

DETAILS

- **WHERE:** Isle of Wight
- **START/FINISH:** Ryde
- **DISTANCE:** 125 miles in a week
- **PICTURES:** © Barry Maytum (Alamy) and Josie Dew



Great rides

ALL WIGHT IN THE END

With Europe out of reach, **Josie Dew** and her three young children took a ferry across the Solent to go cycle-camping



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Last summer's cycling holiday didn't quite go as planned. It almost didn't go at all. A few days before we were due to cycle onto a ferry from Harwich to the Hook of Holland, this time with three young offspring in tow, five-year-old Daisy became very unwell with appendicitis. Cue an urgent visit to A&E, a meeting soon after with the GP, then a four-day stay in hospital on an intravenous drip. Towards the end of the summer holidays, however, Daisy was given a medical check-up and got the go-ahead for a not-too-vigorous cycling holiday. I chose the Isle of Wight.

It was close to home and involved an exciting ferry ride, which made it feel like we were going somewhere faintly exotic. And it was close to Southampton General Hospital, which is where Daisy would go if her appendix flared up again. The plan was to go cycling and camping for two weeks, leaving on Jack's second birthday. But then the summer monsoon arrived. We waited a week for the sun to come out, only it was August in England so it didn't.

With a week left before school began, I rallied my merry mob of young cyclists:

Molly, Daisy and Jack. (Husband Gary couldn't come as he was busy with bits of wood – he's a carpenter.) It was a Sunday and Molly's 9th birthday. The Met Office weather chart had severe weather warnings plastered all over it. Oh dear. But what's a bit of wet when you've got a sturdy coat and a child's buoyancy aid strapped to the rear rail of the trailer? And it wasn't raining when we left home. All that was to come, said the Met Office. The rain was set to become torrential by seven that evening, with a risk of localised flooding. Well, that's all right, I thought. If we arrive at our campsite by mid-afternoon and pitch up on high ground, we should be fine. So tally ho! And off we headed for Portsmouth.

TICKETS TO RYDE

South West Trains no longer have a useful-sized guard's van – a good old slam-door van that could comfortably house an elephant – so it's impossible to travel with a tandem and a trailer. Instead, Gary had to give us a lift to Portsmouth in the campervan. We set off late. I had meant to leave home in the morning, but when it comes to children (especially three of them)

Do it yourself

FAMILY CYCLING

Anything out of the ordinary is an adventure for children. Just a week of cycling and camping on the Isle of Wight felt like a month of high exploration and excitement for them as so much happens in a day. In the tent, Molly and Daisy liked their books, colouring pads and pens, while Jack played happily with a few small toy cars, bits of Lego and a tractor book. As long as we stopped for playgrounds, beaches, crazy golf, animal sanctuaries, play parks, theme parks (Blackgang Chine) and multiple lollies and ice creams, all offspring were happy.



SOUTH WEST TRAINS NO LONGER HAVE A USEFUL GUARD'S VAN, SO IT'S IMPOSSIBLE TO TRAVEL WITH A TANDEM AND TRAILER

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More pushing up more hills. 'It was so heavy it started dragging me backwards,' said Josie

there's always one thing after another thing after another, until suddenly you realise that half the day has gone and you are not where you thought you would be at the time you were hoping to be there.

On a back-street pavement a stone's throw from the magnificence of HMS Victory (where Gary was working), I started loading up the bikes with our panniers and fixing on the trailer. This was the first time I was to attempt to go cycle touring alone with three children. I didn't really know if it was possible, as I suspected I wouldn't have enough hands to cling on to a 2-year old, a 5-year old (luckily, being 9, Molly is old enough to cling on to herself), and a wild array of bike, tandem, trailer, and eleven different bags.

The trailer resembled a garden shed. It contained tools, toys, tent, sleeping bags, books, clothes, wellies, food, water, potty, buckets, spades, flotation aids and a pushchair slung off the rear rail. Oh, and Jack. Plus a thousand other things. The weight was immense. Would I ever move, I wondered to myself? But there was no time to worry about things like that. We had a ferry to catch. And this is where we nearly came unstuck from the start.

