

# Summer *singletrack*

Weekend forecast looking good? Forget the trail centre honeypots and head out into some great British countryside.

**Benji Haworth** is your guide

**U**nfold those OS maps and get out your highlighter: August is a perfect month for going further afield on your mountain bike.

In an article like this we can only scratch the surface and provide starting off points rather than full instructions, but with the right maps and a bit of research you can easily plan a couple of days' riding somewhere different.

## The Brecon Beacons

Escape the hordes and ride in one of the lesser visited National Parks. The Brecons are almost Wales' best kept secret. Most tourists pass through on their way to the Pembrokeshire coast and mountain bikers are drawn to the Forestry Commission's numerous trail centres. The meat of the Brecon Beacons are the Black Mountains, a collection of big, imposing hills. Don't be put off by them: once you're on them, the Brecons aren't as bleak as they first appear. On a good day they offer a

kind of serenity amidst the sweat and toil.

It is possible to do some truly epic mountain bike rides in the Brecons. Polish up your navigational skills and take clothing with you for any possible type of weather. It is, and can feel, remote.

There is a well-known 24-mile route called 'The Gap' (see [www.mtbbreconbeacons.co.uk](http://www.mtbbreconbeacons.co.uk)). Although the ride takes you up very high over exposed terrain, the route is rideable in all but the worst weather. There's nothing overly technical about the trails – apart from a couple of heavily rocky and rutted bits – but it is a demanding day out with lots of climbing and not many sections where you can relax. The views can be stupendous and are worth stopping for.

If you want a break from the emptiness, then Mynydd Du Forest offers plenty of woodland thrills and spills. There's a 22-mile mapped loop on the above website. The dirt is lush and loamy under the dense tree

## Checklist

### Brecon Beacons

#### ROUTES & INFORMATION:

Wales has an abundance of decent websites devoted to mountain biking. The two best ones for these routes are [www.mtbbreconbeacons.co.uk](http://www.mtbbreconbeacons.co.uk) and [www.mtb-wales.com](http://www.mtb-wales.com).

**MAPS:** OL12 Brecon Beacons West & Central and OL13 Brecon Beacons East

#### GREAT PLACES TO

**STAY:** Beacons Backpackers in New Inn and The White Hart Inn in Talybont-on-Usk.

**FOOD & DRINK:** Brecon Beacons Mountain Centre in Libanus and The Coach and Horses in Llangynidr.





All photos by Benji Haworth

Suspension at both ends is a definite bonus on the rockier Dales descents

“Dales trails range from green lanes to rocky descents, ex-mining fells and woodland singletrack”

cover. For such a compact forest it packs in a lot of gradient. The trails in here are steep and twisty with lots of roots. Trails vary from tyre-width singletrack through to 4x4 tracks. The forest has been the location for lots of mountain bike races over the years and the evidence of this is all over the place – from the sinuous contouring singletrack used in XC races, through to the daunting steep and leaps of the Dragon Downhill Series.

Despite the Brecon Beacons’ daunting heights and vast expanses, there are still options for rides that don’t require all day or take much navigational prowess. ‘The Tramway’ (again, see above website) is an easy 6-mile route suitable for families that starts from Talybont-on-Usk. It heads up the decently waymarked Taff Trail in the forest alongside Talybont reservoir. The route then turns uphill, joins the Brinore Tramway trail and gradually descends back to Talybont-on-Usk.

If you do want to play in trail centre honeypot then I would suggest Brechfa Forest. It’s much quieter than the other centres in South Wales and has a nice feel to it. Even if you are

an experienced rider I recommend riding the Blue Route. It’s fast and flowing and will put a grin on your face. More details on [mtb-wales.com](http://mtb-wales.com).

### The Yorkshire Dales

There are excellent and varied trails to be found all over the Dales. From green lanes, rocky descents, sparse ex-mining fells to woodland singletrack. For the true essence and beauty of cycling in the Dales you can’t beat the south west quarter.

