

DETAILS

- **WHERE:** Isle of Wight
- **START/FINISH:** Ryde, with breaks at Sandown and Yarmouth
- **DISTANCE:** 117 miles
- **PICTURES:** Josie Dew



Great rides

GOING COASTAL

Cycling UK Vice President **Josie Dew** circumnavigated the Isle of Wight Coastal Path with two small children, a pushchair, a balance bike, and a pedal bike



(Above) Ryde pier
(Left) Bembridge harbour; Whitecliff Bay

Last Christmas wasn't the most successful I've ever had. Two days before Santa was due to climb down the chimney, my dad suddenly died. This put an un festive spanner in the works; at Christmas, you want boisterous fun, not burials. And then suddenly it was New Year and my two girls (Molly, 10, and Daisy, 6) were due back at school. As I felt they hadn't had much of a holiday, I asked them whether they would rather go to school or have an adventure by the sea. Molly, being the studious and conscientious one, decided she had better go to school. Daisy, being more like me (i.e. not so studious or conscientious) leapt at the idea of a coastal adventure.

School gave the go-ahead for our seaside jaunt, so one cold, sunny day at the beginning of January, I left Molly under the wing of my mum and my husband Gary, while Daisy, my 3-year-old son Jack and I headed for the Isle of Wight. I had no idea how far we would get in a day so booked no accommodation, just hoping we would find some sort of B&B despite the season.

My plan was to follow the coastal footpath for as far as we could get in about five days. Daisy and Jack would ride their own bikes, while I carried a rucksack and

pushed a pram for Jack to climb into should his little legs get tired. Technically, bikes aren't allowed on footpaths, but I thought: 'What the heck: they are young children.' And if they were to ride the coast road on their bikes with all that fast-rushing traffic alongside, it would be almost suicidal.

A WEE ADVENTURE

Arriving at Portsmouth Harbour, we took the ferry to Ryde where Jack and Daisy shot off on their bikes down the oldest (203 years old) seaside pier in the world. From there, we headed east for Seaview and Bembridge. With sea air in their lungs, and legs blurring away at high speed, Jack and Daisy looked rejuvenated: rosy-cheeked and full of bounce again after the sadness of granddad.

As darkness fell that first night (far too early at 4pm), and with no B&B yet found, we struck lucky. On deserted Seagrove Bay beach a little yappy dog suddenly ran up to us and promptly lifted its leg on Jack's wheel. I was about to boot the mutt over the touchline when its owner appeared.

'You look like you're on a bit of an adventure with all that gear!' she exclaimed.

I said: 'We are!' She was called Jo and we ended up spending the night in her huge new immaculate modern-build

Do it yourself

SMALL-SCALE TOURING

Travelling with young children, you have to go at their pace and stop and start a lot. You must have adequate food (and treats) on board to keep them happy, and frequent stops to play on beaches, playgrounds, trees, rocks, and shipwrecks. I always take a football and a small bouncy ball with me. A bucket and spade is good too. We used the Portsmouth to Ryde and Lymington to Yarmouth ferries. There is also a Southampton to East Cowes service and a Portsmouth to Fishbourne one. Southern Vectis buses don't allow bikes – unless you find a bike-friendly driver.



WITH SEA AIR IN THEIR LUNGS, AND LEGS BLURRING AWAY AT HIGH SPEED, JACK AND DAISY LOOKED REJUVENATED



Left: Daisy in action along St Helen's sea wall

Below left: Good-sized path for Jack, but not for wide prams. Near Woody Bay

Below right: Rolling into Island Harbour near Newport



I ASKED THE LONE FIGURE IF SHE KNEW OF ANY B&BS THAT WERE OPEN. 'ARE YOU HOMELESS?' SHE REPLIED

home on a hill overlooking the Solent and distant Portsmouth.

