

WHERE Bristol city centre and environs
START & FINISH Temple Meads railway station
DISTANCE 12.75 miles **WORDS** Ben Hillsdon
PICTURES Ben Hillsdon & iStockphoto.com



BRISTOL SIGHTSEER

Back in the city with his bike, **Ben Hillsdon** decided to make the most of a dry autumn day and explore old haunts

Ask people what they think of Bristol and you'll receive several stock answers. Isambard Kingdom Brunel's engineering exploits might get a mention. You may hear about the hills; it's sometimes called the 'San Francisco of the South West'. And these days, a growing number will tell you about Bristol's reputation as a cycling city.

In June 2008, the city received Government funding to turn itself into a Cycling City. Bristol couldn't transform its culture and infrastructure overnight but now, more than three years on, some real changes are evident, especially in areas such as Bishopston and Ashley Down, where regular cyclists now make up 25% of the population.

I used to be one of these new Bristol cyclists. I ditched my car and discovered a hidden world of fast, convenient cycle routes. I left the city several months

IN THE PHOTOS

- 1) Bristol is the UK's eighth biggest city
- 2) Taking a breather on Brandon Hill
- 3) Temple Quay bike bridge
- 4) Cabot Tower on Brandon Hill

ago, but recently found myself back in the city with my bike and some time to kill. So I did what any self-respecting cyclist would do: I saddled up and took in a tour of my favourite spots.

RAILS TO TRAILS

If you arrive by train, as I did, you'll enter Brunel's Temple Meads station and come face to face with a bike park that's bursting at the seams. Bikes parked three to a Sheffield stand show the enthusiasm for cycling here.

Wheel your bike out of the rear of the station and you'll take in the delightfully curvy 'cheese grater' bridge heading in the direction of one of the first Sustrans paths in the country. The Bristol-Bath Railway Path takes in over a million journeys every year, and it's easy to see why. With its leafy corridor connecting the eastern suburbs to the centre, it's a perfect leisure and commuter route.

My journey on that blustery autumn day took me as far east as Fishponds. You can continue on to Bath, 12 miles away, or you can take a short hop across the A432 into the wide expanse of Eastville Park.

PARK LIFE

Residing in a natural valley, the peaceful setting is in stark contrast to the highline M32 motorway a few hundred metres away. The recently resurfaced route around the park's splendid lake forms part of the Frome Greenway, which stretches north to the University of the



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West of England or south back into the city centre.

Follow the Frome Greenway signs heading south and you'll bypass the busy motorway sliproad on a newly re-prioritised street that gives cyclists a shared path to use. It's worth keeping your eyes peeled for the interesting street art along this path. Look closely and you might even spot a Banksy original!

Frome Greenway snakes its way back into the city through Stapleton, home to a large Indian and Afro-Caribbean community and a fabulous ethnic cuisine shop. Sweetmart is a mecca for authentic Mediterranean and Indian food. You can fuel up on tasty savoury snacks here, or if you have a sweeter tooth you can pocket some delightfully unhealthy treats.

Rejoin Frome Greenway. Cabot Circus, Bristol's new towering monument to retail consumerism, quickly appears on your radar. Unless you fancy mixing it with the shoppers, you should head for Castle Park.

The park was created after wartime bombing destroyed most of the mediaeval buildings that stood here. The ruined shells of two churches, St Peter and St Mary le Port, still stand in the park, and the foundations of Bristol Castle also feature.

This path leads to the cobblestoned Welsh Back riverside area and the Edwardian-era Queen Square, usually an oasis of calm in the hectic city centre. From the southwest corner of the park, Festival Way cycle path is signposted. This runs to Ashton Court Estate.

IF YOU BUILD IT...

The well-signed route heads across Prince St Bridge (one side of which is closed to traffic) and past the entrance to M-Shed, the city's history museum. The imposing battleship-grey cranes outside on the waterfront make for a fantastic picture.

A short journey alongside the River Avon leads you to a new purpose-built pump track underneath the A370 flyover. The track is best suited to BMX and mountain bikes but you can still have lots of fun on a sturdy road bike as long as you don't mind a few raised eyebrows from local riders.



DO IT YOURSELF

- » Leave Bristol Temple Meads via the rear exit and follow the signs for Bristol-Bath Railway Path.
- » After 2.5 miles take the exit to Alcove Road, cross Fishponds Road onto Elmgrove Road, Thingwall Park and Everest Road and enter Eastville Park.
- » Go around the lake and exit the path in the south west corner.
- » Follow the Frome Greenway signs.
- » Cross Bond St and head into Cabot Circus, then turn left for Lower Castle St to enter Castle Park.
- » Head through the park and continue with the river on your left onto Welsh Back to Queen Square.
- » Follow signs for Festival Way to Ashton Court Estate.
- » On the return, cross onto the north side of the harbour and continue back into the city centre.

