



COASTING ALONG

IT'S SUMMER, SO IT'S TIME TO HEAD TO THE BEACH.
WITH A BIKE. **CLIVE ANDREWS** LOOKS AT THE
PROSPECTS FOR CYCLING BESIDE THE SURF



■ **In the photo** In Scotland, beaches and coasts are covered by the same liberal access laws as other off-road areas there (Photo by Bruce Mathieson)

● Brighton and Hove's
Low Tide Bike Ride.
Fat bike not required



WE'RE AN island nation: 11,000 miles of coastline surrounds us. None of us is further than 70 miles from the sea. But most of our coastally-flavoured rides only begin or end at the water – a Coast to Coast perhaps, or an overnight trip to a seaside café for breakfast. Rarely do we explore the shoreline itself. Perhaps it's time we got to know our coast a little better?

Many British beaches were reshaped by last winter's storms. On the south coast alone, beaches from Kent to Cornwall are very different now from how they were in summer 2013. For off-road cyclists, these new beachscapes are places we might explore. But

▶ TIDE AND TIME...

THE SEA is a powerful force, and the fun of riding this close to nature should never blind us to issues of safety.

Don't ride out onto unknown sand flats without sufficient local knowledge.

Don't leave tides to chance. To avoid getting cut off, check their times and get to know their speeds and patterns of ingress.

Be cautious around cliffs, whether riding at the top or the bottom.

Be sensible about the weather. An up-to-date weather forecast is recommended for any ride, but when exploring the beach, it's vital.

we are wary. Isn't the beach out-of-bounds for cyclists? Won't it ruin our bikes?

Fat-tyre fun

One of the most enthusiastic beach riders you might meet is Bruce Mathieson, who lives in Scotland's East Lothian, next to 42 miles of coastline. 'I could never get bored of beach riding. I love the technical challenges it holds,' he says. 'There's so much to explore. I've been riding here for years and I'm still discovering hidden singletrack, shipwrecks and World War II fortifications.' Such is Bruce's love of the ever-changing beach terrain, most of his cycling takes place there, with only occasional ventures inland.

If you're planning to heed Bruce's call to the coast, you may want to equip yourself especially for it. And the most obvious option available now is the fat bike: a mountain bike – usually rigid – with extra-wide tyres (3.5 or 4 inches), mounted on suitably sized rims. Initially pioneered by brands like Surly, the fat bike is a niche that's nudging into the mainstream, with machines now available from brands like On-One, Kona, Specialized and Genesis. Several of them use Surly components. Not only must the frame and fork accommodate these giant wheels, but various other key components have been re-engineered – hubs, bottom brackets and even front mechs – to keep a fat bike rolling. SRAM is now producing a fat bike-specific groupset.

Bruce Mathieson's enthusiasm for coastal

riding sits alongside an equal love of fat bikes, his mount of choice for beaches. Bruce bought the first fat bike in Scotland, an original Surly, and now owns a growing collection. He even organises the Forth Fat event, a gathering of fat bike riders who come together to explore the coastline with him. See coastkid.blogspot.co.uk for details.

Beyond the beach

Though Bruce got into fat bikes purely for beach riding, he is now one of the biggest flag-wavers for their use on any terrain. 'They're lovely in pine woods – great on loamy rooty soil or the peat of the Pentlands and Cheviots. Once they're rolling, they're not bad on the road either.' Bruce has a point. With an overall tyre diameter similar to a 29er, a fat bike is capable enough on tarmac – fine for getting to the beach or trails.

Another fat bike advocate is On-One designer Brant Richards. But unlike Bruce Mathieson, Brant is not convinced about the wisdom of playing on the beach. On-One's venture into fat bikes was inspired by the snow of the Iditarod race, and in Brant's view, riding by the sea doesn't sound wise. 'Why would you do that to the bottom bracket in your quality bike?' he asks.

'Fat bikes are really all about fun,' says Brant. 'This is another way to ride your local trails. An accessible, different way to have a laugh. It's part of mountain biking's bigger evolution away from racing and back towards

“I’ve been riding here for years and I’m still discovering hidden singletrack, shipwrecks, and World War II fortifications”



● Ride below the high-water line and you're unlikely to get any objections

fun' On-One's Fatty is the brand's current bestselling bike.

Brant and Bruce may have very different ideas about using fat bikes for coastal riding, but they are united in their belief that this is a versatile breed of mountain bike and not just a specialist niche. 'I would have no qualms in having a fat bike as my only bike,' insists Brant.

Lower fat alternatives

So who's buying fat bikes? Are they just a fad, or to be taken seriously? Ison Distribution deals with Surly and Salsa, between them providing several quality fat bikes. Allan Doyle at Ison describes a positive picture: 'Fat bikes are selling all over the country. They've really boomed in the last 18 months,' he says. It seems many fat bike buyers are in their forties, and are rediscovering the simple fun of '80s and '90s mountain biking.