The next night, after Puncture Number 1 (Jack's) and spending half a day playing on the beach in glorious winter sunshine, we rolled into Bembridge just on the cusp of darkness. We stopped to take stock outside the fishmonger's shop where two elderly women were talking to each other. One of them turned to us and said, 'My goodness! Now you look like proper cyclists!'

'We are!' I said, using the same answer

as the night before. It had worked wonders then and maybe it would work wonders now? The woman asked how old my mini-cyclists were ('3 and 6', they chirped), before telling us her name was Margaret and that she was 81 years old and 'a very keen cyclist indeed!' So was her husband. They cycled everywhere, all of the time.

'Always have done,' she said. 'I believe cycling leads to a healthy life and a long life'. Convivial Margaret invited us back to stay with her. 'I'm a member of Cycling UK', she said. 'Have been for years. I hope you are!'

'Yes,' I said. 'I'm Vice President!'

'My goodness!' said Margaret.

'Well, fancy that!'

MORE UPS THAN DOWNS

The next day was a long and arduous one following the narrow cliff path from Foreland through Whitecliff Bay. We slipped and slid in the mud and the chalk, carrying bikes and pram up and down steep steps and over the dreaded kissing gates, which are definitely not pram-friendly when you have to unload half a ton of bags first. It clouded over as we climbed up into a cold, wild wind over Culver Down.

Despite the chilly, blustery weather, team morale was good. Jack and Daisy were in bouncy spirits and constantly determined to keep forging ahead. So far, we were doing about six hilly, obstacle-ridden miles a day, >



The Needles.
Up until 1994,
the lighthouse
was manned

BALANCE BIKE GUIDE

For an overview of
balance bikes, visit
[bit.ly/cycle-
balancebikes](http://bit.ly/cycle-balancebikes)

which for the small-legged party was quite an undertaking. But whenever I asked Jack whether he was tired and wanted to get in the pram for a rest, he always gave me a slightly German-sounding reply: 'No, Mum. Me on mine bike!'

We made it to the summit of Culver Down, which is topped with a massive granite obelisk erected in 1849 in memory of a wealthy MP called the Earl of Yarborough. The view from up here was spectacular. But then the weather closed in. The rain started in earnest but my young riders kept happily rolling down the Down, despite rain and buffeting winds. As Christmas had only just been and gone, we still had a barrage of carols bounding round our heads. So as we descended into the rain, we gustily sang and trilled a medley of 'Ding dong merrily on high', 'Jingle bells, jingle bells, jingle all the way...'

By the time we reached Sandown, it was dark and every B&B and hotel we came across was closed. The rain was falling heavily now and the seafront was deserted. But then I spotted a lone figure, hood up,

hunched over into the wind and rain. I asked her whether she knew of any B&Bs that were open.

'Are you homeless?' she replied.

I took stock of the multitude of plastic bags hanging off the pram... and the rips in my jacket held together with gaffer tape. I said, 'I might look like I am but I do have a home – only it's not here!'

The woman had a friend called Neal who had a B&B, 'though I'm not sure he's open this time of year. But let's try. Follow me.'

Neal was in but closed. 'Sorry, love,' he said. 'I'm redecorating – got paint everywhere. There's a couple of places two streets away. You could try there.'

We left Neal and went in search of the B&Bs, which were both closed. Daisy was by now flagging and Jack had at last climbed into the pram and promptly fallen asleep.

'What happens if we don't find anywhere to stay?' asked a cold, wet Daisy.

'Don't worry, sweetie pie,' I said. 'We'll find somewhere. Something always turns up in the end.'

We walked the streets and finally came across a slightly ramshackle building with a B&B sign and a light on. I rang the bell. Nothing. I rang again. A bang, a crash, and the door was unlocked.

'Sorry, my love,' said the woman who opened up. 'We're closed for January.' Pause. She eyed us up and down. 'Though looking at you and your kids, all wet and that, I can't turn you away. Come in.' So in we gratefully went.

