

Christmas Crackers

Mince pie runs, Boxing Day rides, mountain biking in the snow... The Christmas season is as good as any for getting out on your bike. Rob Ainsley explains

A typical Christmas dinner with trimmings packs 956 calories, according to the British Nutrition Foundation. Add cake (249 calories), pudding (587), a pint (185), two mince pies with cream (368×2), and a few glasses of wine ($87 \times n$), and you can see why many people's New Year Resolution is to get that flat-tyred bike out of the garage.

My level five miles to work uses 85 calories, according to my odometer's arbitrary-looking figure. At that rate, I'd have to cycle 175 miles to burn off my mum's Christmas lunch. So it's just as well there are lots of other reasons for cycling over the holiday period, not just cancelling out a surfeit of plum duff. Going out for a spin is the perfect antidote to yuletide ennui: those gaping holes between the Queen's speech and the blockbuster film, or Boxing Day and New Year, that can't be plugged with nuts and sherry.

It's also an experience in itself. Roads feel better, with virtually no lorries and only a few

family cars doing the rounds. In cities, the absence of buses on Christmas and Boxing Day makes the streets blissfully quiet – but the street cleaners are off too, so watch out for broken glass. Railways are at a standstill, as may you be after that dinner, so keep distances modest (no sag-wagon train back). Daylight's short (8am-4pm in London, only 9am-3.30pm in Inverness) so make the most of it.

Pubs are usually open at Christmas lunchtime but not evening; finding an open café or eatery will be tricky, so phone before to check. If you live near an ethnic area where 25th December is another working day, enjoy the difference and try a new restaurant.

Any present is an excuse for a ride: why not test-drive that new pair of socks? Do your family-and-friends visits on two wheels – no risk of drink-driving (although drunk cycling is obviously a no-no).

Everyone's friendly. Ambling round on

Every year, cyclists in Walthamstow put an extra seasonal flourish to their carol singing



Christmas morning you'll be greeted cheerily by dads in new sweaters and kids taking their new 50-quid mountain bikes round the block for the first (and probably last) time.

A white Christmas is the unlikeliest for years, says William Hill (London 9/2, Glasgow 7/1). But if it snows, a bike is the best way to enjoy countryside whiteouts, or your town wrapped in cotton wool.

So enjoy that seasonal spirit from the saddle, like the cyclists on these pages, and earn your rosy cheeks from fresh air rather than the sherry. Then if you do over-indulge with Christmas pudding, at least you have an excuse. You might even have worked off a few calories.



Bottom: left: Rob Ainsley; Right: Matt Hodges

Crisp dry days are great for getting out on the bike, so long as you wrap up warm enough

MY SEASONAL RIDE



NIGEL DEAKIN
Will be on Cambridge DA's annual Christmas morning ride.

'This is probably our shortest ride of the year, but one of our best-attended,

with about 20 riders. We meet at a civilised 10am and ride at a gentle pace through familiar local lanes for about 20 miles. We end up at a pub approximately five miles from Cambridge before making our individual ways home for lunch.

'There's always something special about riding on Christmas morning. Everyone we meet seems in a good mood. Christmas Day is traditionally a day for over-eating and drinking a bit more than usual so it is nice to get some exercise before returning home to carry on the tradition!'

Details: Meet 10am corner of Brookside/ Lensfield Road in Cambridge. More at www.ctc-cambridge.org.uk



CTC CHAIR JILL KIERAN
Will be cycling in rural Hertfordshire on Boxing Day

'Usually on Boxing Day I ride on my 1922 Raleigh loop-frame bicycle to Sarratt, a few miles from here, to a huge informal

gathering of old transport: bicycles, tractors, steam engines, veteran motor bikes and cars, everything.

'The event at Sarratt has been the traditional ride for many cycling groups from West London, Hertfordshire and Buckinghamshire for many years. It is a pleasant ride from the West London suburbs and takes you to rural Hertfordshire as well as the past.'



BARRY MASON
Will be leading the 2512, a Christmas Day ride through London

'We start late morning, see some unknown bits of wonderful Southwark, and

break at a riverside pub. Then it's central London for the sights and parks. Around 3pm or so we'll have a late lunch at a wonderfully accommodating Lebanese cafe on Edgware Road that caters for omnivores, veggies and vegans. And then drift back towards Southwark and maybe a pub. It's a slow ride, paced for all: maybe 30 miles in four hours.

'The first year, 2002, three people joined me on a wet day. Last year about 170 turned up. We're now listed in Time Out and the papers. I love the mix: some regulars but mostly new faces, some tourists even.

'Some people are out for an hour or two before a family day, some are delighted to escape the TV, some might be home alone that day otherwise, some seem to want to stay out forever. I hope the four German goths in drag and high heels turn up again, but who knows!

'Christmas is so commercialised. For me the ride is an antidote to all that. It's the most smiley ride of the year too: everyone in childishly good sociable moods. Pedestrians love us. And almost no other traffic! In many ways it's what the season is all about at its roots: peace and goodwill to all.

'If you want to try it where you live, give people a lie in. Don't start too early. Be inclusive. Make sure the ride's clearly for everybody and that it's easy. Tell local media – it's newsworthy. Don't be put off if only a few people turn up the first year; there will be more next time.

Details: Meet 10am Cutty Sark / 11am Southwark Needle. More at www.southwarkcyclists.org.uk

