed at motorists, it would be wise for you to also follow these speeds and avoid dangerously undertaking cars. The roads do narrow in sectors so it's important to be weary of those around you – whether it's a car or fellow riding partner. As expected, the park is busiest on the sunnier days of the year – encouraging everyone to flock towards this inner-city haven. It's at this time that the traffic is worst, particularly on the roads going past Pembroke Lodge, so be weary.

If you're not so confident riding side by side with motorists, or just fancy a ride with no cars to block your path, then head to Richmond Park after dark. Closed to the motorists at night, you're free to thunder around along the lanes without the worry of traffic – just make sure you're lit up like a Christmas tree as there are very few street lights along some sections of the park.



CATERING TO ALL

From Lycra-clad roadies aboard fiendishly handsome carbon racers, to youngsters learning how to balance themselves on two wheels, Richmond Park caters to all kinds of cyclist. The roads are well-paved and aside from the two hills aforementioned, the roads are flat and fast. Equipment and bike choice is up to you, if there's anywhere in the world to see an infinite swarm of radically different bikes, then it's right here.

For those looking to storm their way around the park at record pace, or challenge for a King of the Mountain sector in Richmond Park's gladiatorial-like Strava scene, it would be best to stick to the outer roads – leaving the smaller inner lanes for the leisure riders and first-timers. There's no proper off-roading to speak of, but there are a few dirt and gravel trails around the centre of the park for some tame mountain biking or a leisurely family saunter.

If you're eager to expand your ride outwards and away from the confines of the park, then head south towards Kingston, Epsom and then Dorking – landing slap bang in the centre of the Surrey Hills. This longer ride encompasses both urban and country roads, tackling the world-famous climbs from the London 2012 Olympic circuit – Box Hill and Leith Hill.

BY ROYAL DECREE

There's just something about Richmond Park that feels so regal, perhaps it's the distant view of St Paul's Cathedral on the horizon, or simply the unique and ornate ironworks that make up each gated entrance around the park. The park itself is royal indeed, Charles the 1st creating the vast nature reserve in the early 17th

century. It's the largest of London's eight Royal Parks and one of the most important both nationally and internationally for wildlife conservation – recognised as one of the UK's larger SSSIs (Site of Special Scientific Interest).

Deer aren't the only wildlife native to Richmond Park, several plantations full of rare flowers and plants are hidden around the 955 hectares. The ornamental Isabella Plantation is one of the prettiest and the perfect choice for a post-picnic saunter. The plantation is best visited in the springtime months of April and May when the dense woodland is flooded with colour from the flowering Azaleas and Camellias. Prince Charles' Spinney plantation is not too far from Isabella but offers a totally different experience, the colours here a mix of greens and whites from the 'Handkerchief trees' that line the meandering paths.

The Parkcycle Centre is located in the easily accessible Roehampton Gate car park. It's impossible to miss, cyclists congregating in their hundreds on the sunnier days of the year. From hire bikes, to all the essential accessories and sugary snacks, this little shop has it all – a Tardis of cycling clobber within the borders of the park.

There's not a lot of things more quintessentially British than a picnic in the park, a veritable buffet of everything from bitesize scotch eggs to cheese sandwiches lavished with Branston pickle. However, perhaps even more British than that is an afternoon cream tea, served at the Pembroke Lodge – a traditional café located at the centre of Queens Rd in the westward part of the park. From quick bites to full, hearty dinners, the Pembroke Lodge has it all. It's a difficult place to leave and once you've settled among its elegant gardens, you'll just have to stay and watch the stunning sunset as it descends over the park right in front of your eyes.

For a detailed description of the route, [click here](#).



“Cycling in the capital needn't be dangerous, nor a snooze-fest of mundane urban roads. The Richmond Park loop is the perfect ride for those yearning for a breath of fresh air and day of two-wheeled fun – all without leaving London.”

HOLME ROADS

PEAK DISTRICT, ENGLAND



Close to home and heart, these roads around the Peak District offer some of the most diverse cycling routes in the whole of the UK – it's no wonder the Tour de France chose these roads when it passed by in 2014.

THERE AND BACK AGAIN

You needn't travel to the Alps or Pyrenees to discover some of the greatest climbs that the cycling world has to offer. Those in the Peak District may not be quite as long, but boy are they steep – the British seemingly never getting the memo about gradient-reducing switchbacks.

There are dozens of routes to discover in and around the borders of the Peak District National Park, but none are more demanding than this 137km-long (85 mile) route that starts and finishes within the bustling hub of Sheffield's city centre. Rolling out of Sheffield, it's not long before you encounter your first climb of the day, a little taster of the gruelling hilltop passes to come.

Rolling roads take you to Dungworth and Low Bradfield where you'll then stare down a section of road locally known as 'The Strines'. With a sawtooth profile, this path is not one for the faint hearted, the up and down nature of the short, but incredibly steep climbs enough to induce motion sickness. The toughest of this 'Strines tasting platter' is the climb of Ewden Bank.

A leg-breaking 25% ramps kicks off the 1 km climb, before shallowing to 13% for the rest of the duration, forcing you to grind and crawl your way to the summit.

You may have left the leg-sapping Strines behind, but the climbing ceases to relent, the short climb of Mortimer road rearing its ugly head before you reach Penistone. A 1.4km ascent with an average gradient of 8.7% is a testy climb by all means, but after Ewden Bank you should fly up these ramps. The small town of Penistone marks the perfect spot for an early café stop or supermarket snack run. Alternatively, you can choose to soldier on, jumping onto the traffic-free National Cycle Route 62 as it heads towards Dunford Bridge following the sloping valley carved by the River Don.

The riverside path climbs slowly, pitching up as you head through Dunford Bridge and make your way towards Hade Edge. From here the roads plummet, a speedy descent taking you right to the centre of Holmfirth, a quintessential English market town nestled within one of the deepest valleys of the Peak District. On the horizon you'll spot the upcoming climb, the pièce de résistance of this Peak District loop.

