

Where to ride off-road

'Off-road' is a wide definition that takes in every route that doesn't involve tarmac and motor traffic, from Sustrans trails through to rocky singletrack. Here we're focusing on unsurfaced routes.

These trails fall into two categories: purpose-built mountain bike tracks and 'natural' routes such as bridleways. Ultimately, all routes are man-made rather than natural, even if the trail builders were men and packhorses hundreds of years ago. The distinction is between routes made for mountain bikers and routes that cyclists happen to be able to use.

Bridleways

Cyclists can use any public right of way except for motorways, footpaths and footways (footways are pavements next to roads). In terms of off-road cycling, bridleways are the most important. As the name suggests they were created by and for horse riders, but since 1968 cyclists have been able to use them too. A cyclist has to give way to horse riders and walkers on bridleways.

Britain has thousands of miles of bridleways. To see what's available in your area you need a good map: either a 1:50,000 Ordnance Survey Landranger (2cm to 1km) or a 1:25,000 Ordnance Survey Explorer (4cm to 1km). As beginners and families are likely to travel shorter distances, the latter is better. See <http://www.ordnancesurvey.co.uk> or go to any bookshop.

Bridleways are shown by a line of long pink dashes on a Landranger and by long green dashes on an Explorer. Get a highlighter pen and mark them all on your local map. You can create some excellent rides by linking up sections of bridleway. You might also want to use unclassified roads, byways open to all traffic (BOATs), and roads used as public paths (RUPPs), which are also shown on OS maps.

If you're riding in Scotland, the situation is different. The Scottish Outdoor Access Code says that you can ride almost anywhere so long you do so responsibly – for example, leaving an area as you found it. Exceptions include private gardens, crop fields and, of course, buildings. See <http://www.outdooraccess-scotland.com> for more.

Bridleways vary tremendously, and even looking at a map it won't be obvious what the riding conditions will be like. There are some clues. Bridleways in valley bottoms and on flat land can be muddy, whereas ones that cross contour lines should be better drained and drier.

Bridleways that run down the middle of a colourless track (dashed lines means unfenced, solid lines means fenced) tend to be wider and better surfaced. They might even be tarmac with a strip of grass down the middle, particularly if there's access from the track to a building. A blue horseshoe on an Explorer map indicates horse riders. Horses' hooves churn up soft ground, which can make cycling difficult.

The only way to be sure what a bridleway will be like is to ride it yourself. Some are fantastic green corridors through the countryside. Others are technically demanding to ride. Others still are impassable unless you shoulder the bike and walk.

Waterways

Canals have towpaths from the days that barges were pulled by horses. Many of them are suitable for cycling. There are also anglers, boaters and dog walkers to share the space with, and as with bridleways you're expected to give way. Progress can therefore be slow. Like bridleways, conditions vary. Some are narrow or muddy while others are so overgrown as to be impassable. Extra caution

may be required in certain places, as bridges reduce sightlines and the damp cobbles underneath them can be slippery.

To cycle on a towpath you usually need a permit. This is free, however, and you can download it from <http://www.waterscape.com>. The site also shows recommend cycling routes by waterways across the country.

Since canals are old industrial routes, towpaths go right into the heart of towns and cities. This makes them excellent escape routes from urban areas.

Trail centres

Visiting a mountain bike trail centre is the equivalent of going to a ski resort. You can choose from a selection of way-marked trails that are graded by difficulty level. There are usually toilets and there may be a café, bike shop and hire outlet on site too.

Compared to 'off-piste' mountain biking, trail centres have more uniformity. Similar purpose-built features crop up on different trails. Yet there is also more bang for your buck: purpose-built trails cram in a lot of technical thrills into a smaller area. The routes are tried and tested, and the way-marking means you can focus on riding rather than navigating. Most are great fun and justifiably popular.

Trail centres are a relatively new phenomenon. The UK's first opened at Coed y Brenin in North Wales in the mid 1990s. Others have followed across Wales and Scotland and, to a lesser extent, England.

Most trail centres are in forests. The Forestry Commission has created more than 2,600km of waymarked cycle trails. You can search an online database for routes near you: <http://www.forestry.gov.uk/cycling>. Forestry commission routes use the Green to Black grading system.

Green routes ('easy') are suitable for beginners and families. They're fairly short, without strenuous climbs, and the riding surface tends to be wide forest tracks. Any bike will cope – even one with a trailer-cycle or child-seat. Blue routes ('moderate') are longer and hillier, but most are still suitable for reasonably fit families riding sturdy hybrid bicycles.

Red routes ('difficult') are mountain bike trails that you need a proper mountain bike and a good level of fitness and riding skill to enjoy. There will be challenging climbs and descents, and trail hazards such as drop-offs, roots, and steep, cambered corners. The trails tend to be longer, too. Black routes ('severe') are for experienced, skilled mountain bikers. Climbs and descents are steeper, the route could be longer, and the trail hazards are harder to negotiate.

With any route, the difficulty level will vary depending on your speed. The faster you travel, the harder the trail becomes – and vice versa: you can go more slowly around routes you're only just ready for, getting off and walking around trickier sections.

Take it easy at first. If you go skiing for the first time, you start on the nursery slope and work your way up. When you start mountain biking, you need that same kind of progression.

Mountain biking hotspots

Here are some of the UK's off-road hotspots. Trails are usually free, though car-parking may not be.

Wales

Afan Forest Park (near Port Talbot). 22km Green rail-trail route, three Red trails (15km-23km) and a Black (46km). Developing fast. Good facilities.

