



Clockwise from top left: Taking a breather before descending to Winchester. Salt Hill on the South Downs Way. Selfie, somewhere between Mottisfont and Winchester. Winchester Cathedral



“The climb up to Butser Hill is long and technically challenging – we appreciated being on mountain bikes”

Cyclery for the route he'd suggested we take to Winchester the following day. The Komoot app was a big help for a lot of the trip but, as we'd found out that morning when it took us through a bog, it wasn't a substitute for proper local knowledge.

The New Forest is chock full of routes both on and off road. Ponies, horses, cows, pigs and donkeys roam around on those routes. It's wise to bear that in mind when going round a corner on one of the narrow lanes where you'd never expect a pig or donkey to be standing. We passed several of each along the way on day five. The weather had deteriorated, but not as severely as the forecast had predicted. It was misty and damp rather than rainy as had been forecast, much to our relief. It improved through the day as we made our way towards our lunch stop in Winchester.

After the bumpy flatness of the north New Forest, we soon hit the bigger hills of Hampshire. We had to get into the rhythm of longer climbs after leaving the Test Valley and hanging a right to Winchester. Days five and six were the hilliest, and by the afternoon of the last day we were definitely ready for the end. We even made a few adjustments to the route on the fly to get us back without any extra climbs or unnecessary miles.

The South Downs Way between Winchester and Petersfield is lumpy and bumpy, and while we were glad to be going down the grassy slope of the infamous Butser Hill, the climb up to it is long and technically challenging in parts, so we again appreciated being on mountain bikes. It also provided our final animal encounter. At one point our route was completely blocked by a friendly herd of cows, which had to be gently encouraged to let us pass.

After six dry days, it started raining five minutes after we finished. Would we do it again? Definitely. As long as we could book the same weather! ●

Pack it in

Troy and I had different approaches to luggage. I went for luxury with a set of Ortlieb bags: waterproof, quick-release bar (11 litres) and seat (13 litres) packs. Troy took a budget approach with a basic REI seatpack (which needed extra stabilising) and a Podsacs bar bag in similar sizes. Both setups did the job, but Troy's required a lot more fiddling to attach and detach, and were best left on the bike overnight. I also had a small frame bag and top tube bag, and Troy borrowed a top tube bag from a friend. Clothing went in the seatpacks, with jackets, trail food and a camera in the bar bags. The smaller bags had tools and chargers, and we each had a small waistpack for extra bits and pieces.

South Downs Way congestion

