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Devon C2C

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Devon C2C

Coast-to-coast rides are all in the north, right? Wrong. Devon's own C2C has all the scenery of its northern brethren, and fewer of the hills. Railway paths dive under tunnels and over viaducts restored and new, so that it's the views that will take your breath away, not the climbs.

The Devon C2C is part of the new Anglo-French circular route, the Tour de Manche. But you can enjoy it as a stand-alone tour, and with easy trains from London, it's ideal for a long weekend break.

What sort of bike?

Whatever you've got! The hills aren't so tough that you'll struggle on a mountain bike, the surfaces not too rough for a road bike with sturdy tyres. As often with Sustrans routes, a hybrid/cross bike is ideal, but really – anything will cope.

How many days?

Three days is an enjoyable, relaxing ride, but you can do it in two, particularly if you miss out the Ilfracombe–Barnstaple section.

Is it suitable for a first-timer?

It's perfect. Enough of a challenge to give you a sense of achievement, but never too taxing – and you can boast that you've cycled from coast to coast.

How do you get there?

On the north coast, there are trains to Barnstaple (on a branch from Exeter), but Ilfracombe's railway fell prey to the unspeakable Dr Beeching. Happily, there's a bus from Barnstaple to Ilfracombe that carries bikes, though only in the summer months. At other times, you can cycle there and back, get a taxi – or simply skip the first 20 miles.

Plymouth, on the south coast, is on the Great Western main line so there's no shortage of trains. First Great Western is a bike-friendly company, but do book your space in advance.

Are there any route options?

Yes: there's an optional upland route (NCN 274) avoiding Tavistock. It's not one for the beginner, but fit road cyclists will enjoy the challenge. There's a couple of minor diversions you might choose, too, including within Tavistock itself.

There's little to choose between north-south and south-north: pick whichever suits your travel plans best.

Ifracombe to Barnstaple

Ifracombe's attractive harbour is a suitably maritime location to start this coast-to-coast ride. Although getting here requires an out-and-back trip from the railway station at Barnstaple (now that the Bike Bus has stopped running), it's worth the effort to reach this colourful town, a down-to-earth hold-out against the march of the chain store.

The ultimate ambition is for the railway path to extend all the way between Ifracombe and Barnstaple, but for now, you'll have to detour onto quiet lanes after five miles of well-surfaced, level path. One option drops down to the coast at **Woolacombe**: the climb back up to the main route at Georgeham is tough, but in sunny weather it's worth it for a burst of sea air.

The railway path resumes at **Braunton**, for an easy five-mile ride along the estuary to Barnstaple. Look out for the Tarka Inn, a bizarre castellated manor house turned into a waterside pub. Henry Williamson lived in Georgeham, and *Tarka the Otter* was set along the rivers Taw and Torridge.

Barnstaple to Petrockstow

This is the Tarka Trail, one of Britain's best-loved railway paths. Completely level for miles on end, it's justly popular with Devon C2Cers and novice cyclists alike.

From **Barnstaple** station, you and your bike gently cruise the Taw estuary – there's no better word for it. Keep an eye out for wildfowl, perhaps stop for a coffee by the bike shop at Fremington Quay, and dodge the day-trippers at Instow. Arriving at **Bideford**, you can choose from the railway station café or the bike-friendly pub down a set of steps.

The route takes on a more inland feel here, forsaking the coast until Plymouth. But the gradient is still gentle as the path criss-crosses the River Torridge on restored viaducts. The crowds thin out after the bike hire centre and pub at Great Torrington. Our favourite, though, is the café and bunkhouse at **East Yarde**, a delightful, decidedly organic encampment with local ale and cider as well as coffee.

Petrockstow to Tavistock

The central section of the Devon Coast-to-Coast mostly follows quiet country lanes. This is Devon, so that means hills; but also unspoilt villages and welcoming pubs. It's the ideal counterpoint to the railway paths at either end.

The route leaves the old railway just before **Petrockstow**. (Though the railway path continues a little further, it's a dead end for now, dumping you on the busy A386.) NCN 27 climbs on narrow, hedge-lined lanes towards **Sheepwash**, a tiny village with cycle-friendly pub and church clustered around the village square.

NCN 3 leaves us here for Bude and ultimately Land's End, but we continue south on undulating lanes to Highampton and the new traffic-free route into **Hatherleigh**. Should you choose to overnight here, the Tally Ho pub here offers great beer and filling food. It's a steep climb out of the village, but worth it for the views from the top.

In fact, the hardest climb on the whole route is within **Okehampton** itself. The town is in a valley; the railway... isn't. And, needless to say, we're heading for a path beside the railway. Okehampton station is a curiosity, both the headquarters of the preserved Dartmoor Railway and the terminus of a summer-only mainline service. Take half an hour to look around and maybe enjoy a coffee. (There's a youth hostel here, too.)

The cycleway follows the railway for a while, but claims the trackbed for its own at **Meldon**, just in time for the magnificent Meldon Viaduct – the finest structure on the whole route. At the summit of the route, this metal beast was too good to lose, and the Devon C2C has given it a whole new lease of life. Don't just speed over, but walk down to the viewing platform to appreciate this feat of engineering.

As the route skirts **Dartmoor**, the scenery is the finest of the whole route. Building a railway up here was quite some achievement. The path isn't yet complete, diving left just after Lake Viaduct on a steep, gravelly path to head for a hilly country lane route via Bridestowe. If you're a little more confident in fast traffic, you may choose to continue on the railway path, then follow the A386 for half a mile before turning right onto a minor road. This gap is being fixed by Devon County Council and shouldn't be an issue within the year.

After the next burst of railway path, it's undulating lanes through **Lydford** (perhaps stopping at the Castle Inn) through to Mary Tavy. Signage here is a little confusing: keep right at the valley dip when an off-road route heads left, and follow the lanes through North Brentor even if the first signs say 274, not 27. Eventually, after **Mary Tavy**, you'll join a new cyclepath that takes you towards Wallbrook Viaduct and the outskirts of Tavistock.

Tavistock to Plymouth

There are two routes in **Tavistock**: the main NCN 27 through the town centre, and NCN 270 over the railway viaduct. If you're not planning to stop, the latter is easier with good views.

The route briefly winds through housing estates before diving onto a railway path, which it will follow almost all the way to Plymouth. And what a railway path. It's all tunnels and viaducts – and of the latter, the most striking is the Gem Bridge. Opened in 2013, this brand new £2m viaduct for cyclists and walkers replaces a demolished railway structure. It saves an awkward hill scramble and has become a magnet for local families on bikes. Devon County Council and Sustrans, we salute you.

There's a steep climb up to the summit at **Yelverton**, while a former tramway provides the roughest surface of the route so far. Don't lose heart; these are brief interludes, if hard.

When the track ends on the moor above **Clearbrook**, however, we'd strongly recommend you continue straight on rather than turning left along the signposted route. The official NCN 27 here is rocky and uncyclable. Straight on, and you'll descend to the railway path on a steep lane.

From here, it's level and pretty all the way – and you might be lucky enough to see peregrine falcons nesting in the cliffs above the route. In time, another preserved railway joins the cyclepath, with a motley assortment of locomotives locked behind security fencing.

Keep an eye out for seabirds on the Plym estuary as you cycle along the wooded path. The official end of the Devon Coast-to-Coast is near the ferry terminal, but we'd suggest you call it a day at **Plymouth's** regenerated harbour area with its pubs and restaurants. Raise a glass to Sir Francis Drake, Plymouth's most famous son – and to your own achievement!