Wheeling our steeds onto the passenger ferry, the Wightlink man took our tickets and, glancing at our topsy-turvy charabanc, said, 'You're not wanting to get off the other side are you, love?'

I looked at him and thought: what can he mean? He has our tickets to Ryde in his hand. Of course I want to get off the other side! Or does he know something we don't? Has the ferry sprung a leak and he's only taking passengers with suicidal tendencies? Are we going to start listing to port as we head out across the Solent before drifting off course and going down off the Nab Tower?

'Well, I was hoping to!' I replied.

'See, the trouble is,' said Mr Wightlink Man, 'we currently have a temporary gangway to get off the ferry on the other side and it will be too narrow to fit your rig through.'

'Oh.' I said. 'Well, never mind. I'll just have to lift the whole lot above my head. I can't turn round now: my husband's currently hurtling back up the M27 and I don't think he will want to see us again quite so soon as he's banking on a week of peace!'

FAMILY TRIPLET TOUR

A father's French tour with his two daughters:
[cyclinguk.org/cycle/
rolling-recovery](http://cyclinguk.org/cycle/rolling-recovery)

'All right, love,' smiled Mr Wightlink Man, 'we'll make sure we get you off!'

And somehow they did. With a helpful crowd of eager arms we managed to carry the whole weighty contraption above our heads and not lose Jack in the Solent in the process. So that was a relief.

ON THE ROAD

Then, at last, the cycling began. By now it was 6pm and the skies were ominously dark. According to the Met Office, we only had an hour before our whole world would cave in and be set awash. An hour to cycle more than 10 extremely hilly miles with three children and a ton of clobber. And to find a campsite and set up base. It was never going to happen.

I felt a tinge of angst. To cycle into a storm alone is one thing; to cycle into a storm with three young bairns quite another. Plus, this was the first time Molly was to come on a cycling holiday riding her own bike. It was the first time she was to attempt riding with loaded panniers and a handlebar bag. It was the first time she was to try riding through a town unattached to me (she's ridden through plenty of towns and cities sitting in or on a child seat, a trailer, a tandem, a tag-along, a Nihola cargo trike and a FollowMe, so at least she has a good idea about how traffic behaves – often very badly!). And it was also the first time she was to attempt cycling down a long wooden-planked pier with tyre-swallowing gaps. What a birthday present!

THIS WAS THE FIRST TIME I WAS TO ATTEMPT TO GO CYCLE TOURING ALONE WITH THREE CHILDREN. WAS IT POSSIBLE?



Left: Jack helping to pack up the tent. The packing up was more exhausting than the cycling

Below left: Jack, Molly and Daisy cavorting on Shanklin beach

LIFE WITHIN TENT WAS FULL OF BUOYANT HILARITY AND COMICAL ROMPING

At home, Molly rides five miles a day with me along country lanes to school and back. So riding into Ryde was a completely new kettle of fish. There were cars and buses everywhere! It felt like a Bikeability lesson gone haywire. With Molly pedalling just in front of me, I gave her a running commentary on what to do. ‘Keep in, Molls, there’s a bus coming up behind... Mind the drain cover on the left... Give the parked cars a wide berth... Don’t ride too close to the kerb... Mind that broken bottle... Watch that man drinking from a can on the pavement – he’s looking the wrong way – it looks like he’s going to step into the road – oh no, he has! That was close!... Get ready to change lanes as there’s a roundabout coming up... I’ll tell you when... Wait for that red car... Yes, the red one not the blue one, now go, go, go!... Keep left... Watch that white van... Take the second exit where that motorbike’s going... Yes! Quick! Now! Go!’

By the time we headed off the Esplanade and entered the steep hill up Dover Street, I felt like a nervous wreck. But I soon recovered as there were more worrying things to worry about. Like the hill. There



was no way I could ride up it with my weighty cargo of children and camping equipment. So I jettisoned Daisy off the back of the tandem and tried pushing. But that was still no good as the whole cumbersome jalopy was so heavy it started dragging me backwards. I had visions of having to set up camp in the middle of the roundabout. Or on that patch of grass near the pedalo swans. But muscle and mind and desperation over matter work wonders, and somehow I got to the top. That’s when Daisy said: ‘Are we nearly there yet, Mummy?’ Nearly there? We’ve only just started!

