

Cycle touring

When you're cycling along with the sun on your back and the wind in your hair, it can be tempting to keep going instead of turning for home. Try it! That's cycle touring: extending your day's ride to the next day, or the day after that, or the next week. It's no longer just a day out or a bike ride: it's an adventure.

How self-sufficient you want to be will determine your luggage, and even the bike that you ride. If you're carrying your kitchen and your bedroom with you because you're camping, you'll need plenty of panniers and a bike that will accommodate them all. If you're 'credit card touring', you need only a day-bag and any bike will do.

A good target for your first trip is to pick an interesting destination 15-30 miles away, riding there on the first day and returning the next. A B&B or youth hostel is perhaps the best option, but just because you're a cyclist doesn't mean you can't stop at a hotel or a Travelodge. Prices for the latter are competitive when there's a whole family in one room.

Credit-card touring

Touring is easier the less weight you carry. You can travel further or faster, or just use less effort. At the extreme, this means you'll have only the clothes you stand up in, your credit card, plus whatever you can stuff in handlebar bag and/or seat pack – or a hydration pack if you're mountain biking. You stay in hotels or B&B's and hand-wash your kit in the sink or shower each night, drying it on the radiator ready for the next day.

You have to be ruthless with what you take, paring it down to a monk-like minimum. It's a useful strategy if you want to travel light on road bikes, or if you'll be mountain biking from place to place. It's seldom ideal when you're touring with children, who will usually want home comforts like spare clothes and a toothbrush that hasn't had the handle cut off to save weight. The exception is on organised rides that have a sag-wagon (i.e. a van or minibus) to move your luggage between overnight stops. You can then have a suitcase of gear but carry almost nothing on the bike.

You'll probably need 10 litres or more of luggage space per person. It's easier when there's more than one of you because you can share tools, toothpaste, etc. Here's one possible kit list. For when you're on the bike: helmet (if you use one); cycling glasses; mitts; wicking vest; short-sleeved jersey; Lycra shorts; socks; cycling shoes (ones you can walk in); arm warmers (extra warmth, minimal bulk); knee warmers (ditto); shower-proof gilet (ditto); pump; puncture kit; two tyre levers; spare innertube; multi-tool; cable ties; spare chain link or two; a pocket-sized cable lock; water bottle; snack(s).

For when you're off the bike: one or two pairs of pants; lightweight poly-cotton walking trousers or shorts; T-shirt; lightweight fleece or jersey (which can also be used on the bike); flip flops if you can't walk in your bike shoes; travel toothbrush & paste; small deodorant; sunblock; plasters; pain killers. You won't need a towel, soap or shampoo as the hotel or B&B will provide them. You'll also want a map or a GPS for your route, a mobile phone, some cash, and of course your credit card. You may be able to squeeze in a luxury such as an MP3 player, a small radio, a deck or cards, or a paperback. Anything else you need, you buy en route. It sounds and is Spartan, but it's strangely liberating to travel with so few possessions.

Two-panniers touring

Sometimes called short-haul touring, or even just 'touring' since it's the most common type, two-panniers touring involves cycling through first world countries and spending each night with a proper roof over your head. The extra luggage space means the minimalism of credit card touring is not required, though your bike choice is pretty much limited to those that can be fitted with a rear carrier rack. (Some other combination of bags is possible, such as huge saddlebag or two panniers at the front.)

You need about 25 litres of luggage space per person and may want more. That's a couple of universal/front panniers or one big rear pannier each.

Even though you've more room than the credit card tourer, it will still take practice to pare down your luggage to fit this space. So lay out all the gear you think you'll need and then get rid of the half of it that isn't essential.

A sample kit list might include the following. For when you're on the bike: helmet (possibly); sunglasses; mitts; Lycra shorts; tracksuit trousers or baggy shorts to wear over the top; wicking vest; T-shirt or cycling jersey; fleece; showerproof or waterproof jacket; socks; trainers or cycling shoes; same tools as the credit card tourer but more spares.

For when you're off the bike: three sets of underwear (one on, one off, one in the wash); lightweight trousers; T-shirt(s); body warmer; sandals; toiletry bag, including Vaseline (in case of chafing) and wet wipes. If you're staying at a youth hostel rather than a B&B you will also need soap, shampoo (sachets), and a hand or travel towel.

As well as the map, lock and mobile phone (and charger), you can take more luxuries – a camera, travel boardgame and book. If you're stopping at youth hostels, which have kitchens you can use, you can carry a few basic foods too.

Where to stay

The UK is blessed with lots of B&Bs and they tend to congregate in just the sorts of rural areas that touring cyclists like to explore. Price and quality varies widely and capacities are often small. Solo cyclists can turn up in any town and usually get a bed for the night. Family cyclists will need to book ahead.

