



Touring with a toddler

Some cyclists hang up their wheels when they have children. Globe-trotting tourer and CTC Vice President **Josie Dew** didn't

When it comes to cycle tourists, you tend to get the ones who plan and the ones who don't. I'm definitely a non-planner, which isn't to say I don't plan at all – I'm constantly plotting and planning in my head – I'm just not that meticulous about where I go once I set off. I have a general idea of which county or country I want to cycle in, and then I get on my bike and see what happens. Sometimes I end up going in a different direction from the one I intended because another road looks far more interesting than the one I'm on.

Apart from my unplanned trips I've had a hefty dose of other unplanned events in my life – the most momentous of which was getting pregnant. Some things definitely hit out of the blue. I'd been away for a year cycling around New Zealand (including the two months it took to sail there on an ex-Russian naval rustbucket) before sailing on to Australia (with the idea that I would cycle home from there) when, thanks to a dog attack, my knee went kaput.

So I flew home, met up with the builder again and got pregnant despite once being told by a doctor I was unable to have children. Three months on things went a bit haywire within and I was no longer pregnant. A while later

I was pregnant again. This one held on a lot tighter so that on a hot summer's day and after returning home from a slightly longer cycle ride than perhaps I should have gone on, Molly was born.

Back on the bike

From the initial shock of realising that my freedom of taking off on my bike whenever the fancy took me had flown out of the window, I suddenly felt very excited that I now had a little Molly with whom I could do the two main things that I loved doing: cycling and camping.

The trouble is you can't put a newborn baby on a bike. So I strapped her to my chest and walked everywhere instead, often spending up to eight hours a day wandering through the woods and over the hills. Then, on those frequent occasions whenever mum or dad came round to push Molly up and down the road in her pram, I would take off on my bike, cycling as far and as fast as possible.

As soon as Molly's neck muscles got sturdy and she could hold her head up I attached her in prime position on the back of my bike in a Hamax child seat that came complete with relaxing reclining options. Although I had a Burley d'Lite trailer and although it would have probably

(Below) A childseat gives your child a grandstand view of the world... sometimes!
(Right) On tour with grandma, closely inspecting the scenery



offered her better protection, I wanted Molly close to me where I could talk to her and touch her and generally make sure she was still there.

The other advantage of the seat over the trailer was that she could see so much more. From her elevated advantage point she could look down into people's car windows and see over hedges and into front gardens and see all the sky and the clouds and the wind blowing the trees.

Changing pace

Before long she was bleating baa (and occasionally moo) whenever we passed sheep, and moo (and occasionally baa) whenever we passed cows. She saw small owls, barn owls, buzzards, egrets and languorous herons in flight. Sometimes when we were going particularly slowly a butterfly or dragonfly or bee would land on her knee or her arm and she would study it with a David Attenborough-like intrigue. Occasionally we would stop to pick up rocks (Molly likes rocks) or small lumps of trees, which then had to be stored in a pannier for later analysis at home.

Molly also exhibited an unusual (and perhaps worrying) interest in road chippings. She would lean at a bike-swaying angle over the side of her seat pointing and aaaahh-ing at the various formations and grades of loose and embedded stones. Sometimes, at her request (a particularly urgent 'aaaahh!') I had to bring the bike to a shuddering halt as a chipping of exceptional interest had been spotted and she must hold this rarity in her hand – often proffering it proudly aloft for a passing motorist to see. Similar analysis was had of beetles scuttling across the road. Not surprisingly it took all day to get nowhere.

Not mollycoddled

Cycling for Molly became an everyday event whereas travelling in a vehicle was more like a monthly one. For both of us there was, and is, no better way to travel. I can't understand why more people don't do something that is

so easy, fun and costs so little. Were I in the Netherlands or Germany or Denmark I would be one of thousands sweeping along on two wheels with accompanying offspring. No one would bat an eyelid.

But here I am treated like a rare species – the cause of much head-turning, pointing, waving, smiling and wisecracking comments. Judging from other parents' responses to me, it's because they don't have the confidence – they find the roads too dangerous and don't want to risk their child's safety; they don't have time; or they worry about their child getting cold and wet.

Wet and cold is good for a child – it makes them hardy! Pile on those layers and a pair of good waterproofs and sally forth in all weathers. Molly has been through freezing temperatures, torrential rain, hail, snow, buffeting winds... and has yet to be ill.

