

Feature

STAYCATION

THE PANDEMIC MAY BE A STICK IN THE SPOKES FOR FOREIGN CYCLING PLANS BUT



Photo by Joolze Dymond



DOMINIC BLISS
Journalist

During lockdown, Dominic wore through multiple tyres on the trails of suburban London and the Surrey Hills

INSPIRATION

THERE ARE PLENTY OF GREAT RIDES IN THE UK. DOMINIC BLISS OFFERS SUGGESTIONS

With its lockdowns and travel restrictions, 2020 will long be remembered as the year of the staycation. And who knows? Perhaps 2021 will follow suit? While we may not be allowed to ride our bikes abroad where we'd like next year, there are benefits to staying within the four home nations of the UK.

Granted, the weather doesn't always play ball, but you can't deny that our countryside offers some astoundingly beautiful biking opportunities, whether you choose to stay on the road or venture off it. There's the added bonus that, by travelling within the British Isles, you're cutting down enormously on your carbon footprint and saving yourself money in the process.

Of course, domestic travel restrictions are as tough to predict as international ones. Next year we may still be cycling in groups of six. Whatever the rules, there are countless routes for roadies, touring cyclists, gravel bikers and mountain bikers to enjoy, whatever their level of expertise and fitness. Here are some suggestions for all types of trails in all four of the home nations.



ENGLAND

Off-road ride • The Pennine Bridleway (southern section) • 130km/81 miles • GPX: cyclinguk.org/route/PennineBridleway

Tackle the Pennine Bridleway and you'll soon see why they call the Pennines the "backbone of Britain". This trail, on a combination of minor roads, gravel tracks and stone paving, runs 205 miles from Derbyshire to Cumbria across open moorland, river valleys and the beautiful countryside of both the Peak District and Yorkshire Dales National Parks. It also forms part of Cycling UK's Great North Trail, so you could keep going all the way to Cape Wrath or John o' Groats!

Following the route of centuries-old droveways and packhorse trails, it has been modernised with equestrians and mountain bikers in mind. Although it traces a different route from the Pennine Way hiking trail, it runs broadly parallel. With many gates and road crossings to negotiate, it is mostly well waymarked.

The bridleway owes its existence to a keen horse rider called Mary Towneley, after whom one section looping off the main trail has been named. In 1986, Mary rode 250 miles from Northumberland to Derbyshire to highlight the poor state of Britain's bridleways.

PEAK DISTRICT TRAILS

While the entire 205 miles of the Pennine Bridleway is too demanding to complete in a weekend (unless you're superhuman), the southern section – from Middleton Top to Hebden Bridge, not far from the start of the Mary Towneley Loop – is a great and still fairly demanding taster. Start at Middleton Top visitor centre, near Wirksworth, and follow the High Peak Trail along a disused railway.

Soon you'll find yourself in the rolling hills of the Peak District National Park, and on an old packhorse road that connects Tideswell to Hayfield. Next you skirt the eastern edge of Greater Manchester, and then you head northwest across moorland and past several reservoirs to Hillingworth Lake. Just north of here is the start of the Mary Towneley Loop, and beyond that Hebden Bridge.

Heather Procter is the Pennine National Trails partnership manager. She describes what off-road bikers can expect: "The most southerly section of the trail between

Middleton Top and Parsley Hay follows the High Peak Trail, a reasonably level track along disused railway lines. This section offers views over surrounding White Peak countryside, and glimpses of the industrial heritage of the railways. Parsley Hay through to Peak Forest gives riders a great feel for the White Peak, traversing the limestone plateau with rolling pastures, stone walls, and steep wooded dales.

