



Coach class

Just how practical is long-distance coach travel with a full-sized bike in the UK?
Dominic Bliss shoulders his bike bag and finds out

Transporting your bike around the country is now more expensive than ever. Petrol prices are high enough to make you scream, while train tickets can be even more costly than flying. But thankfully there is still one long-distance travel option affordable to everyone: the good old coach.

Getting your bike into the luggage hold of a coach isn't the most straightforward operation. It normally has to be inside a proper bike bag, and hence partially disassembled, and it will only be accepted as luggage if there is sufficient room when you board. But the economic benefits are massive. Book far enough in advance and you'll find long journeys – London to Aberdeen, for example – for as little as £8.

Our mission was to catch a coach from London to Plymouth, spend the weekend riding across Dartmoor, and then catch a coach home. Two coaches, two men and two mountain bikes.

Baggage check

The trickiest part of the journey was getting bikes and bike bags to London's Victoria coach station. I live just a few miles from the station, but the bike bags we used (kindly lent from Wiggle.co.uk and LeisureLakesBikes.com) aren't designed to be carried by bike. They are well-padded, with caster wheels on the back, and are quite heavy. So we decided to bag up the bikes in advance at home before taking public transport to the coach station.

Big mistake. Sturdy bike bags are designed to be wheeled around a station or an airport. They are not supposed to be dragged halfway across town. Already late for our coach, we ordered a taxi en route to get us to the station. No ordinary taxi, either. To accommodate the two packed bike bags, we needed a people carrier. The taxi fare to the coach station ended up costing more than a single coach fare from London to Plymouth.

Fortunately we got to the coach station with time to spare. Just as well since the coach operator, National Express, had warned us to start queuing up early. The company is happy to transport bicycles, with two strict stipulations: they must be in protective packaging and there must be room in the luggage hold to carry them.

The first stipulation is simple to adhere to. The second is a little less precise. How will you know in advance whether there's room for your bike? What if you board the coach just after an airport stop? If the coach is full you could end up with a valid ticket, but stranded because there's no space for your bike.

Stagecoach, the main UK operator of interurban express coaches and the long distance Megabus, has regulations equally imprecise. 'We will accept bicycles provided they are in a protective cover and there is sufficient space in the luggage hold,' a spokesman said.

asked what would happen if we turned up with bikes and tickets only to find there wasn't sufficient room. 'I expect that would be a very rare occurrence,' he replied. 'Normally there would be sufficient space. But for passengers with large items, our advice would be: "Get to the depot early!"'

On our National Express from London to Plymouth, at 1pm on a Friday afternoon, there weren't too many passengers. We rolled our bike bags up to the hold door where the driver and his companion eased them into the



storage space. Once we'd warned him the contents were fragile, he treated the bags with surprising respect, and he obliged us when we asked him to stand them upright. The next stop after London Victoria was Heathrow Airport and we really didn't want heavy suitcases lying on top of our bikes.

On the road

It was a relief to get on board at last, knowing our bikes were safe beneath us. Faced with a five and a half hour journey to Plymouth, we went straight to the front row of the top deck. Here, thanks to the huge, curved windscreen, there's an amazing 180-degree vista. Nudging our way west out of central London in the Friday afternoon traffic, we had a better view of the cityscape than we would have had from a double-decker bus. And when we eventually glided onto the M4 it meant we could see for miles across the countryside on both sides of the road. You don't get these panoramas on the train.

Of course the downside to coach travel is that it takes much longer than rail. Plus there's no buffet car. Although you can stretch your legs on a coach by walking tentatively along the aisle, you do look a bit daft.

The seats in most coaches are marginally more spacious than those on an aeroplane, but less comfortable than those on a train. At least the days of cigarette-filled ashtrays and chewing gum-spattered upholstery are over. Nearly all of National Express's fleet, plus many of the other UK operators, have modern seats with smart upholstery and obligatory seatbelts.