A great showcase route of the area starts from Clapham. This route (listed as ‘Tunnels and Bridges’ on the [mtbthedailes](http://mtbthedailes) website – see box) climbs over to Austwick before heading on up to Crummack Dale and then back down Clapham Bottoms. It’s a constantly entertaining and engaging ride. There are drystone walled lanes, some bedrock trails, a fair amount of sheep-trimmed grass tracks, an occasional tricky bit of slab rock, a couple of ford crossings – or old clapper bridges if you want to stay dry. The view over the iconic limestone pavement of Thieves Moss is one of the best in the Dales. The route is around 12 miles or so but

packs in a lot of interest.

Another easy-ish route is the Settle Loop (also listed on the [mtbthedailes](http://mtbthedailes) website). We say easy-ish because the start of it involves getting up out of Settle and on to the hills and there’s no easy way to do this! At least all the day’s hard work is got out of the way in one go. Despite the map chevrons, the road way up via Langcliffe is the best option as it’s quick and gets you up on to the fun stuff efficiently. Traversing the fell top via Gorbeck Lane is much easier going than it used to be due to recent resurfacing. The descent down to Ewe Moor is archetypal Dales stuff: wide, lightly-grassed limestone tracks with sweeping bends and awesome views. The return leg via Stockdale Lane turns up the rocky factor but there’s only one brief section that’s genuinely rough. It’s worth detouring to visit the gladed waterfall of Scaleber Force before plummeting down to Settle.

Horton-in-Ribblesdale is an excellent start point for some more adventurous routes. The start of the 19-mile ‘Tour of Pen-y-Ghent’ route, which is along fairly rough farm track, shares the infamous Three Peaks Cyclocross course over to Hull Pot, a beguiling, big hole in the ground. It continues on over Foxup Moor on a brilliant moorland traverse made up of natural surface and sympathetic man-made reinforcement. The steep descent to Foxup Farm requires good brakes or plenty of nerve – ideally both! The climb out of Littondale over to Dawson Close is rough and loose enough to be sporting but not too unrelenting as to put you off having a go at it all. The final descent to Helwith Bridge goes past Churn Milk Hole (another big hole in the ground) and is a thrilling and fast fling down multiple-choice singletrack. Take care

## Checklist Yorkshire Dales

**ROUTES & INFORMATION:** [www.mtbthedailes.org.uk](http://www.mtbthedailes.org.uk)

**MAPS:** OS OL2 Yorkshire Dales Southern & Western areas, and possibly OS OL30 Yorkshire Dales North & Central areas.

**GREAT PLACES TO STAY:** The Plough Inn at Gigglesworth; The Game Cock in Austwick.

**FOOD & DRINK:** The Blindbeck Tea Rooms at Horton-in-Ribblesdale and Ye Olde Naked Man Café in Settle.

as you join the road at the bottom.

'Over the Stake' (also listed as 'A Grand Day Out') is a 36-mile long ride from Horton-in-Ribblesdale that is less about the adrenaline rush of rough stuff and more about immersing yourself for a full day out in the Dales atmosphere. The route uses a mix of easy-going stone tracks, forest fireroads and minor roads. Head north via Dodd Fell over to Semer Water then across to Stake Allotments and down into Buckden. From there you head through Langstrothdale Chase to the finish.

## The Peak District

Like chocolate, the Peak District is either White or Dark. The respective names of each Peak do give you a good idea of the differing terrain and environment on offer. The White Peak is lush and pretty. The Dark Peak is bleak and brooding. Both offer excellent mountain biking.

A nice taster ride for the White Peak starts from Middleton-by-Youlgreave and heads south to Long Dale along minor roads and old walled paths lined with trees and wild flowers. Long Dale itself is a great little 'pocket valley' – steep grass sides and silence. Exit Long Dale before you join the road by heading down Gratton Dale on your left. Gratton Dale isn't quite as special as Long Dale but it's still a very pretty and charming place to pass through. Head back to Middleton on minor roads. It's about 6 miles total, and referred to as 'Middleton Circuit' in the Vertebrate Graphics White Peak book (see box).

