

The weekend getaway

Cycling groups have been enjoying hostelling weekends for decades. Last autumn, **Julie Rand** and riding companions headed for the Yorkshire Dales with mountain bikes

Friday afternoon in the supermarket and the nine of us are smiling. We're not here for the weekly groceries: we only came in to change into cycling gear and cleated shoes in the toilets. We emerge, clattering past shoppers, not as middle-aged parents with sensible day jobs but as weekend warriors primed for action. Another half hour nevertheless disappears as we reassemble bikes in the car park, add and remove layers, and stuff Camelbak pockets with snacks and tools – a process known to all cyclists as 'faffing'. Finally, we're ready to go.

We're in Settle for a hostelling weekend in the Yorkshire Dales. It's an activity as old as hostels, cycling and CTC. Today times have changed and it is no longer a requirement to arrive under your own steam. Many hostellers use the network as a fixed base for expeditions into the surrounding area rather than as stopovers when touring. We're here for three days of what would have been called rough-stuff riding. Weekend organiser Paul has planned three rides based on routes in the 'Yorkshire Dales Mountain Biking Guides' by Nick Cotton.

The Dales offer inspiring scenery, good facilities, and easy access via the M6. For us the riding will be a challenging change from the more genteel terrain of the Surrey Hills, where we meet regularly throughout the year to ride and enjoy a beer together. 'We' is an informal group of 20 or so riders. In the summer we meet weekly for a local night ride, with occasional outings further afield. This weekend there are nine of us, including my husband Roland and the only other female rider apart from myself, Alex.

Endless autumn skies

Today's ride is a short one that should see us back at the car park in time to get from Settle to our base at Ingleton YHA before dark. Leaving the shoppers to their chores, we



Feeling on top of the world: the gang at the trig point on the Calf in the Howgills

cycle out of town along the main road. My grin starts to fade as we turn onto a stony track that will take us up into the wild, rocky landscape around Malham Cove. So much for the gentle warm-up I was hoping for!

As the climb progresses I stay at the back, admiring the skill of those who skim over the rocks like dragonflies over water. By the time we reach the crest of the hill, I'm lagging behind and am worried about my fitness and bike handling ability. Roland mutters something about the back brake of my bike being sticky. I lift the rear wheel and try to spin it: it barely turns. Wilf takes an Allen key to it and suddenly the wheel moves freely. 'Poor maintenance' joke the others, a jibe aimed at anybody whose bike develops a fault. Relief floods through me as we begin the fast, rolling grassy descent, briefly catching the glorious views to Malham Tarn in the distance. It's a stunning start to the weekend.

At Ingleborough Youth Hostel, Roland and I have a room to ourselves while Alex is the only occupant of a female dormitory and the other six 'lads' are all together. After many emails to and fro, this is the best possible arrangement. Roland feels a little aggrieved at missing out on the 'blokey' banter, but knows he will sleep better without the collective snoring.

Dinner is a two-mile walk away

through the darkness to the cosy Marton Arms in Thornton in Lonsdale. I hardly recognise my fellow riders scrubbed up and looking smart: I usually only see them in their muddy cycling gear.

Letting off steam

Saturday morning and Alex's bike needs a new transmission. After a visit to Settle's bike shop, cycle surgery is performed by a host of self-confessed technical 'experts' in the hostel car park. But the morning is golden and nobody minds the delay, knowing a long day's riding is ahead. Today's route is the 43km Tour d'Ingleborough, which loops around the peak in a wide arc taking in the villages of Clapham and Horton in Ribbleside before carrying on to Ribblesdale. We'll cross high moorland and pass stone and cement cairns and vast stretches of limestone pavement before heading under the famous Ribblesdale Viaduct back to Ingleton.

After a tough series of rocky climbs, we stop in Horton for pint-sized mugs of coffee and slabs of flapjack at the Pen-y-Ghent Cafe. We're not even halfway round yet and from the village the riding becomes harder as the route climbs up across moorland pitted with ruts and dips that demand total concentration. Stopping at a waterfall for a welcome breather, adults turn into naughty schoolchildren: Paul and Nigel try to splash each other by throwing large rocks into a stream. Like the banter, such moments are what gives these weekends their special flavour – although as a woman in a mixed group, a certain amount of sangfroid may be called for: the language may be fruitier than what you are used to and you must turn a blind eye to men answering the call of nature.

In our group, however, the men are generally the more experienced riders, and it can improve your technical skills if there's someone to take you out of your comfort

Alex, Duncan and Paul swoop down the fast descent into Settle



We begin a fast, rolling grassy descent, briefly catching the glorious views to Malham Tarn

Group dynamics

Organising a weekend away for a group presents a few extra considerations...

Insurance

Would you be covered in the event of an incident? If you are a ride leader with a CTC group or an affiliated club, you are covered by CTC's Organisers' Liability Cover. See www.ctc.org.uk/insurance for details of the cover and click the 'Groups and Clubs' then 'guidance notes' links for 'CTC's Guide to Cycling in a Group'.

Off-road leadership

Consider becoming a qualified trail leader if you will be organising regular off-road rides. CTC can help with this – see www.promtb.net for details of courses we offer.