As you zip along the motorway at close to the national speed limit, you

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really feel like you are getting somewhere. Granted, a coach journey will often be slowed by traffic jams, but all the competitive coach operators do their utmost to leave their starting depots bang on time. And if there's a mechanical problem, there's always another coach available. No sitting on the runway for three hours or 'leaves on the track'.

We arrived at Plymouth's Bretonside bus station five and a half hours later, just a few minutes after our stated ETA. I'd checked in advance that there were lockers at the bus station so we could store our bike bags there over the weekend. With a bit of squeezing we managed to fit both bags into one locker.

That night we stayed at a Hostelworld hostel in Plymouth. They didn't have a secure area for the bikes, which was a bit worrying, but we were able to store them under a tarpaulin in the back garden. The hostel lent us a lock.

Two days on Dartmoor

The following morning we cycled east out of town towards Dartmoor. An old, dismantled railway links Plymouth with Dartmoor National Park. Starting from where the River Plym becomes an estuary, it rises up a gentle incline for six miles, mainly on tarmac and gravel, as far as the village of Clearbrook, and is a great way to reach the countryside quickly. As we struck out on a grey Saturday morning there were dozens of other trail-users out in force – joggers, hikers, bird-spotters, and bikers of every variety.

Once you're within the boundaries of Dartmoor National Park you have a huge choice of cycling routes. Country roads criss-cross the moor, as do forest tracks, bridleways and dismantled railways. Wherever you go you'll see road bikes speeding along the metalled roads and mountain bikers negotiating the trickier routes.

We decided to leave the tarmac behind as soon as possible and, after reaching Burrator Reservoir, near the south-west corner of the moor, we headed east past Sheeps Tor and onto a dirt track known locally as Jobbers' Road. The going got tough as we were forced to climb through the peat bogs on a rising, rocky dirt track.

Dartmoor is perhaps the wildest region in all of England. A bleak, 368 square mile granite upland, it has a raw beauty to it, especially when you come across any of the exposed granite hilltops, known as tors. The region is, in parts, so desolate that in some of the central areas of the moor you can look 360 degrees around you and

barely spot any evidence of human civilization.

Nowhere else can you find such barrenness, such isolation. It's for this reason that Dartmoor became home to the notorious, high-security Dartmoor Prison, and it is regularly used by the army for manoeuvres and live-firing exercises.

If there was any live-firing going on around us, we didn't notice it. After climbing Jobbers' Road past Seward's Cross we then turned westwards and onto a downhill track back towards Burrator Reservoir. Sliding between boulders and skittering across loose stones, we had to concentrate hard to find the right line. Eventually we found ourselves back on the tarmac roads. That night we stayed with some friends west of Dartmoor.

Back on the coach – hopefully

We spent another day riding Dartmoor's the roads and tracks, then headed back to Plymouth on the dismantled railway. Downhill all the way, it allowed us to sit back on our saddles and enjoy the views. An hour or so later we were back at Plymouth's Bretonside bus station,

Bikes on coaches the rules

There are hundreds of different bus and coach companies operating across the UK, each with their own rules and regulations regarding the transport of bikes.

The main operators of UK coach services, National Express and Stagecoach (Megabus, Oxford Tube, Stagecoach Express etc), have confusing website information on cycle carriage. When you phone up to check, both companies state that they will carry bicycles, provided they are bagged properly and there is sufficient room in the hold.

Many smaller companies will carry bicycles, too. The CTC carried out research a few years ago and discovered there were just under 50 bike-friendly operators. As ever, the precise rules differ between each company. Ultimately, it's often up to the individual drivers whether you get your bike on board. You'll get more joy if you're polite and insistent rather than plain bolshy. And try to board at a main stopping point rather than at an exposed roadside stop.