If there's no room in the shed for another bike right now, there are other options than a brand new fat bike.

Option one: use a standard mountain bike. For all the fat bike excitement, a regular mountain bike, with its two-inch tyres, is still a versatile machine built for uncertain ground conditions. A conventional MTB will be fine on rock and firm wet sand, though will struggle on dry sand. If you have a choice of bikes, then simple is best. A bike with fewer gears (maybe just one) will run better in sandy conditions and will be easier to clean up afterwards. Avoid suspension or any other feature that >>>

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● Four-inch tyres provide traction even on loose, dry sand



Right: Clive, by Paul Stanley. Other pictures by Clive Andrews

“If your chosen beach bike is anything other than a scrapyard special, a through post-ride clean is essential”

» can't be easily cleaned or disassembled.

Option two: scrapyard challenge. If you fancy neither a fat bike investment nor the salty abuse of your favourite machine, another option is to keep your eyes open for skips, tips and car boot sales.

If your chosen beach bike is anything other than a scrapyard special, a thorough post-ride clean is essential. Wash it rigorously. Consider removing the bottom bracket if the sea is likely to have reached that level.

Bruce Mathieson's tip is to plan for prevention rather than repair. He coats the inside of his steel frames with a wax treatment, and every bolt on his fat bikes has been inserted with the aid of copperslip grease.

Shore enough

As proof that beach riding doesn't need specialist equipment, consider the Brighton and Hove Low Tide Bike Ride. This irregular jaunt unites a varied collective around the twice-yearly equinoctial tides. Participants set off to explore Brighton's rarely-exposed sand flats – not on fat bikes, but on a collection of old mountain bikes, rusty shoppers and basic singlespeeds.

Few of them are fervent cyclists, just Brighton people with a love of their beach

and a wish to see their city from a different perspective.

How about the legal implications of exploring the coast? In Scotland, a liberal approach to countryside access affords much freedom. In England, beach access is more complex. 'Of the 3,000km of English coast, just 90km is technically bike legal,' access expert Colin Palmer says. 'Half of this is underwater at high tide.' For the remainder, common law and local tradition combine to give horses and walkers a technical right of access, but the situation for those on two wheels is unclear.

Colin is reassuring: 'Above the high water line, usual rights of way laws prevail, with bridleways and byways providing access. Below the high water line, things are much more relaxed. Use some common sense and no one's going to stop you.'

In Northern Ireland, the legality of coastal riding is unclear, but there seems to be a positive approach in Wales – above the beach, at least. The Wales Coast Path is currently 20% bike-legal, though these sections are geared more towards leisure than off-road beach riding. CTC's Councillor for Wales is Gwenda Owen. 'The Welsh Assembly's Active Travel Act provides an obligation to map and improve cycle routes, and there's even talk of using the Wales Coast Path to link up communities,' she says.

Exploring any off-road environment by bike needs care, and a respect for other users, but Bruce Mathieson points out that the fat bike, at least, can be a force for good in areas where relationships with other outdoor enthusiasts are sensitive: fat tyres float on top of fragile soils, rather than digging in. ●

High fat content

» Those 4-inch tyres, mounted on super-wide (82mm!) rims, define the Surly Pug Ops. The steel frame has asymmetric stays to accommodate them. And they make a huge contribution to the way it rides.

On wet sand, the Pug rolls easily. On dry sand or shingle, it stays mobile where other bikes stall. On firmer terrain, it feels much like a regular hardtail once it's up to rolling speed. The wheels don't lift and respond as easily as a regular 26-incher's. Long chainstays, part of fat bike design, make rearward weight shifts almost unnoticed.

But to try to ride it like a normal bike is to miss the point of a fat bike. Why wrestle its weight to flick and manoeuvre your way through technical terrain when you can just relax? The key to enjoying the Pug is to let it do its thing. Don't try to finesse it: let it plough over and soak up the bumps. It's a different feeling from telescopic full-suspension, but it's a fun bike to ride.

There are lots of frame fittings. The 135mm-wide rear-facing dropouts allow singlespeed or hub gear usage, although ours was set up with derailleur gears.



Tech spec: Surly Pug Ops

PRICE: £1849 **WEIGHT:** 16.2kg (35.8lb) **SIZE TESTED:** L
SIZES AVAILABLE: XS, S, M, L, XL **FRAME & FORK:** Surly 4130 cromoly steel, with double-buttressed main triangle. Surly Moonlander fork. Rack and bottle mounts.
WHEELS: Surly Nate tyres 26x4in tyres. Surly Rolling Darryl rims on Surly (F) and Shimano (R) hubs.
TRANSMISSION: 2x10, Shimano SLX/LX mix, with Surly cranks
BRAKING: Avid BB7 cable discs
STEERING & SEATING: Salsa ProMoto bars, HL stem, Kallouy seatpost, Velo saddle **CONTACT:** Ison Distribution – ison-distribution.com – 01353 662662