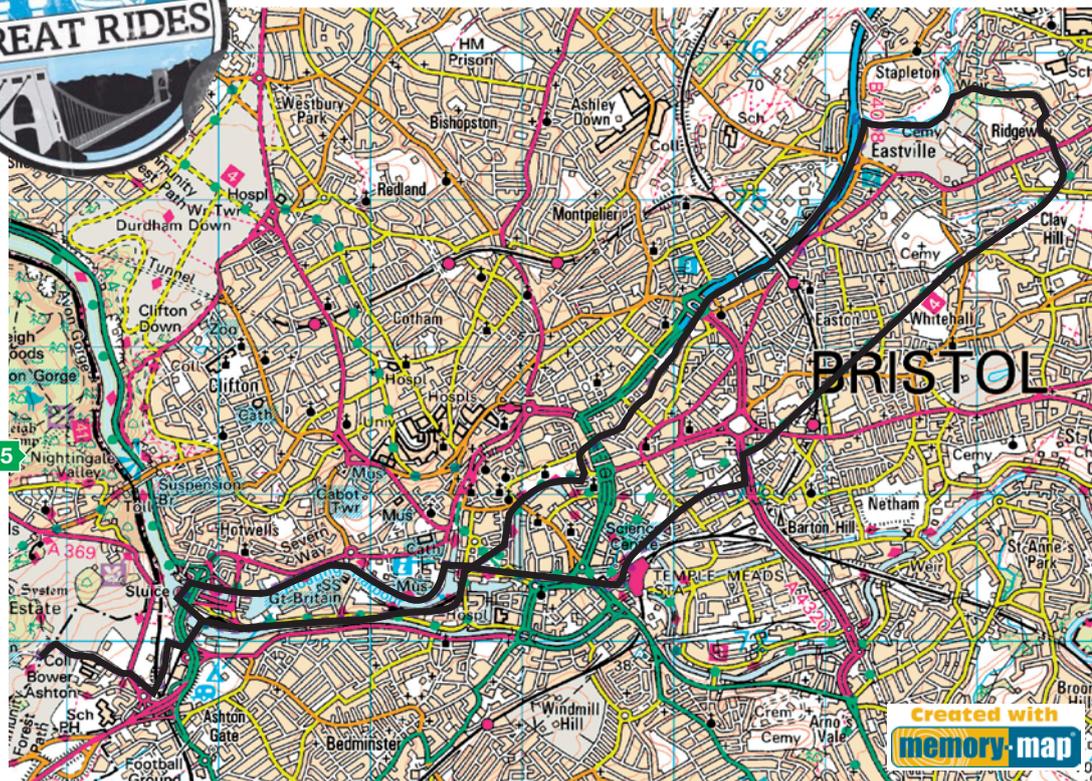
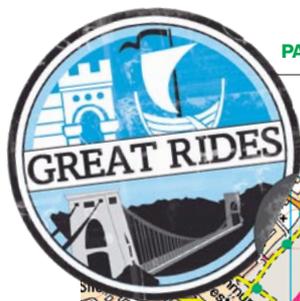
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“You’re treated to a fantastic view over the city. Ashton Court is home to kite and balloon fiestas, as well as deer and great mountain bike trails”



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FACT FILE BRISTOL SIGHTSEER

Distance: 12.75 miles

Time: 1 hour or more.

Terrain: 95% of the route is on smooth traffic-free bike paths.

Maps: Bristol: a map for Cyclists (see betterbybike.info for details)

Start/finish: Bristol Temple Meads railway station. You could do the ride in between changing trains if you time it right.

Bike shops: Mud Dock Café and Bike Store, 0117 929 2151

Cafes/pubs: Bristol Sweetmart, 80 Saint Mark's Road; Arnolfini, 16 Narrow Quay; Ashton Court Mansion House café, Ashton Court Estate.

Accommodation: Bristol Youth Hostel is in the centre of the city. See yha.org.uk.

Route data: download a tracklog of the route from the CTC maps website. Visit <http://www.ctc-maps.org.uk/routes/route/2353> or search the site for 'Bristol Sightseer'.

➤ Continue heading west on Festival Way and you'll catch a glimpse of another Brunel project: Clifton Suspension Bridge. You'll also spot Ashton Court Estate high up on the hill. Cake and coffee await you in Ashton Court's Mansion House café, but only after a severe uphill test, complete with several energy-sapping speed bumps.

UP ABOVE BRISTOL

It's worth the climb because you're treated to a fantastic view over the city and a better impression of the 850-acre estate, which is home to annual kite and balloon fiestas, as well as a golf course, a number of deer, and some excellent mountain bike trails, recently upgraded thanks to the 1 South West project (www.1sw.org.uk).

If you're a glutton for punishment, you can continue to climb up through the estate to the start of the mountain bike trails. If not, head back down the hill onto Festival Way. Once you get back to the tall red-brick Create Centre building (a former tobacco warehouse), you can take the cycle path on the north side of the harbour, ticking off the SS Great Britain from your Bristol spotter's journal.

This path leads back to Queen Square, and then onto Brunel Mile, another recently revamped cycle route. This was the original route that wealthy travellers used to take from Brunel's Temple Meads train station, where they would spend a night at Brunel's Coaching House and then onto Brunel's SS Great Britain ship to sail to New York.

Whilst countryside cycling has many merits, I find it hard to beat the sights and the sense of history, plus the excellent cycle path network, that city centre cycling around Bristol has to offer. ☀

If you're in Bristol for a few days, why not go riding with CTC West? Contact details on p78.



IN THE PHOTOS

5) Start at Temple Meads station and head north east (anti-clockwise)

6) Statue of King William III in Queen Square

7) Down by the docks