For a longer, more strenuous route in the White Peak try the 'Chatsworth Circle', which is about 20 miles. Starting from Bakewell the route passes by two stately homes (Chatsworth House and Haddon Hall) and takes in a variety of trails. The haul up, through and down Manners Wood and Calton Pastures to Chatsworth House is English mountain biking at its best. Hard

work but rewarding and super scenic. Beyond Beeley lodge are prehistoric stone circles and field systems. The riding is great too. The copses around Rowsley in particular contain some ace singletrack sections. The return to Bakewell along picturesque riverside trails and the Monsal Trail cinder path is an ideal combination of scenery and swiftness. For directions, see what the Vertebrate Graphics White Peak book (see box) calls the 'Rowsley Circuit' – it's a variant of this route.

The Dark Peak doesn't have to involve gritted teeth and steep bleakness. A very pleasant spin can be had from Hadfield (of TV's *The League Of Gentlemen* fame). Starting from Hadfield train station it's simple to get on to the Trans Pennine Trail and head out east to take in a tour of the reservoirs. How many reservoirs you pass is up to you; it's possible after each one to cross over the dam heads and return to Hadfield on the opposite side using minor access roads. Distance is 5-10 miles, depending on reservoirs visited.

If you want a proper Dark Peak mountain bike ride then a good rule of thumb is to try one or more of The Gates. The three classic Gates are Cut Gate (north of Derwent Water), Chapel Gate (west of Mam Tor) and Doctor's Gate (east of Glossop). All three together add up to over 50 miles. Cut Gate is a popular section with mountain bikers: a sunken moorland track with ruts and rocks to test your skills. Chapel Gate is an old 'attempt' of a road that is now a hair-raising and unpredictable double-track descent. Doctor's Gate is one of the trickiest bridleways in England. It's hard work (and hard to get to) and only for the most committed of riders. Linking up a couple of these Gates via the abundance of bridleways in the area will give you the proper Dark Peak experience. We'd recommend Cut Gate plus Doctor's Gate. It's about 36 miles. See [www.mountainbikerides.co.uk](http://www.mountainbikerides.co.uk) > Routes > The Peak District.



The Peak District packs an enormous variety into a relatively compact area

## Other Great Weekends

### Isle Of Skye

It's a long way from anywhere but this island is bigger than you think – both in area and altitude. It's worth the effort. Eerie and ancient, it's mountain biking in what feels like a *Lord Of The Rings* film set.

### The Lake District

Like The Beatles' *Sgt Pepper* album, the Lake District is always up there in people's Top 10 lists. Justifiably so. Brilliant trails in exquisite scenery. Try the west side to avoid crowds.

### Shropshire

No one goes to Shropshire. It's the keen mountain biker's secret. The hills above Church Stretton contain an abundance of incredible, alpine-style, ravine-side singletrack.

### The South Downs

Many a Northerner has been cured of their 'it's all flat down South' prejudices by the huge whaleback hills of the South Downs. Gorgeous chalky ribbons of singletrack that never fail to excite and reward.

### The Scottish Borders

Lush green hills with hidden amplitude. Secretly and discreetly massive hills that lure you in and before too long you've got yourself involved in an epic ride. Enter from the Selkirk side for the best stuff.

### Dartmoor

One of the hidden gems of UK mountain biking, Dartmoor offers a rich but manageable tapestry of trails. Ride everything from dappled woodland tracks through to whizzy moorland singletrack.

## Checklist Peak District

**ROUTES & INFORMATION:** Vertebrate Publishing ([www.v-publishing.co.uk](http://www.v-publishing.co.uk)) are based in the Peak District and no one knows it better. 'Peak District Mountain Biking - Dark Peak Trails' (ISBN 9781906148188) and 'White Peak Mountain Biking - The Pure Trails' (ISBN 954813146) both by Jon Barton.  
**MAPS:** OS OL1 Peak District – Dark Peak Area and/or OS OL24 Peak District – White Peak Area.  
**GREAT PLACES TO STAY:** The Wind In The Willows guesthouse in Glossop.  
**FOOD & DRINK:** Eyam Tea Rooms. Woodbine Café in Hope.