CONTENT IN TENT

And then came the rain. Luckily it was just a rainy sort of rain – and not yet the forecast

torrential, all-hell-breaks-loose rain. Our destination was a campsite in Sandown about 12 miles away, though when Molly asked how far it was I said, ‘Probably not much more than five.’ Well, you don’t want to crush all hope from the start.

With rallying spirit, Jack fell asleep and the girls pedalled on as darkness fell and the hills got steeper and the miles got longer and the rain got harder. We passed Havenstreet, struggled up Mersley Down before plummeting down a death-defyingly deep-potholed 1-in-4 cliff-face to Langbridge. It was a stop-start ride full of pushing and heaving and hauling uphill and moral-boosting snacks and multiple wee-wees, and jacket-adjustments and back-tracking to find a dropped bear.



Finally, I found the disused railway path I was looking for and we sallied forth the rest of the way by bike light, which is probably not an ideal way to go cycling with young children but you have to start somewhere. Luckily the girls found the whole thing the height of excitement, especially when the clouds momentarily parted to reveal a huge low yellow moon like a gigantic porthole in the sky. To top that, an impromptu firework display erupted into the blackness in the field beside us. Molly said they must have

known it was her birthday.

By 9 o'clock (yes, it took three hours to do 12 miles), the campsite had been located.

Amazingly, the rain petered off to what Kiwis call a pizzle while I erected the tent by head torch and Jack and the girls ran around doing somersaults and tripping over guylines. But then, with only four pegs left to knock in, the sort of rain that causes rivers to burst their banks and set cars and arks afloat started to hammer down, drenching everything in seconds. I threw all bags and chirruping children into the tent before leaping in myself and zipping up at speed. Phew! Had this biblical rain started ten minutes earlier, it would have been an absolute disaster. Everything and everyone would have been soaked to the core. As it was, life within tent was full of buoyant hilarity and comical romping. Jack and the girls loved every moment.

I took a daring peak outside. Small muddy rivers had formed and were gushing past our tent with gusto. The prospect of slipping our mooring and drifting out to sea didn't seem to worry my young campers in the slightest. Tented life was far too exciting to dwell upon such possibilities, especially when we retreated into the puffy soft down of our sleeping bags for a fine feast of well-earned cyclists' fodder. All that was missing were lashings of ginger beer.

We'd done it: our holiday had begun. □

Left: Molly and Daisy happy to be on top of Mersley Down

Below left: Jack on Shanklin beach indicating, 'Weather's closing in, mum. Rain imminent!'

Fact file

DISTANCE: 125 miles in a week. We managed about 15 to 20 miles a day.

ROUTE: From Ryde to Sandown and Shanklin, up to Newport, down to Godshill and Chale Green and Brightstone and Grange Chine and Blackgang Chine. Then back to Sandown and Ryde.

GETTING THERE: Wightlink catamaran passenger ferry from Portsmouth Harbour.

CONDITIONS: Wet. But we did manage to find some sun too. Traffic in and out of Ryde was awful. I managed to find some lovely quiet and lanes: Rowlands Wood to Langbridge; Godshill to Southford; and Pyle to Yafford to Brightstone.

CYCLE ROUTES: There's a good cycle track that follows the old Cowes-to-Sandown railway. It's nothing like a top-notch Dutch-standard cycle path but it is mostly car-free, which is a huge relief when cycling with children. There's also a good vehicle-free cyclepath that follows the sea-wall from Sandown to Shanklin.

BIKES: With Daisy, I rode a Circe Helios tandem (the same one I've used with Molly). I pulled Jack in a Burley D'Lite trailer. Molly rode an Islabikes Beinn 26.

TENT: Hilleberg Keron 4 GT.

MAPS: OS Landranger 196, The Solent & Isle of Wight. Plus an AZ Atlas of the Isle of Wight.

I'M GLAD I HAD... Decided to take the plunge after Daisy's illness and go on holiday with Jack and the girls. Daisy was fine and loved it.

NEXT TIME I WOULD: Hire a strong person at the bottom of each hill to push the tandem-and-trailer up it!

