



Shadowing  
Hadrian's Wall,  
near Vindolanda

**W**e spent the day chasing a dark grey raincloud. My friend Claire, often ahead of me on the hills and behind me on the flats, merrily pedalled along in her pink cycling jacket, which popped pleasingly against the implausibly dark line hovering in the sky, always just ahead of us.

The weather did little to puncture our mood, however, because we were enjoying the second of a nearly perfect three days of cycling. Coastal paths met billiard-smooth tarmac with barely a car in sight, and the scenery stretched before and beside us, first on remarkably flat land and secondly on remarkably hilly.

We were roughly tracing, at least for the central part of the ride, the route of Hadrian's Wall, an engineering marvel of the Roman era. But for now the road ran, with barely an incline, alongside the coastline on off-road paths and quiet roads. That first day the drizzle set in shortly after leaving our train at Whitehaven.

#### RIGHT AS RAIN

We'd planned our trip weeks ahead, Claire taking a couple of days away from her infant son and partner, so a little thing like three days of predicted rain wasn't about to stop us. We arrived at our B&B in Silloth early evening, soaked but happy, and our hosts delighted us with conversation and delicious home-made food, before we dangled all our clothes over a heater and I tried in vain to sleep in the



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resulting sauna. Claire had no problem nodding off, I'm pleased to report.

The next morning an equally top-notch breakfast, including home-made bread, set us up for day two. As we stepped outside, a dramatic squall saw Claire and I run for different shelters. Once the rain ceased pummeling the dripping trees of the town's waterfront park, it revealed the most remarkable view. Standing before the Solway Firth, with Scotland beyond encased in a grey-blue damp, was one single windswept pine, defiant against the elements. The hills of Dumfries and Galloway were distantly lit across the deep blue water in spotlights of golden sun.

We hid under a few more trees during the few moments when we outpaced that cloud that morning, stopping for a snack and a photo somewhere along the road to Carlisle. I was wrongly convinced if I closed my mouth and grinned, you couldn't see my cheeks were hamster-full with flapjack. We almost died laughing examining the pictures that evening.

We were a bit damp, and Claire had some waterproof socks I was admiring. Struggling to get my bike into the big chainring since its last service, we stopped at Bikeseven cycle shop in Carlisle, hoping for a fix. This turned out to be a very good decision, as they also gave Claire a shorter secondhand handlebar stem at a very good price – her upper body was looking awkwardly stretched out on the bike. The mechanic waved a magic wand over my bike as well; I'd just needed to push harder on the lever, it turned out.

Staff also let us order a delicious local

