

A loop through the Borders

Rod Wark won the Cycle magazine prize to be the Scottish Borders Cycling Ambassador 2010 and spent a week there

It was a gamble riding the 250-mile Scottish BorderLoop in mid-October, but Mother Nature was forgiving. Promoted as a seven-day tour, we found five days manageable, riding 50 miles per day, clockwise from Broughton, Melrose, Coldingham Bay, Kelso, Hawick and back to Broughton. We still had time to take in visitor attractions, cafés, fabulous scenery and warm hospitality wherever we ventured. With the official (waterproof) route-map in hand, the well-marked route is easily followed.

Unsupported except for our final day, pannier capacity was

critical. It was straightforward for me on my Thorn Raven Tour, more challenging for my riding companion Duncan Brownnut on his Trek 1.2 compact road bike! Trek waited patiently for Thorn at the top of each climb, but the Thorn offered greater comfort and load carrying, and the Trek was nervous on the only (500m) off-road section near Peebles.

The ever-changing scenery was fascinating. The western side of the loop is characterised by sprawling hills with rounded summits, in many places steep sided on their lower slopes and cut by deeply etched valleys and streams. To the east, the rolling



Photos: Michael Lairdler

landscape ultimately yields a rocky coastline, North Sea cliffs and sandy bays.

Much of route follows the famous Salmon River – the River Tweed. The route is a haven for wildlife. Herons, pheasants, buzzards, deer, grouse, a badger, a peacock and an osprey, were all sighted at close range.

The spectacular and exhilarating hairpin bend descent to Talla reservoir from

the highest point of the tour (450m) tests both brakes and nerves, and the final 13 miles back to Broughton enabled a fast finish on a final day of seven testing climbs. If challenging touring with magnificent scenery on mainly singletrack roads floats your boat, then the Scottish BorderLoop is tough to beat.

There's more information about the BorderLoop at cyclescottishborders.com.

Chasing trails

15-year-old Louie Seber headed to South Wales with his dad and his friend Harry

With the first week of the summer holidays to kill, my mum at work and my sister away at Scout camp, my dad and I were at a loose end. So we threw the camping gear in the car boot and headed to the South Wales valleys, home of the mountain bike trail centre. My friend Harry and I entertained fantasies about having a couple of cool downhill bikes to review for Cycle magazine – teenagers love to dream! In the real world, we wheeled our Specialized Stumpjumper and BMC Trailfox out of the shed and Harry brought his singlespeed hardtail jump bike.

We started in England (just) finding ourselves near Coleford in the Forest of Dean. This is home to the Forest of Dean Cycling Association trail (FODCA). We soon got over the disappointment of not having the top-notch downhill bikes as we discovered the main attraction at FODCA: uplift. My dad is old school and reckons that you have to earn your descents the hard way, but teenagers don't see the point of slogging uphill when

you can get a van to take you up before blasting back down. In fact, it would have been hard to ride uphill on the downhill machines that some riders there had.

We camped three nights and spent one night on my aunt's living room floor near Cardiff as we headed west to Cwm Carn and our final destination, Afan Forest Park. You get a strange sense of going round in circles and

not getting anywhere when you ride at a trail centre but you do have a blast while you're at it! The black descent on the Whites Level trail at Afan Forest is a man-made masterpiece. It has rocky sections, smooth twisty singletrack, banking, North Shore and jumps. We rode it in slightly wet conditions, but in the dry it would be even better. We rounded off the trip with a shower and a decent-sized slab of beef lasagne in the Drop-Off café, which is listed among the top places in the country for cyclist-style nosh. Perfect.



Photo: Roland Seber

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GREAT RIDES
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