



Fact file King Alfred's Way

Distance: 350km (217 miles).

Route: I joined King Alfred's Way 12km south-east of Swindon.

Conditions: This spring was unusually dry, so it was a lot less muddy than sometimes reported. Surfaces vary between loose gravel, hard chalk, deep ruts and rooty woodland.

Bike used: Trek Roscoe 8 trail bike equipped with Podsacs.

Maps/guides: Cycling UK Guide (cyclinguk.org/king-alfreds-way), I downloaded the GPX file to my phone and used the OS Maps app for navigation. I downloaded the map of the route in case of a weak data signal.

I'm glad I had: Adidas Trailcross GTX boots; day after day of wet feet is grim. Fleece and woolly hat, my essential if unconventional nightwear.

Next time I would: I loved the bunkhouse at Puttenham. There are four on the route. If I did it again, I would ditch the tent and arrange my schedule around them (independenthostels.co.uk/king-alfreds-way).

Further info: Two books assisted with my planning: *Cycling King Alfred's Way* by Dave Lewis; and *Cycling King Alfred's Way: A Piece of Cake* by Julia Goodfellow-Smith.



Previous page: The Ridgeway in Oxfordshire
Top: Wayland's Smithy, near Ashbury
Bottom: Mathew carried camping gear but says he would go without next time

Day five: stone circles and firing ranges

Near Old Sarum I heard the two-tone proclamation of the first cuckoo of the year. There are two possible routes here: via Amesbury or a byway through Stonehenge. Although I would have to cross the A303, I decided to visit the World Heritage Site. I rode up a trail that climbs a valley to the stones.

Tumuli were scattered in all directions. Half a dozen lapwings took to the sky.

The stones were visible from half a mile away, contrasting against the greens and the white of the local landscape. The scene quivered with thousands of tourists decanted from coaches. I crossed the road carefully, looking forward to a time that a better junction can be created.

At Bustard Junction, I looked unsuccessfully for the eponymous world's heaviest flying bird, which lives near here. I settled for my first house martin instead. A notice warning of a military road closure proved an unnecessary anxiety; the route turned off just ahead of the red barrier. I pedalled alongside warning signs and the ominous red flags that

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characterise much of Salisbury Plain.

Day six: wet weather and the way home

The sodden tent was strapped to the top tube one last time, and I made an early start along the Imber Range Path. This vast military area is the reason that there is an expanse of white on the map. The village of Imber lies at its centre, emptied of its inhabitants in 1943.

I turned onto the Ridgeway, following its signs back to where I started. Miles of gravel roads followed the summit as I progressed towards the final monument: Avebury stone circle. Less famous than Stonehenge, it is bigger, quieter and has none of the restrictions, allowing you to walk among its stones. Sightseers who had ventured out today were soon beaten back to their vehicles or nearby cafés by the rain.

The climb out of Avebury is rutted and steep. I was glad when the sky cleared and I could lose a layer. A benevolent south-westerly wind had been following me all morning and pushed me up the last few climbs. When Swindon at last came into view, I checked the train times home. ●