Holme Moss was the toughest climb that the Tour de France tackled on their trip to the UK in 2014 and the only one to be granted Cat-2 status. At 4.7km long with an average gradient of 7.3%, it's the jewel in the Peak District's crown, a real showstopper. The roads begin to snake as you reach the halfway point, meandering their way up the hillside in an attempt to keep the gradients below 10%. The toughest portion of the climb comes just 1,500m before its summit, the roads ramping up to a devilish 9.5%. As you reach the top be sure to stop for a quick photo with yourself and the legendary sign that marks the highest point of the ride – a cloud-scraping 524m.

The descent towards Glossop is blisteringly quick, the arrow-straight roads and well-paved surfaces hurrying you along. While this part of the route isn't one you'll necessarily want to complete in a hurry – with dazzling views of rolling moorland as far as the eye can see – it is a welcome change to the ambling pace you were reduced to on the earlier climbs.

As you follow the route out of Glossop and leave the remnants of industrial Britain behind, the climbing begins in earnest. Snake Pass is the longest climb of the day and arguably the most scenic, swapping the sombre moorlands for rich, luscious pine forests to rival those of the Swiss Alps. The slopes are uniform, sticking to the average 6% gradient for the majority of the 6.1 km. A long climb means a long descent and the one following Snake Pass duly delivers. It is not nearly as twisting as the uphill section, allowing you to pick up some speed as you thunder towards Bamford.

Now in the heart of the Peak District, it's time to take a slight detour to tackle one of the most fabled climbs in the whole of the UK. From Bamford head west towards Castleton, cautiously making your way to the foot of Winnats Pass. The climb is set into a deep and truly unforgiving gorge, creating a scene that is almost gladiatorial. It's not the longest climb of the day at 1.7km, but with an average gradient of 11.2% and ramps of 20% just before its summit, it's probably the toughest. The climb is locally used as a metric for assessing young riders' capabilities – shooting some to stardom but humbling most.

The roads plateau at the summit and rise once more before you truly reach the top of Mam Tor. From here, a winding descent takes you all the way back to Bamford through the quaint villages of Edale and Hope. On your return to Bamford, continue east towards Hathersage and its bustling square lined with tiny coffee shops and local eateries. The final climb of the day begins just on the edge of this square, heading out from Hathersage to the top of Burbage Moor. The lower ramps are the steepest – around 13% – and covered by trees, forcing you to curse as you grind your way upwards, looking for the summit. After 3.4km, the climb reaches its summit atop a vast, sprawling moorland that marks the passage from Derbyshire back to Yorkshire.

For a quieter return to the lively city of Sheffield, follow the National Cycle Route 6 from the top of Burbage Moor. The traffic-free path descends right into the city centre, safely dropping you off back where you started some five or six hours before.



THE ROAD CYCLING HEARTLANDS

Balancing on the fine line between Derbyshire and Yorkshire, the Peak District lies right in the middle of two of the country's most cycling-crazy counties. A countless number of local teams ply their trade over the hills and rolling roads, the rivalry among them fierce should they ever cross paths on one of the Peak District's key climbs.

If you forget about the occasionally poor road surface and recurring potholes, the roads around the Peak District are perfect for road bikes. Gearing is a big factor to consider, and if you're planning on tackling the route described here – with a lung-busting 2900m of climbing – you'll certainly need a compact groupset and one life-saving sprocket to drop into for when the climbing gets particularly rough.

Climbing isn't for everyone and the Peak District does offer some amount of leisurely riding, the National Cycle Routes forging a dense web of trails around this large National Park. The traffic-free route from Penistone to Dunford Bridge, following the National Cycle Route 62 and parts of the Trans Pennine Trail, is the perfect option for those looking for a slow saunter through the Peak District. This clandestine trail is blessed with stunning views across its entirety, as well as a smattering of pretty picnic sites around Bullhouse Bridge and Hazelhead Bridge.

FUELLING THE FIRES OF INDUSTRIAL BRITAIN

Bordering Derbyshire, Yorkshire and Lancashire, the Peak District lies at the centre of what was once the beating heart of industrial Britain. Known as the 'Steel City', Sheffield was an international hotspot – innovations such as crucible and stainless steel developed locally. Sheffield was also known for its vast coal production, as was neighbouring Lancashire and Yorkshire, these counties stoking the fires that drove the industrial revolution.

Away from the ashes of the larger cities lie the quaint market towns that occupy the numerous valleys within the centre of the Peak District. You're welcome to make a stop in all of them, but the smaller villages of Hope and Hathersage are some of the best, hiding some of the Peak District's best kept secrets.

The Coutyard Café in Hope is so good that you pass it twice. Whether you choose to visit pre or post Winnats Pass is up to you, but with freshly baked flapjacks, lavishly drizzled with golden syrup, it would be best to load up beforehand and truly absorb all the sugary, revitalising powers. Set in the lively square of Hathersage is Colemans Deli, a staple café stop for local club runs. The Bike Shack can be found just adjacent to this café, a small independent bike shop that offers a bike hire service as well as a handy cycle repair station.

As the route starts and finishes in Sheffield, rail connections are quick, simple and easy – no matter where you're based. The journey from London St Pancras is only two hours long and with one departing every 30 minutes, you'll struggle to arrive late. Rail connections in Glossop – the midway town on the route – are also excellent. Should the hills begin to bite early on, or the weather take a turn for the worst, you can always bail out here and head back home.

For a full rundown of the route, [click here](#).

“Inspired by one of my favourite, local rides, this route through the Peak District is sure to take you on one incredibly tough journey, testing both your legs and local orienteering knowledge.”



THE ELAN VALLEY TRAIL

ELAN VALLEY, WALES



Graced with gruelling mountain passes and snaking descents, the Elan Valley is a haven for mud-hungry, thrill-seeking mountain bikers.

SPOILT FOR CHOICE

Hidden within the heart of Wales, the Elan Valley is a remote area famed for its rugged trails and breath-taking scenery. There are an untold number of routes that wind their way up and down the remote valleys, this region boasting some of the longest stretches of uninterrupted, off-road single-track in the whole of the UK.

