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Avenue Verte UK

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Avenue Verte UK

Your very own Tour de France starts at the London Eye. Launched in 2012 to celebrate the London Olympics, this capital-to-capital ride takes the familiar Sustrans recipe of quiet lanes, off-road routes and scenic detours and gives it a unique Gallic twist.

The ride from London to the ferry at Newhaven is enjoyable, and a few tweaks – detailed in this guide – make it even better. From Dieppe to Paris, though, this is a truly memorable route. The best rail trail you've ever cycled, the historic towns of France's eerily quiet Vexin region, and peaceful rolling lanes together lead to a classic approach to Paris *au bord de la Seine*. All are ideal for novices and experienced *rouleurs* alike.

Dedicating a full week to this holiday will give you enough time to enjoy the French countryside and spend a while in Paris, too. The ferry crossing and return journey mean that this route requires a little more planning than most, but it's worth it.

We've split this guide into two sections: one in England, one in France. Check out the French guide [here](#).

What sort of bike?

A hybrid or cross bike will cope with the wilder off-road sections (principally in England) and be light enough to eat up the miles. A light road bike is the fastest way to make progress, of course, but you'll need to divert from the official route in several places. At 250 miles in total, the full route would be a long haul on a mountain bike.

How many days?

From London to Newhaven, the 98-mile official route is best tackled in two or three days. Starting from the edge of London, not the centre, will make for a more enjoyable two-day ride.

Is it suitable for a first-timer?

Yes, mostly. The London roads may be intimidating; consider skipping this section if you've never ridden in the city. Occasional bridleways in Sussex require nifty bike-handling for rapid progress, but you can always push as long as you haven't set too tough a schedule.

How do I find my way?

Our downloadable PDF route-book has a full map of the route. In conjunction with the (mostly reliable) signs, this should be all you need.

Signs in Britain are normal National Cycle Network blue signs, for the most part following routes 20, 21 and 2. A little AV logo has been added to many of them. Signage is sporadic in central London, where several sections aren't on NCN routes, so you'll find it reassuring to have a map with you.

Should you follow the official route?

Not slavishly. The route is well chosen for some cyclists, but inevitably involves compromises, particularly on the English side. It's a rare cyclist who will feel equally at ease with London's busy traffic, Crawley's tortuous route past industrial units, and the wilder bridleways of Sussex.

Our step-by-step guide should give you the knowledge you need to make your own route choice. But consider skipping the London section by taking a train to Coulsdon South, and following our alternative route which avoids Gatwick and Crawley. If your bike is narrow-tyred or you're uncomfortable on rough surfaces, we would additionally suggest making short diversions in Sussex.

Should you take a support vehicle?

Packing your holiday needs into a pair of panniers is the classic cycling holiday and is, of course, more sustainable. On the other hand, a car-borne companion will make your return journey easier (no need to worry about booking your bike onto French trains), and facilitate quick dashes to the out-of-town hypermarket when all the boulangeries have closed. Alternatively, a cycling holiday company will sort all these worries for you.

London Eye to Coulsdon

There could be no more iconic start point than the **London Eye**, the capital's own Big Wheel by the River Thames. The riverside path is too busy for efficient cycling, so the route begins around the back of the Eye by a discreet blue AV (Avenue Verte) sign.

The passage through London is a lot of Avenue but not much Verte. It's enjoyable enough but far from compelling, and with heavy traffic in places, can be taxing for inexperienced cyclists. If you don't need to tick off every mile, consider getting a train from London Bridge station to Coulsdon South, on the outskirts of London, and picking up the route there – just in time for the most enjoyable, scenic sections.

But if you do ride it, your first half-hour will follow a succession of city streets towards **Clapham** and **Wandsworth**. A few have painted bike lanes or traffic calming, but there is, sadly, no escape from the London traffic. Queenstown Road, after the Chelsea Bridge, is a notorious free-for-all. Keep your wits about you, watch for buses, black cabs and (particularly) construction trucks, and when you can, enjoy the sights such as Tate Britain and Lambeth Palace.

In time the route drops onto quieter back streets and across city parks, on its way to the Wandle Trail. This narrow riverside trail is much like an urban canal towpath, with the requisite quota of dog-walkers, but no boats. It's a little intermittent, lapsing onto residential streets for short bursts, but the main annoyance is the all-too-regular gates across the path; the endless dismounting quickly becomes exasperating.

A straight, busy residential road through **Carshalton** eventually leads to a pleasant private drive and the hilly tracks through the Surrey Oaks country park. Lavender fields signal the retreat from London, but take great care at the confusing junction where you rejoin the roads.

