

See you on the Sea to Sea

It's rare to receive an invitation for a three-day-long birthday party, particularly one that specifies padded undershorts as the dress code. But when Wendy Johnson was asked to join a group bike ride celebrating 20 years of the 140-mile Coast to Coast – the country's most popular challenge cycle ride – she was on the train to the route's starting point in Cumbria before you could say 'saddle sore'



It couldn't be a better time to honour this remarkable route; right in the middle of a golden summer for UK cycling. Riders in the first ever L'Eroica Britannia have clattered through the Peak District National Park on vintage bicycles, followed hotly by Tour de France riders taking on Yorkshire. It's the first time the world's biggest cycle race has been to the North of England.

Now, a good old English classic is taking the spotlight. It's no exaggeration to say that the Coast to Coast (or C2C as it's more commonly known) is the backbone of the country's National Cycle Network. It slices across some of the most testing landscapes in the North of England, from the Cumbrian coast to Tyne and Wear, taking in the Lake District, Eden Valley and the North Pennines along the way.

As a salute to the route, a group of game cyclists (myself among them) took an anniversary ride along the route led by Wayne and John of Newcastle-based cycling holiday specialists Saddle Skedaddle and Sustrans, the charity behind the C2C's creation.

'This is the classic coast-to-coast ride,' says Tom Bailey, North East Area Manager for Sustrans, who has ridden the route many times. 'It's one of the country's long-standing routes and is on the must-do lists of many cyclists. C2C riders talk about the wonderful feeling of remoteness on parts of the route, and there's really nothing like it when it's just you, your bike and the scenery. For most people it's the tough climbs that really stick in the memory - Hartside especially. There's huge satisfaction in conquering such a long and difficult ascent and the 360-degree views from the top are sensational.'

Whitehaven Harbour is already alive with C2Cers when we arrive, each rider dipping their back wheel into the Irish Sea. Tradition dictates that this dunk marks the official start, and the ride won't end until we dip our front wheels into the North Sea in Tyne and Wear when we finish. If we finish that is. This is a challenge ride after all, and a glance at the map's route profile reveals some thigh-burningly steep inclines that would set even the most seasoned cyclist's knees trembling. 'It is going to get hilly,' Wayne warns sagely as we push off, 'But just take each climb at your own pace.'

It's a mercifully gentle introduction along a flat, traffic-free path before we join the undulating country lanes of the Lake District, with glimpses of Ennerdale below and fells looming above. Some are so high that the tops are lost in the clouds

and it's a huge relief that we're only pedalling between them and not up them.

A steady ascent scuffing the edge of Whinlatter Forest brings us to Siskins Café at the visitor centre in the magical Whinlatter Mountain Forest, one of the few places to stop for sustenance during the first 25 miles. The forest is a hotspot for wildlife, mountain biking and other activities and, whilst there's no sign of the resident red squirrels as we lunch, there are plenty of youngsters zip-wiring between the tree trunks of the Go Ape course.

Appetites satisfied, we enjoy the best descent of the day: a mile or so of winding blissfully downhill from Whinlatter into Braithwaite before following a beautiful former railway path through the romantic and leafy Greta Gorge.

The towns and villages we pass through are working proof that the C2C has become a real opportunity for tourism over the last 20 years. Most of the pubs, cafés and B&Bs we see have embraced the route and now carry the 'Cyclists Welcome' logo, happy to invite weary bodies and muddy bikes through their doors. At Greystoke I stop in the pretty tea garden of the Cycle Café, one of the first cafés that opened specifically to meet the needs of C2C cyclists. 'We love what we do, where we are, and having the opportunity to refresh cyclists with some much needed sustenance,' enthuses the café's owner Annie Swarbrick.

Just a few miles from Greystoke we reach our Penrith pitstop and enjoy a restorative night followed by a colossal cyclist's breakfast at the bike-friendly Norcroft Guesthouse. Such a hearty breakfast is intended to set us up for the toughest part of our trip. There are several ascents in the 46 miles planned for today, including the challenging two-mile climb at Hartside. By mid-morning we're already in its foothills, weaving among dozens of other cyclists zig-zagging upwards on the moorland road, accompanied by the sombre call of curlews, the tick and clunk of gears being changed until they can go no lower, and the occasional anguished gasp of a cyclist pushed to the brink of fatigue. Our common goal is the summit's Hartside Café at an altitude of over 1,900 feet. Slowly, one-by-one, we get there and enjoy tea in the bracing wind whilst enjoying panoramic views and congratulating ourselves on reaching roughly the C2C's halfway point.

As high up as we are it's still not the highest point of our ride. A giddy and sweeping descent from Hartside is

followed by yet another long climb along moorland to the Northumberland border and Black Hill. This is the highest point on the C2C, and on the entire National Cycle Network - all 14,700 miles of it.

