



FEATURE
*Celtic cross
country*



PHOTOS BENJI HAWORTH

CELTIC CROSS COUNTRY

The National Parks of Pembrokeshire, the Brecon Beacons, and Exmoor encompass some excellent off-road riding. That's why XCalibre will be set there.

Benji Haworth explains

In the photo

Exmoor is crisscrossed with bridleways and there's lots of variety: woodland, moorland, clifftops... you can even paddle in the sea afterwards

Now that the trails are drying out after the winter deluge, it's time to plan some big summer rides. Why not avoid the honeypot destinations and explore somewhere that's literally off the beaten track? We're casting an eye over the riding opportunities in three snippets of the Celtic fringe: Exmoor, Pembrokeshire and the Brecon Beacons.

All three are beautiful National Parks that offer something different from typical trail centre segments: wild moorland, craggy coastline, quiet woodland, neolithic stones, zip-along singletrack, white-knuckle rocky descents, and more. And all three will feature in this year's inaugural XCalibre mountain bike event.

XCalibre is a televised, seven-stage mountain bike competition, the first of its kind in the UK. CTC is one of the supporters of this new event. We're not covering the race routes themselves; they're top secret and can't be ridden before the event. Instead, we're hoping to show what these National Parks can offer, sketching out a taster ride or two in each.

EXMOOR

The Lake District and the Peak District get more attention when it comes to mountain biking, but for my money it's Exmoor that is the best National Park for off-road riding. Where else can a ride involve wild moorland, woodland singletrack, clifftop cruising... and a bit of paddling in the sea?

Exmoor has the lot. About the only thing that Exmoor doesn't have a lot of is flat stuff. A glance at the Ordnance Survey map reveals that the whole National Park is covered with tightly-packed contour lines. The abundance of bridleways crisscrossing Exmoor is impressive and inspiring. In fact, there's so much to consider that it can be a bit daunting.

Exmoor can be divided into two: the northern coastal half and the southern inland moorland half. There is a great route that takes in some of the highlights of both the northern and the southern halves.

Begin at Lynton and head west through the fern-sided singletrack through the Valley of Rocks. Although rather early in the ride, it'll be tempting to pop to the beach at Lee Bay for a paddle (and why not?). Then you'll climb away from the sea up doubletrack to Woolhanger Common. Then it's a case of crossing moorland on always-engaging tracks and trails over to Brendon Common.

The ravine-side riding alongside Badgworthy Hill

is excellent singletrack. A brief vista over the sea at Countisbury sets you up for the return, slightly inland through the gladed Watersmeet wooded valley sides, and back into Lynton. But hold up. Don't just drop down on the road to Lynton. Pick up a short but excellent singletrack descent heading down out of the back of a small hamlet called West Lyn; it pops out just above the Lynbridge caravan site and from there it is a straightforward drop down the speedy road into Lynton for an ice cream and a(nother) paddle.

A good area to go for a little play and explore is at the eastern end of the Exmoor National Park: Horner Wood. It's an area of steep-sided woodland that clings to the sides of the curvy valley formed by the river that runs along the bottom of it. There are numerous bridleways that head up, down and along the sides. If you want to extend your ride you can head out of the treeline and on to Dunkery Hill moorland.

