

Top tours abroad

Where will you explore in 2011? World traveller **Rob Ainsley** has some suggestions on where to head next with your bike

If there's a part of the world on your must-see list – through personal links or sheer whim – some of it's likely to be good for cycling. From Albania to Zimbabwe, CTC's information sheets and Overseas Touring Correspondents can give you invaluable first-hand experience. Web travelogues and blogs may add helpful pictures and info, too. And if you don't fancy going it alone, there are guided holidays pretty much everywhere now.

But if you're simply looking for inspiration – somewhere offering all-round cycling pleasantness for a week or three, suitable for everyone from the casual tripper to the adventurer – I reckon you can't beat these places and routes...



Netherlands

Not many people come for the food or the scenery, but the Netherlands is a must-cycle. In the world's biking capital, the simple business of getting around on two wheels – whether to the supermarket or to Luxembourg – is a pleasure.

Partly, that's because of the universal network of cycle tracks, complete with comprehensive signage, and priority at junctions. Drivers are cyclists too, so there's little of the tribal animosity Londoners are wearily familiar with. The helmet 'n' lycra look is strictly training-runs only: everyone else, from the school-bound child to the shop-bound pensioner, rides in bare-headed mufti.

Yes, it's ironing-board flat, and sometimes about as beautiful: city sprawl, industrial tundra, featureless fields. But there's something constantly intriguing about this most man-made land (over a quarter is reclaimed). Pocket-sized farms with toylike livestock; perky, colourful social housing; woods, windmills, waterways; quaint old villages; cobbled canalside towns, art galleries, relaxed Amsterdam cafes...

...and that amazing land-engineering. Never mind the Great Wall of China: the polders, islands stolen

from the sea, really are visible from space. They're the world's largest man-made objects. One of Europe's oddest cycle journeys is along the Enkhuizen-Lelystad dike, a 30km causeway snaking north from reclaimed Flevoland; and then across the Afsluitdijk, the 32km causeway that shuts out the North Sea from the vast artificial lake of the IJsselmeer. It's what cycling over the Channel would be like.

The easy LF1, hugging the length of the Netherlands' North Sea coast for 270km, has a whole-family appeal. Take the ferry from Harwich to Hook of Holland and cycle northeast (with the prevailing wind) the 160km or so towards Den Helder, taking the train back (or vice versa, if the wind's the other way). It's a virtually traffic-free parade of dunes and beaches, fresh breezes, seaside towns, and (in spring) Holland's tulip fields. (Calling the whole country 'Holland' is like calling Britain 'England'.)

Photos by Mark Waters, Rob Ainsley & iStockphoto.com





“Mallorca is Spain in miniature: mountain passes, quiet lanes, secluded beaches, sunny plazas”



Spain - Mallorca

Some islands compress the whole-country cycling experience. Arran is Scotland in miniature; Isle of Wight, England distilled; Mallorca, pocket-sized Spain. Kind of: to locals, it's firmly Catalan rather than Castilian.

Like the mainland, Mallorca has mass-tourism ghettos, spread like a concrete rash along the south and east coasts. But pedal a mile or two inland, and you have a scenic and tranquil island, discreetly touristy not trashy, superbly set up for all sorts of cycling.

You see German and British clubs on training tours, especially in the pleasantly warm autumn and spring, and there's a large network of marked cycle routes on- and off-road. Big mountain passes, quiet flat country lanes, secluded beaches, bird's-eye coastal views, laconically sunny small-town plazas doing seven-euro three-course lunches, including the wine...

Thanks to the tourist tsunami, budget airfares are easy to find. CTC provides special bike bags suitable for 'planes, along with tips and advice. But if you don't fancy risking the luggage carousel, bike hire (from English-speaking shops in places such as Soller) is convenient and reasonably priced. How about trying a five-grand road bike for a week?

You could book a cheap package deal and use the hotel room for a night or two either end, roaming in between – decent hotels are plenty, but don't expect internet-bargain prices outside the resorts.

