



Route masters

Finding the best cycling routes through cities is getting easier.

Simon Nuttall of Cambridge Cycling Campaign explains

So at navs are developing so quickly that before long your mobile phone will be able to pick the best route from A to B by any form of transport, including the bicycle, and it will even warn you of any congestion, trip hazards, and potholes en route. Already there are websites that provide some of this information, but signs and cycle maps are still vital for finding the best way across a town or city by bike. While cycle couriers might develop 'the knowledge' like taxi drivers, those of us who don't spend all day cycling in the city need pointers.

SIGNS FOR CYCLISTS

Most urban route signs are for drivers. If you follow them on your bike, you'll still get to where you want to go but you'll end up riding in traffic on main arterial roads and ring roads. If you're used to it and you can ride fast and assertively, you might be happy to do that. Yet you might not *want* to cycle in that environment, or have the confidence to do so, and during rush hour you'll be caught up in the congestion with everyone else.

In some towns and cities you'll see little blue cycle route signs saying e.g. 'Euston ¼' that seem to promise a direct, trouble-free route to your destination by bike. Often they will, but you'll need to keep your eyes peeled to stay on the route and not get lost. Riding on familiar bigger roads is a hard habit to break, even in your own home town. Yet the alternative routes, even if they are longer, can be quicker and more pleasant.

They're usually sandwiched between the arterial city roads and often run along back streets, old railway lines or tow paths. They may connect to the rest of the city along sections of road closed to motor traffic and bridges specially built for walking and cycling. Some of the signed routes run alongside the main roads but will have some degree of cycling provision such as cycle lanes or toucan crossings.

The quality of those routes is variable – even where they're improving, we've got a way to go to match the Netherlands, where cycleway fingerpost signs list distances and destinations at every intersection.

FIND OUT MORE

CYCLE MAPS

- London Cycle Maps can be ordered from: www.tfl.gov.uk/tfl/roadusers/cycling/cycleroutes
- For a list of maps from other cities follow the link to 'Maps and information' at www.lifecycleuk.org.uk
- Sustrans – map of the National Cycle Network: www.sustrans.org.uk

JOURNEY PLANNERS

- Cambridge Cycling Campaign: www.camcycle.org.uk/map/route/
- Transport for London: <http://journeyplanner.tfl.gov.uk> (click on the cycle option further down the page)
- Brighton: www.journeyon.co.uk
- Walking: walkit.com

ROUTE LIBRARIES

- CTC's route library: www.ctc-maps.org.uk
- Bikely: www.bikely.com

Photo: jason@cyclimg-images.co.uk

CYCLE MAPS

Road atlases are aimed at drivers and have scales to match those driving distances. Their colour schemes draw attention to motorways and trunk roads and are more like maps of where *not* to cycle. For cycling, you'll need to find maps that focus specifically on your town or city with scales or around four or more inches to the mile. London has a comprehensive range of free cycle maps that are over eight inches to the mile (see Find Out More, previous page).

The best cycling maps make the most direct and practical routes for bikes stand out. Motorways and trunk roads dissolve into the background and the quiet routes and traffic-free routes appear in continuous connected solid colours.

Once you've obtained a cycle map you'll have to spend a while studying it. The legend will describe in detail the various different types of route, using a colour scheme to indicate the minimum level of experience expected on each section of road. Note also how it marks shared-use pavements, on- or off-road sections, steep gradients, and one-way streets.

You can plot a route by the map alone. Ultimately you'll have to get on your bike and try it out when time is not of the essence – e.g. a weekend. Only then will you really know if it is right for you and anyone (children?) who will ride with you.