Coed y Brenin (near Dolgellau). A new Green route (10.8km) has been added to its collection of three Reds (8.7, 18.4 and 20.2km) and two Blacks (31.1 and 38.2km). Great facilities for families

Cwmcarn (near Newport). 15km Red trail with an optional 1km Black section for expert riders.

Gwydyr Forest (near Betws y Coed). The Marin Trail is a 25km Red route. Penmachno, a few miles south, is a 22km Red route.

Llandegla (near Wrexham). 5km Green route, 12km Blue, 18km Red, and 21km Black.

Llanwyrtyd Wells. Lots of mapped bridleway routes from the town. Short (4-5km) Blue, Red and Black trails at nearby Coed Trallwm, Abergwesyn.

Machynlleth. Mach 1, 2 and 3 are 16-30km bridleway routes south of the town. Cli-machx is a largely Red 15km loop with a fast Black final descent.

Nant-yr-Arian (near Aberystwyth): 9km Blue trail and 16km and 35km Red routes.

You can find more information at <http://www.mbwales.com>.

Scotland

Ae (near Dumfries). 9km Green route with optional 4.5km Blue extension, and a 19.6km Red route. There's also a 1.6km downhill route.

Dalbeattie (near Dumfries & Castle Douglas). 11.5km Green route, 14km Blue and a 27km Red that includes optional Black sections.

Fort William (between Torlundy and Spenn Bridge). Highlight is the 8.5km Red route, with Black optional sections, which was devised for the 2007 World Championships. Also has two Blue routes (1km and 19km) and a 16.5km Red.

Glentress & Innerleithen (near Peebles). The jewel in the 7stanes crown. 1.5km Green 'skills loop', 4.5km Green route, 8km or 14km Blue, 17km Red, 19.4km and 29km Black routes, a free-ride skills park, and four extreme downhill routes. Excellent facilities.

Glentool (near Newton Stewart). 9km Blue route. There's also an ungraded forest/minor road route: the 58km Big Country CTC Ride. Seasonal facilities.

Golspie (between Inverness and Wick). 0.9km Green route, 6.5km Blue, 7.5km Red, and a 13.6km Black route.

Kirroughtree (near Newton Stewart). 6km Green route, 10km Blue with two optional extensions (+4km and +2km), 17km Red route and 31km Black. Good facilities, including play area.

Laggan Wolftrax (near Newtonmore and Kingussie). 4.8km Green route, 15km Red and 6.4km Black. There's also a 3.6km bike park trail.

Mabie (near Dumfries). 8.2km Green route, 10km Blue, 17km Red with optional 2km Black-graded extension. Also has a free-ride skills park for jumps etc. Good facilities.

Newcastleton (between Carlisle and Hawick). 0.4km Green route, two Blue routes (5.5 and 8km) and a Red (10.5km). There's also a short Black-graded North Shore section.

For more details go to <http://www.forestry.gov.uk/scotland> and follow the 'mountain biking' link.

England

Aston Hill (near Wendover). 9km Red route and a range of Red/Black downhill courses. There's an 8km Green trail in nearby Wendover Woods.

Avon Timberland Trail (Ashton Court, Bristol). 11km ungraded route.

Bedgebury Forest (near Royal Tunbridge Wells). 10km family route (Green), 12km Red-grade route, plus a skills area. Also has bikes/facilities for disabled riders.

Cannock Chase (near Rugeley). 11.3km Blue route, plus a leisure cycling route (also Blue) that's 1.6km-30.4km long.

Dalby Forest (near Pickering). Two Green routes (3.2km and 9.7km), 12.9km Blue, 37km Red and 9.7km Black. There's also a skills area and a downhill track. Good facilities.

Delamere (near Chester). Two ungraded trails, 6.4km and 11.3km, and a skills area.

Forest of Dean (near Monmouth). 17km Green route on former railway lines and a 4.5km Red.

Grizedale (near Hawkshead). Three Blue routes (3.2km-11.3km) and three Red (16km-22.5km). Good facilities.

Haldon Forest (near Exeter). 4.8km Green route, 3.7km Blue route and 11.3km Black route.

Hamsterley Forest (near Bishop Auckland). 4.8km Green route, three Blue (1.6km-14.5km), 22.5km Red and an 11.3km Black. Good facilities.

Kielder (between Newcastleton and Bellingham). 11.3km Green route, three Blue (0.8km-16km), three Red (15km-48km) and one Black (2.4km). Good facilities.

Penshurst Off-Road Club (near Royal Tunbridge Wells). Variety of short cross-country courses, jumps and downhills. Better for teens than tinies.

Queen Elizabeth Country Park (between Petersfield and Horndean). Two 6km ungraded routes.

Sherwood Pines (near Mansfield). 4.8km Green route, 9.6km Blue and a variety of short Black routes, including a 'Dual Descender' and a 2.4km training circuit. Good facilities.

Surrey Hills (near Dorking). Variety of ungraded but mostly intermediate or harder singletrack around Pitch, Leith and Holmbury Hills.

Swinley Forest (near Bracknell). Surprising variety of short, ungraded trails that range from easy to hard.

Thetford Forest (near Thetford and Brandon). 9.7km Green route, 12.9km Blue, 17.7km Red and a 16km Black.

For a more definitive list of places to ride in the UK, get *Where to Mountain Bike in Britain* by Nicky Crowther (£12, <http://www.wheretoMTB.com>).