The centrally located Elan Valley Visitor centre, just on the outskirts of Elan Village, acts as the region's hub – a base from which most routes start and finish. Eight recognised routes radiate from this point of the valley, ranging from the family friendly Ant-Hills route to the incredibly tough Elan Epic trail, a 60km adventure through open country, white water rivers, dense woodlands and gravelled bridleways.

While the majority of mountain bike trails head out from the visitor centre, the real jewel in the Elan Valley's crown is the aptly named Elan Valley Trail.

It's a route that mixes both paved roads and off-road track, nothing too tough, but this is no simple lark in the park.

The 35km (22 mile) linear route sets off from the pretty village of Cwmdauddwr where it then heads west, towards Rhayader, following the lines of the old Birmingham Corporation Railway. These railway lines were built between the years 1892 and 1904 to help construct the Elan Valley reservoirs, each one of them acting as landmarks and waypoints along this 35km route.

Heading out of the village of Cwmdauddwr, follow the National Cycle Route 81 as it meanders its way up the valley. The path follows the river upstream, steadily climbing until it reaches a crossroads. The route swings south and begins to saunter alongside the Craig Goch Reservoir, providing stunning views of the waters that satisfy the insatiable thirst of the west midlands and Birmingham.

The Craig Goch Reservoir soon transitions into the Garreg Ddu Reservoir, but not before a small tea room appears – separating the two large water bodies. The Penbont House Tea Room sees many different faces throughout the four seasons, walkers, mountain bikers and mountaineers all seeking refuge within its cosy confines.

From the team room the trail continues south before it bends around the headland and towards Elan Village. Before you leave the flooded valleys behind, be sure to stop by the water's edge and drink in the view, the sustainably managed Henfron Plantation can just be seen on the other side of the reservoir with its blanketing forest sprawling from the water's edge to the top of the hill.

As the trail continues through Elan Village, the roads start to smooth and the weight of fatigue will soon dissipate; the final stretch to Rhayader is all downhill. As one of the largest towns in the area, Rhayader is the perfect end destination. With several eateries, ranging from local Welsh favourites to exotic Indian cuisine, there's a post-ride meal to satisfy just about any appetite.

If you're not one for getting down and dirty with the mountain bike, then the Elan Valley also offers a route for the diehard roadies – should they dare to take it. The 164km (102 mile) ride is a true brute, one that delivers a distinctly Welsh cycling experience with its eclectic mix of devilishly steep climbs, barren moorland and rolling hilltops. The route starts and finishes in Rhayader, navigating both the Elan and Camddwr valleys as it tackles a large loop of the region's toughest roads. The focal feature of the route is the Devil's Staircase climb which rears its ugly head almost immediately. The climb is only 1.1km long, but with an average gradient of 13% and ramps of 20% near the base, it's one climb that is truly deserving of its name.

The scenery is tranquil and the roads utterly remote with only the surrounding wildlife for company. This is a ride where food and water stops are few and far between so make sure to plan ahead and bring pockets stuffed with as much food as you can carry – you will certainly not want to bonk halfway through this ride.



A MOUNTAIN-BIKING HOTSPOT

The Elan Valley Trail is ideal for beginners or family groups given its length, steady climbs and well-paved surfaces. The majority of the National Cycle Route 81 is tarmacked, but there are narrow sections that transition into gravel, making the ride a little unsuitable for thin-tyred road bikes. A standard hybrid, rigid hardtail or all-round mountain bike will complete the route just fine, but make sure you pack some spare inner tubes and a life-saving puncture repair kit for those dicey gravel sectors.

The out and back road route from Rhayader is the perfect opportunity to show off your flashy carbon racer but do make sure it's equipped with compact gears – the Devil's Staircase climb certainly demands them. Buffeted by gusty tailwinds or sapped by vicious headwinds, you'll be thankful for a road bike's aero frame as you cut through the open moorlands at the top of the valleys.

For the eight mountain-bike routes that radiate from the Elan Valley Visitor Centre, the most-suitable bike really depends on which route you choose to go for. Almost all travel across untamed, open country so a full-suspension, mud-munching mountain bike is probably your best bet – one that can conquer each and every route on offer.

“There isn't another place in the UK more suitable for a week of mountain-bike action than the Elan Valley.”

There are bike hire points at both Clive Powell Mountain Bikes in Rhayader, and the Elan Valley Visitor Centre, providing a wealth of options right on your doorstep. Each bike is optimised for ragging the trails around the Elan Valley, so much so that you needn't bring your own. With countless routes to choose from, and several hotels and camping sites in the area, Rhayader is the dream destination for cyclists looking for a week-long holiday of non-stop, trail-blazing action.



THE VALLEY'S HIDDEN GEMS

Flanking the Elan Valley to its east and west are the towns of Cwmdauddwr and Rhayader. In this remote part of the country, these small towns soon become bustling city centres – people flocking towards the quaint, independent shops and fascinating, local landmarks. Surrounding Rhayader are a number of ancient cairns and standing stones, evidence that prehistoric peoples called this valley home several thousand years BCE.

You can also spot the remains of a dry moat in the centre of Rhayader, the lasting remnant of the since destroyed Rhayader Castle. One ancient building that still stands, however, is the Old Swan – a timber framed, medieval pub that dates back to the year 1683. Rhayader's thirst for pubs still runs strong, the town awash with some of the most rustic inns this side of the Welsh border. The Eagles Inn and Crown Inn are two of the best, serving up the region's finest ales for a refreshing, well-deserved post-ride pint.

With over 70 square miles of moorland, bog, woodland and reservoir, the Elan Valley is home to some of the UK's rarest birds of prey. 180 different species of bird have been recorded in this area since records began in the 1880's, Goshawks, Peregrines and Red Kites all sighted above the valley tops. Make sure you swing by the Elan Valley Visitor Centre to learn even more about the region's endemic wildlife.

As you can imagine, these remote towns in the Elan Valley are rather difficult to access, particularly if you've not got a car and bike rack at your disposal. Rail connections are few and far between, but there are accessible stations in the nearby towns of Llandrindod Wells and Crossgates. The Hearts of Wales Railway line runs through these stations, providing a scenic route through the region's most stunning swathes of countryside.

For a detailed description of the route, [click here](#).