"The limestone grasslands of the area, including the nature reserve at Chee Dale, are full of wildlife in the summer. Peak Forest to Hayfield signals the move into the Dark Peak, on the millstone grit and around the edges of blanket bogs and heather moorland. Hayfield to Uppermill provides great views over the surrounding landscapes, and a first glimpse of the reservoirs which are to become familiar. Uppermill to Summit is characterised by long climbs and extraordinary contrasts between the bleak, remote moorland of the Pennine edge and the roads and towns of the South Pennines." ● nationaltrail.co.uk/en_GB/trails/pennine-bridleway cyclinguk.org/offroadcampaigns/great-north-trail

Walsden Moor near Todmorden, on the Pennine Bridleway and the Great North Trail



Left: Joolize Dymond

FAMILY/BEGINNER

● **Tamsin Trail • 11.7km/7.3 miles**

Richmond Park in south west London is best known as a busy roadie hangout. However, for beginners and youngsters the off-road Tamsin Trail, around the park perimeter, is perfect. This wide, well-maintained gravel track loops for 7.3 miles, through trees, copses of bracken and the odd herd of deer. There are two short but steep climbs. There's easy access from railway stations, including Richmond, Norbiton, North Sheen and Mortlake.

bit.ly/cycle-tamsintrail

TOURING

● **Peddars Way & Norfolk Coast Cycleway • 134km/83 miles**

These two routes link up to offer an 83-mile easy-going tour of Norfolk on a mixture of off-road and on-road surfaces. Start near Thetford and follow the flat-as-a-pancake Peddars Way (an old Roman road) for 46 miles to Hunstanton on a combination of dirt paths, gravel tracks, forest trails and short tarmac sections. Then take the Norfolk Coast Cycleway, a 37-mile chain of quiet public roads from Hunstanton to Sheringham. There are stations at both Thetford and Sheringham.

bit.ly/cycle-peddars-norfolkcoast



SCOTLAND

Touring • The North Coast 500 •
835km/519 miles • GPX: cyclinguk.org/route/NorthCoast500



Head north of the border and the weather can be inclement, especially on the west coast, where the midgies – which descend in their hordes in summer – will frustrate even the most stoical cyclist. But of all the four home nations, the natural scenery of Scotland cannot be beaten.

To witness some of the very best, embark on a legendary road route called the North Coast 500. Some call it “Scotland’s Route 66”. Yet this 500-mile tarmacked tourist route around the Scottish Highlands sees a lot less traffic than the famous road trip from Chicago to Los Angeles.

Although it can get busy in the summer season as motorists – some of them not the most responsible drivers – negotiate the route, outside of the tourist season there are rural sections where you’d be lucky to spot anything speedier than Highland cattle.

HIGHLAND SCENERY

Riding clockwise, the route starts in Inverness and takes in some gloriously Caledonian sights including windswept coastal roads, snaking inlets, rugged sea cliffs, loch-spanning bridges, deserted sandy beaches, fairytale castles, little known Gaelic villages, island-dotted bays, imposing Highland Munros, and mainland Britain’s most northerly point. It runs for 519 miles in all, with an elevation gain of around 10,500 metres, and would take a fit and experienced touring cyclist five days or more. Former professional cyclist James McCallum holds the course record – 31 hours and 23 minutes.

“It was like nothing I had ever taken in before and a million miles from what I did as a professional athlete,” the cyclist said after completing his ride in 2018. “Yes, I have done many races around the world but none of them had the combination of the constant elevation changes or the beautiful scenery of the NC500.”

Most cyclists tackle the route clockwise, to benefit from the southwesterly winds that prevail on Scotland’s west coast. There is plenty of accommodation en route, and many great spots for wild camping.



Above: The spectacular climb of Bealach na Ba
Below: Loch Eriboll on the north coast



Heading west from Inverness, the route first crosses the southern section of the North West Highlands on A-roads towards the Applecross peninsula. Before you reach the coast you’ll face the toughest test of the entire ride, and arguably the toughest road climb anywhere in Britain: Bealach na Ba. Once that’s completed, for the remainder of the route you mostly hug the coastal roads, twisting, turning, rising and dropping as you skirt the entirety of the top section of the Northwest Highlands, taking in Ullapool, Durness, Thurso, John o’ Groats, Lybster, Helmsdale, Dingwall and back to Inverness.

