



● The Savoy in London welcomes cyclists – not just those on folders

BED, BIKE & BREAKFAST

As CTC's revamped Cyclists Welcome website shows, there are more bike-friendly ways than ever to overnight in Britain. **Rob Ainsley**, who's spending 234 nights away during 2014, looks at some options

Cycle touring reminds us of how basic and timeless our human needs are: just food, drink, and shelter for the night. And free wi-fi. Plus sockets to recharge the phone, laptop, e-reader, and GPS... Joking apart, while the most important thing about touring is the time spent on the bike, and the accommodation only the wrapping, it still affects the enjoyment of the contents.

For instance, an otherwise lovely Wales trip was overshadowed by a shudderingly awful guesthouse, where the extensive pattern of white flecks in the carpet proved on examination to be toenail clippings. On the other hand, a miserable day in the North York Moors was turned into a delightful experience by a welcoming B&B whose owners helped me clean and lube my bike, laundered my sodden clothes, and told me laugh-out-loud village tales over unlimited tea and cake.

An informal online poll of CTC members for this article suggested that on tour, most of us camp around half the time. (Partly because it's cheap, but also for flexibility and freedom.) The other nights are spent in hostels; occasionally, inexpensive hotels or B&Bs; and – increasingly – that online phenomenon of couchsurfing.

Where you lay your head

While cycle-camping remains much the same as ever, the business of getting a roof for the night has been transformed by the internet, and cycling accommodation options are more varied than when I gleefully discovered bike touring in 1979. (The first night was in Selby Youth Hostel: long since closed, but then a narrowboat. It set the pattern for quirkiness that has characterised my subsequent adventures. The weather set the subsequent pattern too. It didn't rain – it poured.)

Then, it seemed the only affordable weatherproof beds were in Youth Hostels. We booked them by sending a postal order, arriving by car was an act of sedition, alcohol was banned, and we had to sweep the kitchen before being released. Now, we book with an app, the car park is full, own-brand bedding is supplied, and they'll flog us a bottle of YHA-rebadged wine with dinner. And they're almost free from youths – at least, the remote rural hostels that haven't been auctioned off are.

Some of these far-flung YHs are a destination in themselves, such as Glen Affric in the Highlands, a rough but cyclable eight miles from the nearest tarmac. There's no bike shed here, but the warden smiled when I locked up my tourer: opportunist theft by sheep, she reassured me, is not a problem.

Camping barns & hostels

For a simple shelter in remote locations, camping barns have proliferated. You usually need your own bedding, and there'll be little more than a dorm mattress and basic kitchen, but they're handy spontaneous alternatives to tents in bad weather. I came across some in Scotland this summer that seem part of a new pattern: bunkhouse plus B&B rooms on the same site, offering a range of basic to mid-market beds, with fireside food and drink (and wi-fi) in the attached pub.

Youth Hostels (187 of them in England and Wales, plus 26 camping barns) have had to change in response to the 200-odd independent hostels (some former YHs) that now dot the country. Many independents are town-centre, backpackerish places that are better for free wi-fi, but not as good for drying rooms. But they vary in character enormously, and if they're bike-friendly, they're often worth building a tour around.

One such independent is Wayfarers, in Penrith. It sits on the C2C and End to End, and was created 'very much with cyclists in mind', says Mark Rhodes, who runs it. Through the summer, about two-thirds of their guests arrive by bike, and can enjoy outstanding facilities, as I did: large indoor, secure storage space; a workstand and tools for free use; washing facilities; and a drying room 'for those odd occasions it rains in Cumbria!' laughs Mark. 'As a cyclist, these are things I use regularly and know what a difference it makes to start the day in dry clothes and to sort niggling gears!'

