

Feature

SOME BLUE SIGNS

THE NETHERLANDS HAS A DENSE NETWORK OF HIGH-QUALITY CYCLING INFRASTRUCTURE. THE UK? SOME PATCHY GOOD BITS AND LOTS OF BLUE SIGNS, AS **LAURA LAKER** DISCOVERED



LAURA LAKER

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A set of stairs with a bollard on them was uniquely obstructive, even by National Cycle Network (NCN) standards. I'd had a delightful day's riding on country lanes and magical off-road paths in the countryside around Loch Lomond but, even after a year or so's exploration of the NCN, its good bits and bad bits, this surprised even me.

Don't get me wrong: I love our NCN. Last year, I wrote a book detailing some of the wonderful, surprising, joyful and maddening things about it. I'd cycled to awe-inspiring places across Britain. I'd seen lives transformed by a new walking and cycling bridge reconnecting canal-side communities after more than a century. I'd seen how a protected cycle lane on a busy urban road had enabled groups of Muslim women to cycle confidently for the first time.

On a macro as well as a micro level, from the politics that fund (or don't fund) cycle routes in the UK, to the weird

details like the stairs bollard (were they expecting particularly ingenious daleks?), I'd pretty much seen it all. And while the little blue signs took me to some truly delightful places, and clearly a lot has gone right with it, it's just as clear that a lot has gone wrong.

DOES THE NETWORK WORK?

On my travels I found myself asking: what is a cycle network? What would it look like if we were to do it properly? The answer really depends whom you're asking. It could resemble the continuous network of dependable paths in the Netherlands that take people anywhere they need to go. Here in the UK, well, it's a bit more complicated.

For one thing, just 26% of Brits have even heard of the National Cycle Network. I remember introducing an ex to the blue and red stickers pasted on street furniture alongside pavements and stretches of otherwise unaltered road in London, and seeing his bewilderment and wonder. Every spring, Sustrans, the

