



ROB AINSLEY

Rob Ainsley is a cycle route researcher and writer who blogs on **e2e.bike**, in the hope it makes his seaside trips tax-deductible.

Great Rides

RELAX AND COAST

Seaside breaks are always better with bikes. **Rob Ainsley** explores some of the best parts of Britain for coastal cycling



Bikes and the seaside go together like – well, a bucket and spade. Both are about simplicity, about enjoying nature. About stripping away the stress of everyday life and concentrating on the basics. Cake or ice-cream? Sunbathe or paddle? Tea or something stronger? Ride to the nature reserve or the waterfront bar? (These aren't necessarily either-or questions.)

Britain didn't invent the beach holiday but made it available to the masses in the late-1800s heyday of the seaside resort, thanks to railways and paid holidays. Cheap air travel from the 1970s made sunny foreign beaches more tempting, but for obvious reasons the pendulum has swung back towards home lately. British resorts are in vogue again. Wikipedia lists 211 to choose from, so which ones suit us best?

Many offer memorable two- or three-wheel experiences. In Wales, almost direct from Barmouth's beach, a remarkable mile-long, bikes-only wooden bridge runs across the estuary mouth, then turns into a delightful rail-trail to Dolgellau – ideal for a family ride. As is the Camel Trail, another old riverside rail line, heading out from Cornish fish-restaurant hub Padstow to Wadebridge.

A FIRST, NOT LAST, RESORT

Sometimes you can link resorts by bike. From Scarborough, often said to be Britain's first ever seaside resort, you can ride the car-free, 20-mile Cinder Track to one-off harbour gem Whitby. The northern half has wonderful coastal views, though on the bumpy southern half you'll be watching the surface in front of you. The Way of the Roses, a three- or four-day trans Pennine adventure from Morecambe in Lancashire to Bridlington in Yorkshire, is bookended by smooth, friendly promenades: begin and end your ride with an ice-cream and a paddle.

Wonderful beaches can come in unexpected places. The 185-mile Hebridean Way, down Scotland's island chain, passes unearthly landscapes with gorgeous-coloured sands that could have come out of the Caribbean... except for the temperature. No resorts here – this is definitely 'away from it all' – but the Hebrides are proving very popular just now with tourers looking for an 'exotic foreign ride' without the need for a passport or fears of quarantine.

Promenade rides can surprise, too. The car-free seafront path at Cleethorpes boasts a Greenwich Meridian, Britain's smallest pub (the Signal Box), and its biggest fish and chip shop (on the pier). The cycle route at the top of the Wirral peninsula, opposite Liverpool, gives you ten miles of unbroken, relaxed traffic-free seaside cycling from Hoylake to the terminal for the ferry 'cross the Mersey in Birkenhead. Work in some rail-trails to complete the loop to the south, and you can make it an (almost) all



Opposite: Brighton
This photo: Llandudno beach, looking west

Opposite: Getty Images. Other photos: Rob Ainsley

Do it yourself All aboard!

The railways helped create the seaside resort and remain an option for getting there with your bike. Good planning helps. Gem and Louise Clines have great tips for solving the 'train+bikes+kids = holiday' equation on their blog ecofamilytravel.co.uk/10-tips-taking-bicycles-train-kids/. Strings of resorts along a rail line, as on the North Wales and East Kent coasts, offer super train/bike flexibility. But Beeching's axe was bad news for resorts like Hornsea or Ilfracombe, which lost their lines and now require a car – or long ride – to reach.

car-free circuit – or go and explore Liverpool instead.

But what we're looking for here is the Complete Cyclist's Seaside Break. That means good relaxing beaches with all the traditional trappings for when it's a bit too cold to be swimming: donkey rides, amusements, piers and proms, cheap and cheerful food and drink, amiably gaudy lights. It means lots of accommodation options with a limited budget no problem. A good cyclable car-free prom, suitable for kids and occasional riders, with plenty of toilets. Some more ambitious route options inland for the keen day-riders. Easy, bike-friendly rail access – and bike hire options. Fun for all the cycling family.

So here's our pick of Britain's best cycling resorts, which give all that and more, in spades. Buckets and spades, in fact...



Best for seafront rides

PRESTATYN TO COLWYN BAY

The North Wales Coast west from Prestatyn to elegant, likeable Llandudno is one long chain of resorts – and you can cycle all 20 miles of it on a glorious car-free seaside promenade, Britain's longest car-free seaside ride. (Almost all, anyway: there's a mile of quiet road just outside Llandudno; and, until autumn 2022, halfway along are two mile-long roadworks diversions along paths or quiet roads.) A café, ice-cream or toilet is never more than a few hundred yards away, the views change constantly, and there's a handy cycle-workshop-hire-café at the Hub in Rhyl, right on the harbour. There are rail stations along the



entire route, giving group flexibility. Llandudno's regal promenade and seaside – now open to cyclists again thanks to a Cycling UK campaign – is one of Britain's best. Looking for even more? The short stiff climb up to the summit of the Great Orme (or cable-car ride!) gives imperious panoramas, fascinating Conwy is a short ride away, and – for the adventurous – Snowdonia's epic roads are just to your south.