THE APPLECROSS PENINSULA TOUR

ROSS AND CROMARTY,
SCOTLAND



There's no escaping it, there's no going round it – you can only go over it. Some regard Bealach na Bà as the jewel in Applecross's crown, others the thorn in its side. The 'Pass of the Cattle' bows to no one, many egos humbled on its devilishly steep, never ending ramps.

SCOTTISH SOLITUDE

It may be the focal point of the day, but the climb of Bealach na Bà only encompasses 8.9km of the overall route, the rest of the 144km-long (90 mile) ride taking on a scenic tour of one of the most remote parts of Scotland. Rugged landscapes carved by vast, ancient rivers of ice make this westerly part of the Scottish Highlands a cycling paradise. Combined with its remoteness and rather inviting allure of sheer solitude, the Applecross Peninsula is not only a place to discover one's legs, but also one's mind.

This lonesome part of Scotland is sparse with regards to paved roads, each one serving its purpose to connect the tiny villages lying in almost complete isolation. As a result, the two cycling routes across the peninsula only differ in terms of distance, rather than an alternative path.

The Bealach Mor is a 145km (90 mile) excursion, offering a thorough tour of the Applecross Peninsula and beyond. The Bealach Beag is a shorter route, only 72km (45 miles) in length. Both routes are recognised sportives, but you needn't have to sign up should you want to tackle the foreboding routes alone.

The longer Bealach Mor route is the ride of choice, the extended route doing a little more justice for the peninsula's most clandestine scenery. Starting in the tiny village of Kinlochewe, the route heads towards the slightly larger village of Achnasheen, one of the few communities in this remote area graced with a train station. The terrain becomes noticeably hilly around Achnasheen, the roads starting to rise as you solemnly make your way towards Bealach na Bà.

From Achnasheen, the roads head southwest towards the sea and the picturesque town of Lochcarron. But before you arrive on the salty shores of this fishing village, you'll tackle the rolling road through the Glen Carron estate, a well-paved, narrow road flanked by rolling hillsides and skeletal Caledonian Pine trees. Keep a watchful eye out for the deer, these roads are so absent of cars that they often stray onto the tarmac, unaware that it is not a natural feature of the landscape that surrounds them.

Arriving in Lochcarron, you'll meander along the shores of the village's namesake loch – Loch Carron – before being warmly greeted by two cafés eager for your passing trade. With Bealach na Bà looming, it may be wise to stop at both the Waterside and Tee Off cafés, each one of them serving up some deliciously calorific cakes, solely baked to fuel your legs for the mountain pass to come.

As you leave the vestigial warmth of Lochcarron behind, you'll head west towards the small village of Tornapress,

passing through a steep sided valley that serves as the sole gatekeeper to the rest of the Applecross Peninsula. The roads begin to climb for 2.5km straight from the shores of Lochcarron, the steepest ramps of 13% tackled right at the base. The road begins to shallow as you make your way into the valley, leading you down an arrow-straight descent to the outskirts of Tornapress.

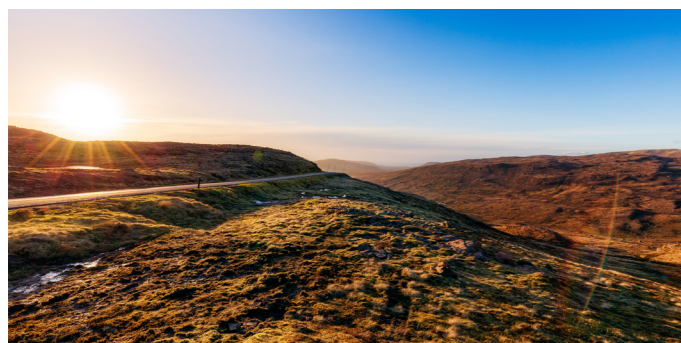
This is the final frontier, the last stop before you reach the foot of the gruelling Bealach na Bà. The Bealach Café, tantalisingly positioned on the turn off to the climb, tries its hardest to lure you in with the promise of rescue. This is false hope, stopping here will no doubt interrupt your rhythm and end your attempt of the climb before it has even begun.

The climb is hard to miss, even before Tornapress it looms on the horizon, standing like a silent sentinel among the mist and fog. Rising from sea-level, Bealach na Bà continues to climb for a mammoth 626m in just 8.9km – officially making it the toughest ascent in the whole of the UK.

Snaking its way up the mountainside, the climb starts with a relatively benign section of just 6%. These sinuous switchbacks are soon dispensed with in the second half of the climb however, the roads ploughing a much straighter and steeper path to the summit. Ramps fail to dip below 9% here, slowly hammering the nails into your coffin, one by one. The final part of the climb is littered with blind summits, cruelly masquerading the toughest ramps of 20%. Enjoyment is optional here, but pain is almost certainly obligatory should you want to summit this beast. Your efforts are duly rewarded however, the top of this climb providing some of the most jaw-dropping views of the neighbouring Isle of Skye and its many miles of ravaged coastline.

The descent to Applecross is quite technical, with narrow roads and tight bends really putting your skills to the test. From Applecross, the route follows the well-signposted North Coast 500, Scotland's answer to Route 66. There are no flat roads in sight as you head northwards, the coastal road dipping and diving as it makes its way across the undulating clifftops.

The quaint town of Shieldaig is soon reached, marking the final stretch of your ride back to Kinlochewe. Fortunately, the homebound route takes the path of least resistance, sauntering its way through the snow-topped valleys as it makes its way to the finish.



NOT FOR THE FAINT HEARTED

It's not the longest ride, nor is it the toughest – the Bealach Mor ride only taking in 2100m of vertical ascent – but it is certainly the most gruesome should the weather turn nasty. In this remote part of the country, fair days are few and far between, the pouring rains and howling winds a much more common sight. Preparing for such weather is vital, so be sure to bring waterproofs and several layers for when the temperatures inevitably plummet.

Both the Bealach Mor and shorter Bealach Beag rides are intended for road cyclists, especially those looking for a wild and remote challenge in the far north of Scotland. There are a few options for mountain bikers however, the best being an out-and-back ride across long flowing singletrack from Kenmore to Applecross. The trails are relatively technical, crossing swathes of open country, but they're nothing that a run-of-the-mill hardtail couldn't handle.