Mallorca is no poor scrabbling backyard, as the many grand villas, streetfronts and town squares in orange-coloured stone demonstrate. (Over our convivial seven-euro lunch in a small town called Muro, we were bewildered to see the local policeman scooting around on a Segway.) Palma is a busy

(Above) Getting away from the trashy tourist hotspots isn't hard on Mallorca

(Left) The Netherlands might be flat, but it's set up so well for cycling that it's a must-visit

Accommodation ranges from ultra-cheap basic farm campsites, through cyclist-to-cyclist B&B options (*Vrienden op de fiets* or 'Bike buddies'), to the usual hotel chains. It's a compact country: you're never more than a few minutes' ride from a supermarket, restaurant or bar, or a few minutes' push from a bike shop (which will feel cheaper than at home, especially for bike hire – and kids love riding in those box-fronted bikes).

Add to that the humorous, practical, down-to-earth Dutch (almost all speaking excellent English). For families, mixed-motivation groups, or just for an easy and civilised cycle break, you can't go wrong.

Ah yes... Dutch food. Had enough pancakes? Try breakfast toast with chocolate flakes (*vlokken*); or with aniseed hundreds-and-thousands (*muisjes*, 'mousies')... well, we did say few people go for the cuisine.



Manchester-sized city, with lots of cycle tracks taking you from upmarket art studio to intimate café-lined square.

If the island is a diamond, Palma is towards the western point, and the mountainous stuff is along the northwest side. Southeast of that it's pretty flat. A tour round the island – 200-350 miles including sidetrips, say – makes for a fabulous week, mixing in as much exercise or beachside lazing as you like.

Mountain roads are well-surfaced and gently graded: ascents of several hundred metres are no problem – and the views can be astounding. The snake up and over the mountains to once-isolated Soller (north of Palma) is a treat, for instance, with rip-roaring downhill, and little traffic thanks to the tunnel bypass (not open to cyclists). And the rollercoaster ride out from Pollensa along the headland to the island's northeast tip is a thrilling daytrip.

You'll need a helmet. Spain's curious laws demand that you wear one while cycling – except in towns, up hills, if you feel hot, or are allergic to them!

(Top) A clement off-season climate makes Mallorca popular for road training holidays. Take your road bike – or hire one there

(Above) The Romantic Road in Germany runs through picture-postcard towns and countryside



Germany

Astounding scenery, hearty food and drink, over 200 well-signed long distance cycle routes: Germany is an underrated touring delight.

Much of that delight comes from how easy the essentials are – finding spontaneous refreshment and a bed. Informal routeside signs advertise bike-friendly B&Bs, cafés and restaurants. Coffee and cake, and ice-cream parlours, are never far away. Camping's straightforward, and accommodation is high quality and spotless. Beware weekends though: there's no Sunday (or bank holiday) shopping, and Saturdays may be early closing. Petrol stations are your emergency supplies option.

The riverside routes are always popular, thanks to their obliging mix of travel-poster views and largely traffic-free, flat, smooth surfaces. The Moselradweg ('Moselle Cycle Route', 250km) threads through near-vertical vineyards – in autumn sample the new crop of wines. The Rheinradweg ('Rhine Cycle Route', 330km) has cathedrals, dramatic scenery and Wagnerian legends. The Elberadweg (860km, Czech border to North Sea) gives you scenery and high culture (and even Dresden's most upmarket hotels hire bikes).

The huge range of other signed trails include ones dedicated to wine, art, the route of the Berlin Wall, frogs, asparagus, even Pope Benedict – and most famous of all, the Romantic Road, stretching 420km from the River Main to the Bavarian Alps. It's heavily toured, but for good reason: this is picture-postcard, cultural-historical Germany at its most intense.

Cycle hire is easy and cheap, and cycle-rail

“Germany's huge range of signed trails include ones dedicated to wine, art, frogs, Pope Benedict..”



(Above) Riverside cycle routes are justifiably popular in Germany. And coffee and cake are never far away

(Right) New Zealand can be as wet as Britain, but when it's not the views range from scenic to epic



combinations are generally effortless; so basing yourself in a city on a riverside route for a few days is a safe option whatever the weather.

The old East Germany is often relatively laid-back and easy-going, and Berlin has its radical and arty edges. With parks, waterways and a huge network of bike tracks, it's ideal as a bike city break.