Coulsdon is London's last gasp and a merciful conclusion to this interesting, but often frustrating section. As you cycle slowly up the long-looming hill, be reassured: better times are just ahead.

Coulsdon to Crawley

Coulsdon South station is just off the route, and is a practical rejoining point for those who have opted out of the busy London streets. But London hasn't breathed its last yet: the glorious road over Farthing Downs, curiously, is owned by the Corporation of London. The climb isn't easy, but it's worth it for the views back over the London skyline. This is the first of many memorable moments on the way to Paris.

An exhilarating, weaving descent takes you over the M25 (wave at the queuing traffic) and to the junction with NCN route 21. This weaves towards Redhill on delightful, if narrow, bridleways. It's enjoyable on a hybrid, particularly going downhill, though road bikers will want to find an alternative.

Redhill, Gatwick, Horley and Crawley form an extended urban passage. Not without its highlights, particularly the byway past Salfords with its bike-sensitive traffic lights, it can sorely test the cyclist's patience as one Crawley business park becomes another. The route through the bowels of **Gatwick Airport** is a striking curio, but the effect is rather spoilt when you're delivered into a lorry park immediately afterwards.

The official Avenue Verte follows NCN 20 through **Crawley**, with a short connecting path to the Worth Way which will lead you into the countryside. For a slightly more direct alternative, follow NCN 21 signs to Three Bridges station, which becomes the Worth Way soon after.

If all this sounds too uninspiring, we've concocted an alternative route which avoids the urban sprawl of Gatwick and Crawley. There's no signage, so you'll need to print out a PDF or put the route on your GPS, but it's a pleasant option for those who would rather be out in the open countryside.

Crawley to Heathfield

At last; the Avenue Verte truly lives up to its name. The route from Crawley to the coast at Newhaven is a rural idyll, following old railway tracks past little villages and unspoilt market towns. There's a little climbing on the quiet lanes that link the rail trails, but for the most part, this is a relaxing, easy ride.

The pretty town of **East Grinstead** joins the Worth Way and Forest Way, the first two railway paths. The surface is mostly gravel but firm throughout; there's often a smoother, worn rut at the side of the path which will give road-bike riders more comfort. There are few facilities en route, but short diversions will take you to Royal Tunbridge Wells and the villages of Forest Row (good pubs and restaurants) and Groombridge.

A burst of hilly lanes begins at **Groombridge**. This undulating, wooded countryside is particularly enjoyable for the more experienced cyclist who will get a first chance to stretch their legs. For sustenance, there are pubs at the villages along the way, and useful railway stations at Eridge and Crowborough – though note that the trains don't go all the way to the coast.

The short bridleway after Eridge station saves an awkward crossing of the A26 but is narrow, steep and rough; take an on-road diversion if your tyres aren't up to it. The bridleway begins via a driveway that is marked 'PRIVATE'; ignore this, and trust the fingerpost to point you the right way.

Heathfield, too, is approached via a bridleway passage, beginning with an unimproved grassy field. This is fun for those with a taste for off-roading, but others will prefer to continue along the minor road, then turn right at the A267. Though the route proper bypasses Heathfield town centre on steeply falling back streets, the town is worth a visit if you have time to spare.

Heathfield to Newhaven

The Cuckoo Trail from **Heathfield** to Polegate is the finest hour of the Avenue Verte in England. This flat, wooded, tarmaced railway path is easy riding throughout. Endearingly, many signs are in both English and French, enticing you to visit the 'Cidrerie de Merrydown' (though we'd suggest you save your euros for the infinitely preferable Norman cider). Hailsham passes unremarked as the railway speeds you on its way. Don't miss the interactive lineside display where you can work the old semaphore signal yourself!

Turn right at **Polegate**, just before the road bridge, onto NCN 2. A rough mile-long bridleway gives out to tarmac and a series of fairly busy lanes: there is an optional roadside cycle path after the Berwick station crossroads. The route turns left immediately before **Alfriston**, but this olde-worldle village is worth a visit for its pubs and tasteful tourist shops. (There's a youth hostel beyond the village up a fairly steep hill.)

The lane down the valley of the Cuckmere River is an understated delight; rural Sussex without hills, traffic or mud. Look out for the white horse high on the opposite bank. Crossing the river necessitates a mile-long slog on the busy A259, but before long, residential streets deliver you to the **Seaford** seafront.

The route from here to **Newhaven** is excellent, starting on the esplanade and ending with an above average roadside cycle path. It's a shame Newhaven Ferryport is quite so uninspiring, simply a queue in a car park with nowhere for the tired cyclist to shelter. There is, however, a handy Sainsburys just before.









