
WHERE: Powys, Mid Wales

START & FINISH: Pennant (on the B4518 between Llanbrynmair and Llanidloes)

DISTANCE: 140 miles (40 miles on day 1, 80 on day 2, 10 on day 3)

PICTURES: by Alamy and Dave Barter



GREAT RIDES

WILD WALES

*Mountain bike, camping kit, list of checkpoints: novice bikepacker **Dave Barter** had everything he needed to explore mid Wales. Except a plan*

My bag-strapped mountain bike was at the bottom of a steep, grassy gully 20 metres below, lying where it had fallen. I stared down at it and swore. I'd begun the Welsh Ride Thing, an orienteering-style bikepacking event in Mid Wales, less than an hour before. The route I picked to the first checkpoint was looking overly optimistic...

The Welsh Ride Thing (WRT) is an anarchic event with no winner. The aim isn't to amass points but to have fun and adventure while exploring and camping out off-road. It's now in its sixth year. The 2014 edition took place over the early May Bank Holiday and attracted around 100 riders.

The format is simple. You pay an entry fee of £20, the profits of which are donated to the air ambulance. You receive a set of checkpoints via email, and you plan a route visiting as few or as many as you wish. You set off some time after 1pm on the first day of the event and return two days later for tea and cake.

Routing around

I'd been itching to have a go at bikepacking, and the WRT seemed like the perfect introduction. I went online, searching for information about bike luggage, cooking apparatus, dehydrated foods, and backwoods 'hygiene'. When I arrived at the start point, I was confident that I had every base covered.

I'd researched equipment well; I'd researched my route less well. I headed up a

remote bridleway without properly checking where it went. The overgrown track clung to a steep valley side and was littered with bushes that snagged at my laden bike. After pushing it for hundreds of metres, I lost my grip and the bike tumbled down the hill.

The beauty of the WRT is that I didn't have to continue along this route. It was up to me. Minutes later, I was retreating from this steep, overgrown bridleway in search of more rideable tracks. As the event is based in the Cambrian Mountains, there are plenty of good ones to choose from – although even the better ones are hilly.

My kit for the three days hung from the front and rear of the bike. A handlebar harness held sleeping and bivvy bags, and a custom seatpack contained food, stove and spare clothing. On the road, things felt fine. Off-road, I had to take things easier, occasionally pushing but still enjoying the views.

I rode through Hafren Forest for a while. Its shade fended off the midday sun, so I began to explore and head a little off piste, a luxury not afforded to those competing in point-to-point events. I ignored the nagging GPS and relished the freedom. Meandering around the cycle trails, I encountered the occasional dead end but it didn't matter. I'd »



DO IT YOURSELF

- There is a vibrant community of British bikepackers more than willing to offer advice and company. I found many at the Bear Bones forum. There's a link to it at bearbonesbikepacking.co.uk
- Stuart Wright offers bikepacking specific courses for novice riders or those wanting to improve. His website is: forestfreeride.co.uk
- Bikepacking gear is available from alpkit.co.uk and wildcatgear.co.uk

“WATER DRAGGED ME BACK TO CIVILISATION. I'D FORGOTTEN A FILTER AND MY DEHYDRATED DINNER WOULD LOSE ITS APPEAL EATEN RAW”



© Stephen Dorey / Alamy

- (Left) Llyn Clywedog. The reservoir supplies water to Birmingham and the Midlands
- (Right) Camping gear is at each rider's discretion: 'in or under whatever you think best', the organisers say
- (Below right) The weather wasn't bad during the 2014 WRT, but this is Wales. It had rained not long before...

Fact File: WELSH RIDE THING

DISTANCE: I covered 140 miles

ROUTE: Started at Pennant (Powys), headed south to Hafren Forest, then east via Llanidloes, over high moorland via Pegwyn Bach, then lanes/tracks/bridleways to Knighton. Road to Bishop's Castle, then Kerry Ridgeway to Cider House. More off-road to Llandinam, road section to Esgair Hir, then return to start.

BIKE & KIT: Boardman MTB Pro 650B hardtail. Wildcat Tiger seatpost harness for food and cooking utensils. Small backpack for water, tools and trail food. Handlebar-mounted drybag, attached with Wildcat Mountain Lion harness, containing: Alpkit 3.5 single-person tarpaulin, Terra Nova Discovery Gore-Tex Bivi Bag, PHD Minim 400 down sleeping bag with liner, Thermarest Neoair Xlite Sleeping Mat.