Despite the remote nature of this route, the roads are surprisingly well paved. With so few cars thundering over the tarmac, potholes are few and far between, making for a pleasant riding experience relatively devoid of punctures. The weather can turn in an instant however, and soon turn the roads into a slick, often icy, surface so be sure to come equipped with robust tyres boasting some grippy tread.

THE PENINSULA'S ISOLATED OUTPOSTS

With very few villages to act as waypoints along this route, you'll find yourself traversing through miles and miles of truly remote and wild Scottish countryside. Patches of pine forest pockmark the landscape, but it's the vast, rolling moorland and heather that dominate – hilltops and mountainsides covered in the dense vegetation.

This small area of western Scotland is part of a much larger and expansive sedimentary platform, the rocks beneath your feet some of the oldest anywhere in the UK. Metamorphosed basalts and turbid sandstones of Pre-Cambrian age dominate the landscape and act as the basement rocks. These sequences of rock are older than the first multi-cellular lifeforms, with some even suggested to be close to three billion years old.

Weathered into table top mountains and steep sided valleys, these ancient rocks construct the vast cycling paradise that is the Applecross Peninsula. The tiny, outpost-like villages find their space snuggled at the feet of these colossal hills; Shieldaig, Torridon and Lochcarron all watched over by their respective mountain peak.

Shieldaig is an ideal location for a quick pitstop, the tiny village once a remote bastion for training up seamen to fight in the war against Napoleon. Nanny's Café lies at the centre of the village, serving up the most delicious, homemade cakes and freshly caught, local squat lobsters. For a place to rest your head however, look no further than the neighbouring village of Torridon. The Torridon Inn is a little on the pricey side, but if you've ever wanted to stay in a lakeside castle with stunning views of the surrounding mountains, it's the perfect choice. Torridon is also home to an affordable YHA as well as a small, but accommodating campsite.

Accessing these remote outposts within the north west highlands is a rather difficult task. Unless you're driving, the options are rather limited. Both Strathcarron and Achnasheen have a station that is quite local to the route, but if you're looking to combine your journey up with a quintessentially Scottish experience, then the Caledonian Sleeper train is definitely recommended. Travelling overnight from London Euston to Fort William, you'll sleep and dine in wooden panelled cabins worthy of royalty. The final part of the journey, from Fort William to the Applecross Peninsula, is best done via rental car – one with a sizeable bike rack attached.

For a detailed description of the route [click here](#).



“For a wild, remote and truly breath-taking cycling holiday, look no further than the Applecross Peninsula.”

THE BOX HILL OLYMPIC CIRCUIT

SURREY HILLS, ENGLAND



Coasting the golden wave ever since London 2012, this route around the southern Surrey Hills has become somewhat of a staple for both hobbyists and seasoned pros living in the capital.

A STONE'S THROW FROM THE CAPITAL

The perfect route for those looking to escape the hustle and bustle of London, the Box Hill Olympic Circuit strikes the perfect balance between serene, country riding and testy, lung-busting climbing – the perfect combination for a bike ride.

The classic Box Hill circuit has been used for decades, made popular years before the London 2012 Olympic Road Race tackled this fabled climb. At 16km in length, it's not too difficult on its own, but when combined with multiple circuits, or detours into the steeper, less known parts of the Surrey Hills, it soon becomes quite the arduous affair.

Starting at the Burford Bridge Hotel in the sleepy town of Mickleham, the route heads through Givons Grove before joining quieter, country lanes as it snakes its way

towards Headley. As the vestiges of London's bustling city centre fade, the comforting, tranquil allure of these tiny villages take their place. Making one of its first named appearances in the Domesday Book of 1086, Mickleham is perhaps best known for its rather scant Domesday assets: seven hides, one church, seven ploughs and three acres of meadow – equal to the price of just four hogs.

From one slumberous town to the next, Headley soon transitions into Pebble Coombe, the final village before the route swings onto the testy Box Hill Rd and begins its journey upwards. As you pass through the village of Box Hill be sure to breathe in the fresh country air while you can as your lungs will soon be screaming for it in a matter of minutes.

Surrey's answer to Alp d'Huez, the switchbacks come almost immediately into the testy, 2.4km long climb. There are no steep ramps to fear, but a consistent rise of 5% sure does start to take its toll. As you break the treeline in the final half of the climb, drink in the views and laugh at your riding mates still struggling on the switchback section below.

The climb begins to level off at the summit, giving you the chance to regain your breath before heading to the hilltop café for a well-deserved coffee break.

With rolling vistas as far as the eye can see, this peak is one of the most popular in the whole of Surrey, not just cyclists making the pilgrimage to the top. Once rested and refuelled, begin the short descent down to the T-junction and take a right, straight back to Mickleham to either call an end to your cycling ventures, or start another lap.

You also have the choice to turn left at this junction, adding on another loop to your Surrey Hills excursion. Heading through Dorking and then Ockley, you'll tour even more of the tranquil suburbs just a stone's throw from the capital. It would be wise to make the most of them as soon you'll be climbing yet again, this time up the tougher, steeper Leith Hill – another one of the key climbs used on the London 2012 Olympic course. It's shorter than Box Hill at 2.1km, but its ramps are a whole lot tougher with an average gradient of 6.4% and a leg-breaking 13% section just a few hundred metres before the summit.

As you guzzle air at the top of the climb, make sure to stop for a quick photo. The views may not be as impressive as the ones from Box Hill, but they're still worthy of a photo stop – if not only to let the stragglers catch back up. Follow the descent down into Abinger where you'll then follow signs for Wotton and Westcott to take you back to Dorking and the end of the circuit. When combined with the Box Hill loop, this ride totals an impressive 50km, the perfect distance for a weekend club run or mid-week training ride.

If you find yourself hungry for more by the end of the ride, why not make your way towards two of Surrey's lesser known, but equally as formidable climbs. White Lane is only a short one, a mere 500m long, but with an average gradient of 13% and one ramp of 30%, this is one you may just have to summit on your feet. Barhatch Lane is a longer test, harder than both Leith Hill and Box Hill. Attempt the 2.5km climb at your own peril, the 6% average gradient may sound easy enough, but the roads soon ramp up to a vertigo-inducing 21%.

