



Feature

SMALL WONDERS

WITH THE RIGHT KIT AND ATTITUDE, TOURING WITH YOUNG CHILDREN CAN BE GREAT FUN – EVEN IF, LIKE CYCLING UK VICE PRESIDENT **JOSIE DEW**, YOU'RE OUTNUMBERED THREE TO ONE...





Top: Honfleur, France (Jack's asleep in the trailer)
Bottom: North Sea coast bike path, Netherlands, 2016



There's nothing like children to turn your life upside down. I hadn't expected babies; at 19, a doctor told me that I wouldn't have them. But when I was 40, I had Molly, followed by Daisy at 44 and Jack at 48. When I first became pregnant, people told me to forget cycling. You can't look after a baby and cycle, they said. But you can: you just take baby with you and scale down distances and locations. Cycling across America or around Japan, which I'd done by myself, would be difficult with a baby. So with Molly I kept my cycling closer to home: Sussex, Dorset, Devon, the Isle of Wight.

I got a Burley child trailer, which I padded liberally with pillows and blankets. Molly went in that, enjoying good protection from the sun, rain, and wind. I also had a Hamax childseat, which I used as soon as Molly's neck muscles could hold up her head (at about eight months). This gave her a good view above the hedges and meant I could chat to her while riding along.

When Daisy was born I acquired a Nihola cargo trike, with a front box cavernous enough to store an assortment of children, camping equipment, teddies, and nappies. When Daisy was one she sat in this, admiring the windmills and multitudes of cyclists as we cycled across the Netherlands. Molly rode her tag-along attached to the rear of the Nihola.

Next came a Circe Helios tandem. Just after Daisy's second birthday, I managed to cajole my husband Gary to cycle 800 miles with me along the North Sea coast from

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Holland up through Germany to Denmark. Gary towed Daisy in the trailer, while five-year-old Molly rode the tandem with me. This was a good combination as it meant we could cover fairly long distances each day.

A few months after this, Jack was born. Gary made sure he was working for the next summer's jaunt! I wasn't quite sure how I would cope cycling singlehandedly with a baby and two young girls, so instead I pushed them in an off-road pram along the South Downs Way, with help from my Dutch friend Anoek. Since then, I've done all my trips with my three offspring alone.

FOUR WHEELS, EIGHT LEGS, ONE MOTOR

Cycling around the Isle of Wight was the first trip I did with three children by myself. The weight was immense! Sleeping bags, tent, tools, toys... I perfected the art of cramming. Anything that didn't fit inside the bags, I hung from the rear rail of the trailer: buckets, spades, potty, water bottle, rubber rings, pushchair, toy digger, *and* the kitchen sink – a collapsible Ortlieb bowl with handles. The trouble with the Isle of Wight for cycling so heavily loaded is that it is hilly. Plus there are far too many cars in places. So we spent the entire six weeks of the next summer holidays in the Netherlands, an ideal country for cycling with children.

A couple of months after this trip, I acquired a Circe Helios triplet. This meant all four of us could now travel on one bike: me at the helm, Molly in the middle, Daisy on the rear, Jack in the trailer. It's an unwieldy 14-foot-long articulated monster but is fun to ride, and it means all three offspring are tucked in with me on the road and travelling at the same speed. To save my knees from exploding, the triplet has electric assistance. The 250W motor is designed to help propel one rider on a single bike so the assistance it gives us is minimal. I turn it on when I really need it – mostly to prevent being dragged backwards on an incline by the unearthly weight.

Since you can't fit 14 feet of bike onto a train or a plane, this limits our mode of escape from England to ferries; we simply cycle onto the car deck with the trucks. The first place we toured around by triplet was the Channel Islands (ferry from Portsmouth). ➤



Hoek van Holland, 2012. Daisy (one) in Nihola trike

We went there for the Easter holidays last year. Although the Channel Islands are part of the British Isles, it's a long way by slow ferry (seven hours) and you see bits of France (Normandy) float past.

These beautiful islands are well worth the effort to see. We cycled 20-30 miles a day, all around and up and down Guernsey, before catching a ferry to Jersey where we cycled similar daily distances. We totalled just short of 300 miles in 12 days. Every day Jack and the girls played on the beaches and the rocks, made sand castles and forts, and ate ice cream and chips.

Despite the number of vehicles crammed onto the Channel Islands, most of the drivers were slow, patient, respectful, and happy. They cheered, waved, and took pictures. The only trouble we had was when a scuffle broke out on the back row of the triplet: Daisy attacked Molly, who then tried to elbow Daisy clean off her seat. Not what you want when descending a cliff-side road laced with hairpins!

