
WHERE: Wales: Newport to Holyhead, via the Cambrian Mountains
START & FINISH: Newport Transporter Bridge to South Stack Lighthouse, Holyhead
DISTANCE: 287 miles, riding 32-47 miles per day
PHOTOS: some by Steve Rock, others by Alamy



GREAT RIDES

THE DRAGON'S BACKBONE

Steve Rock's first cycle tour was in Wales. Decades later, he returned to ride from one end to the other, taking in the best climbs along the way

Vivid forget-me-nots and bluebells lined the road as I cycled along in the sunshine of a late spring morning. This was what I had come for.

The road climbed gently up the Lrfon Valley from Llanwrtyd Wells, into the eastern flank of the Cambrian Mountains. I savoured the moment, knowing what lay ahead.

At Abergwesyn, the character of the route changed. A sharp climb and an 'unsuitable for caravans' sign provided early warning. Woodland and pasture gave way to an open valley, with the narrow road running along its flank. After another couple of miles, the head of the valley appeared to be blocked by a hillside of dense woodland. I could see the road disappearing into the bottom of the trees and emerging near the skyline above them. The Devil's Staircase is one of the steepest roads in Britain. This was also what I had come for.

Then and now

The idea of doing a Welsh End to End had been on my mind for a number of years, something to daydream about and turn over in my mind like an unsolved puzzle. It would be a challenging ride, covering as many of Wales's fierce climbs and wild places as I could link together in a week.

My first ever bike tour was in Wales. I was 18, my school-mate Russ was 16, and we cycled from home in Merseyside to Pembrokeshire and back, staying at youth hostels. The idea of traversing the opposite diagonal had a neat symmetry. It would also

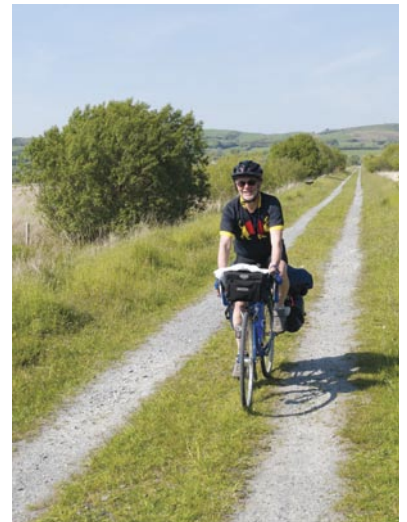
be a Welsh coast to coast ride: Casnewydd (Newport) to Caergybi (Holyhead).

Back in the day, Russ and I had done a lot of pushing up hills. I had a Sun 5-speed and Russ had a Triumph with a 3-speed Sturmey-Archer. Nowhere did we push more than on the Bwlch-y-Groes, between Bala and Machynlleth. This had the reputation of being the highest road in Wales. Not only did we push up it, we walked our bikes down the first part of the descent, as we did not trust our feeble sidepull brakes. (Having already overshot one corner...)

Modern technology makes it easy to research where to go, how to get there, and where to stay. It's a far cry from those pre-computer days of youth hostelling, when we made bookings (including meals) with stamped, addressed envelopes and postal orders. For route planning and navigation we used my father's old Bartholomew's half-inch cloth maps. Now it can be all electronic, and it's getting more sophisticated every year.

Mountain roads

While planning my route, I found out that the Bwlch-y-Groes is only the highest road in North Wales. At 545m, it is just pipped by the 549m of the Gospel Pass between Abergavenny and Hay-on-Wye, so this road also went on the list. Then the route of this year's Tour of Britain was announced, with a mountain top finish at The Tumble. More research showed that instead of taking the easy route along the canal north of Pontypool, I could climb steadily along the



● (Top) Steve on the Tregaron cycle trail. It goes all the way to Aberystwyth, although Steve didn't
● (Above) Nant Gwynant. There's a tranquil campsite nearby – no radios are allowed





“I HAD MAGNIFICENT VIEWS ACROSS TO SNOWDONIA AND THE LLEYN PENINSULA AS I RODE ACROSS ANGLESEY”

» old railway trail to Blaenavon and then take in The Tumble en route to Abergavenny. This would be the ‘easy’ side of the mountain, with only two miles of 11% from Blaenavon.

Adding in the mountain road from Llanidloes to Machynlleth and the majestic Nant Gwynant and Llanberis passes in Snowdonia gave me ‘The Dragon’s Backbone’, a ride along the spine of Wales from the Bristol Channel to the Irish Sea.

It was a surprise to hear a cheery ‘Good morning’ behind me as I approached the steepest part of the Gospel Pass. Matt was from near Swindon and had just finished his finals. He was now getting away from it all by cycling to Snowdonia to meet up with family. As he was staying in bunkhouses rather than camping, he had less kit than I did. He also had a lighter bike: a Specialized Allez road bike, compared to my Bob Jackson steel tourer. This would have made him faster up the hills even without the 40-year age advantage. However, he seemed more interested in having company than racing ahead, as this was his easy day and a warm-up for the next day’s 100-plus miles from Rhayader to Pwllheli.