Accommodation

Plan well ahead. Finding suitable accommodation for a group in a popular area can be problematic and good YHAs and bunkhouses are often booked up months in advance. There is 25% off new YHA memberships for CTC members – see p72 for more.

Your guests

Be patient and flexible; it can be hard for individuals to commit a long time in advance and incidents will crop up which mean they won't make it at the last minute. How about a reserve list? Be prepared to field endless phone calls and emails. A Facebook page for your group could help with planning the event and sharing post-ride photos.

Route finding

If you are unfamiliar with the area, a guidebook will be worth its cost many times over. If you're not good at navigation, a GPS is very useful. Many routes can be downloaded from www.ctc-maps.org.uk.

zone. While Alex is the fastest rider up the next tricky section of boggy moorland trail, I am nearly at the back again. I hope no one's looking as my front wheel gets stuck in a bog and I just manage to avoid a 360° spin over the handlebars but land on my knee.

At the top of the climb, Ribbleshead Viaduct appears in the distance. Its 24 arches are Grade II* listed and rise 34 metres above the valley floor. But there are clouds on the horizon too, so we put on jackets ready for the descent – strangely, we are nearly all wearing hi-viz clothing so we look like a posse of cycle commuters rather than hardcore off-roaders, except Pete who is always immaculately coordinated with his bike in blue. A fast byway straight down the hill is our reward for all the uphill slog and we arrive at the Station Inn next to the viaduct in Ribbleshead in double quick time.

Man down

After dinner that evening, I consider bailing out of the next day's ride and going home with Pip in time for Sunday lunch. The next day's route will be long with lots of climbing. When the next morning arrives, however, the late autumn weather is glorious and I find myself in cycling gear, ready for the drive to Sedbergh.

After an hour or so of riding and pushing the bikes uphill, we reach the trig point and tarn at the top of The Calf, 676 metres above sea level. The panoramic view to the North Howgills and the Lake District beyond must be one of the most stunning in the land. A fell runner appears and chats briefly, barely out of breath, before cantering off across the moor.

Nigel doesn't have this route on his GPS, but after much poring over the map and mutual discussion, a combination of guesswork and luck leads us in the right direction. The hoped-for sweet singletrack descent to Bowderdale turns out to be a demanding, rocky, rollercoaster ride which is 'a bit of a disappointment – often narrow, sunken, boggy or filled with loose rubble', according to Nick Cotton. I feel a great sense of achievement all the same: mountain biking is all about the challenge, not just of the terrain but also of your fellow riders and ultimately,

yourself, and I manage to negotiate each and every one of the numerous rutty dips, keeping Duncan's back wheel just in sight.

Halfway down, I come across Roland at the side of the track, grinning sheepishly and straightening his handlebars. 'Just getting acquainted with the grass,' he says. Later on, I find out he has had a spectacular 'stack', or crash, after greeting a walker and losing concentration. Some miles further on, his thigh balloons and he can barely walk. Fortunately he can still pedal, albeit slowly. By the time we have a late lunch stop in Ravenstonedale, I realise we're going to be very late back to Surrey.

We cycle into Sedbergh about 6pm, just as the sun is about to disappear below the horizon like molten wax. We hastily ring other halves, babysitters and dogminders back at home and within half an hour we are stuck in heavy traffic going south on the M6. The freedom and emptiness of the Dales seems a world away but the memories of an awesome weekend in good company will linger far longer than the colourful bruises that appear a couple of days later. Roll on the next adventure!

Fact File Yorkshire Dales Weekend

ROUTES: 3 separate routes starting from Settle, Ingleton and Sedbergh based on 'Yorkshire Dales Mountain Biking: The South Dales' and 'Yorkshire Dales Mountain Biking: The North Dales' by Nick Cotton, £15.95 each (www.v-publishing.co.uk)

MAPS: OS Explorer OL19 Howgills Fells and Upper Eden Valley; OS Explorer OL2 Yorkshire Dales: S & W areas; OS Landranger 98 Wensleydale and Upper Wharfedale

ACCOMMODATION: Ingleton YHA. Open all year. Tel: 0845 371 9124, email ingleton@yha.org.uk, £15.95 per adult, £11.95 under-18s

REFRESHMENTS: Malton Arms, Thornton in Lonsdale; Pen-y-Ghent Cafe, Horton in Ribbleside; Station Inn, Ribbleshead; The Black Swan, Ravenstonedale.

MORE INFORMATION: Details of other accommodation, routes and bike shops in the area can be found in the Cyclists Welcome section on the CTC website.

GETTING THERE: the M6 is one option, but you can arrive via the Settle-Carlisle railway (if you are staying in Ingleton, your accommodation provider will meet you at Ribbleshead Station by arrangement) or via the Leeds to Morecambe and Lancaster line (five miles away at Bentham). The Dales Bike Bus runs a shuttle service between Malham and Settle throughout the summer carrying a maximum of 3 mountain bikes – www.dalesbus.org



Julie concentrating on staying upright on the rollercoaster ride into Bowderdale



Fresh air, freedom and friends – the perfect mix for a great cycling weekend



Nigel and Pete next to the famous Ribbleshead Viaduct, hoping to spot a steam train