



Above: The mountain road from Machynlleth over the aptly named Rhiw Fawr ('Big Hill')
Right: Caen Hill Locks, Devizes, on the Kennet and Avon Canal



good for the soul. Humans are built to move around with muscle power, and those who do so seem calmer and more reflective than those who are sedentary. Touring cyclists, not tramps or highwaymen, are the true gentlemen and women of the road.

At Hay-on-Wye, the Cosy Café was another that offered e-bike plug-ins for cyclists buying food. I sat thinking about how, after centuries of rural subsistence, people have had to adapt rapidly to an urban lifestyle and the tsunami of additional stimuli that entails. Seeing my bicycle through the window was a reminder that we're better equipped to handle slow travel where we can get lost in the moment.

"Flat white," said the waitress, "and don't forget your battery. You'll not get far without that, will you?"

I rode through Monmouth and on into the Wye Valley. It was getting dark and while there was plenty of accommodation in the town, it was expensive.

An arc of trees created a dark corridor, so I found a spot by the river to set up my tent for the night.

Over the Severn

Early the next morning I rode along a very quiet A466. Before reaching Tintern, home to the

abbey of that name, I took a left up Mill Hill to stop at the Brockweir community café, where I did what I always do: purchase something so I could charge my battery. The owner told me how the abbey was deliberately built far away from cities,

towns and "the conversation of men", and how it fell into ruin after the dissolution of the monasteries in the 16th century.

Leaving Tintern, I continued uphill for while, passed by well-mannered traffic obeying the 40mph and speed-camera signs, then freewheeled downhill past the racecourse to the port of Chepstow. Passing under the restored 13th-century town gate, I immediately found another café.

The weather was sunny and fresh; it was turning into another good day. After crossing the Severn Road Bridge, I navigated urban landscapes until I reached the Bristol and Bath Railway Path, which starts near Temple Meads railway station. That night I camped again.

"On a bicycle you carry as little as you need. You are decluttered and plugged into your surroundings"

White horses

Up with the sun, I soon found myself in the main square of Devizes and then in an early-opened Greggs. Town houses here are reminders of a prosperous past, where merchants

traded in corn and wool, and businesses included a bell foundry, booksellers, brewers, snuff-makers, milliners, grocers and silversmiths.

The Kennet and Avon Canal runs through Devizes, and the towpath was part of my planed route. →

Nick's top 10 tips

1. See what National Cycle Network routes you could use. They're either traffic free or quiet roads.
2. You don't need to reinvent the wheel when planning. Half of this ride was on signed routes.
3. Be imaginative when linking up your routes. Unclassified tarmac lanes (white on an OS map) criss-cross the country.
4. If you're going to wild camp on farmland, ask the farmer first. Leave no trace.
5. If you're e-biking, take a spare battery or be mindful of charging points. Most cafés are happy to help if you buy something and offer, say, £1 for a 30min top-up.
6. If the off-road sections are rougher than you anticipated when planning, there will be a tarmac alternative.
7. Don't worry too much about booking accommodation ahead. Cafés, pubs and hotels are ever present on this route. Use an app like Booking.com on your phone.
8. Don't slavishly stick to your planned route. Ad hoc alterations are fine.
9. A phone is indispensable. There's a signal on almost all of this route.
10. Don't put off until tomorrow what you could do today. Riding this simple, quiet route on home soil was one of the highlights of my travelling year.