There are, of course, those parents who would like to cycle with their small bundles of semaphoring joy but aren't confident enough riders to get the wheels turning. Confidence is all-important before you think about strapping a baby on board. Being so used to cycling, I have a fairly good idea of how drivers react to cyclists and the stupid things that some drivers can do. For those worried about instability, practise cycling with a 15-kilo sack of potatoes – or better still a live cow.

Heavy load

Molly was still pretty new when I hooked on the trailer – a sort of tent on wheels which even includes a boot to stash

“Molly has been through torrential rain, hail, snow, buffeting winds... and has yet to be ill”



(Clockwise from top) Surprised to be going in the trailer; A seat that reclines is always handy; Trailers are also handy when running errands



a lorry-load of shopping. For the first two-and-a half years, I retained the child seat on the rear rack so that she could have a choice of seating area – the trailer for wet, cold horrible weather; the seat for fine days and big views.

Naturally, being an articulated vehicle of considerable weight, we have slight haulage problems, in that we travel even slower than I used to. Luckily, along with taking delight in the painful slowness of the ascents, Molly also relishes the speed of the descents. Top speed achieved so far is an eye-watering 38mph which when attached to two wheels, four panniers, a trailer and a toddler all swaying about in the breeze seems at least twice as fast.

Rocketing downhill on a bike with a whooping infant is probably not the sort of advice you find in your average childcare manual, which is partly why it is so enjoyable.

Pass wide and slow...

I've only had one very bad reaction from a road-user to my trailer – not a car driver but a woman on a horse. I was cycling up a gentle incline so travelling at the grand speed of approximately 4mph when the woman, riding towards me, shouted, 'Just STOP can't you?' No niceties about it, just a big haughty bellow.

I dutifully stopped while thinking 'here we go!' along with some not particularly charitable thoughts. The horse then went into reverse and refused to move forwards despite the woman shouting at the horse and whacking it with a stick. To lighten the air, I said, 'Don't worry, it's only a bike!' meaning it's just an inanimate object (though a very useful one!) and not some horse-eating alien. For some

reason that was enough to turn the woman apoplectic.

'You stupid cow!' she screamed. 'It's that stupid flag! You should put your child in a car like normal people instead of using such a stupid contraption!'

With Molly beside me I wasn't going to get into a full throttle argument so I just said, 'I'm not going to stand here being insulted by a fussing old bat – the sooner I get past you the better!'

So I started cycling forwards at which point the horse started reversing up the verge. The woman then screamed abuse so I just said, 'And a very good morning to you too!'

I then cycled on my way telling Molly that some people are just a waste of air and best given a wide berth.

So far Molly has travelled over 10,000 miles attached to the back of my bike. These aren't miles in exotic locations (unless you call the Isle of Wight exotic) but in Devon, Dorset, Hampshire and Sussex. I'm starting off cycling with Molly where I started to do all my cycling some 30-odd years ago. This is fun because it's like starting all over again. Slowly but surely we will go further and further.

The only stumbling point is school. I feel sorely tempted just to skip the whole catchment area thing and go cycling round the world instead.

Josie Dew has written seven books about cycling around the world. For more information see: www.josiedew.co.uk

CHILD SEAT VERSUS TRAILER

CHILD SEAT PROS:

- Good views
- Close contact for touching and talking to child
- More comfy for sleeping if seat reclines
- Can be transported on train with ease
- Takes up little space
- Little increase in road drag

CHILD SEAT CONS:

- Little protection from sun and cold wet weather
- Makes bike handle very differently
- Access to rear panniers not so easy
- Little protection for child should bike fall over

TRAILER PROS:

- Good protection from weather
- Can carry two children side by side depending on model
- Pockets inside for child to reach their food, drink, toys and on-board library
- Big boot for carrying shopping, camping equipment etc.
- Some models can convert to a pushchair
- Good protection should bike topple over
- Being a relative rarity on the roads it can make drivers slow down and pass with care
- Highly visible with bright colours, Scotchlite, rear lights, lollipop spacer and flagpole
- Bike handles normally as weight is detached and at low centre of gravity

TRAILER CONS:

- Takes up more storage space
- Additional road and wind drag will slow you down
- Can be initially expensive to buy (but works out economical if frequently used)
- Not so easy to transport by train
- More tyres to change and more punctures to mend!