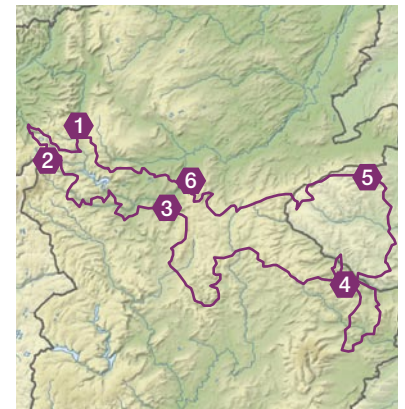
MAPS & GUIDES: I planned the entire route using Tracklogs digital mapping software on top of 1:50K Ordnance Survey maps.

I'M GLAD I HAD: My Jetboil lightweight gas stove – hot coffee was a morale boost. Wet wipes – the less said why, the better.

NEXT TIME I'D: Carry less in the backpack – two kilos of water caused some shoulder pain. Put contact lenses in *after* suncream application.

FURTHER INFO: Welsh Ride Thing – bearbonesbikepacking.co.uk Self Supported Challenge Rides – selfsupporteduk.net

DAVE'S MID-WALES RIDE



- | | |
|------------------|--------------------|
| 1) Pennant | 4) Knighton |
| 2) Hafren Forest | 5) Bishop's Castle |
| 3) Llanidloes | 6) Llandinam |

“ANOTHER KEY LESSON WAS LEARNED AS I AWOKE OUTSIDE OF MY TARPAULIN: DON'T PITCH CAMP ON A SLOPE”

just point the bike in the opposite direction and meander elsewhere.

A night in the woods

Water dragged me back to civilisation. I'd forgotten a filter and realised that my dehydrated dinner would lose some of its appeal if eaten raw. I returned to my planned route, using NCN route 8 to race the River Severn into Llanidloes in search of an open shop. The irony of following a river to purchase water was not lost on me.

I left town and headed back into the wild, my next objective a windfarm-strewn moor. The thrill of leaving the road behind again was offset by the effort required to gain that height. I forgave my loaded bike, however: it was worth the sweat to escape the crowds.

I rode for hours without seeing a soul. Fading light ushered me towards a campsite deep within a coniferous plantation. My

home for the night: a tarpaulin draped over my upturned bike and pegged to the ground. Dinner: a disgusting rehydrated survival meal that looked like it had been used before. Company? I'm not sure. I was woken twice during the night, once by my own snoring, the second time by a heavy rustling in the trees. Encased in a bivvy bag with a midge net over my head, I must have looked like a giant grub, but whatever was out there wasn't interested in me. I awoke refreshed, ate a marginally more tasty rehydrated muesli breakfast, and looked at the map.

The Kerry Ridgeway gave me the opportunity to abandon a planned road section and make my way west via off-road ridge tops instead. No contest. This was why I'd decided to try bikepacking in the first place: unstructured exploring. I brushed aside a few miles of steep hills and narrow



lanes before joining the track shortly after Bishop's Castle.

A great escape

The weather was fine, and I made rapid progress along easygoing trails. Bikepacking, I decided, was brilliant. I'd covered a huge variety of trails and terrain in a single ride: thin lanes, technical singletrack, hard climbs, river crossings, even a short but misguided length of dual carriageway...

My wild camping gear had kept me away from hostels, B&Bs, and the televisions they contain. I had no idea what was happening on the nightly news nor on Facebook. Instead, I was happily whistling to myself, high on a Welsh ridge system, slightly muddy yet looking forward to another night in the wild. A long series of poorly-lubricated gates did little to dent my revelations, while a solitary pint in a pub beer garden simply

reinforced them. I smelled slightly ripe; the lounge bar was not the place for me.

My second night out was quieter than the first but another key lesson was learned as I awoke outside of my tarpaulin: don't pitch on a slope. I breakfasted with birds for company and followed trails back to the event HQ. Stuart the organiser welcomed me back and occupied my hands with tea and home-made cakes. A number of other riders had also returned. We shared stories of our nights in the wild, the mistakes we'd made, the hills we stupidly climbed, and the trails that had been a huge mistake.

I've never felt such camaraderie at the end of a cycling event. Nobody had won, nobody had lost. All of us had shared the joy of a relatively unencumbered bike adventure. Bikepacking opens up every legally-rideable route for us to explore. I can't wait to get the maps out and plan another trip. ●

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