A big advantage hostels have is their capacity for groups. The last few years have seen a rise in charity teams doing routes



● Travelodge rooms can be booked for as little as £19 a night



● Location, location, location: Whitby Youth Hostel is right by the abbey

Photo: Dan Joyce



The classic former-child's-bedroom in an empty-nest house, with pastel nylon sheets, is still around, but bed and breakfasts have raised their game

» such as the End to End or Way of the Roses (WoR). It's a trend noted by Chris Alder, deputy manager at York YH. They can easily be accommodated, thanks to flexible spaces that can be used as secure cycle storage, its laundry areas, restaurant and bar facilities: 'At weekends we get 20, even 40 cyclists sometimes. Often they're not regular cyclists, so they don't fancy riding into town in the evening; they're happy to eat and drink in the hostel.'

Cycle-touring here is on the up, he reckons, with Saturday nights the busiest. (York is an obvious WoR stopover when done over a long weekend.) 'Sunday can often be quiet,' he says, 'which means it's a bargain – prices can be virtually half that of the night before.'

Hotels & budget chains

Off-peak, advanced booking makes hotels cheap too. Chains such as Travelodge or Premier Inn regularly release blocks of rooms at low prices, and comfort can come cheap: I routinely stay at them for £19 or £29 respectively, off-peak and booked a month or three in advance. (Avoid Fridays and Saturdays – except in business areas, where weekends may be cheapest. Add £20 or more to those figures for London, which is always busy!)

The no-frills but clean, comfy Travelodges invariably seem happy for bikes to stay in rooms, while the comparatively luxurious Premier Inns always find an unused function suite or cleaner's cupboard to store mine.

In fact, my Raleigh has spent more time in meeting rooms than I ever have.

We're more welcome at other hotels these days too. Increasingly, the reception staff or manager turn out to be cyclists themselves. At Bewley's in Leeds and Kimberley's in Harrogate this summer, for instance, staff in both showed enthusiasm and knowledge when we arrived on two wheels.

But for anybody credit-card-touring (travelling ultra-light but luxuriously), not all the UK's top end has quite caught up with, say, Germany, where we've never been looked up and down when arriving by bike. Some big-name hotels in London, to judge by my experiments this year, still look with faintly patronising amusement if you do so. Honourable exceptions exist, such as the Savoy, off Strand, which even offers guests cycle hire.

Traditional B&Bs

Bed and breakfasts, that British institution, have raised their game since 1979. The classic former-child's-bedroom in an empty-nest house, with family photos and pastel nylon sheets, is still around. But many mid- and up-market places offer classier experiences with, say, organic farm food for breakfast. Solo tourists still usually pay a premium though.

Being bike-friendly makes good economic sense if you're a B&B. Louise Alexander, owner of Blakeney House in York, targeted cycle tourists when she took over the place two

► CYCLISTS WELCOME

Ever since CTC's formation in 1878, we've recommended establishments that catered to the needs of cyclists. These could be identified in the early days by cast-iron Winged Wheel logos, two feet across, mounted on the wall. Many of these Winged Wheels still exist – see wingedwheels.info for where they are.

The Winged Wheel was a seal of approval, marking cycle-friendly inns and hotels. These days, CTC doesn't issue iron plaques but the tradition of identifying cycle-friendly accommodation providers, cafés and cycle hire outlets continues. Now it's digital: the details are collected on CTC's website, cyclistswelcome.co.uk. You can search it for cycle-friendly accommodation in an area in seconds, either before you set off or en route by smartphone.

Whether you're cycle touring or going away for a mountain biking weekend, you'll then know what you can look forward to. Not just the cake, the comfortable bed or a suitable campsite, but something that all cyclists need to be sure of when going somewhere new: a welcome for you and your bike.

You can have confidence that there will be somewhere safe and secure to store your bike. And you can relax in the knowledge that even if you arrive looking like a drowned rat, having contended with our traditional British weather, you'll still be just as welcome.

Cyclists Welcome also lists cafés, recommended by cyclists for cyclists. That should ensure cyclist-friendly portions, as well as somewhere where bicycles can be parked safely, securely and in clear view.