Clockwise from top left: Margate's seafront path is part of a largely off-road route between Whitstable and Broadstairs. Blackpool: you can take your bike along the piers but only if you push it. Bournemouth's seafront cycle path is very good but is closed to cycling from 10am-6pm in July and August



Best for smiles

BLACKPOOL

One evening in late summer each year, Blackpool's Ride the Lights closes its seafront roads to traffic and turns it over to thousands of cyclists to enjoy the famous Illuminations being switched on. But thanks to its 12-mile promenade cycle path – mostly very wide, sometimes 'dual-carriageway', always smooth and car-free, past innumerable cafés and toilets – from Starr Gate to Fleetwood, it's a place you can relish by bike all year round. (They even invite you to push your bike to the end of the piers.) Pretentious and arty it ain't – think fish and chips, donkey rides, roller-coasters and one of Britain's biggest Wetherspoons – but even if the weather is chilly, there's usually a Lancashire warmth and humour to any encounter. As proved, indeed, by the (cyclable) 'Comedy Carpet' afoot the famous Tower, celebrating the county's comic tradition.



Best for beaches

BOURNEMOUTH

For invitingly golden sands and balmy weather, the south coast is the beach-fancier's choice.

And fine Bournemouth is in the middle of a ten-mile stretch of car-free prom ride from Sandbanks (with its chain ferry for the beautiful Isle of Purbeck) to Hengistbury's nature reserve. There are caveats: there's no cycling on the prom during the day in July and August, and there's a 10mph limit outside of that. But then this is a place best dawdled, past bright beach huts, endless places to eat and drink, the odd 'chine' (lush ravine), and plenty of loos. Thanks to the inexpensive local app-based 'Beryl Bike' scheme, renting wheels by the hour or day is easy. (If you're used to urban schemes, the sight of a docking 'station' on the beach might amuse.) There's more conventional bike hire available too. Poole harbour, a short ride away, offers yet more car-free waterside cycling, and a Victorian cycle-racing track!



Best for inland jaunts

HUNSTANTON

The prom path from Heacham to Hunstanton is only a mile or two; the ride to the railhead at Kings Lynn, a little longer. However, where Hunstanton scores isn't just its unusual (for southeast England) experience of watching the sun set over the water,

The cyclable path between Hunstanton and Heacham in Norfolk. Sea to the west!



thanks to it facing west. Or its pleasant but modest trad-seaside vibe, funfair and all. It's the rides inland. Quiet lanes over gentle hills, rarely steep enough to warrant changing gear but creating views that change regularly, take you to delightful (often upscale) villages and views. Spiffy Burnham Market, aka 'Chelsea-on-Sea'; glorious Holkham Park and Sandringham; the quiet beaches around Wells; Cromer; Castle Acre; the easy off-road Peddar's Way; the strange timeslip pilgrimage shrine at Walsingham... There are day-rides galore here.



Best for new-wave seaside

MARGATE

Kent's north coast is a real mixed bag of shellfish. You can cycle mostly off-road for 20 miles along the bracing seaside, from Whitstable with its fresh-seafood shacks, via Herne Bay and Margate, round Foreland Point to Broadstairs and Ramsgate. Surfaces vary and the functional, brown concrete paths aren't always pretty. But riding here is always interesting – and rejuvenated 'nouvelle plage' Margate these days is as interesting as anywhere. 'Culture-led regeneration' entices visitors coming by train from London: the Turner Contemporary Gallery is here plus arty boutiques, but the retro seaside town is still going strong too. A few decent bike routes (e.g. Crab and Winkle Way), plus good train connections, make the area good for touring: Sandwich, Canterbury, even Dover and Folkestone

are within easy day trips. NCN Route 1 all the way to London is a thrilling Thames-side adventure.



Best for bohemian chic

BRIGHTON

Just over an hour from London by train is Brighton, an unapologetic and lively mix of class, kitsch, grittiness, alternative-chic, and naturist beaches. It sits halfway along ten miles of super promenade riding from Shoreham to Peacehaven. Bike hire is easy, and the local rental scheme BTN Bikeshare gives easy ad hoc access. The boutique-filled centre isn't always easy to ride around, though decent Sustrans paths can get you out of the centre surprisingly painlessly to places like the magnificent Devil's Dyke, Ditchling Beacon (the notorious climb on the London to Brighton cycle ride), the Seven Sisters, and Wilmington's Long Man. If the South Downs climbs don't entice, family-friendly NCN Route 2 runs along that prom, dead flat all the way west to Worthing, from where you can get the train back. ●

Fact file Classic Coast Rides

- **Devon Coast to Coast:** Gentle, scenic southwest crossing from Ilfracombe to Plymouth (100 miles) cycle.travel/route/devon_c2c/guide
- **Dunwich Dynamo:** Annual mass ride through a summer night from London to the sea (120 miles) facebook.com/groups/DunwichDynamo/
- **London to Brighton:** Annual charity ride or anytime day-trip challenge (55 miles) londonbrightoncycle.co.uk
- * **Way of the Roses:** Popular delight from Morecambe to Bridlington (170 miles) cycle.travel/route/way_of_the_roses
- **C2C:** Original coast-to-coast, from Workington/Whitehaven to Newcastle/Sunderland (120 miles) cycle.travel/route/c2c
- **Coast and Castles:** Newcastle to Berwick via beaches, history and thrilling scenery (100 miles) cycle.travel/route/coast_and_castles
- **East Neuk 50:** Kirkcaldy to Dundee via quirky fishing villages and St Andrews (50 miles) eastneuk50.org
- **North Coast 500:** An odyssey around Scotland's northern fringes, but some busy roads (500 miles) northcoast500.com

i More info

Cycling UK is promoting cycle tourism in three coastal counties – Cornwall, Norfolk, and Kent – through the EU-funded EXPERIENCE project. See page 10 for more details or visit:

cyclinguk.org/experience

