

Cross country

Coast-to-coast rides have a special appeal, so why not explore an alternative to the oft-ridden C2C? **Cass Gilbert** rides across northern England on the Sustrans-signposted Walney to Wear...



The stunning views of Lowgill Viaduct are one of the highlights of the ride

Classic Ride Walney to Wear



On the first day of the ride the route winds its way through bluebell woods



You won't need more than a bar-bag and panniers if you're staying in B&Bs

Why is it that coast-to-coasts hold so much appeal? Perhaps it's the way they lend shape and challenge to any tour, propping it up like bookends. Roll up to a windswept, shingle beach and it's clear the journey's over; you can't cycle any further. All that's left is to stare whimsically out at the ocean, as past toils soften into perspective and satisfaction seeps through weary muscles.

On our little island we're spoilt for choice. Although travelling from end to end is the grail of UK touring, a 'side to side' promises a similar sense of journey, handily distilled into a weekend – or a long weekend if you prefer. The Sustrans-signposted C2C from Consett to Sunderland has long been a favourite, but the Walney to Wear, at the other end of the alphabet, is growing in popularity too. And while the Wear in question is not so much a place – it's the river flowing under Sunderland's Wearmouth Bridge – there's a catchy ring to it.

Likewise, Walney Island might not be on your list of 'to do' destinations, but if nothing else, touring teaches you to appreciate the lesser-travelled spots as much as the tourist highlights. Originally developed to house workers in the naval shipbuilding era, it's a skinny strip of rock just off the south west coast of Cumbria, with something of a forgotten air to it.

For the local dog walkers, it was

another day on a pebble beach, as they watched us head down to the shores of the Irish Sea for the obligatory departure photo. For us, it was the beginning of a journey. A handy blue Sustrans route sign nudged us through Barrow-in-Furness, before the road detoured to wrap around the crumbling sandstone remains of Furness Abbey. It was also the beginning of quiet, softly rolling country lanes that headed northeast, before narrowing down to a cyclepath that crossed a bridge at the tip of the Ulverston Channel.

Lounge lizards

Whittling down to a touring tyre-friendly farm track that wound its way through a forest and back to tarmac, we emerged in the Victorian seaside town of Grange-over-Sands, after the sting-in-the-tail of the aptly named Bigland Hill. Indeed, it seemed like time stood still here, its retired population basking like reptiles in the sun on its long promenade, looking out to a view of mudflats sprouting with meadows.

Although we were skimming the edge of the Lake District National Park, the lanes were a far cry from the rugged hills to the north. In fact, it was an unexpectedly gentle start to the ride, as we rolled past the ornate gardens of

Kendal to end our first day in the saddle. Still, touring is always sure to give you a guilt-free appetite, so it





A few hills aside, the first day of the ride eases you in gently



wasn't long before we were settled down in the YHA to tuck into a hearty platter of fish and chips and taking time to plot the route ahead.

The following morning, the sun was beaming down once more and a faint haze had enveloped the horizon. A few steep hills out of Kendal were a better wake up call than any cup of coffee as we followed low stone walls that snaked their way up, over and around the medley of bumps and lumps. There was no doubt about it, we were definitely warming up to something bigger. We stopped to watch an endless stream of cars as we crossed the M6, glad that we were enjoying the place on bike.

As we swivelled round to face the high-rise, polished hills of the Howgill Fells, we were surprised by the stunning views of Lowgill Viaduct, set to a

backdrop of patchwork farmland and capped with fells rising steeply behind. Although just a few hundred metres from the M6, we couldn't have ridden a more satisfying road; a perfect ribbon of tarmac draped before us, squeezed in by stone walls guiding us off into the distance. It was the stuff of postcards – the hills were speckled with sheep, dotted with old oaks and dappled with patches of long grass.

With barely 20 miles on the clock, Orton was too idyllic a village not to explore. Not only was the post office packed with delicious local fare, but there was a well-stocked bike-friendly tea house round the corner and, the pièce de résistance, it boasted its

Most of the route is on quiet back roads, all but traffic free

very own chocolate factory. It may not have been Willy Wonka in scale but we certainly weren't complaining. No surprises really that we met our first group of fellow W2Wers there, a charity group headed by the owner of ProBikeKit.com – reassuring to see her

out testing the kit she sells! From here on, the landscape just kept getting better and better, as the road crossed the open moors and climbed onto a nature reserve past a large spill of water – Sunbiggin Tarn. On such a clear day, it was hard to imagine how bleak these moors might feel in the depths of winter. Various murders are even said to have occurred on the Tarn's shores, and legend has it that it's no stranger to