Since he holds the record, the last word on this Scottish classic really should come from James McCallum. “Plan for every eventuality both mechanically and from a weather perspective. Scotland can be both very beautiful and brutal at the same time.” ●

northcoast500.com

OFF-ROAD RIDE

• **Glasgow to Loch Ossian • 179km/111 miles**

Obscura Mondo Cycling Club’s An Turas Mor route takes you off-road from Glasgow into the Highlands proper. This is a two-day slice of it. The first leg to Balquhitter Station is a good warm up through the Trossachs. The more challenging second leg makes good use of tracks built for Scotland’s new hydro schemes and ends at the remote Loch Ossian youth hostel. anturasmor.co.uk

FAMILY/BEGINNER

• **Fort Augustus to Laggan Locks • 18km/11 miles**

The Great Glen slices diagonally across the neck of Scotland, coast to coast. For beginners or families, the 11-mile section between Fort Augustus and Laggan Locks – on flat towpaths and cycle paths – is the perfect introduction. It starts at the southern end of Loch Ness and skirts Loch Oich as far as the northern tip of Laggan Locks. Even beginners can make the journey there and back in a day.

highland.gov.uk/greatglenway



WALES

Family/beginner • Mawddach Trail
• 15km/9.5 miles • GPX: cyclinguk.org/route/MawddachTrail

Wales boasts some of the UK's finest mountain bike centres and – when you reach the middle of the principality – some gloriously traffic-free roads. Mid-Wales is also home to this cycle and walking path alongside the Mawddach Estuary. It once featured in the Julia Bradbury BBC TV series *Railway Walks*.

The well-surfaced track follows the final section of a former railway line that originally linked Barmouth with Ruabon, in North Wales, and the West Midlands beyond. Between 1869 and 1965 it brought holidaymakers to the coast. But as part of the Beeching cuts in the 1960s, it was deemed surplus to requirements. The railway's loss was the cyclist's gain.

Suitable even for beginners, it starts in the market town of Dolgellau, in the car park next to the bridge, and gently winds along the southern edge of the estuary, mostly flat and clearly marked the entire way. But thanks to the amazing views south towards Cadair Idris, you'll at least get a psychological sense of the steep ground surrounding you.

Eventually you approach the mouth of the estuary and turn right over Barmouth railway bridge. Here is the only section that beginners or youngsters might find tricky as the route follows the A496 into Barmouth town, but fortunately only for 300 metres.

THE BEST RAIL TRAIL IN WALES?

"The Mawddach Trail is easily one of the most spectacular railway walks that Britain has to offer," says the trail website. "There are stunning views across to Diffwys and the Rhinogs, and up the estuary to Y Garn and the Arans beyond Dolgellau. Pretty much the whole of the estuary is listed as a site of special scientific interest. There are two RSPB reserves (Taicynhaef and Arthog), and a whole host of historical sites to ponder over as you make your way through this beautiful landscape."

Julia Bradbury describes the route well in the BBC episode of *Railway Walks* dedicated to the trail. She starts by heading west out of Dolgellau, following the river and the bypass towards the head



Above: Mountain backdrop to a flat route
Below: Barmouth Bridge is 699m long



of the Mawddach estuary. "From here the old railway makes its own path, across the reed bed and floodplains to meet the River Mawddach at Penmaenpool Bridge," she says. "Now the river really begins to look like an estuary. The railway path hugs the south banks as it follows the corridor through the Welsh hills. Then there's a long curve as trains once reached the bustling Barmouth Junction, the final landmark before the stunning approach to Barmouth itself. Barmouth Bridge may be man-made, but what finer way could there be to reach the Welsh west coast?"

Once you've reached this coast, perhaps you'll have plenty of energy left to turn around and head the 9.5 miles back to Dolgellau. ●

mawddachtrail.co.uk

ROAD RIDE

• The Dragon Devil • 298km/185 miles

Margam Park, near Port Talbot in South Wales, is the starting point for one of Wales's best known sportives, the Dragon Ride. Since it's an open-road sportive you can, of course, ride it at any time of year. The organisers offer four routes; the longest, at 185 miles, is called the Dragon Devil which takes in several peaks above 500 metres in the Brecon Beacons. Total ascent? 4,396 metres.