Yes, most Germans still like things done properly. Where you see a white-bike-in-blue-circle sign, it means you must use the cycle lane. It's 'Excuse me, Herr Schwarz', not 'Hey, Jens, mate'. And you'll want to bring something a touch classier than shorts and T-shirt for dinner. Traditions matter: those photo-pretty 'preserved' old villages and towns are often in fact painstakingly restored. And their environmental awareness and responsibility is way ahead of us in the bag-chucking wild (north) west of Europe.

But you'll cycle into lots of fun, too: summer festivals are everywhere, and lively southern Sunday morning *Frühshoppen* serve up food, drink and music in quantity in village marquees and halls. And you'll be most welcome.

After cycling in the heart of the EU, you might well come away feeling that modern Germany has the best bits of its traditional image – efficiency, cleanliness, quality, reliability, diligence – enlivened by a new-Europe sense of brightness and cosmopolitan outlook. And a bike's the best way to discover it.



New Zealand

Imagine Scotland with volcanoes, glaciers and subtropical beaches. You couldn't invent a better place for outdoor experiences than clean-and-green New Zealand. Throw in friendly, easy-going, can-do people, awesome unspoilt landscapes but all mod cons, and you have an excellent place for adventurous cycle touring.

It's always been a hiker's Elysium. But it's dragged its feet in making long-distance cycle routes. About the only one so far has been the Otago rail trail, opened a decade ago. It's a cracker, though: 150 occasionally bumpy kilometres via tunnels and viaducts through the remote hills of the South Island, ending up with the stunning olde worlde train trip down the

spectacular gorge from Pukerangi to Dunedin.

But now, at last, work has started on the New Zealand Cycle Trail: a series of tracks, railtrails and upgraded walking paths, roughly ranging from the southern tip of the South Island, with its glaciers and alps, through the wine country of Marlborough, to the northern tip of the North Island, with its geysers, volcanoes, jungly greenery and beaches.

Helmets are compulsory. Which is odd, because otherwise it's a go-as-you-please, spontaneous place, where people – especially in the countryside – muck in with a smile. I've had several lifts, bike and all, from pickup trucks and motorhomes. In Taupo I was corralled by a troupe of biking lasses into doing a 160km organised event round its mighty lake, and staying in their beachside house. When I got invited to join a yacht crew with a couple of hours' notice, a complete stranger offered to box up my bike and send it to where I was sailing in his shop's delivery van. (Yes, it arrived safely.) It's that sort of place...

Until the Cycle Trail project gets going over the next few years, you'll be routefinding along roads. Some rural ones are unsealed, and lots are hilly. Traffic varies; in the alpine South Island, where there are few roads and longish distances between settlements, there can be quite a bit of highway-slogging alongside trucks and tourist buses.

But the epic Lord-of-the-Rings scenery more



(Above) Dedicated cycle trails are still a rarity in New Zealand



(Left and right) Travelling south down the west coast of the USA means you get an unobstructed view of the sea



problems, and as much safe-challenge natural wonder as you can explore, there's nowhere better. Beware: I went for five weeks; I stayed for five months.



USA's west coast

Globetrotters such as Mark Beaumont frequently report that many of their least rewarding miles were spent toiling across the Midwest's autocentric badlands. Despite pockets of bike-friendliness (such as Portland, Oregon) the US is generally best explored by car.

Not quite everywhere, though. The route down the Pacific Coast, mostly following the old Highway 101 south (with the prevailing wind) 2,700km from the Canadian to Mexican border, appears on many world's great bike rides lists. The last few hundred k, south of Santa Barbara, is flat, but most of the rest is not. One much-photographed sign warns HILLS 63 MILES.

But the magnificent coastal scenery and wildlife (otters, whales, space-launcher-tall redwood forests) make it a thrilling trip. There are fine beaches, too, for example round relatively bike-friendly San Diego. Distances between shops can be day-long, so stock up when you can; but accommodation from hostels to hotels is available enough, and state campgrounds are absurdly cheap.

Some road stretches are jaw-dropping, such as the celebrated, remote-feeling Big Sur south of Carmel. The narrow Highway 1 here, built to create Depression-era jobs, is a winding old-style roller-coaster that clammers along the coastline for 140km or so. Only after a while do you realise why it feels so un-US-like: it's a conservation area, with no development or billboards. Other roads can be tedious, and less short on billboards, but cycle lanes or wide shoulders go most of the way.

