



Nowhere has its own signpost



Tern Joe folders for train use

Off-road to Nowhere

MARK JOLLY TOOK AN UNUSUAL TRIP ON NEW ZEALAND'S NORTH ISLAND

Halfway along the Mountains-to-Sea Trail on the North Island of New Zealand, you come to the Bridge to Nowhere. It's a perfectly serviceable bridge, built for cars. Yet there are no roads to or from it. All you can see on the other side is an intense green wall of New Zealand bush. It looks impossible to get through – and in bad weather it is, even on a mountain bike.

The bridge was built in the 1930s in anticipation of roads that never arrived. Now the only people who use it are hikers and cyclists. 'Nowhere' is an apt name, but it's a unique and colourful nowhere, with fantastic views of mountains and the wildly verdant vegetation of native forests you won't see anywhere else in the world.

The Mountains-to-Sea Trail is 217km, going from Mount Ruapehu in the middle of the North Island, to the shore on the west coast at Whanganui. Some of it is on unsealed roads, other parts on technical mountain bike trails. I am not an experienced mountain biker and I fell off five times in one difficult section near the Bridge to Nowhere. There are sections where it is too dangerous to ride, for fear of falling down a cliff. But it's well worth the effort.

Read an extended version of this article at booksandbikes.co.uk.



The 217km trail is best by MTB

ROOKIES RIDE THE RADWEG

Susanne Langer and family embarked on a traffic-free tour of Bavaria

We're regular commuters rather than tourers, but two years ago, at the Youth Hostel in Keswick, we met a wonderful German family who were cycling coast to coast. Their enthusiasm fired our own imagination. Last summer, we felt ready for our own adventure. With a five-year-old, a Follow-Me tandem, and only a modicum of parental fitness, we needed to go somewhere largely flat and traffic free.

A shared desire for 'a proper summer' ruled out the North Sea Cycle route, while the fabled river-valley routes of the Danube and the Elbe were dismissed as 'too busy'. We settled on the Altmühl-Radweg, a German long-distance cycle path that includes imposing castles, countless lakes, and many enticing beer gardens. Following the valley of the sleepy Altmühl River, the route starts at

the walled medieval city of Rothenburg. Imagine a walled city like York, but bigger and with better-preserved old buildings. It finishes at the imposing baroque abbey of Weltenburg on the Danube.

Covering some sections by train and averaging about 15 miles per day, we cycled the stretch Rothenburg to Kinding, and included a detour to the Großer Brombachsee, a reservoir and popular recreational lake. The area is renowned for its fossils, and Solnhofen's unassuming Bürgermeister-Müller-Museum holds one of only six known specimens of the archaeopteryx. We tried our luck at finding our own mini-dino at one of the quarries open to visitors.

Most of our cycling was along idyllic, traffic-free paths through the countryside, offering plenty of opportunities for breaks for sightseeing, splashing, playing, or eating ice cream. It helped that in our fortnight spent in Bavaria, we didn't get rained on once; the sky reflected the blue-white pattern of the Bavarian flag. Our tour ended in the picturesque village of Kinding, which has excellent rail transport links to nearby Nuremberg and its airport.



Archimedian screw, Graben

The Altmühl-Radweg has countless sightseeing opportunities



Heading towards the Chinese border

VIETNAM TOUR

David Catlow and his son Andy explored the former communist republic of North Vietnam

The motorbike slowed and pulled alongside us. 'We don't get many tourists round here,' said the rider, adding: 'The villagers will be pleased to see you exploring our country.' We had quickly got used to such friendly approaches from everyone, but our trip to North Vietnam hadn't started quite so well...

'How on earth did they do that?' asked my son, Andy, as he surveyed the damage to his bike after the flight from South Korea, in our hotel near Hanoi Airport. 'That' was a shattered front hub and squashed rear fork end. Fortunately, he had used an old hub as a spacer for the front fork so, while he carried the rest of his bike to a motorbike repair shop, perched on the back of the hotel manager's little scooter, I rebuilt his rim onto that hub.



A friendly reception

Bike fixed, we set off next day with nothing but a rough idea of where we were heading. Everywhere we went, we met friendly faces, people eager to shake our hands, say 'hello', and have their photos taken, especially the children in the villages we passed through. We meandered on tracks alongside canals, on rough roads surrounded by terraced paddy fields, past the friendly motorbiker, all the time getting further into the mountains.

Not knowing where we would end up each evening initially caused us some concern: where would we sleep? But we needn't have worried. We soon discovered *nha nghi*, private houses run as small hotels. They were everywhere and great value. Capitalism in a socialist state!

After three weeks, we took a train back from the Chinese border to the chaos of Hanoi – the end of a wonderful trip in a beautiful country.



At the top of the Col de la Madeleine. Climb one...

Col his bluff

JONATHAN GREEN'S FRIEND UNDERSOLD A 'LITTLE' CLIMB IN THE FRENCH ALPS

Just the Tamié to go now, except for a little pimple up the road,' Andrew said as we filled our bottles at a village fountain. We were based at a campsite between Annecy and Albertville and were tackling the local cols. We'd planned a loop of 140km to take in the Col de la Madeleine and Col de Tamié.

The early, chilly kilometres on the cycle path to Albertville were a great warm up, as were the lanes along the Isère Valley. The climb up the Madeleine is 26km and about 1,500 metres of climbing. It was really hard, and I had ample time to recall the tale of David Millar's epic lone battle in the 2010 Tour, albeit going the other way.

We had coffee at the top but didn't fancy the price of the food. Mistake! We weren't carrying enough of our own and felt a bit empty as we rolled along the valley from La Chambre. With just 'the pimple' and the steady Col de Tamié ahead, we reckoned we'd manage. The pimple turned out to be about 10km of nasty, steep, sinuous climbing that nearly did for us both. My wheezing abuse of Andrew was only interrupted by the appearance of an old chap, looking fairly fresh. He said he was seventy.

The Col de Tamié was every man for himself. We knew it was steady, but with empty legs (and bellies) it asked a few questions. Not until we'd had cold beers back at base was Andrew forgiven.



Take low gears and food

Share your story

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