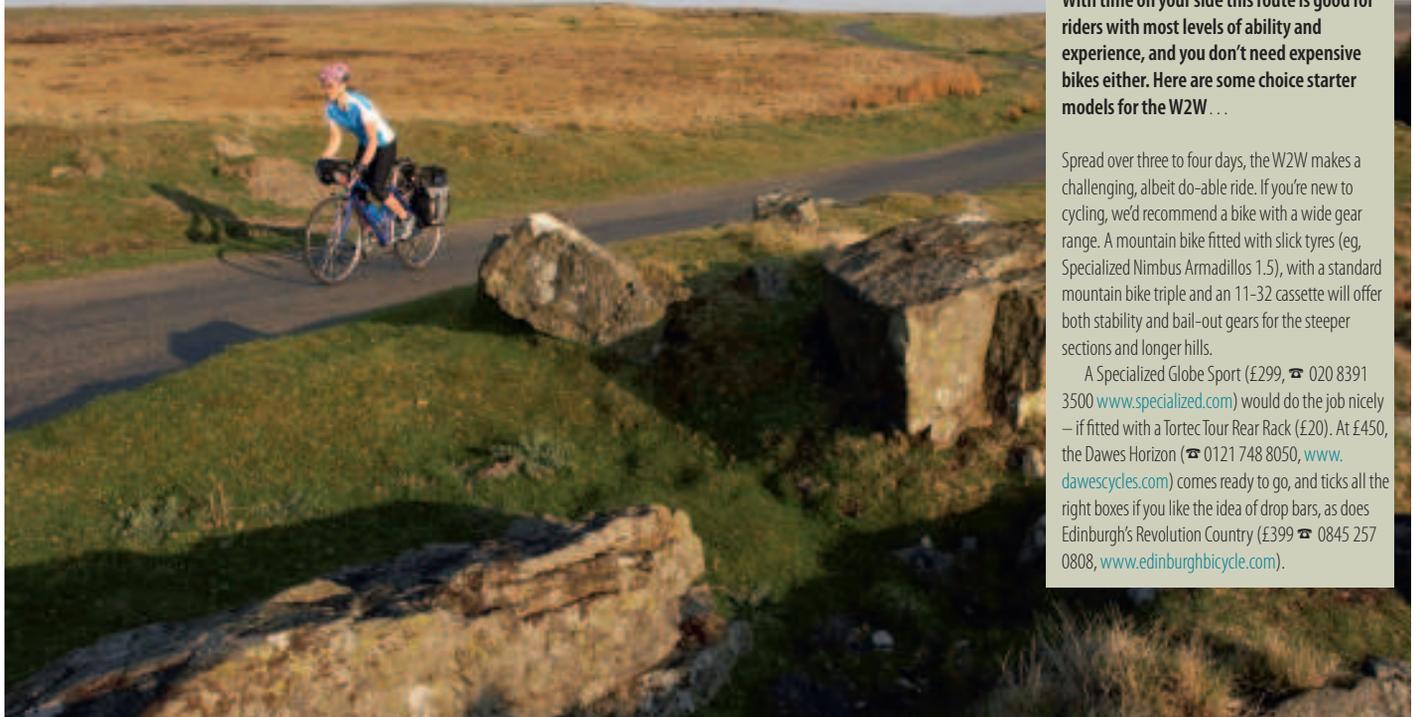


A perfect ribbon of tarmac skirts around the Howgill Fells



Classic Ride Walney to Wear

Crossing into the Yorkshire Dales offers a wilder and more exposed feel to the ride



BEGINNERS' BIKES

With time on your side this route is good for riders with most levels of ability and experience, and you don't need expensive bikes either. Here are some choice starter models for the W2W...

Spread over three to four days, the W2W makes a challenging, albeit do-able ride. If you're new to cycling, we'd recommend a bike with a wide gear range. A mountain bike fitted with slick tyres (eg, Specialized Nimbus Armadillos 1.5), with a standard mountain bike triple and an 11-32 cassette will offer both stability and bail-out gears for the steeper sections and longer hills.

A Specialized Globe Sport (£299, ☎ 020 8391 3500 www.specialized.com) would do the job nicely – if fitted with a Tortec Tour Rear Rack (£20). At £450, the Dawes Horizon (☎ 0121 748 8050, www.dawescycles.com) comes ready to go, and ticks all the right boxes if you like the idea of drop bars, as does Edinburgh's Revolution Country (£399 ☎ 0845 257 0808, www.edinburghbicycle.com).

ghosts. Just off the road in Little Asby lies the equally lonely Dowly Tree, set amidst the open fells – 'dowly' being Westmoorland dialect for sad. It too has a somewhat dark history, as locals reckon it was once used for hangings.