A ROADIE'S PARADISE

With exquisitely tarmacked surfaces up both Box Hill and Leith Hill, thanks to the 2012 London Olympics, this route is perfect for slick-tyred road bikes. While the surrounding hills do offer up a few trails for the mud-hungry mountain bikers, the loop described is certainly one for the Lycra-clad roadies. In terms of gear ratios, a standard 50/39 with an 11-25 sprocket on the rear will work just fine, the hills aren't too steep and with gradients of only 5-10%, you shouldn't really be searching for the granny gear.

Aside from embarking on your own circuits of the Surrey Hills, there's also a wealth of organised sportives to choose from; the most popular being the RideLondon event which regularly attracts over 100,000 cyclists each year. With three route options, varying in length and difficulty, RideLondon sets off from deep within Surrey, traversing some of the region's most well-known climbs before sprinting to a close on The Mall, right in front of Buckingham Palace. With mobile road closures along the entire route, this is one of the few chances you'll get to really feel like one of the pros.



SLEEPY SURREY HAS ITS SECRETS

The villages around the Surrey Hills may appear remote, slumberous and detached from the hustle and bustle of the nearby capital, but each have their own unique flavour and character to discover. Dorking is the ideal spot for a café stop or impromptu afternoon meal, the Stepping Stones Pub serving up some of the most traditional dishes to satisfy your insatiable mid-ride appetite.

One of the more booming villages in Surrey during 1086 and the writing of the Domesday Book, Dorking boasted an impressive list of assets worth the equivalent of 88 hogs, paying shame to Mickleham's measly four. But perhaps the most valuable asset to be unearthed from Dorking, quite literally dug up in one of the village's surrounding clay pits, are the remains of a fish-eating dinosaur named *Baryonyx walkeri* – a close cousin of the T-Rex-slaying *Spinosaurus* that Spielberg's Jurassic Park franchise taught us so rightly to fear. Its skeleton can be seen mounted at the Natural History Museum in London if you're eager to come face to face with a fearsome predator that roamed the streets of Dorking some 130 million years ago.

If you're planning a longer trip to the Surrey Hills, be sure to check out Waverly Abbey, one of the oldest and most stunning English Heritage sites there is. Runnymede, a town to the north of Surrey, is also worth a visit, particularly to its meadows which are famous for classic British picnics and the signing of the Magna Carta by King John, way back in 1215.

Transport links to the various villages in Surrey are fantastic, a train running every hour from London Victoria to Box Hill and Westhumble. The station is conveniently located at the base of Box Hill's descent and just five minutes from the start of the circuit in Mickleham. Bikes can be taken aboard free of charge if the train has enough space, so make sure you book an off-peak ticket to guarantee a spot.

For a detailed description of the route, [click here](#).

“The Surrey Hills are just a stone's throw from London and offer up some of the best terrain and scenic views that a cyclist could ever ask for.”



THE CELTIC TRAIL

PEMBROKESHIRE, WALES



Named after the once fearsome Celtic conquerors who swept away the vestiges of prehistoric Britain, the trail that runs across Pembrokeshire is every bit as wild and wonderful as the people that carved it some 3,000 years ago.



A TALE OF TWO TRAILS

Travelling from the old Norse trading post of Fishguard, to the country's second most populous city of Swansea, the Celtic Trail embarks on an intrepid tour of Pembrokeshire before drawing to a close in the historically rich Gower Peninsula – an area of Wales once ruled by intuitive Stone Age peoples, bronze-wielding Celts, political pioneers from Rome and savage Viking raiders looking for grain.

Departing from Fishguard, two routes present themselves – one a forested, off-road inland route and the other a winding, wind-battered coastal jaunt. To soak up the most of Pembrokeshire's natural history and inviting allure, the coastal route is the best choice, a 230km (143 mile) epic that can be easily split into four manageable stages.

Following the National Cycle Route 4, the trail meanders its way southwest along the wild Celtic coastline towards the city of St Davids. This is the smallest city in the whole of the UK, boasting a population of just 1,841 people.

The first day doesn't stop here, once you've paused to view the colossal St David's Cathedral and paid your respects to the patron saint of Wales himself, you'll soon be back on the road, following the paths that bend their way around St. Brides Bay.

This final leg of the first stage passes through the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park, an area famous for its crinkled coastline, lonesome beaches and dazzling wildlife – puffins, seals, dolphins and even orcas sighted along the shoreline. Totalling 58km (36 miles), the first day draws to a close in the seaside village of Broad Haven, an area famed for its pair of UFO sightings in 1977. If you can handle the supernatural, Broad Haven is the perfect place to rest up before day two, the seaside resort offering a multitude of guest houses, B&Bs and a YHA.

Day two travels for 74km (46 miles) eastward towards the town of Laugharne which lies on the banks of the River Tâf, one of the three tributaries to the larger Carmarthen Bay. This is the longest stage of the four and arguably the toughest, crossing inland to Haverfordwest before heading towards Pembroke and the seaside town of Tenby.

Set within the cliffside, Tenby's roads hug the high clifftops as they amble their way northwards through Saundersfoot, Wisemans Bridge and the tiny village of Marros – the penultimate stop before the day's end in Laugharne. Like Broad Haven, Laugharne is awash with cosy guest houses and B&B cottages, all sitting within view of the centrally located, 12th century Laugharne Castle.

Ready and raring to embark on the 51km-long (32 miles) third day of the trip, you'll continue to follow the National Cycle Route 4 north east and around the River Towy, another tributary leading into Carmarthen Bay. The roads travel inland where they meet Carmarthen, a town that is believed to be the oldest in Wales according to ancient texts recorded by Claudius Ptolemy, a Greco-Roman scholar from the 1st century.

