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# Cycle across the Beacons

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# Cycle across the Beacons

**This really is a ride of two halves. From Abergavenny to Brecon, it's a gentle towpath amble along the lovely Monmouthshire & Brecon. After Brecon... let's just say it's a bit less gentle.**

You wouldn't expect a route called "Cycle across the Beacons" to be flat, and it isn't. Indeed, although Sustrans worked with the Brecon Beacons National Park to set it up, the hilly section isn't numbered as part of the National Cycle Network – they considered it too tough for that. But if your legs are up to it, this is a magnificent 55-mile ride through the southern Welsh hills: the quietest roads, the sleepest villages, the greatest views.

## What bike do you need?

The hilly section west of Brecon really asks for a road bike, a cross bike or perhaps a hybrid. A mountain bike will be too heavy to haul up those gradients.

These are often single-lane roads with a grassy centre and a smattering of gravel, so don't turn up with skinny tyres expecting pristine tarmac. Especially when you see the canal towpath after Abergavenny: some of it has been widened and smoothed out, but much of it is still essentially unimproved singletrack. Fortunately, there's a tolerable road running parallel (the A4077/B4558), which roadies may prefer.

## How's it signposted?

NCN-style stickers on lamp-posts and road signs have a little orange 'Cycle across the Beacons' logo: simply follow that. The very first section out of Abergavenny is signposted as NCN 46, and approaching Brecon it shares the route with NCN 8, the Taff Trail / Lon Las Cymru.

## How do you get there?

Both Abergavenny, at the start of the route, and Llandeilo, at the end, have railway stations. Abergavenny has frequent trains but they can be busy, so book a bike space if you can. Llandeilo is on the tiny Heart of Wales branch line, perhaps Britain's most rural railway, with just four trains a day in each direction.

## Ok, I've ridden it. Now what?

At 56 miles, it's doable in a day, though many riders will choose to take two days over it. So where next?

You could extend the ride from Llandeilo to Carmarthen along the quiet B4300 road. (Sustrans and local councils have a plan to build a cycle track along the old Llandeilo–Carmarthen railway in due course.)

But perhaps most tempting of all is that Llandeilo is only 35 miles from the lovely Ceredigion coast. Add another day to your ride, and you could be eating ice-cream in Aberaeron by mid-afternoon. From there, it's a 20ish-mile spin up the coast to Aberystwyth and a train home. Tempted?

# Abergavenny to Brecon

The route stickers start right at **Abergavenny** station. The official route takes you downhill onto a riverside path that dodges the town centre, and if you're eager to get going then by all means follow that. If you've got time to spare, Abergavenny's a delightful little town with a strong cycling tradition, and worth exploring: pretty much everything is clustered around the pedestrianised High Street. Follow the signs to Llanfoist to rejoin the route.

Crossing the River Usk on the main road bridge, the route ducks under the A465 Heads of the Valleys Road to take you to a classic Sustrans railway path. Though this is one of the finest railway paths in Britain, running alongside the genuinely breathtaking Clydach Gorge, we don't stay on it that long. Instead, at **Govilon**, we drop down onto the canal towpath.

The Monmouthshire & Brecon Canal runs from the outskirts of Newport into Brecon, and in theory we could follow it all the way. In practice, much of it has not yet been improved for cycling. The route stickers keep you on the towpath until **Llangattock** (mile 8), but if you have a road bike you may choose to duck onto the parallel road before then: conversely, ruff-stuff riders might continue on the towpath all the way. It's a delightful canal, much loved by holiday boaters and almost entirely lock-free, and with a fine selection of pubs on its banks.

None better than the Star in **Talybont-on-Usk**, the tourist-friendly but charming village where we're joined by NCN 8, aka Lon Las Cymru, the long-distance cross-Wales route. It follows the valley B road and little lanes to Brynich Lock, on the outskirts of **Brecon**, where we rejoin the canal. The canal terminates at Theatre Basin, from where we thread through the town and its confusing one-way system. Again, if you have the time, do stop to explore this town of cathedral and coaching inns.

# Brecon to Llandeilo

Limber up. This stretch is undeniably fabulous, taking in some of South Wales's finest scenery as it skirts the edge of the Brecon Beacons National Park. But that means hills, and the climbing starts as soon as you leave **Brecon**. A 50-metre slog past the castle takes you onto a winding country lane through tiny villages, constantly undulating up and down until you return to the Usk valley at the military settlement of **Sennybridge**. (There are shops and pubs here if you need to fuel up.)

Take the main road out towards Defynnog, but don't miss the right turn onto a back lane immediately after leaving Sennybridge. (Defynnog Church is worth the half-mile detour, though, for its 5000-year old yew tree and pre-Conquest history.) This lane contours around a hill before another right turn takes you onto a short but exceptionally brutal climb through a farmyard. Award yourself five bonus points and the promise of a post-ride pint if you can make it without dismounting.

For a while, the Usk valley climbs with us. But as the meandering lane straightens out and the climb gets longer, the route approaches its finest hour. This moorland summit by the **Usk Reservoir**, in the shadow of the great Beacons themselves – Bannau Sir Gaer and Fan Brycheiniog, the Carmarthenshire and Breconshire beacons – is reason enough to ride the route.

If only we could say that it's all downhill from here. Yes, you do get to enjoy a five-mile descent, the last mile on a classic 'lost lane' with grass growing up the centre and some enjoyable hairpins. But as soon as you cross the A4069 road, it's uphill again for the last leg of the ride. Still, if anything this last peak feels more secluded than any road so far, and the two-mile downhill into Llandeilo is pure fun.

**Llandeilo's** colourful roadsides and arty shops make a great place to relax after the exertions of the route. If you're staying overnight there are several independent hotels in the town, though we're fond of the Plough at Rhosmaen (just beyond) simply because of its exceptional restaurant. After all, all that climbing has surely earned you a little indulgence.