If you're after something smaller-scale, San Francisco – an obvious stop on the Pacific Coast

“Some stretches of the USA's west coast are jaw-dropping, such as the remote-feeling Big Sur”

than makes up for it, and some of your airfare will be defrayed by the modest cost of living. Accommodation, especially no-nonsense but traveller-friendly budget stuff, is easy to find, and camping's a good option. Some say the chalet-ish villages, rural pubs and cafés have a 1960s-England feel; or maybe it's simply 2010s-New Zealand.

You need time and money to go to New Zealand. But if you want an extended cycle break in their-summer-our-winter, with no cultural or communication



odyssey – is your base. Bike hire is easy, and the quasi-European feel makes it easy to orient yourself in – and to like. Many suburban trains and some buses take bikes, so you can day-trip flexibly. A must-do is the roll across the majestic Golden Gate bridge to Marin County. Here you can ride the fire-roads of Mount Tamalpais, where mountain biking was invented, then trundle round bay villages before taking a ferry back.

San Francisco itself – with those famously vertiginous streets – is good to explore on two wheels, socially as well as practically: we went to watch the informal bike polo down in Golden Gate park, and soon got invited to various dinners and parties with local cyclists. Americans are generally a positive, enthusiastic and hospitable lot.

Then there's the wine regions. Napa Valley, an hour's ferry then an hour or two's ride from San Francisco, is a popular place to explore by bike, with trails going through the vineyards themselves. Helmets are common though not compulsory for adults in the US, but the best way to protect your head in Napa's wineries is not to overdo the tastings!

Find out more

You can learn more about many of these (and other) places using the library of CTC Route Sheets, which is at:

ctc-maps.org.uk/routes/

FOR DIY TRIPS, the list of Overseas Touring Correspondents, sheet inf31, is at ctc.org.uk > Go Cycling > CTC Route and Information Sheets > Information Sheets. (If you're not online, call CTC National Office on 0844 736 8450 for more on route sheets or correspondents.)

FOR GUIDED TRIPS, CTC Cycling Holidays & Tours regularly visit these and other places. In fact, many of the photos in this article are from tours led by CTC's Mark Waters. For details of CTC tours in 2011, visit cyclingholidays.org or see the advert in this issue.

TOP TOURERS' TOP FIVES



Peter Crofts

Veteran CTC
tour leader

BHUTAN (Himalayas) Wonderful scenery and culture.

CHILE AND ARGENTINA lake district Tremendous lakeland scenery.

TIBET (Friendship Highway) Great scenery, including Everest.

SUMATRA Wonderful culture and friendly people.

SWITZERLAND Such a beautiful country.



Vin Cox

Round-the-world cycling
speed record holder

EGYPT, Sinai Peninsula Stunning landscape, history and heritage, friendly locals keen to prove to Westerners that they aren't terrorists.

THAILAND Smooth roads, welcoming people, decent food and accommodation at great prices.

NEW ZEALAND Like a more spectacular version of Britain.

USA SIERRA NEVADA MOUNTAINS, California High snowy mountains in a forested wilderness.

FRANCE, South west coast Great food, beaches, cycle paths through pine forest.



Josie Dew

Cycling author and
CTC vice-president

NEW ZEALAND, South Island west coast Glaciers, rainforests (and spectacular rain!) ten-foot icicles (on Haast Pass in winter) and the Puke Pub (for bring-your-own-roadkill e.g. Headlight Delight Pie; Guess that Mess Daily Special; Wheel-Tread Possum toasted sandwich).

MOROCCO, South of Marrakesh by way of the Tizi n'Tichka and Tizi n'Test Passes to Ouarzazate and Zagora Good for Atlas and Anti-Atlas mountains, Saharan sand dunes, sand storms and locust invasions.

HAWAII, Molokai Island Good for saying you've cycled round a slipper, odd phallic rock and the world's biggest rubber-lined reservoir.

ICELAND, Especially the north-west peninsula Glacial camping, erupting volcanoes, incomprehensible language, dive-bombing great skuas, strange food (fisky fangs, rams' testicles, singed sheep's heads and buried rotten shark strips) and lunar-like cycling.

JAPAN, Especially the sub-tropical islands around Okinawa Overly generous people, feeling tall when you're small, Shinto shrine-camping and typhoons.