

Fact File:
Hadrian's Cycleway

Distance: 223km, daily average 74km (Day 1, 50km; Day 2, 106km; Day 3, 67km).

Route: Following coastal paths from Whitehaven. At Carlisle the route heads inland and eventually uphill on smooth, quiet roads, with some punishing climbs around Vindolanda. From there, it's a long, satisfying descent into Newcastle.

Conditions: A drizzly first afternoon, threatening (but largely not producing) rain the following two. Very good country roads interspersed with some off-road paths.

Bike used: Charge Plug steel frame with drop bars and custom 'gravel' build.

Accommodation: Night 1: Green View Guest House, Silloth (thegreenvIEWSilloth.co.uk). Night 2: Bridge House, Haltwhistle (bridgehousehadrianswall.co.uk).

Maps/guides: We followed the blue NCN signs and a route plotted on Komoot, using the OS Maps app's NCN layer on our phones as backup.

I'm glad I had... Waterproof socks, bought en route in Carlisle; phone holder for navigation.

Next time I would... Try to allow a little more time to cycle all the way to Wallsend, the official end of Hadrian's Wall.

Further info: sustrans.org.uk/find-other-routes/hadrians-cycleway



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pizza to eat at a high table in the shop. To top it off they stocked matching waterproof socks to Claire's, the purchase and application of which made my feet sing with delight. We were only halfway through our day by this point, and the road was about to turn uphill, so we took our pizza-filled bellies and my newly cosy, dry feet and headed out.

THE EDGE OF EMPIRE

Bowness-on-Solway marks the start of Hadrian's Wall, but we saw no evidence of it until long past Carlisle, when it practically walloped us over the head. This is partly because much of the wall was dismantled over the years, to be used in local buildings – long before heritage conservation was a concept. Construction of the original wall began in 122AD, during Hadrian's reign as emperor. Claire and I tried to work out how many generations of people this unfathomable timescale will have spanned – and failed.

We rode in silence for a while, pondering the enormity of human history and its vagaries. Claire is a stronger rider than me, despite a lopsided single pannier, which stayed on the same side of the bike for three days and sometimes jumped off the bike on the more vicious speed humps. On flat roads she daydreamed and dawdled behind but on the hills her killer instinct kicked in and she quickly overtook me like a wonkily laden mountain goat.

Personally, I was worried about the hills. We'd chosen this coast-to-coast route as a gentler alternative to the more famous but lumpier C2C (Sea to Sea) route. I later learned I'd plotted our route wrong, somehow including a double scaling of the hilliest part of the ride by adding our waypoints in the wrong order. This left me pleasantly surprised, by the end of day two, at the ease of the remaining challenge.



Once we'd ascended to wild Northumbrian hill country, we had our first sighting of the wall. We leaned our bikes up and gazed at one of its 80 milecastles. These regularly spaced watch towers, one Roman mile apart, would have been patrolled by men tasked with keeping the empire safe from local people that propoganda at the time depicted as barbarians.

We contemplated the remains of this structure, little more than a two-storied tower surrounded by wild grassland, and thought of the soldiers posted here long ago. Many of them had been ordered to march on foot from southern and eastern Europe to this posting. Hadrian himself was born and raised in a villa south of modern-day Seville. He and many of his companions may have felt they had travelled to the very end of the earth when they arrived at this cold, damp wilderness.

This border represented the northern reach of what the Romans considered civilised territory. Beyond it lived the Picts, the Roman name for a diverse collection of northern British tribes. These people were so called for their tattoos, the name stemming from the Latin word pictus, meaning painted.

DIGGING IT

Claire and I, meanwhile, were on the lookout for our own blue-painted imagery. The red and blue NCN signs pointed us off a steep main road and around an awkward chicane barrier to a wall