Even with the warmth of a summer's day, there was still a real feeling of empty, remote wilderness. Again the road was picture perfect, impeccably unravelled for cyclists. The jet black strip of tarmac lay highlighted against the mottled hues of the fells and Great Asby Scar, as it rippled gently through the surrounding grasses.

An American Werewolf in Tan Hill

With all our dallying for pictures, we stopped for a quick refuel in Kirkby Stephen. Time wasn't on our side and still the big climb of the day, even of the ride, loomed ahead. Houses and farms gave way once more as we closed in on the five-mile climb up Tan Hill, before the road elbowed sharply up onto the rolling moors of the Yorkshire Dales.

However, the gradient was just right and this vast sense of space inspired us, so we pushed straight up to the windswept, isolated pub that marks its summit. Not only is it the highest pub in the UK (1,732ft), it was also the highest point on our route. To me though, it held an unsettling resemblance to the Slaughtered Lamb, the pub from the horror classic *An American Werewolf in London*. The sun was dropping, so with little time to dwell on this similarity, we needed to push on if we were to make it to our B&B – and I wasn't too keen on getting caught out on the moors with Cara, an American, at night...



Jumping up into the big chainring, we launched down the steep, winding descent, the perfect terrain to make up some lost time. But just when we thought we were safely on the way, our friendly signpost pointed us onto a rough bridleway that had us bouncing along and panniers flapping about. The race was on, as we cranked it as fast as we could to Cotherstone, pulling in barely a minute before last food orders.

A good night's sleep in a luxurious B&B and the accompanying feast for breakfast set us up for our last day of the ride. Our next stop was the Norman-founded Barnard Castle, before the road rolled its way to the top of Hamsterley Forest. A sharp, fast descent dropped us down into its wooded bowels. All that

The whole route is well signposted so you can get on with enjoying the cycling

altitude we'd worked so hard to gain was gone, and so quickly, yet so enjoyably! Touring tyres were put to good use again as we followed a smooth, easy-going dirt track, picking up a cyclepath a few miles out of Durham.

Dark clouds had swept in by the time we hit the city, and it wasn't long before we were slipping about on the cobbled streets in our bike shoes, as rain began to fall. A cycle lane guided us along the banks of the River Wear, the path of which would lead us to our final destination. Everyone was out and about; skulkers flitted up and down the calm waters like pondskaters and university joggers enthusiastically bounded along. Looking back, the impressive spire of Durham Cathedral rose high above the fields.

A pebble returned

The end was in sight. As we closed in on Sunderland, the surroundings took on a grittier, urban feel, underlining its industrial heritage, both in coal mining and as the former shipbuilding capital of the world. It wasn't exactly the picture-perfect idyll of the Howgill Fells but again, it was an insight into a part of the country that too often gets overlooked.

Briefly picking up the Stephenson Trail cyclepath, which follows the world's first steam railway, we crossed into Hetton Lyon Country Park. It sounds a lot fancier than it is, but encapsulates an important part of Sunderland's social history and the changes it's now undergoing. Previously a coal pit, it's been filled,



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landscaped and turned into a lake, in the hope of bringing a more positive atmosphere to this scarred and rundown area. A brooding sky had us rushing through the housing estates and over the River Wear on the impressive wrought iron Wearmouth Bridge. Round the

marina and past the stunning National Glass Centre, we pulled up to another pebbly beach.

Out on the concrete banks where the wind pounded and waves lashed against the shore, there was no one but a pack of gangly kids, who watched as two oddly

dressed cyclists strode purposefully down to the water's edge. There, with a celebratory yelp of delight, the pair lobbed in a couple of small pebbles, all the way from the Irish Sea into the North Sea, got back on their bikes, and rode off again with contented smiles.

THE ROUTE

Distance 151 miles. Barrow to Sunderland is the best direction to go to have prevailing south westerly winds at your back

Grade Medium

Duration 2-4 days

Maps Sustrans Challenge series Walney to Wear (£4.95) from their online shop

Getting there

There are trains to Barrow from the West Coast mainline at Lancaster, and to Newcastle on the East Coast mainline from Sunderland. The Grange-over-Sands based Easy Rider Bike Taxi (☎ 015395 32631) can carry up to nine bikes to the start from Lancaster or Oxenholme and provide a very friendly service. It's not easy by car. If you're coming from the north, you could park in Carlisle and take a train to Barrow (around the west coast or via Lancaster), with a relatively short train journey back from Sunderland.

