

Morning glory

Days slip past if you let them, even the longest day.

Clive Andrews had other plans – and used the summer solstice as an excuse to go mountain biking



The alarm goes off at 3.00am. My arm reaches out of bed to stop its bleeping. It's virtually the middle of the night but I begin stumbling round my bedroom, pulling a cycling jersey over my bewildered head. I snap the clear lens into my Oakleys, unplug my lights from their charger, shove a couple of bananas into my Camelbak, and head through the dark garden to the shed.

A regular cyclist is more aware than most of the passing of the seasons in the UK. With so much of our year characterised by cold and darkness, warm summer riding is a precious thing.

The longest day in the northern hemisphere is the day on which the summer solstice occurs – usually 21 June, when the tilt of the earth leans us closer towards the sun than at any other time of year. It's a special day, a day I like to welcome with a dawn ride.

I've always loved the summer. I was born in the summer. It's the time when everything feels right. Those bright mornings and evenings of sunlight are a wonderful thing – a reward for the months of soggy gloom endured in the winter.

A few weeks ago, I broached the subject of a longest day dawn ride to some friends. While some declined immediately, a few expressed

initial excitement at the idea before soberly changing their minds as the appointed day approached.

Commit to ride

My companion this morning will be Simon – a friend of a friend, with whom I've never yet ridden. Many mountain bikers in Brighton discuss their ride plans via Twitter, so it's easy to encounter new ride buddies. This was how Simon and I had agreed on this morning's arrangement.

I leave home a little later than planned, so I ride quickly through the deserted Sussex roads towards my rendezvous with Simon at Hove Park. Making quick progress on empty streets, my bike and I begin to wake in unison. I yawn as my legs become accustomed to early morning motion and I click through the gears on my hardtail. Click – click – click – then nothing. Something feels strange. My pedalling becomes heavy and the shifter beneath my right thumb is slack as I realise my rear gear cable has just snapped. Bugger. An inauspicious start to the longest day. I drop into my granny ring and continue to the park.

Simon and I exchange a friendly handshake of introduction, before I rummage in my Camelbak for a screwdriver. I set to work on the 'H'



The South Downs Way (above) is a short spin from Brighton (top)

screw of my rear mech, winding in its upper limit, and giving it an artificial resting position around the sixth of nine available sprockets. My very lowest gears are still out of reach but with a triple chainset up front, I have access to three gears – enough, probably, to see me round this morning's downland route. There's only one way to find out.

On top of the Downs

From Hove Park, there exists an off-road track that efficiently conveys suburban mountain bikers between back gardens and up towards the South Downs. The first ten minutes of gentle climbing take place on a

GREAT RIDES DAWN MOUNTAIN BIKING

tree-covered bridleway sprinkled with slippery roots and peppered with obstacles left by local dog-walkers. We emerge briefly by Patcham Windmill, overlooking the Downs.

Our hopes of a dramatic sunrise are dampened by the overcast sky. Nevertheless, we feel a kind of excitement around the discernible increase in light. Then we drop into the twisty tree-covered trails of Coney Woods. Once again beneath the foliage, our eyes re-adjust to the dimness, reminding us that although dawn is upon us, full daylight is still a while off.

We swing north beneath the A27 – the busy dual carriageway that runs along the south coast – effectively a boundary between Brighton and the South Downs. We climb a gradual trail and the city becomes smaller behind us. Though the sky is grey, the early morning tranquility is something special.

We join the celebrated South Downs Way – an often busy long-distance bridleway with no other users at this time of day. We drop to the village of Pyecombe and cross the A23, upon which a trickle of early morning cars are beginning northbound journeys to Gatwick or London. The South Downs Way then climbs through Pyecombe Golf Club – another deserted reminder that most of our usual outdoor acquaintances are still fast asleep at this hour.

Cruising along the top of the South Downs is a simple but significant pleasure. Brighton is one of those busy cities that allows a quick escape to anyone with a bike and a brief nugget of time. It's a great feeling, bimbly along the green ridge, with the city and the sea to one's right and, to the left, a distant view of the North Downs and, on a clear day, the tiny skyscrapers of London.

Our next waypoint is Ditchling Beacon, just two days earlier the most notorious landmark of the London to Brighton Bike Ride. Approached by road from the north, the climb represents a stiff challenge. Cruising along the South Downs Way, however, a following wind brings us effortlessly to the viewpoint. We continue a little further along the rolling ridge before we veer south and begin our journey



When you're out on your bike at dawn, you've earned it



A cyclist's almanac

Other riding dates for your diary.

Shortest day: 22 December 2011

An obvious counterpoint to June's dawn ride. Celebrate the darkness with a chilly ride on the day of the winter solstice.

Autumnal and vernal equinoxes: 23 September 2011 and 20 March 2012

The moments in spring and autumn when everywhere on earth has around 12 hours of daylight and we move from one season to the next.

New Year: 31 December 2011

As an alternative to a pub or house party, time a night ride to reach a scenic spot at midnight. Carry lights, fireworks, mince pies and perhaps a celebratory tippie.

Daylight saving time: 30 October 2011 and 25 March 2012

Take advantage of autumn's extra hour by spending those sixty bonus minutes on the road or trail. Then celebrate the arrival of spring's lighter evenings.

Extra days off

This year's royal wedding bank holiday was a great opportunity for a ride on near-empty roads. With the Queen's Diamond Jubilee bringing another such day off on 5 June 2012, perhaps another day of riding beckons...

back towards the sea.

By 6.30am, we are skirting the meadows and woods that surround the University of Sussex, with no signs of life visible from the still-slumbering students. One of my favourite local trails runs beside the university campus – a twisty wooded track that rewards a bit of speed and rhythm.

Seafront finale

Emerging from the trees at Falmer, on the edge of Brighton, we spin into town along Lewes Road. We arrive at Palace Pier just before 7am and ride along the seafront cycle path, where the first of the city's commuters are making their way to work.

We take a seat at an outdoor seafront café and order breakfast and coffee. Runners shuffle by, fitness boot camps trudge around laps of Hove Lawns, and an old man practises his Tai Chi.

The sky is still overcast, the breeze is still fresh, but for us, this is a worthwhile moment. With nearly 20 off-road miles achieved before work, this morning has been a reminder not to take the summer for granted. In the winter, all our weekday rides involve darkness. In the summertime, it's easy to become complacent and forget that all this daylight is a fleeting gift.

Seize the day.

4am isn't the best time to discover that your bike needs attention!