

Don't forget the dog!

Expeditions don't require exotic destinations or big distances, only a sense of adventure – as **Judy Mapledoram** and family discovered in Devon

Why don't we cycle down to Grandad's next year? It was just an idea at first; he lives over 70 miles away. But it grabbed the attention of the children. 'Could we?' they asked. 'Isn't it too far?'

There were lots of questions to be answered. Would the children both be on their own bikes? Should I take the tandem so they could take turns on the back? How could I carry all the camping equipment? And not least: what about the dog?

The dog in question is a German Shepherd. She is used to me cycling. I just hold the lead and she runs alongside. My main worry was whether her feet would get sore if she ran too much on roads.

Thinking inside the box

We decided we needed a trial run, so one Saturday afternoon in June we set off for Horner, which is about 10 miles from home. I took a trailer for the camping equipment.

We arrived at the campsite in good time and enjoyed our celebrity status – everyone was fascinated that we had come on bikes. Small children kept asking 'Where's your car?'

While our trial run proved we could do it, there were still things bothering me. Firstly, the dog needed to be able to ride on the downhills to save her feet from getting sore. Secondly, towing a trailer was awkward on the tiny lanes we were using.

The solution to both problems was a cargo bike. I justified the extravagance of buying one by telling myself that it might make

the difference between getting to Grandad's and not. I bought a Madsen cargo bike, then made a box to go on the back. I wanted the box to be fairly narrow so the dog wouldn't be able to move from side to side too much and knock me off balance. I also needed to be able to carry the camping gear.

A difficult hill start

By this time it was August. I'd have liked another trial run but there wasn't time – so we just went. I had planned to ride to Wiveliscombe and then to Tiverton, partly using the path by the canal. This would be fairly flat and quiet, making for an easy start. Unfortunately the nearest campsite to this route didn't allow children. So we had to go uphill instead and camp at Wimbleball Lake.

There were a few problems with the bikes the first day. We had to stop to fix brakes, tighten up racks and adjust rubbing mudguards. I had prepared the children for the very long hill on the first day, but it was still hard – after Roadwater it seemed forever until we crossed the main road at the top. Ryan fell off his bike too. I wondered if I were doing the right thing. He *never* falls off his bike. Perhaps the trip was too much for an eight year old?

According to the leaflet about Wimbleball Lake there was a cycle path around it, offering a route across the dam up to the Haldon Hill car park. But it was hard going, so we went back around the top of the lake and up the

road to Upton. It isn't called Upton for nothing. By the time we got to Haldon Hill we felt we'd already put in a good day's cycling.

At Bampton I should have headed straight for the Exe Valley, but I was seduced by the sight of National Cycle Route 3, promising a nice quiet road to Tiverton. Unfortunately it meant a *very* long climb, and as I had told the children it would be all downhill to Tiverton they were not best pleased with me. It was also very hot.

Paws for thought

When we reached the top, we had a long cool ride down through woodland into Tiverton. Going this way, we came out right near my friend's house without hitting any main roads in the town.

We had a lovely evening in Tiverton and camped in my friend's back garden. I was a bit worried about the dog's paws but said nothing. However, in the morning it was apparent that the dog needed time off – no running on hard roads for her that day. I didn't want to stay in Tiverton, so we decided to leave the dog at Tiverton, cycle on to the next campsite (only







Fact file

Minehead to Whitstone & back

DISTANCE: 160 miles total; 10-20 miles covered each day.

TERRAIN: Very hilly! If I had not had the dog to help pull my loaded cargo bike up the hills, I would not have managed it.

On the way from Barnstaple up onto Exmoor, the children really struggled and I used a rope to tie the children's bikes onto the back of my bike – and the dog pulled us all up!

CONDITIONS: A typical UK summer. We got some rain but not too much.

ACCOMMODATION: Camping was from £10 to £20 per night but free with friends and relatives! We stopped at Wimbleball Lake, West Middlewick Farm, Dolton, Smytham Manor and Westermill Farm – which I found on the internet, and then plotted our route around.

MAPS: Goldeneye map of Exmoor and North Devon (ISBN 1-85965-182-8)

BIKES USED: The children both had Raleigh Starz bikes with 24-inch wheels. These bikes are rather girly so I painted one of them blue. My bike was a Madsen cargo bike. I made a wooden box to go on the back for the dog. Our cooking equipment went in the box with the dog and sleeping bags and tent were tied on the outside and underneath. The children carried their own clothes and I carried everything else.

WHERE NEXT: We plan to cycle to Ilfracombe and get the new ferry over to Swansea, where we'll join the cycle route there.

nine miles away) and have my friend bring the dog over in the car in the afternoon. That way we would still make progress but the dog would rest her paws. It worked really well: we made good time and got to our campsite in two hours.

The next day's leg would be longest so far, so it was vital that the dog got on the bike. We set off in drizzle and had a good ride along the top of a line of hills and finally down into Chawleigh. The views were great, with Dartmoor in the distance to our left and Exmoor on our right. I was feeling better by now: the dog had worked out what the bike was for and I was able to stop worrying about her feet.

The children were good too. It was the longest day of cycling and we had to keep going. We made it to Dolton at about four o'clock and were pleased with the campsite. We celebrated with a pub meal.

Mush, mush!

The final day would be a long one too, but we set off in good spirits and got to Sheepwash for lunch. My plan was to follow NCN Route 3 again, through Black Torrington to Holsworthy, and so keep off the main roads. However, after Black Torrington the hills were terrible. They were so steep that if I hadn't had the dog to get out and pull, I don't know if I would have been able to get my heavy bike up them.

On the plus side the roads were quiet. So quiet, in fact, that

we could sit down on them to rest without expecting a car to come along. I realised that this was a bad sign in many ways: if there was no traffic on the road, it probably didn't go anywhere! We spent several hours struggling along these lanes and finally when we were only two miles from Holsworthy, I gave up and we went back to the main road.

It was such a joy to be on a road that went somewhere, and we did the last two miles in about 10 minutes! From Holsworthy to Whitstone, I knew where I was going because I had cycled this road many times as a teenager

(Clockwise from top left) The children carried their own clothes. The rest, and the dog, went on the cargo bike. Judy designed the route around the best campsites

"The hills were so steep the dog had to get out and pull"

when I lived with my parents.

After a few days of rest and surfing at the beach, we were ready to hit the road again for the trip back. It took four days instead of the five it took to get there. Overall, it was a brilliant trip, and we can't wait to do another one. The highlights were seeing the way people's eyes popped out of their heads when they saw the dog on the bike, and eating chocolate cake at Simonsbath. By the end of the trip, the bike had been christened 'the Mad Mum'.