ENJOYING THE JOURNEY

Last summer we spent five weeks cycling 642 miles across northern France, Belgium, and Holland. When I say 'we' cycled, that's not quite correct; the girls didn't always put in much cycling effort. Although Daisy (seven) was supposed to be cycling, she spent far too much time with her legs hoisted up over the handlebar so that she could recline and sunbathe on the bags bunged on the rack behind her. 'Ahhhh,

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this is the life!' I would hear her sigh as I toiled away.

When you cycle in another country with three children on your bike, there is a lot that could conceivably go wrong. You can't help ticking them off in your mind: vehicle crashing into us; one of us (or all of us!) falling off; breaking bones; becoming ill; bodily or mechanical breakdowns; bad weather; dangerous roads; dubious people. But I try not to dwell on the bad and instead look for the good: the fun; the camping; the living outside; the new places; the new faces; being on the move; life 'on the road'. All the time there is that exhilarating feeling of freedom and uncertainty and spontaneity – the not knowing exactly where we are going every day, who we are going to meet, or where we are going to sleep (I'm not one for booking ahead).

When I used to tour alone pre-children, the cycling was the tiring part, the camping the relaxing bit. Now it's the other way

ALL ABOARD!

BIKE: Circe Helios Triplet with electric assistance. With the Burley Cub child trailer, it enables all four of us to travel on one bike. circecycles.com
PANNIERS: Ortlieb. Strong, waterproof, tough. ortlieb.com
TENT: Hilleberg Keron 4 GT (5.5kg). gb.hilleberg.com/EN/
NAVIGATION: I use paper maps because they are lovely and I can write notes on them.

PHONE: I now take a basic phone so that Gary can keep up with our current position.

SOLAR-POWERED CHARGER: A Dutch-designed Waka Waka. Each one purchased helps refugees, school children, and others in developing countries. waka-waka.com

TOOLKIT: A kit that covers every fixture and fitting on the bike and trailer. With children, it's no good getting stranded: you have to make do or mend. I never leave home without a multi-tool knife, zip-ties, and gaffer tape.

TOE STRAPS: Useful for attaching potty, buckets, spades, etc to the trailer's rail.

BUCKETS: I take two small buckets with lids. The one named 'Bottoms' is the night-time toilet. The one named 'Bath' is for washing when wild camping, or when I can't face the palaver of getting four of us through a campsite shower.

TOYS/DISTRACTIONS: A Moon Ball (bouncy ball); toy truck and tractor for Jack; colouring pens, pad and activity book; small fat book with multiple stories. Molly has an old phone so she can keep in contact with friends, take pictures, and look up info. Sometimes, as a treat, Jack and Daisy watch 'Tractor Tom' on it.

BAR-END REAR VIEW

MIRRORS: The articulated triplet and trailer is unwieldy when loaded with camping clobber and three children, which makes looking over my shoulder for traffic awkward, so I rely heavily on my two mirrors. They're also very useful for checking whether my cycling passengers are actually cycling or sunbathing instead, with legs resting on the down tube or handlebar.



CW from top: With Gary. A rare Dutch hill. Netherlands



“Every day Jack and the girls played on the beaches and the rocks, made sand castles, and ate ice cream”

round. Although the cycling is wearying, everything is packed up, everyone is on board, we’re on the move. It’s the end-of-the-day part that wears me into the ground: finding somewhere to camp; putting up a big tent; dealing with mechanical problems; washing clothes for four by hand; trying to keep an eye on all three children when they run off in three different directions; trying to cook for us all on a tiny camping stove

without burning the tent down. It’s not a holiday in the usual sense but it is hugely enjoyable... most of the time.

There are occasions when you just don’t have enough hands. Take showering. Last year, our first shower in a campsite in Katwijk wasn’t very successful. The women’s showers were closed for cleaning so we were directed to share the men’s. It was busy but finally a cubicle became free and we all crammed in. Molly undressed and I managed to get Jack’s, Daisy’s and my own clothes off without dropping them on the flooded floor. We then pushed the button for our limited-time shower. The girls went in without incident but Jack was not keen so I had to lift him in, whereupon he started yelping and wriggling about. He slid soapily out of my grasp, unlocked the door, and made a break for freedom.

I had a split-second decision: grab a tiny

travel towel (too small for decency) or bolt out of the door after him. I went out of the door after him. Much-amused faces turned from shaving to watch the naked foreigner slipping and sliding in hot pursuit of her little bare boy. When I collided with a group of Dutch teenagers sauntering around the corner, it was like something out of a Carry On film – breasts and bottoms everywhere. Luckily, a helpful German woman caught Jack at the door and I scarpered back to the shower where we all burst out laughing. I said to the girls that I wasn’t sure how I was going to show my face in the morning.

‘Don’t worry, mum,’ said Molly. ‘All those men probably won’t recognise you with your clothes on!’ And she was right. The next day, no one batted an eyelid. 

For more family touring advice from Josie, see [cyclinguk.org/category/tags/josie-dew](https://www.cyclinguk.org/category/tags/josie-dew)