We had a lovely descent to Hay-on-Wye,

enjoying the views of the Wye valley and the smooth road surface. After celebrating with coffee in Hay, we carried on up the Wye Valley. By the side of the road we saw two cyclists sitting on a bench admiring the view. They were students from Colorado, making their first ever bike tour – from Dublin to Budapest. They had stayed the previous night at the bunkhouse near Rhayader where Matt was headed. Small world.

Here be dragons

One of the charms of travelling alone is meeting people and sharing stories. Another is the kindness of strangers. I had two very welcome cups of tea: Dot was a resident in a mobile home at the campsite near Bwlth and had the tea made before I had put the tent up; Phyllis and Richard were having a picnic in a layby overlooking the Dylife Gorge and invited me to join them.

The landlord of the Eagles Inn in Llanuwchllyn at the south end of Llyn Tegid (Bala lake) opened the pub when he saw me outside, even though it was his day off and the pub was closed. A pint of orange and lemonade was very refreshing after the exertions of the Bwlch-y-Groes.

Do it yourself

» Both Newport and Holyhead have direct train services to and from Manchester, Birmingham, Cardiff and London. As I live in the Thames Valley, it suited me to travel back via Newport, meaning no stairs or lifts at all for the return journey, just a same-platform change. I found my campsites through a combination of symbols on the OS mapping and Google searches. It should be possible to find B&Bs within five miles of each of the campsites, though it would be advisable to book ahead. Bunkhouses or youth hostels are fewer and further apart. Whatever time of year you choose, respect the Welsh weather: you never know when the dragons are going to wake up.



© Keith Shuttlewood / Alamy



● (Left) The River Twymyn in the Dylife Gorge, Powys. There's a 40-metre high waterfall further upriver at Ffrwd Fawr

» Campsites ranged from the basic 'tap in a field' at Llanthony to four-star rated with café or B&B on sites in Snowdonia. Some of them were sufficiently far from the nearest pub that I had planned to cook my own food in the evenings, stocking up at a shop earlier in the day. This strategy worked well most of the time. Not wanting to carry more weight than necessary up the Bwlch-y-Groes, I was counting on getting some more supplies in Trawsfynydd. I had decent weather for the morning's big climb, but in the afternoon there was a huge thunderstorm. Not your wimpy English heavy rain for 20 minutes then all sunshine and light again; this was a real Welsh thunderstorm that went on for hours. I took shelter next to a stream under a bridge for an hour hoping the storm would blow over, as the next stretch of road was over very exposed open moorland.

When the rain eased I carried on, but it came back with a vengeance, with the thunder ominously close behind the lightning. Already delayed, I made slow progress in the rain and wind. The shops were closed by the time I reached Trawsfynydd, and I was down to iron rations for my evening meal. Later that night, I sensed where the dragon legends came from as the thunder returned. Even inside

my tent with my eyes closed, I felt the flash of their fiery breath and heard the echoes of their roars as they resounded across the Trawsfynydd from Moelwyn to Manod.

North through Snowdonia

There were other 'this is what I came for' moments. The descent of the Gospel Pass was outstanding, particularly sharing it with a fellow cyclist. I enjoyed the remote spaces of the Cambrian Mountains despite, or even because of, the effort involved in climbing up there.

One of the highlights of the trip was Nant Gwynant. Unlike many other roads in Wales, this is engineered to a steady gradient. It was a joy to get into a rhythm and winch my way slowly upwards, drinking in the views. From the viewpoint near the top, Snowdon's summit and Crib Goch were occasionally visible as the cloud came and went.

Beautiful weather meant I had magnificent views across to Snowdonia and the Llyn Peninsula as I rode across Anglesey, and even a hazy glimpse of Ireland's Wicklow Mountains from the cliff above South Stack.

I had intended it to be a challenging ride, and for me it was. But am I glad I did it? Very. Lots of lovely memories... and a greater appreciation of dragons. ●

Fact file: THE DRAGON'S BACKBONE

DISTANCE: Planned 268 miles, rode 287 due to extra at each end to visit the Newport Transporter Bridge and South Stack Lighthouse. Daily mileage ranged from 32 to 47 miles with lots of climbing.

TIME: One week.

BIKE: Bob Jackson tourer.

MAPS: Open Cycle Map on ViewRanger for planning and detailed navigation, plus OS 1:50k mapping on Memory-Map. Backup in case the phone failed was a printout on one sheet of A4. Matt from Swindon was using the Sustrans Lôn Las Cymru North and South sheets.

TERRAIN: Lots of up and down, much of it over very exposed moorland above 1,000 feet. Wonderful road surfaces, even on the narrowest roads.

ESSENTIAL KIT: Busch and Müller E-werk battery charger, which connected to the dynohub on my front wheel and reduced the rate of battery depletion when using the smartphone for GPS navigation. I also carried a battery backup pack.

NEXT TIME I WOULD: take a Euro plug adapter, to recharge camera and phone battery from shaver sockets at campsites.

FURTHER INFO: sustrans.org. Paper maps for Lôn Las Cymru are available from a number of sources. My route is at goringgagacycling.co.uk/c2cwales/

STEVE'S E2E ROUTE



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|-----------------|----------------|
| 1) Newport | 4) Llanidloes |
| 2) Abergavenny | 5) Trawsfynydd |
| 3) Builth Wells | 6) Holyhead |