



Great Rides

UNSURFACED IRELAND

With a week to spare, **Joshua Gill** planned a 350-mile circuit of the gravel tracks and smaller roads of Northern Ireland and the Republic



JOSHUA GILL

Josh is Cycling UK's media manager and a keen bikepacker

Of the four home nations, Northern Ireland was the only one I hadn't yet explored by bike. Expectations for my week-long trip were high. I'd been told that the island of Ireland – I'd also be visiting the Republic – had a lot to offer. What surprised me was just how much.

The ancient and more recent history of the country lay at the edge of each road, trail and town. Signposts to stone circles, old pilgrimage routes and megalithic tombs were interspersed with memorials, monuments and plaques from the more recent history of the Troubles in Northern Ireland. Landscapes ranged from dramatic mountains draped in clouds to forests and farmland that filtered those that lived in the countryside towards cities like Belfast and Derry-Londonderry.

Beginning the journey in Southampton, I packed my gravel bike in a cardboard box from the local Halfords and got a lift to the airport. Arriving in Belfast that evening, I opted to stay the night in the city, which gave me enough

time to set the bike up properly. The bike box had arrived a little battered but all seemed well. That was until I began cycling the next day...

BIKING AROUND BELFAST

Only an hour and eight miles into the ride, my gear cable snapped. Fortunately, I had spent that first hour cycling to different spots across Belfast, visiting places that paid tribute to pivotal points during the Troubles. Stuck in 12th gear, I pedalled into the city centre to hunt for a bike shop.

Bicycle Coffee Shop was one of the most helpful I've ever visited. Despite not being open, they were kind enough to let me in early and sort me out. While they worked on the bike, they shared suggestions and detours to fine tune my route. Their kindness and expertise were unmatched. Before I left they even offered to help box up my bike and drive me to the airport for free when I returned in seven days. I couldn't have wished for a better start to my trip, and thanked them profusely for their help.

Besides the initial bad luck, the first day was blessed with sunshine, rolling hills

Sketching made Josh pause and appreciate views



Top left: The misty Bingorms, seen from the R254 road
Top right: Gravel track south of Glenveagh National Park