



Afan Valley Route, NCN 887



Real miles, imaginary tour

Lockdown

Virtual world tour

Frank Burns exercised locally last winter – but not in his head

THE ADVERTISING WORLD is awash with advice on how you can do everything 'from the comfort of your own home'. We cyclists are slowly being persuaded that we can live a full and rewarding cycling experience without ever stepping over the threshold. Is that true? Do I hear you shouting at the page?

In my own struggle to stave off the 'virtual enemy', I have tricked myself into believing that, without ever straying more than 50km from my own front door, I can actually tour the world by cycling my local lanes. Starting in 'Paris', I have virtually passed through Istanbul, Tehran, Karachi and, after 8,000km, I'm currently in Mumbai. All of this without ever needing visas, having my bags checked, dicing with dodgy street food, nor sleeping in river drains – the very ingredients that make adventure cycling 'adventurous', and thus create the stories that become the clickbait of social media.

The world is not interested in seeing me holding a glass of wine while I gaze at a crimson sunset. No, they would much rather hear of me sitting miserably in my tent during a thunderstorm and cutting my finger on the sharp edge of a sardine can. For some dark reason, we all have a tendency of taking consolation in the misery of others, better known as the syndrome of 'There but for the grace of God...'

The solace that I now feel on a wet December day in England is that I can arrive virtually in Mumbai during the dry season, where the temperature is 30°C, the sun is shining in a cloudless sky, and I am assured of at least 11 hours of daylight.

Wales

Beyond the vale

Last April, **David Cope** and his friend Colin took a train-assisted ride through the Welsh valleys

For much of the last year, Colin and I have trundled around familiar routes through the Vale of Glamorgan, starting and finishing at our homes in Llantwit Major. It's got us out and about but had become a little monotonous. So last Good Friday, with the weather sunny and breezy, we decided to venture further afield and try some of the National Cycle Network routes that South Wales has to offer.

We loaded our bikes onto the early train to Bridgend. Our route was the Ogmere Valley Trail, NCN Route 883, a former railway that transported the coal mined in Nantymoel down the valley to Porthcawl on the coast. The gently rising track passes through Ogmere Vale and Wyndham, once thriving mining communities, before finishing in Nantymoel at the top of the valley.

The climb from there up to Bwlch-y-Clawdd (450m) was achieved with much more of an effort from Colin on his hybrid than from me on my e-bike. At the summit we were greeted by a gusting icy wind, spectacular views down to Treorchy, and the welcome sight of a refreshment van in the lay-by!

Refuelled with tea and Welsh cake, we continued along the A4107 towards Port Talbot and down into the Afan Valley. This descent must be one of

the best rides in Wales: fast and smooth, with Alpine-like turns.

We joined NCN 887, the Afan Valley Route, at Cymmer. We glided along the well-maintained cycle track, freewheeling down through woodlands and the former mining communities of Pontrydyfen (birthplace of Richard Burton) and Cwmafan.

In bustling Port Talbot we searched for NCN 4, which would take us back to Bridgend via Margam. After an unintended detour to Aberavon beach, we found our bearings and headed east past the imposing structures of the steelworks. We completed our journey back to Llantwit Major on a route we had come to know and love during lockdown: NCN 88.

For more Welsh valleys ride ideas, visit cyclingsuk.org/talesofthetrails.

Cold spring sunshine at the top of Bwlch-y-Clawdd





Framlingham Castle in Suffolk is set in extensive parkland



Ten-year-old Luke and mum Kerrin rode 144 miles

Southern England

Cycling to the sea

Luke Cocks and his mum, **Kerrin**, rode from Stroud to Southampton

I LOVE CYCLING and wanted to do something challenging so my mum said to plan a three-day cycling trip. I wanted to cycle to the coast and chose Southampton. We had never cycled that sort of distance before, but I ride my bike to school every day and we did a few hilly rides beforehand.

I planned the entire 144-mile trip, sticking to the National Cycle Network. I then found places for us to stay in Swindon, Amesbury, and Southampton. The January lockdown messed up all my plans, so we had to wait until April for restrictions to ease.

We bought waterproof covers for our backpacks, a handlebar bag, and cycling shorts. We were really lucky with the weather: although it was cold in the mornings it didn't rain. Before we left, I worried that the lockdown would come back, my mum worried that one of the bikes would break, and my little sister worried that we'd crash. As it turned out, we only crashed once – into each other – in Cirencester!

It was an amazing three days spent outdoors, seeing the spring countryside with lots of fields of baby lambs and rape in full bloom. We also watched a military convoy cross Salisbury Plain. We ate lunch in fields and fuelled on fruit pastels and chocolate. Next time we need a handlebar holder for the phone so that we don't get lost. Also, backpacks aren't very comfortable.

I'm now planning a cycling trip across Wales for us.

East Anglia

Staycation success

With last summer's plans in disarray, **Lesley** and **Alan Baillie** toured East Anglia instead

Every year we enjoy a cycle touring holiday in Europe or the UK. In 2020, we'd planned three weeks in Scotland and Northern Ireland in June. With lockdown still in place in May and accommodation closed, we realised this couldn't happen and cancelled the trip. We discussed cycling the French Atlantic coast in September but, by August, France didn't seem feasible either.

We then decided to plan a trip most likely to actually happen: a tour in England that we could start from home. We chose East Anglia and ordered Sustrans maps so we could follow National Cycle Network (NCN) routes. Our tour took us through Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire, and Suffolk, and then up around the Suffolk and Norfolk

coastline. We cycled back through the Fens, with a memorable night in the beautiful cathedral city of Ely. It was a fantastic trip, helped by an Indian summer, and brought us great memories to sustain us through the winter.

We set off in early September from our home in Aylesbury. Highlights en route included the beautiful Anglesey Abbey gardens near Cambridge, Wicken Fen Nature Reserve, Bury St Edmunds Abbey, and Framlingham Castle. There were unexpected treats too: medieval stone bridges in Cambridgeshire; cycling through Minsmere to the historic port of Dunwich; coffee by Horsey windmill in the Norfolk Broads; lunch at Norfolk Lavender; and walks across the beautiful beaches on this lovely coastline.

The NCN routes took mainly quiet lanes through pretty countryside and villages, interspersed with stretches of traffic-free routes alongside waterways and through country parks. Most impressive was the 14-mile St Ives to Cambridge Busway route, where we cycled on an excellent tarmac path alongside open countryside.

We're now excitedly planning our 2021 UK cycling tours, using NCN routes once again.



Sun, sea, and sand remained on the agenda



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