Where to stay

We stayed in the Barrie Guest House, Barrow-in-Furness ☎ 01229 825507; the Kendal YHA ☎ 0870 770 5892; Cotherstone B&B; Abingdon Guest House, Sunderland ☎ 0191 514 0689. All of these were very happy to accept cyclists and offer secure parking for the night. Contact the tourist information for more options.

Food and drink

You're not short of options. Food stops with good tea houses/bakeries/pubs include Ulverston, Cartmel, Grange-over-Sands, Low Sizergh Barn, Kendal, Orton (Kennedy's chocolate factory!), Kirkby Stephen, Tan Hill Inn, Barnard Castle, Hamsterley Forest and Durham.

Bike shops

There are plenty of shops en route, including a Halfords in Barrow-in-Furness ☎ 01229 813300; an Evans in Kendal ☎ 01539 740087 and Cycle Force 2000 in Durham ☎ 0191 384 0319. See the official Walney to Wear website www.cyclingw2w.info for more.

Tourist information

Barrow-in-Furness (☎ 01229 896505), Kendal (☎ 01539 725758), Kirkby Stephen (☎ 017683 71199), Barnard Castle (☎ 01833 690909), Durham (☎ 0191 384 3720), Sunderland (☎ 0191 553 2000).

Terrain

Predominantly good tarmac with some rough sections and mixed surface cycleways. They're marked on the map so you can detour around them.

Gearing

A triple chainset is advisable, with an 11-32 block if you're travelling with heavy pannier loads.

Kit

We stayed in B&Bs and YHAs, so there was no need to carry more than a rack (Tortec Expedition Rear), a couple of panniers (Vaude Discover Back) and a bar bag (Ortlieb Ultimate 5 Classic). While the route is mostly very well signposted, the accompanying Walney to Wear Sustrans map is handy, in case you do get lost or need to make any shortcuts. Most of the route is good quality tarmac, though some of the cycleways are more mixed and there's a rough descent off Tan Hill. A couple of the cycleways in Sunderland are prone to some glass. We'd

recommend a 28-32c tyre (eg, Schwalbe Marathon) for big wheelers, or a 1.3-1.5in for mountain bikes (eg, Vredestein S-lick).

Daily riding time

The W2W is 151 miles long, beginning in Barrow-in-Furness and ending in Sunderland. We did it in three days – Barrow to Kendal (42 miles), Kendal to Cotherstone (57 miles) and Cotherstone to Sunderland (54 miles). This allowed us plenty of time to dawdle in tea houses, stop for photos, and still feel like we were getting a decent ride in each day. If you're pushed for time or like to munch up the miles, riding it in two days shouldn't be much of a problem – we suggest dividing the ride at Kirkby Stephen or Tan Hill. The group we met took four days, including two half days on either end to allow time for transport – we just stayed the extra nights in Barrow-in-Furness and Sunderland.



Don't forget to collect your pebble from the beach at Walney Island

Route options

There's a few braids on the route. We detoured at Barnard Castle to Hamsterley Forest, which added in a couple of climbs. We also spent an extra day based in Cotherstone to explore the North Pennines using parts of the Wheels to the Wild Cycle Route (see CPlus 195 Classic Ride, www.northpennines.org.uk), which is well worth the ride while you're in the area. Another option is to take the southern braid to Whitby from Barnard Castle, following Regional Route 52 (opening May 2007) across the North York Moors. Return home via Scarborough (for direct trains to York) on the disused railway bike path along this dramatic coast.

Alternative coast-to-coasts

You could easily make a great loop by stitching the W2W and the C2C (www.c2c-guide.co.uk) together. The two routes connect in Sunderland, and there's an interim link route between Ulverston and Whitehaven shown on the W2W map. Allow 5-7 days. Or, from Sunderland, ride up to Newcastle and head back via the Hadrian's Wall cycleway (CPlus 187, www.cycle-routes.org/hadrianscycleway) – about 360 miles. The 150-mile Reivers Cycle Route between Whitehaven and Tynemouth is another option (www.reivers-guide.co.uk) as is the Trans Pennine Trail (www.transpenninetrail.org.uk), a 213 mile off-road route from Southport to Hornsea. Further north, there are various departure and arrival points for a Scotland coast-to-coast, including the Ardnamurchan Peninsula, the most westerly point on the British mainland, to Montrose (approx 200 miles). For southerners, the Devon coast-to-coast goes from Ilfracombe to Plymouth (102 miles, Sustrans Route 27). Or start in Minehead and cross both Exmoor National Park and Dartmoor National Park to Plymouth in one long day – about 100 miles.