From Carmarthen, the trail then hugs the eastern side of the River Towy as it heads south towards Kidwelly to mark the end of day three. There are places to rest up in the town's centre, but you'd be missing out on a treat if you didn't opt for one of the Sea View Holiday Chalets just a few miles west of Kidwelly. The self-catering chalets vary

in size with large groups able to split themselves across three, side-by-side along the seafront.

The final day is the shortest of the four, a 46km (29 miles) meander from Kidwelly, through Llanelli and down to Swansea – the final stop on your tour of Pembrokeshire. Pedalling across the traffic-free paths that make up the Millennium Coastal Park, the Brunel Trail and finally, the Swansea Bike Path, the fourth and final day on the Celtic Trail is one almost entirely devoid of cars – a fitting end to your wild and wonderful journey through Wales' rugged lands and fascinating history.

If you're after something a little more off-road, that still shepherds you along a cultural tour of Pembrokeshire, then follow the National Cycle Route 47 from Fishguard. The route encounters forest and rugged trails almost immediately, heading inland towards Rosebush, Tegryn and Carmarthen before coming to a stop in Llanelli. It's a little bit shorter than the coastal route, but with several unforgiving climbs to clamber up and a handful of tricky trails to negotiate, it's arguably the tougher choice of the two.

THE TOURING DREAM

While it's possible to complete the 230km (143 mile) trip from Fishguard to Swansea in a single day, it would be nigh on impossible to experience any of the charm that gives the Celtic Trail its unique, distinguishing character. The route is much more suited to those riders looking for an intrepid adventure around their old, often rusted, steel touring machines – laden with bulging panniers and years of experience out on the road.

The Celtic Trail is made up of quiet coastal roads mixed with traffic-free bike paths, threaded together by narrow, hilly lanes that take you up and around the Pembrokeshire countryside. Much of the roads are tarmacked, but the bike paths that were once railway lines do run along surfaces of compacted earth and gravel so be wary of possible punctures.

This area of Wales is pockmarked by old, disused railway lines turned into bike paths, constructing a wide web throughout Pembrokeshire. There's nothing to keep you on the designated route, so why not construct your own routes using these little detours – whether that's to lessen the load on your fatigued legs or add even more miles onto your adventure.

The adventure needn't be limited to just four days, nor stay within the confines of one pre-determined National Cycle Route. Upon reaching your destination in Swansea, why not hop aboard the National Cycle Route 47 and complete the wooded trail back to Fishguard? It's a 402km (250 mile) round trip and certainly not one for the faint-hearted.



A JOURNEY THROUGH TIME

Laid down 350 million years ago during the Carboniferous period, a time before even dinosaurs set foot on the earth, the building blocks of Pembrokeshire were carefully set. Built upon layers and layers of crumbling limestone, much of Pembrokeshire was lost to the ravaging sea, the weak rocks no match for the waves and the tides. What is left is the crinkled, serrated coastline you'll see along the Celtic Trail, a wild landscape that not only illustrates Wales' natural history but typifies its culturally tumultuous past.

Many of the seaside towns on the first day of the ride are old Norse settlements, their foundations built on raiding and pillaging. As the days tick by and the trail gets ever closer to Carmarthen, you'll begin to transition into an even earlier time period, that of the 1st century Romans. The town of Carmarthen has Roman blood flowing through its veins, remnants of the ancient city still visible within the ruins of the fort and amphitheatre, one of only two surviving Roman amphitheatres in the whole of Wales.

As the trail nears its end and saunters towards Swansea, you'll pass through the Neolithic ruins and standing stones that litter the Gower Peninsula. These sites represent the earliest period in Pembrokeshire's rich, cultural history – marking the transition from early Stone Age people to the fabled bronze-wielding Celtic warriors that made this arable land their home some 3,000 years ago.

Fast forward to the present day and these quaint Pembrokeshire towns are now flooded with rustic eateries and modern guest houses kitted out with facilities for touring cyclists. The Celtic Trail is a touring cyclist's dream, and it's also one of the easiest to get to for those aspiring beginners. The start, in Fishguard, can be easily reached from Carmarthen, one of Pembrokeshire's most bustling railway hubs.

For a detailed description of the route, [click here](#).

“The Celtic Trail is the perfect ride for the two-wheeled adventurers, the route taking you on a wandering tour of Pembrokeshire as you soak up the history of these fascinating lands.”



TOUR OF THE PENNINES

CENTRAL PENNINES, ENGLAND



As the backbone of Northern England, the Pennines straddle the borders between Lancashire to the west and Yorkshire to the east – a natural boundary to separate two bitter rivals from one another. This route through the Central Pennines chooses no side – the wild, rolling roads sewing together centuries of division with joyous cycling fun.

NORTHERN SOUL

Lying on the doorstep of Greater Manchester, the Pennines are a perfect retreat for those looking to escape the hustle and bustle of city life. The Pennines possess a certain kind of abstract beauty, one best described by the medium of song or painting. It's a type of beauty that one has to squint at before really understanding the majesty that lies before them, the sombre rolling moorlands a rather acquired taste – a northern delicacy if you will.

This 120km-long (75 mile) out-and-back route from Rochdale tackles over 2,400m of climbing, featuring some of the most fabled climbs of the Central Pennines. Heading east from Rochdale, you'll soon dispense with the traffic laden roads of the town centre and jump onto the well-paved, wide roads towards Littleborough. The climbing starts in earnest, the foreboding passage of Blackstone Edge lying just ahead. This hill is the Pennine's answer to the Alps, a scenic, twisting road that consistently climbs at an average gradient of 6% for 4.5km.

The summit is marked by The White House pub, the lure of a refreshing pint or sugary soft drink fiendishly drawing you in. Forgoing the temptations of a rest, carry on along the short plateau at the top of Blackstone Edge where a speedy descent lies in wait. Faster than a cannonball, make your way down this hill towards the valley town of Ripponden – home to a small but lavishly stocked Tesco ready to satisfy your insatiable, mid-ride appetite.

The route carves its way straight through Ripponden and onwards through the town of Sowerby Bridge before arriving at the centre of Mytholmroyd – a small village that marks the base of the longest climb of the day. Swinging south and across the bridge, you'll soon be pedalling towards the infamous stretch of road known as 'Cragg Vale' – only the longest continuous uphill gradient in the whole of England.