Seasonal cycle-carrying coach operators heading to the Continent include the excellent European Bike Express (www.bike-express.co.uk; 01430 422111) and Yorkshire Bikeliner (www.bikeliner.karoo.net; 01482 222122). Unfortunately Eurolines services departing from the UK have a ban on all bikes, including folding ones.

For more information about taking your bike on buses and coaches, log onto the CTC website (www.ctc.org.uk) and download the information leaflet 'INF12 - bikes on buses and coaches'. Or phone national office on 0844 736 8450 to request a paper copy.

COACH CLASS



“I was worried the coach back would be too busy. It was Sunday and it was coming from Penzance on its way to London”

extricating our bike bags from the locker. We soon had the bikes bagged again. The coach wasn't due for another half an hour but it was Sunday evening and I was worried the route would be busy. The service was coming in from Penzance on its way to London. We could quote the National Express Conditions of Carriage (Clause 7.1 onwards) but there was always a chance there wouldn't be space for the bikes. Luckily there was lots of room in the hold and the driver was able to stack the bikes upright, as they had been on the way down. We boarded the coach and settled down for the five and half hour drive back to London.

Travelling by coach can mean big savings. Thanks to huge competition between the main operators, there are amazing offers to be found on ticket prices. Granted, there is hassle involved in having to bag up your bike for each journey, and on the more popular routes at peak times there's always a risk there won't be room for your bike bag. For this reason a standard coach isn't an option if you're part of a large group of cyclists, or if you're travelling as a family.

Then there's the problem of what to do with your bike bag once you reach your destination. I wouldn't travel with a large, sturdy bike bag unless I was sure I had somewhere to store it at the other end. A lightweight bike bag (you can fold up some bags small enough to carry in a pannier) isn't as protective, but it will ensure you're much more manoeuvrable once you're in the saddle.

And, let's face it, manoeuvrability is what it all boils down to. That's why, in the public transport stakes, trains will always beat coaches and aeroplanes hands down for travel within the UK. It's only with trains that you can wheel your bike on board and, at the other end, wheel it straight off again. If only the trains were as cheap as the coaches and had a better attitude to cyclists – or if the coaches were better at carrying bikes.

Thanks to National Express (www.nationalexpress.com) and Hostelworld.com (17,000 properties in 166 countries) for transport and accommodation. Thanks to online bike shops Wiggle.co.uk and LeisureLakesBikes.com for providing bike bags.



Versus trains, planes and automobiles

Here we compare long-distance journeys by car, train, coach and aeroplane.

All prices quoted are for the cheapest mid-week journeys, city centre to city centre, booked a month from the time of writing, returning a week later. Distances and times are each way, while costs are for the return journey.

Total car running costs are estimated at (an optimistic) 50p per mile. Fuel only costs are based on fuel at just £1.15 a litre and fuel efficiency of 40mpg – i.e. a reasonably efficient car with the bike inside.

LONDON TO INVERNESS (562 MILES)

Coach. Price: £32. Time: 13hrs, 35mins.

Car. Total price: £562. Fuel only: £147. Time: 10hrs, 30mins.

Train. Price: £74. Time: 8hrs, 8mins.

Aeroplane: Price: £107.98 (including bike – but train to airport costs extra). Time: 1hr, 35mins, plus check in and time to/from airports

BIRMINGHAM TO KENDAL (149 MILES)

Coach. Price: £29 (train required from Preston to Kendal). Time: 2hrs.

Car. Total price: £149. Fuel only: £39. Time: 2hrs, 36mins.

Train. Price: £59.60 Time: 2hrs, 40mins.

Aeroplane: impossible route.

NEWCASTLE TO PLYMOUTH (409 MILES)

Coach. Price: £64 Time: 12hrs, 30mins.

Car. Total price: £409. Fuel only: £107. Time: 7hrs, 20mins.

Train. Price: £53 Time: 7hrs, 8mins.

Aeroplane. Price: £148 (extra cost for bike) Time: 1hr, 30mins, plus check in etc.