



Most softshells are designed for 0–10°C. This ride was sub-zero

Left: Dan on the Cinder Track, by Dave Learning

## Softshell jackets

Until spring finally arrives, you'll likely want a warm and windproof jacket for every ride. Dan Joyce and Emma Silversides test six

**Softshell jackets** are stretchy windcheaters for athletic riding in colder conditions. Unlike a hardshell waterproof jacket, which can usually be worn over normal clothing, softshells are bike-specific kit designed to be layered over nothing much bulkier than a long-sleeved vest.

Softshells work well for gravel riding and mountain biking but are primarily aimed at year-round roadies such as club riders, training cyclists and mile-eating audaxers – cyclists who would find a hardshell waterproof too hot and too flappy. As such they have a jersey-style tailored fit, along with a high neck, long sleeves that won't expose skin in a drop-bar crouch, and a longer back (ditto). Standard features include elasticated pockets and reflective details to catch car headlights.

Softshells are made from thermal fabrics rather than swishy, sibilant nylon. Most suit conditions from around 0–10°C, although the functional range will depend on the warmth of your baselayer, what your temperature tolerances are like and so on. All softshells are breathable and windproof.

Rain resistance varies from vaguely showerproof – typically from a DWR (durable, water-repellent) coating – to genuinely waterproof, with a hydrostatic head rating of 10,000mm or more. Moisture can still get through nominally waterproof fabrics as they're not impermeable and may have untaped seams. This isn't a big problem, however. These jackets are intended to keep you comfortable, not completely dry.

### What to look for

**Fit and sizing**  
As with all clothing, manufacturer sizing varies. Try before you buy if you can. To put the reviews into context: Emma typically wears UK 12 (size M), while Dan (37in/94cm chest) is usually borderline between S and M. Because of the tailored fit, unisex softshells aren't really a thing.

**Weather protection**  
Effective windproofing is more important than insulation for cycling, but a fleecy-faced inner fabric will add some warmth and help prevent hypothermia when you're fixing a puncture. A pocketable rain jacket is worth carrying if the softshell isn't itself waterproof.

**Visibility**  
Some brands have a Henry Ford approach to cycling gear for roadies, but brighter colours clearly stand out better in off-season UK conditions. At night, reflectivity is all that really matters.

**Pockets**  
You're unlikely to wear a cycling jersey underneath a softshell, so traditional rear pockets are useful for snacks and spare layers. A zipped pocket is invaluable for a phone, especially off road.

**Care**  
Softshells can usually be machine washed at 30°C. Don't use conditioner if the jacket has a microporous membrane as it will block the pores and stop the fabric breathing. Don't iron or tumble dry unless the label says you can. You can reproof DWR coatings; PFC- and PFAS-free treatments are available.