The boasting sign at the base of the climb certainly doesn't lie, the roads dragging their way through the tree-covered valley before braking onto moorland at the halfway point. It is here that you're left at the true mercy of Mother Nature, the winds barrelling their way down the valley, hitting you square in the face. As you summit the 8.8km-long climb, you'll arrive at a very recognisable junction – it's the same one you rode past just an hour before when you summited the adjacent climb of Blackstone Edge. Once again, head down the fast descent towards Ripponden, this time swinging right from the village's centre to the foot of the next climb – the devilishly steep Ripponden Bank.

The steepest ramps of 20% fall right at the start of the climb, but if you can build up enough speed on the downhill section just before, it's possible to scurry up them without having to grind the gears. The rest of the 1.1 km climb averages 10%, taking you to the small village of Barkisland. From here, the roads swing south and up to the top of the vast, sprawling moors that look down over Scammonden water and its colossal dam.

Just as you begin to question whether the gruelling slog to the top of the moors will ever end, the scenic descent towards Denshaw presents itself – your first taste of the quaint and quirky Saddleworth villages. Heading through the next village of Delph and then Diggle, you'll reach the foot of the next climb – one locally known as 'Beard Hill'. The surface is cracked and uneven, climbing at an average gradient of 8% for 2km up to the top of Standedge Cutting. From there, a long sweeping descent takes you to Marsden and the following town of Slaithwaite – two gems just on the outskirts of Halifax.

Slaithwaite lies a little over the halfway point, marking the perfect spot for a café or lunch stop. The Handmade Bakery is hidden away along the canal, serving up some of the most delicious homemade breads and expertly brewed coffees on this side of the Pennines. As you leave the vestigial aromas of fresh bread behind and head towards Meltham, you'll draw ever closer to one of the final, but most gruelling climbs of the day – that of Wessenden Head.

It is neither the length (4km), nor the average gradients (7.5%) that make this climb the toughest of the day. It is rather the prevailing winds and blind summits on the latter slopes that really begin to wreck both your legs and already fading morale. A long, seemingly never-ending plateau is faced at the top; this is the highest and most weather-beaten point on the route, only heaven knows you're miserable now as you trudge your way back towards Saddleworth and the comforting arms of Greenfield.

From Greenfield back to Rochdale, you'll stare down two smaller climbs that if not for the distance already covered, would be summited at ease. However, with over 2,000m of climbing already in the legs by this point, you're soon reduced to a crawl over these cold and lonely roads. Rochdale may not be best-known for its welcoming charm and inviting allure, but by the end of this epic ride, you'll be thanking each and every sign that directs your route back to the finishing town.

ONE FOR THE STRONG

This route is not only for those with the strongest of legs, but also those with the strongest of wills and unwavering morale. This isn't a region that's blessed by sun and as a result it's not uncommon that rides are stopped in their tracks by hellish downpours. Mustering the strength and will to soldier on is the hardest part, but equally one of the most rewarding – particularly when you pause to reflect on your epic ride within the cosy confines of one of the route's many roadside cafés.

As you'd expect, the Central Pennines is a paradise for eager road cyclists looking to conquer some of the country's toughest climbs. A compact groupset is recommended, as are large rear sprockets to help boost you over some of the leg-breaking percentages faced on Wessenden Head and Ripponden Bank. With so many alternative road routes available, in and around the valleys that litter the central Pennines, you can take that

route aforementioned and mix it up into a whole new order, tackling the featured climbs from their other sides.

This region also caters for mountain bikers and casual family riding groups, the traffic-free paths around Hollingworth Lake – in Littleborough – perfect for a Sunday saunter. For those looking for some off-road trail blazing, then paths around Dovestones reservoir, just off of Greenfield, are ideal. Take the meandering path that clambers its way up Chew Valley Rd, from the boat house at the bottom to the clandestine reservoir at the top. The climb is covered in coarse gravel and contains gruelling ramps of over 15% for 2km, making it one of the toughest ascents in the whole of the Pennines. The views at the summit are extraordinary, well worth the mammoth effort it took to clamber up this mountainside.

THE HOME OF MODERN MUSIC

Lying in the foothills of the Pennines are the great, industrial engines of Sheffield, Manchester, Leeds and Liverpool. These cities have gone on to create some of the world's most well-known innovations, as well as produce some of the most listened to bands of the 21st century. Propelling the northern cities into pop super stardom, these purveyors of no-nonsense, quintessentially British pop-rock are heralded as the region's true heroes – those that put the Pennines on the musical map of the world.

Providing the epic soundtrack to your Tour of the Pennines ride, these bands typify the very roads that you ride upon – their lyrics sombre like the moors, but their beats and melodies warm and inviting, just like the quaint towns that litter the Pennine valleys. It is in these smaller towns that some of the Pennine's best kept secrets can be found – particularly within Hebden Bridge, a village that the Guardian refer to as a 'rain-soaked paradise'. Set within the crumbling ruins of old millworks, lie quirky independent shops seemingly detached from the rest of the world. This is Hebden Bridge in a nutshell, it is detached, but it's certainly not behind – they carve their own unique niche there and it is certainly one town worthy of a visit.

Also worthy of a stop are the several Saddleworth villages that line the route – all of them awash with cosy cafés and rustic, English pubs. Uppermill lies at the centre of Saddleworth and is the pick of the bunch for any organised stop or impromptu mid-ride break. From pub grub at The Waggon Inn, to bulging butties at Buckley's Bakery, there's no better place to stop and refuel for the homeward stretch back to Rochdale.

Accessing the route via train is incredibly easy, especially since the start of the ride sets off from the entrance of Rochdale train station – a quick 20 minute journey from one of the larger Manchester stations. Greenfield lies at the centre route and is also easily accessed from Manchester, the journey taking you on a scenic, 45-minute tour of the city's surrounding countryside.

For a detailed description of the route, [click here](#).



“Taking you on a musical tour of the Central Pennines, this route from Rochdale is one best enjoyed with friends – if not only to use them as windbreaks for when you inevitably find yourself at the mercy of Mother Nature.”

INSYNC