ONLINE ROUTE LIBRARIES

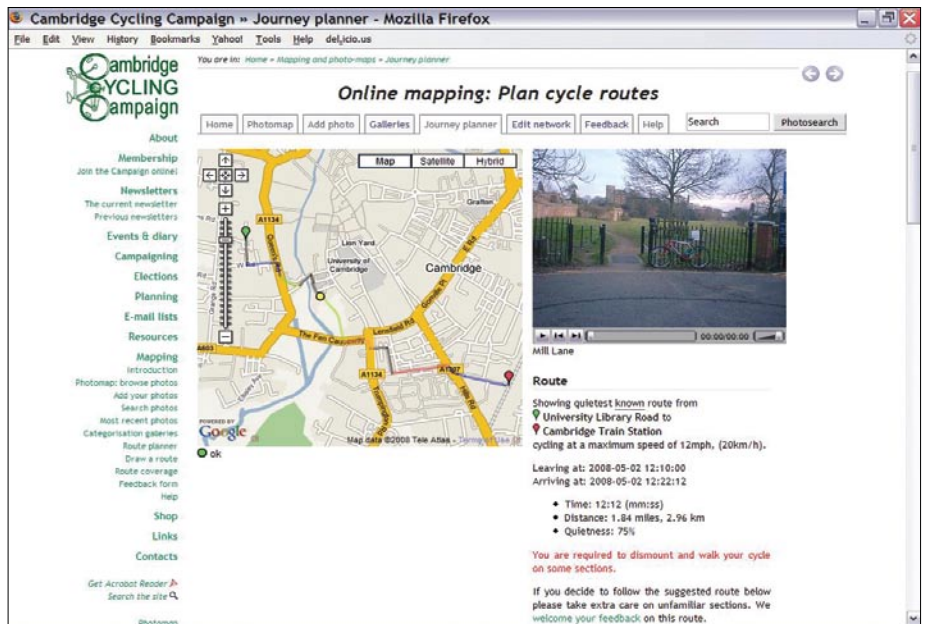
Online route planners for cyclists fall into two main categories: route libraries

'Road atlases for drivers are more like maps of where not to cycle'

and journey planners. The former are huge databases of bike routes. Cyclists contribute their favourite routes by adding maps and descriptions to cycling websites. Although many of them are heroic stories of mountain bike trails, there are many describing useful routes within cities.

For example, let's say you want to get from Liverpool Street Station to Waterloo in London. Googling 'cycle route liverpool street to waterloo' provides a link to CTC's own www.ctc-maps.org.uk site. There you'll find a route that goes along the South Bank described as 'Most pleasant and infinitely preferable to the road route, which is usually heavily trafficked.' There are maps, an elevation profile and route instructions in plain English.

Bikely (www.bikely.com) offers much the same. You can search for routes by type and location and with persistence you should be able to find some useful suggestions.



ONLINE JOURNEY PLANNERS

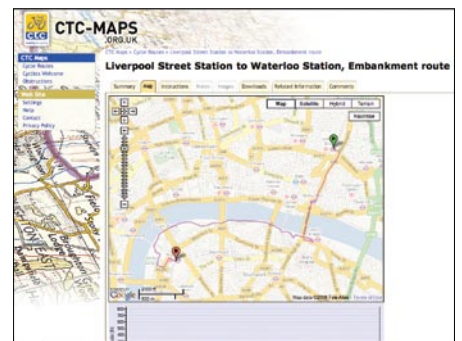
There's a petition on the internet to persuade Google to provide a 'Bike there' option for its online route planners. The Department for Transport is developing a national cycle journey planner. That is not finished yet, but there are already some city-wide journey planners.

Online planners work by asking for the start and finish points of your journey and when you want to leave. You can do this by providing post codes, street names or just clicking on a map.

Transport for London's journey planner includes a cycling option alongside tube, bus and train routes. It is quite usable and presents routes both as a scrollable map and as a printable map with detailed routes and directions. The routes it produces seem to correspond closely with the routes that would be suggested by the printed map.

Brighton and Hove's journey planner works in a similar way. Like the London planner it produces a table comparing travel times for each mode of transport but this time telling you the amount of CO2 burned and calories used. For cycle routes it produces a detailed cue sheet of directions, and most importantly a 'Route Altitude Profile'. The local weather is helpfully summarised at the bottom.

Cambridge Cycling Campaign's journey planner, which I have been involved in creating over the past two years, works in a different way. Click two points on a map and it provides options for the shortest, fastest or quietest routes between them across the city. The routes it produces vary according to the time of day, how fast you ride and whether you're prepared to dismount. It is closely linked to a 'Photomap library', which is a collection of photographs of the cycleways



in Cambridge indexed by the time and location when they were taken. The two combine to present a slide-show of the journey. The photographs give a useful indication of what the ride might be like, and I've been surprised how popular the site has become within the city, being used 40 times a day on average.

Unlike most other journey planners it is based on a detailed map of the city, which includes which side of the road you ride on and the exact route you follow through junctions. It is that sort of information that helps to provide it with the most accurate route.

BEYOND THE MAPS

These tools all help to give an idea of how long a route will take and how hilly it will be. There are other considerations. At night you might want to avoid certain parts of town or places where there is no street lighting. Weather is important too: a canal towpath can be an ideal route in summer, but impassable after heavy rain. Some routes will be better or worse depending on what bike you're on.

Experience – 'the knowledge', if you like – is your best guide here. It's all part of knowing what your route options are so that you can make the best choice in a given situation.