Do spell out that you'll be arriving by bike, because you want somewhere secure and undercover to store your bikes. The star rating for hotels and B&Bs is just a guide; well-run establishments can score low due to a lack of facilities rather than a lack of quality or care.

For a list of cyclist-friendly B&Bs, visit the CTC website (<http://www.ctc.org.uk>) and follow the links 'What I need', 'Travel Services' and 'Cyclists Welcome Online Directory'. With these establishments, you know the owners are used to dealing with cyclists and that they'll look after your bikes.

Youth hostels are an excellent alternative to B&Bs. There are more than 200 in England and Wales, mostly in honey-pot touring areas. Virtually all of them have bike sheds. You don't have to be young or even a member to stay there. Costs are low because you stay in single sex dormitories in bunk beds, although families can book a room to themselves in most hostels. Prices range from £33 a night for a family room – about £8 per person! That doesn't include meals. Youth hostels often have breakfast and evening meals available. They also have kitchens and dining rooms – and pans, plates and cutlery – that any guest can use, so you can take your own food with you.

You will be provided with a sheet sleeping bag at a hostel, so you won't need bedding. You will need your own towel. If you'll be staying in a dormitory, take foam ear plugs – there's always one snorer. For more information about the Youth Hostel Association, or to join (which gives you discounts), see <http://www.yha.org.uk>. Don't forget that you can stay in hostels across the world, too. Children under three are welcome in some hostels but not all. Children aged 14 or over can visit youth hostels by themselves, with parental permission.

Cycle-camping

Cycle-camping is the most self-sufficient way to travel, and it's a great way to enjoy the outdoors. It's an expedition for children, whether you're spending one night at a campsite 15 miles from home or a couple of weeks touring through France. Once you've got the kit, it's a cheap holiday too.

The price of carrying your kitchen, bedding and shelter with you is an inescapably bigger load. The adult bike(s) will likely need four panniers each. Tent, groundsheet and poles may fit in a large rear pannier and/or across the top of the rear rack, but you'll still have sleeping bags and mats to carry somewhere. A luggage trailer adds capacity if you need more. Or you can fit a carrier rack to one or more of the children's bikes, so long as you don't overload them. Light items that are eating into adult pannier space are best: sleeping bags, showerproof jackets and such. However you pack, don't put tent pegs in with the tent as they may tear it.

A tent for family cycling needs to be much lighter and more compact than those huge tents you see in catalogues. You can get two small tents and pitch them face to face, with an adult in each or with older children in the non-adult tent. Or you could get one big one. Whichever way you do it, aim for a weight of under 2kg per person – and the lower the better.

If you're getting two tents, there's plenty to choose from tents designed for backpackers. If you're getting one big one, there's less choice, though a tent that fits three adults will usually fit two adults and two children. Tunnel tents offer more 'living space', while dome tents have more headroom. A tent with two entrances is best, because you can come in and out without walking past a lit stove. Alloy poles are better than fibreglass, which can break.

You'll need a groundsheet too. And to insulate you from the ground and provide a bit more comfort, everyone needs at least a foam rollmat. Self-inflating Therm-a-rest mats (not a lilo: too bulky) are even more comfortable.

Down sleeping bags are very warm and compact but are quite expensive and take a long time to dry if they get wet. Synthetic bags are bulkier but easier to live with. You can pay silly money for mountaineering bags that you don't really need for a UK summer. That said, there's nothing worse than shivering through the night. A three-season bag will keep you cosy. Expect to pay from £40 upwards.

For cooking, a couple of resealable gas-cartridge stoves will suffice. Alternatives include a meths-burning Trangia or, for those travelling further afield, a multi-fuel stove. Whatever method of heating you use, get a reasonable sized cookset that includes 1-, 1.5- and 2-litre pans with lids. They stack inside each other like Russian dolls, and you can get a little kettle that will do the same. For eating, stackable plastic bowls, beakers and plastic cutlery are sufficient. Don't forget a dishcloth, a small amount of washing up liquid, and a tea towel. Two-pan meals based around pasta, rice or noodles are easy, as are camp favourites like tinned beans and sausages. Experiment at home using your cookset on the kitchen hob.

Clothes will be much the same as for short-haul touring. Quick-drying material is best for obvious reasons, so avoid cotton. For children, a spare fleece and tracksuit trousers can double as pyjamas, and everyone's main jumper or fleece can be rolled up underneath the head of the sleeping bag for use as a pillow.

Towels take a long, long time to dry when camping so go for dedicated travel towels available from most camping and outdoor shops. If everything does get wet, head for the nearest laundrette.

Tools will need supplementing with camp tools, such as a mallet for tent pegs and either a Swiss army knife or Leatherman for can and bottle opening. Either offers a way out of the tent if a catastrophe happens and it catches fire – you just cut through the side with a blade.

A useful extra for camping is an LED head torch or two. Use it for reading, going to the toilet block at night – even as an emergency bike light.