From Sandown, we had to veer away from the coast to head back to Ryde as time had run out: I had to get home to look after Molly and get Daisy to school. We took the long route via Newport to Cowes, following about 15 miles of the old railway, now a cyclepath (Sustrans Route 23) and a perfect way for children on bikes to cross the island. From Cowes, we joined the coastal path again and tallyhoed to Ryde.

BACK FOR SECONDS

Part 2 of our Isle of Wight coastal-path-by-bike-and-pram saga had to wait until February half-term. And then we were off: train to Portsmouth, ferry to Ryde, before



Above: Within sight of the Needles in a south-westerly gale

Near right: Muddy going up Compton Down

Far right: Step gridlock



YES, I KNOW EXPOSED, NARROW CLIFFTOP PATHS ARE NOT THE BEST PLACES TO BE WHEN A STORM WHIPS UP 70MPH WINDS

catching a very fun and bumpily rickety 80-year-old former London Underground tube train, which is now used overground on the 8-mile Ryde-to-Shanklin line. We piled out the stop before Shanklin at Sandown to resume where we had left off on in January on our clockwise jaunt around the coast.

As on Leg 1, I didn't pre-book any accommodation as it was impossible to know how far my merry mob would travel in a day when faced with mud, wild winter weather, cliffs, and hundreds of steps that are part and parcel of following this very undulating coastal path. This live-in-hope-that-we-will-find-a-bed method tended to be a little hit and miss, as most B&Bs were still closed for winter. But somehow we always managed to find a room in the end, though there were a couple of occasions when, with darkness falling and no doors opening, I started in slight desperation to eye-up bus shelters and church porches to lay our weary heads down in. (Personal preference from past experience of spending many a night in both is for a church porch as they tend not to be used so often as a public toilet, plus most churches have a water tap in a corner

somewhere, which is useful for alfresco ablutions and water bottle top-ups.)

The good news is that we had a very fun time and didn't get blown over a cliff (though it came perilously close), fall into a chine (a southern England ravine), or slip down a landslide (of which there are plenty on the island's south coast). The bad news is that we got hit by multiple punctures. Daisy's bike was the one to fall prey. Despite changing her tyres to Schwalbe Marathons before we set out on our coastal escapade, broken glass and devilishly spiky hawthorn hedge-cuttings pierced their way in.

We also got hit by Storm Doris.

What tumultuous wind Doris had! Yes, yes, I know exposed, narrow clifftop paths a stone's throw from the Needles are not the best places to be when a Doris-like storm whips up 70mph winds to lift you clean off your feet and chafe your cheeks raw – particularly with two young children.

EDGING FORWARD

When I sensed it was just too dicey to be on a clifftop in such wild, wind-battering weather, we would veer inland, weaving our

way along footpaths and bridleways to climb up a down or two or three. It was a strenuous procedure that involved four or five hours of climbing and dragging and carrying the pram and bikes through thick, deep, sludgy mud or over gates and styles and up steep, chalky, slippery slopes in a completely bonkers head-rattling wind until we hit the exposed ridge of the down, with its spectacular views of the churned-up sea and the rolling patchwork of wind-blown land beneath us.

So in this snail-creeping manner we covered 46 miles in a week, averaging six and half miles a day and passing through Shanklin, Ventnor, Niton, Chale, Brighstone, Mottistone, Compton Bay, Freshwater Bay and Yarmouth. I ended up doing a lot more than this, as in areas of vertical inclines and multiple steps (the Devil's Chimney springs to mind – an incredibly narrow and scenically steep rock cleft that ascends like a natural cliff staircase from the Bonchurch Landslips), I had to walk the same section of path at least seven times: remove heavy bags from pram; run uphill with them and dump them on the ground; trot back to push/drag/carry pram up; run back to get Daisy's bike; then ditto Jack's bike and my big rucksack.

In Yarmouth, our half-term week was up so we jumped on a double-decker bus to Ryde (bikes are banned on buses but luckily we wooed the friendly driver) and caught the ferry to Portsmouth.