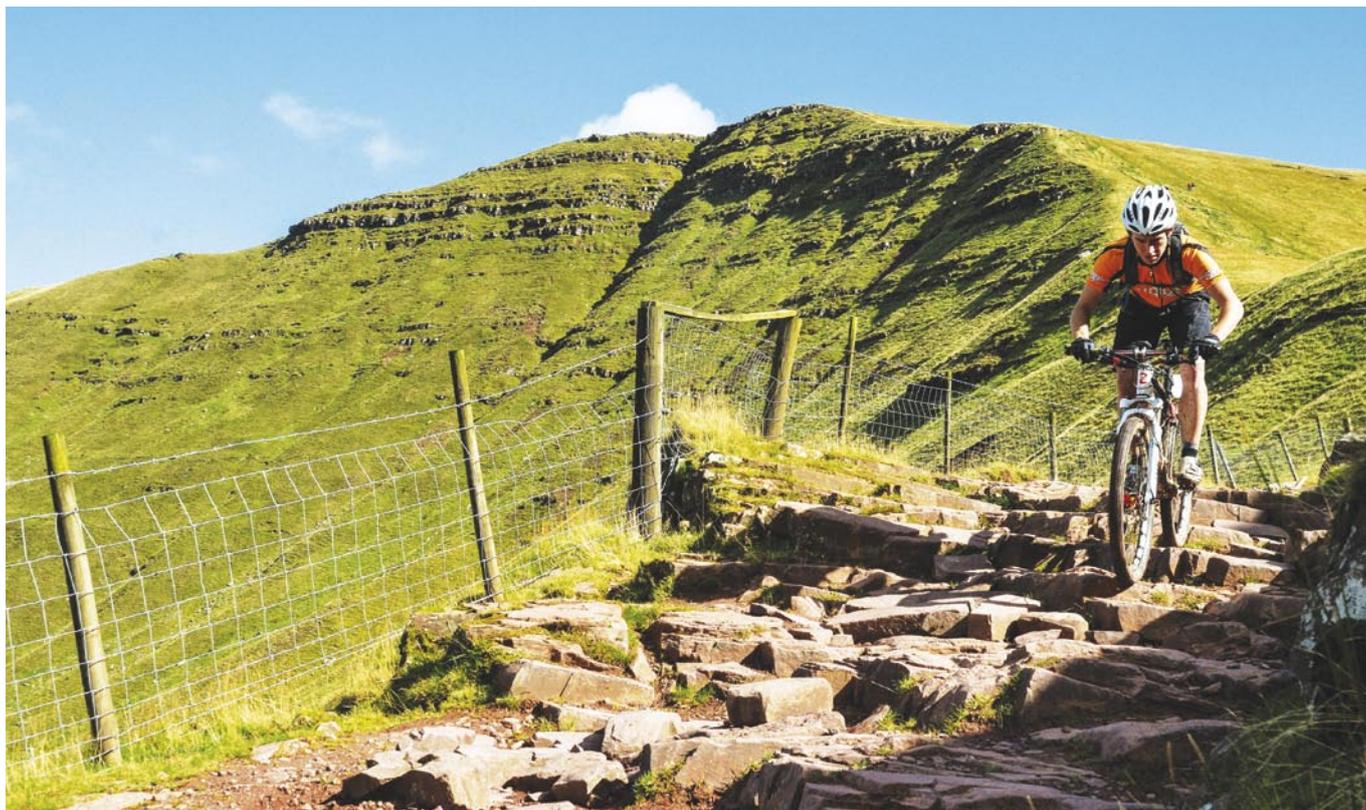
FACT FILE EXMOOR

Where to ride: 'South West Mountain Biking' by Nick Cotton and Tom Fenton (Vertebrate Graphics, v-publishing.co.uk). As well as a comprehensive bunch of Exmoor routes this compendium covers Dartmoor and the Quantocks.

Maps: OL9 Exmoor.

Where to stay: Caffyns Farm, Lynton, EX35 6JY, 01598 741234, doonevalleyholidays.co.uk. Or Lynton Cottage Hotel, North Walk, Lynton, EX35 6ED, 01598 752342.





In the photos

The rocky tracks of 'The Gap' in the Black Mountains are best enjoyed on a full-suspension bike and in good weather

➤ BRECON BEACONS

Although the Brecon Beacons is a huge National Park, covering over 1,300 square kilometres, it's best known among mountain bikers for one bit: the Black Mountains. If you've ridden in the Black Mountains before, you've typically had one of the two experiences: loved it or hated it. I've experienced both.

My first trip wasn't fun. I didn't have the legs to deal with the epic climbs. I didn't have the character to deal with the hellish weather that day. So I didn't return there for years. But when I did, I had a cracking ride: blue skies, big smiles. The hills were still as massive but my fitness and attitude were both better.

The Black Mountains are best done in fair weather and with a set route that's accepted as a classic: The Gap (see mtbbreconbeacons.co.uk). It's a big day in the saddle, only 24 miles but with lots of ascending – and descending.

The tracks on the route are fairly weatherproof. They've been used for centuries and can withstand being ridden during or after a bit of rain. But it's still best to avoid this route if there's a grim forecast, because there's no real shelter from the elements.

The Gap's tracks are wide and rocky, with little tree cover. You go through, up and over some of the most amazing scenery that Wales has to offer. Although your cornering skills may not be called on, you will have to be adept at dealing with steep gradients and loose surfaces. It's a great ride to do with a few friends on a long, drawn-out summer day.