As with other places to stay, campsites can vary tremendously in quality, facilities and clientele. In the UK, look for Camping and Caravanning Club sites (<http://www.campingandcaravanningclub.co.uk>) – they're good sites and you don't have to be a member to stay there.

Preparing for your tour

If you're a regular bike rider, you don't need to worry about training to go touring. Just don't over-commit yourself – or your family – for your first few days. They might manage 40 miles on day one but struggle to do any miles at all the day after.

Go easy and let your fitness build as you go. If you've over-estimated your daily mileage, reschedule your plans. As a rule of thumb, don't ride more than two-thirds the distance you would do as a one-off under the same conditions. So if you're used to doing day rides of 30 miles, don't aim to ride more than 20 miles a day back to back – at least, not to begin with. Plan to include rest days too.

Family touring is easier in flatter areas, so be careful what route you pick in Cornwall, Wales, the Pennines or the Scottish Highlands. Easier areas include East Anglia, the Vale of York, and the Scottish Borders. You can get free touring advice from CTC if you're a member (<http://www.ctc.org.uk>).

If you're planning a longer trip, have a 'shakedown tour' first. This is an overnight trip somewhere nearby. Load your bike up with everything you intend to take, do the daily mileage you intend to do on your trip, preferably in similar terrain. Use this experience to add to or subtract from your kit list. Don't try anything brand new and untried – especially a saddle or shoes – at the start of a tour.

First bike trip abroad

Whole books have been written about cycling in Europe – as they have on camping. There are lots fantastic places to visit, and it's possible to get there with a bike by various combinations of plane, train, ferry, coach, car and bicycle. You could cycle down the Loire Valley, explore the Black Forest, the Galician coast, or the hills of Tuscany... just for starters. Once again, CTC has a whole library of information sheets and route advice it can offer free to members.

For your first trip abroad, aim to keep it simple. Take a ferry to Holland or Denmark. Both are excellent cycling countries. Hills are modest, the climate is much like the UK's, everyone speaks English, and both countries have a huge cycleway network. You don't even need the car; you can cycle straight onto the ferries.

To reach Denmark, take the overnight ferry from Harwich to Esbjerg with DFDS Seaways (<http://www.dfds.co.uk>). Stop at a few campsites or youth hostels ('Danhostels') as you travel out on one of the national cycle routes (1 or 8, maybe) then work your way back to the ferry port. If you want help planning your itinerary, contact De Frie Fugle (<http://www.friefugle.dk>), a Danish cycling organisation that's part of the European Cycling Federation. They are happy to help anyone sort out a cycle tour in Denmark. The Danish Tourist Board site, <http://www.visitdenmark.com>, may also be useful.

To get to Holland, there are ferries from Harwich to the Hook of Holland day and night. The journey with Stena Line (<http://www.stenaline.co.uk>) takes a little over six hours. Alternatively, take the DFDS ferry from Newcastle to Amsterdam, or the P&O ferry (<http://www.poferries.com>) from Hull to Rotterdam. Both sail overnight both ways. There are more bicycles per capita in Holland than anywhere else in the world, and the results of this are everywhere. You could take one of the LF cycle routes through Dutch countryside and towns. There's a map showing them all, the Fietsideënkaart (bicycle ideas map) for a few Euros from Dutch bookshops and ANWB ('Dutch AA') offices. You can get it online via <http://www.fietsplatform.nl>, but the internet shop it takes you to is Dutch only. The one down-side to cycling in Holland is that bike theft is relatively common, so take a good lock. For more information, see also <http://www.holland.com/uk> and <http://holland.cyclingaroundtheworld.nl/>

Don't forget travel insurance. Be sure the policy covers cycling and note that some policies won't include 'dangerous activities', which may include mountain biking. Insurance aimed at cyclists does exist. Take a look at <http://www.cyclecover.co.uk>.

Package touring

Package touring costs more than doing it yourself, but you do get a tried-and-tested trip with full back-up, and usually a bit more luxury. Exactly what's included on an organised cycle touring holiday varies between holidays and operators, not least depending on how much you're paying. Many trips are 'self-led': that is, you get a route-marked map, which you follow to each night's pre-booked accommodation. Others have a guide who accompanies you. All have a support phone number you can ring if you get into difficulties, and some have a van that carries your luggage.

When you're considering an organised holiday, it's best to compare the price with other non-cycling holidays in the area. Just because you're on a bike doesn't mean that it will be cheap, any more than a holiday in which you lie on a beach – another free activity – ought to be cheap. A DIY tourer might sleep in a tent and live off pasta. When you're staying in decent hotels and eating three-course meals, the price will rise accordingly.

CTC has its own holiday company, CTC Cycling Holidays, which offers a huge range of cycle-tours in Britain and abroad. Some are specifically aimed at families, and the easier-graded ones are also suitable. See <http://www.ctctours.co.uk> for more.