dragonride.co.uk

OFF-ROAD RIDE

• The Trans-Cambrian Way • 160km/100 miles

This behemoth of a trail stretches 100-odd miles from Knighton, on the English border, all the way to Dovey Junction, near Wales's west coast, taking in the remote hills and moorlands of mid-Wales, on country lanes, moorland tracks, and dirt trails.

transcambrianway.org.uk



NORTHERN IRELAND

Road ride • **Kingfisher Trail (Northern Loop)**

• 160km/100 miles • GPX: cyclinguk.org/route/KingfisherTrail

Head away from Northern Ireland's major cities and you'll quickly discover some gloriously traffic-calmed country roads over rivers and rolling hills, and alongside beautiful lakes – or loughs. One of the best is the Kingfisher Trail, a 300-mile or so route (depending on which turns you take) through the border counties of Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic. One of its prettiest sections is the Northern Loop, a 100-mile circular ride in the south west of Northern Ireland, around Lower Lough Erne, mainly on quiet country roads.

Most cyclists start in the town of Enniskillen but unfortunately there's no railway station here. You can choose to tackle the Northern Loop clockwise or anti-clockwise. This description assumes the former.

After heading southwest out of Enniskillen you'll soon wiggle past Florence Court House, and then to the north of Gortmacconnell Rock, up to Lower Lough MacNea. Now you briefly dip into the Irish Republic as you pass through the towns of Blacklion and Belcoo, before heading northwest past Ballintempo Forest and then along the northern edge of Lough Melvin. At Belleek you make a tiny loop into the Irish Republic's County Donegal, before crossing the River Erne, then north of Lough Scolban, to the edge of the mightier Lower Lough Erne. Now you follow a long, circuitous route around this lough, south back to Enniskillen.

A LOOP AROUND LOUGHS

Sights along the way include the Marble Arch Caves – a vast system of limestone caves accessed via a subterranean boat trip – and Ireland's oldest pottery in Belleek.

On the return leg there are the wonderful forest parks at Castle Caldwell and Castle Archdale, as well as some pretty islands on the eastern edge of Lower Lough Erne. If you're lucky, you might spot one of the brilliantly coloured birds after which the route is named.



Below: A quiet lane in County Fermanagh, NI
Below: Upper Lough Erne



Martin Hughes is a touring cyclist from Cork. He and six friends rode much of the route one year in June. "You need to keep your wits about you, especially in towns," he offers by way of advice. "We found that it was good to keep the map to hand while cycling so you would be expecting the next place to turn. It is very easy to miss turns, especially when tired after a long day. The signs are often partly obscured by vegetation." ●

kingfishercycletrail.com

BEGINNER/FAMILY

• **Castlewellan Castle trail** •

4km/2.5 miles

The gentle, circular green Castlewellan Castle trail, on well-maintained forest paths, skirts the shore of the lake and passes by the pretty Victorian Castlewellan Castle. Even though it's off-road, it offers an easy gradient and is only 2.5 miles long. Perfect for total beginners to off-road biking or even the smallest of cyclists.

mountainbikenl.com/castlewellan

TOURING

• **Loughshore Trail** • 182km/113 miles

Lough Neagh is the largest lake in the British Isles. The 113-mile Loughshore Trail (Route 94 of the National Cycle Network) uses quiet country lanes to circumnavigate the lough, taking in nature reserves, parks, marinas, castles and islands along the way.

bit.ly/cycle-loughshoretrail

CTC HOLIDAYS: BACK IN THE SADDLE

Like other travel businesses, CTC Cycling Holidays had to cancel many trips in 2020 due to Covid-19. But our volunteer-led company has worked hard and is optimistic about holidays in 2021, with many more planned in the UK. For details, visit cyclingholidays.org.

CTC Cycling Holidays is unique in being run by volunteers. They design and run cycling trips for everyone from beginners to adventurous travellers – in the UK, Europe, and worldwide. We're looking to recruit more volunteers to help run our trips. Your expenses are covered when leading rides. Please advise us



on your ride or tour leading experience, but training is provided. Get in touch via the Contact Us link on the top right of the website homepage: cyclingholidays.org.

Left & below left: Alamy