If the weather is looking a bit too wild, or you want somewhere to go for a blast-about, head over to Brechfa Forest trail centre. There's no visitor centre or facilities, so you'll need to go prepared, but the lack of development also helps to keep Brechfa a bit quieter than the other bigger trail centres in south Wales. ➤

FACT FILE BRECON BEACONS

Where to ride: Wales has plenty of websites devoted to mountain biking. The two best for these routes are mtbbreconbeacons.co.uk and mtb-wales.com

Maps: OL12 Brecon Beacons West & Central and OL13 Brecon Beacons East.

Where to stay: Beacons Backpackers, New Inn, Bwlch, nr Brecon, LD6 7RQ, 01874 730215, beaconsbackpackers.co.uk. Or The White Hart Inn & Bunkhouse, Talybont-on-Usk, Brecon, Powys LD3 7JD, 01874 676227, breconbunkhouse.co.uk

“THE GAP'S TRACKS ARE WIDE AND ROCKY, WITH LITTLE TREE COVER. IT'S A GREAT RIDE ON A SUMMER DAY”



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In the photos

Ride the Preseli Hills in Pembrokeshire when it's dry as they can get boggy. Plus, the views are fantastic on a clear day



**RIDE
XCALIBRE**

› This seven-stage mountain bike event takes riders across Pembrokeshire, the Brecon Beacons and Exmoor from the 16-23 August. Teams of two riders will tackle three differing mountain bike disciplines: marathon, cross-country, and enduro. The event will include night-time stages, a prologue time trial, and a mass start 60-kilometre loop. XCalibre will be shown on ITV4.

Hugh Roberts, Chief Executive of XCalibre organisers SweetSpot, said: 'The challenge for riders taking part is unrivalled, with XCalibre giving riders the opportunity to ride in some spectacular locations on routes created just for the event.'

The two-rider format, similar to events such as the Cape Epic and the TransAlp, will ensure a shared experience through the highs and the lows during 200km of trails.

Team entry for XCalibre costs £1,800 (£900 per rider). Riders will receive: food and accommodation, fully-stocked feed stations, neutral service en route, a mechanics' station in the event village, seven stages of previously-unridden routes, XCalibre kit bag, giveaways and more. xcalibremtb.co.uk



› **PEMBROKESHIRE**

'Pembrokeshire' conjures up images of beaches and craggy coastline, sandcastles and surfers. Cycling, particularly off-road, doesn't spring to mind. And it's true that the mountain biking opportunities are limited, compared with some National Parks.

The coastline may be gnarled and rugged but once you come inland it's farmed and flatter. That is until you reach the Preseli Hills: a modest-looking but surprisingly demanding ridge of connected summit points set amidst some of the most ancient-feeling and beautifully barren landscapes in the whole of the UK.

The Preseli Hills loom up seemingly out of nowhere. They always appear to be differently lit from their surrounding flatlands: when the lowlands are bright, the Preselis are dark and dramatic; when the lowlands are dull and dank, the sun brightly illuminates the hills like a beacon.

The riding, although sparse and only enough for one full day, is really entertaining. The spine formed by the aligned summits of Foel Eryr, Foel Feddau and Bwlch Ungwr makes up the main meal of a Preseli Hills ride. It's best to attempt the ridge during a dry spell as it's pretty soggy going when wet.

Once on top, you make your way along sunken singletrack and wider, faster rollercoaster tracks. You really need to look around you as you ride or you'll miss the magic of the area. Huge panoramic vistas, wild white ponies and the famous Preseli standing stones. (The 'bluestones' of Stonehenge came from these hills.) You can approach the Preselis from the north or the south to make up a decent day's loop.

From the north, start from Newport, pass by Mynydd Carningli before ascending to the Preseli Hills proper, and finish with pleasant farm tracks and minor roads through Crosswell and Pentre Ifan. Starting from the south, begin at Rosebush and head up on to

the hills via Pantmaenog Forest, ride the ridge, and come down into Mynachlog-ddu, return to Rosebush via the standing stones circle of Gors Fawr.

If you want a half-day's easy pedalling, you can cruise around the Llys-y-Frân trail, a 12km circuit of a reservoir set in parkland and mature woodland. ☼

**FACT FILE
PEMBROKESHIRE**

Where to ride: 'Wales Mountain Biking' by Tom Hutton (Vertebrate Graphics, v-publishing.co.uk) is handy. The Preseli Hills get a route devoted to them and there are plenty more routes just outside the National Park that may be an option too.

Maps: OS Explorer Map OL35 North Pembrokeshire.

Where to stay: A recommended cyclist-friendly B&B is Y Garth, Cae Tabor, Dinas Cross, Newport SA42 0XR, 01348 811777, bedandbreakfast-pembrokeshire.co.uk