I had planned to finish off the coastal path



Left: Above Alum Bay. Daisy rode the whole way (117 miles) and wanted to do it again at the end

during the two-week Easter holidays. But as we needed only about a week to do it, I didn't want to waste the other week when we could be off cycling further afield. So off to the Channel Islands I went, cycling 277 miles with Molly, Daisy, and Jack all on the same bike as me: a Circe Helios triplet which, with trailer attached, is 14-feet long – about as long as a Range Rover.

GREAT RYDE

When May half-term came along, we were back on the Isle of Wight (train to Lyminster, ferry to Yarmouth) to finish the last leg of our coastal meanderings. Although it hadn't rained for weeks – we were in the midst of a semi-heatwave – the moment we set foot on the island, a sky-exploding storm took hold and the heavens opened. Lanes turned to mini rivers, footpaths and tracks turned to mud. We walked, cycled, pushed and, in pond-sized puddles, almost swam our way back to Freshwater.

The next morning, as we started out up Tennyson Down en route for the Needles, the sun shone. But then, up near the top, the fog suddenly rolled in – fog so thick we could hardly see our hands in front of our faces. Every 15 seconds the Needles lighthouse bellowed out its booming foghorn; in between there was a lovely, eerie, fog-filled silence. As Tennyson Down and the Needles offer some of the best views on the island, I abandoned our mission and descended to

Totland Bay to try again the next day.

It was the right move, as the following morning was clear, blue and beautiful.

The heatwave returned, and over the next few days I sprinkled our water-bottle water at regular intervals over Jack and Daisy's heads as we sweated our way along the much flatter (though not flat) north coast to Cowes. As the chain ferry was suspended due to 'teething issues', we had a 10-mile diversion up the Medina River to Newport and back down the other side. But it was a lovely diversion. Thanks to the island's cycle campaigning group, CycleWight, the old railway is now a car-free cycleway for most of the route.

And then we were back in Ryde, with Operation Bike-Riding Pram-Push all done and dusted. 'Can we do it all over again now?' asked an ever-keen Daisy. I wished that we could, but school was calling.

The surprising thing was that, despite the vigorousness of our trip, Jack and Daisy never whinged, moaned or whined like they sometimes do on walks or bike rides at home. They took the handlebars by the horns and charged head first into the whole jolly jaunt.

'This is weally 'citing a-venture, Mum!' Jack would declare on a daily basis. Daisy remained buoyant and comical throughout, always game to keep going through thick and thin, while calling out to Jack: 'Full steam ahead!' 

Fact file

ISLE OF WIGHT COASTAL PATH

DISTANCE: The Isle of Wight coastal path is 67 miles long but we did 117 miles due to doing several sections several times and veering off course to find food/beds and see interesting sights. Daisy rode her bike all the way; Jack rode his bike for 88 miles.

ROUTE: We followed the coast path on the Isle of Wight in a clockwise direction. Plus we also walked/cycled the old railway cyclepath that crosses the island from Sandown to Cowes. Twice we followed the path along the former railway line connecting Yarmouth to Freshwater.

CONDITIONS: We did the journey in three stages to fit around school: a few days each in January, February and May. We had everything from frost to heat waves, torrential rain to Storm Doris, which gusted 82mph at the Needles.

ACCOMMODATION: B&Bs.

EQUIPMENT USED: Daisy rode her Islabikes Beinn 20 with my old Karrimor front panniers attached to her rack. Jack rode his Islabikes Rothan balance bike. I pushed an old third-hand pram loaded with kit.

I'M GLAD I HAD: Decided to do the coast path despite several people warning me it would not be possible to do with bikes, pushchair and small children. It was hard but not impossible.

NEXT TIME I WOULD: Do it anti-clockwise for variation.

FURTHER INFORMATION: I used my old OS Landranger 196 and a small Isle of Wight A-Z Atlas.