If you've visited somewhere that you think should be listed by Cyclists Welcome, why not recommend a cycle friendly establishment on the website and be in with the chance to win £50 of Wiggle vouchers in our monthly draw? Visit cyclistswelcome.co.uk





● Approaching Glen Affric. It's touring-cyclable from the east, more of an MTB ride from the west



● Yurts can be booked in Keld in the Yorkshire Dales



● York YH gets groups of charity cycle-tourers

Some far-flung Youth Hostels are a destination in themselves. Glen Affric in the Highlands is a rough but cyclable eight miles from the nearest tarmac

» years ago. Business is thriving, with dozens of cyclists every month. 'There have been more independent groups this year, often riding for charity,' she says – and the trend is up. In 1999, Sustrans put the annual value of the UK cycle-touring market at £600m; it must surely now be well over £1bn.

The internet is not essential to get a bed: I still find places by cycling around, looking and asking. And though I've occasionally come to accommodation grief while backpacking (having to overnight in bus stations, or walking streets at 4am), I've never had serious problems cycling. The nearest to failure was in Kennacraig, Scotland, when a regatta had booked out everything for miles. Luckily, the ferry we were booked on to next morning was waiting in the harbour, and as cyclists we were allowed to kip onboard. A bit like that Selby narrowboat, except with a staff bar...

But now, thanks to the web, it's easier than ever to find cyclist-friendly accommodation. This isn't only a matter of secure storage or drying facilities: it's also attitude. Again, things seem to be improving here, perhaps thanks to cycling's higher PR profile these days. More often, your hosts or their family members ride too. So they're not fazed when you turn up soaking wet. They just smile, help you hang up the tent to dry, put the kettle on and run a bath – and they'll happily supply a healthy breakfast before your early-morning departure. CTC's

own Cyclists Welcome website is a great first port of call.

Someone's spare room

A recent trend is couchsurfing – hooking up with people via the internet who are happy to put you up for free, on the understanding that you will one day do the same for someone else. A cyclist-specific such website (covering Britain and abroad) is warmshowers.org, a free-to-use network of cycle tourists who offer this reciprocal hospitality, from a camping spot in the garden and use of bathroom, up to ensuite rooms with generous dinners.

The concept has many fans, especially among long-haul adventurers such as David Hammerton and Grace MacKenzie, who are now in Bristol, having cycled from Australia. 'Almost everyone we've stayed with through Warmshowers has been incredibly hospitable,' says David. 'We got a safe place to store our bikes, fantastic meal, comfy bed, shower and whatever else we needed. The real fun is sharing stories over a meal.'

As for me, it's the variety of accommodation styles now that I love. In reasonable weather, camping's wonderful. But often the forecast is less enticing, I'm tempted by town-centre amenities, or simply fancy a treat. When I do, bike-friendly comfort – whether in hostels, B&Bs, or hotels – is cheaper and easier to arrange than ever. Sleep well! ●

▶ BOOKING YOUR BED

These are the typical costs per person you can expect to pay (outside London!), based on a single person/two sharing.

● **WILD CAMPING, COUCHSURFING, FRIENDS & RELATIVES: £0**

● **CAMPING: £10–£12 / £5–£10**

● **HOSTELS, CAMPING BARNs: £15–£22 / £15–£22**

● **B&B, PUBS: £30–£50 / £20–£40**

● **HOTELS: £40–£80 / £20–£40**

There are lots of websites dealing with accommodation – you can even just type 'place name' and 'B&B' into a search engine. Here are some more useful ones.

● **CYCLE-FRIENDLY ACCOMMODATION**
cyclistswelcome.co.uk | warmshowers.org

● **BARGAIN HOTELS**
travelodge.co.uk | premierinn.co.uk
ibis.co.uk | booking.com

● **HOSTELS**
yha.org.uk | syha.org.uk
independenthostelguide.co.uk
hostelbookers.com



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