We cross the border into County Durham, but in a cruel twist the final few miles of the day also turn out to be the steepest. Weary from the arduous climbs that have gone before, a mean stand-up-on-the-pedals ascent up Crawleyside Bank out of Stanhope is almost unbearable. In fact, I'm so light-headed from altitude and effort that Parkhead Station, our B&B for the night, appears at first to be just a wavy mirage perched alone on the remote moor. Thankfully, it turns out to be very real and is busy with cheery day trippers finishing tea and picking at the last crumbs of cake as I check in. When I come down after a long hot soak they're gone, the restaurant's fairylights are lit and it's late enough for a glass of wine on the sofa whilst damp socks and shoes steam gently on the woodburner.

Completing such mountainous climbs allows certain bragging rights, and we're all happy to recount the day's challenge to our hosts Terry and Lorraine. As a popular overnight C2C stop for many years they've heard it all before. 'People underestimate the C2C,' says Terry. 'We regularly get people who come through the door and immediately burst into tears. If the weather is against you it's particularly tough.' The couple are more than just hosts to the route-ravaged riders that stumble inside - they're supporters, encouragers and counsellors, supplying comfort and a sympathetic ear as readily as toasted teacakes and hot chocolate.

In the morning, we're promised a gentle descent all the way to Tynemouth among some of the most diverse landscape of the entire route, offering a glimpse into the history and heritage of the communities we pass through. We follow some of County Durham and Tyne and Wear's former railway lines, beginning with Waskerley Way across the wild heather moorland of the North Pennines. It turns out to be nine miles of the most scenic and exhilarating riding. Exceptional views over Muggleswick Common to the rolling green fields beyond are as breathtaking as the fresh breeze on the exposed moor tops and the mighty Hownsgill Viaduct in the final mile is the perfect end, with blustery vistas from the centre across the treetops of Knitsley and High House Woods.

Lydgetts Junction, marked by a rust red smelt wagon, is a crossroads for several former railway paths. Once vital veins



'It's no exaggeration to say that the Coast to Coast (or C2C as it's more commonly known) is the backbone of the country's National Cycle Network'



for industry, they have now been given a new life as traffic-free walking and cycling routes; Derwent Walk, Lanchester Valley Walk, Consett and Sunderland Railway Path and Waskerley Way all meet here. In fact, the Consett to Sunderland path takes cyclists to the alternative C2C finish point and many favour it as an ending because of the ambitious artwork along the route. The 'Terris Novalis' sculpture by Tony Cragg marks the site of the once great Consett Steelworks, and the 30ft head sculpture 'King Coal' by David Kemp honours the area's former collieries and miners.

However, we're heading for the Tynemouth finish, so we follow Derwent Walk to the River Tyne and cross the wonderful Gateshead Millennium Bridge to Newcastle's lively Quayside, where we stop for amiable bike chat and lunch with like-minded pedal heads at The Cycle Hub. It's Saddle Skedaddle's base camp and a pleasing mix of cycle hire, cycle training, bike shop, repair workshop and stylish café bar.

It's a mere ten miles from the Quayside to our endpoint and soon the coast begins to call with an abrupt turn into Royal Quays, revealing the impressive yachts of the marina and a brisk sea breeze which greets us at North Shields. The final roll along Tynemouth's seafront to the finish post is naturally spent grinning and congratulating each other. But there's one more vital bit of business that needs taking care of. I carry on past the finish to King Edward's Bay beneath Tynemouth Castle and Priory and dip my front wheel for the official finish, silently wishing the C2C many happy returns as I do.

Cycling the C2C

Tackle from west to east to make the most of prevailing winds, gradients and views. There are two start points in Cumbria (Whitehaven or Workington) and two finish points in Tyne and Wear (Tynemouth or Sunderland). The route is well signposted throughout but it's advisable to buy the route map (£7.99) from www.sustrans.org.uk/shop

Sample shorter, family-friendly sections of the C2C on the outstanding traffic-free sections. The most scenic are Whitehaven to Rowrah in Cumbria (9 miles), Keswick Railway Path in the Lake District (3 miles) or Waskerley Way (9.5 miles) and Derwent Walk (11 miles) both in County Durham.

To make a donation and directly support the C2C visit www.sustrans.org.uk/donate. Click 'Make a single donation' and select 'C2C route' from the dropdown menu.

Travel and cycle hire: Wendy travelled with CrossCountry Trains and Virgin Trains. Both carry bikes free of charge but cycle spaces are limited. Consider hiring bikes as a simpler alternative. Try Pedal Power Cycle Hire in Amble, Northumberland 01665 713 448 or Haven Cycles in Whitehaven 01946 63263.

Where to stay: Cycle-friendly accommodation can be found all along the route. For a three-day trip, stay at Norcroft Guesthouse in Penrith or The Strickland Arms at Great Strickland, visited by Sir Bradley Wiggins and the rest of Team Sky in 2012, and Parkhead Station B&B near Stanhope in County Durham.

Organised rides: Saddle Skedaddle, based at The Cycle Hub in Newcastle, has been organising cycling holidays and adventures all over the world for the last 16 years, but it has a particular fondness for the C2C. Visit www.skedaddle.co.uk or call 0191 265 1110

