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C2C

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C2C

Tackled by thousands of cyclists every year, this is the iconic coast-to-coast route that started it all. From the Lake District to Sunderland and Newcastle, it's an unforgettable ride that will test even the fittest of riders. Make no mistake, the hills are steep and relentless. But the scenery, the bike-friendly cafés, and the camaraderie combine to make it all worthwhile.

You can choose from two start points (Whitehaven and Workington) and two end points (Sunderland and Newcastle), but the recipe is essentially the same: easy, tarmac railway paths bookend a gruelling central succession of climbs. With the right bike and a sensible pace, any cyclist can have a go – but expect to push uphill now and then.

Several organisations now offer group tours, and these are a great way to enjoy the route in the company of an experienced guide. They'll even carry your luggage for you! But the route is so popular there are plenty of facilities for the solo cyclist: bike shops, cafés, and B&Bs all proudly proclaiming "cyclists welcome".

What sort of bike?

A hybrid or cross bike is perfect for the principal route (though not the optional off-road sections). A thin-tyred road bike will cope with almost all of it, but you'll need to take the road over the Whinlatter Pass, not the cycleway. A mountain bike is great for the off-road options, but you'll find it incredibly hard work hauling up all those hills.

If this is your first long-distance ride, and you're planning to take your 'old faithful' mountain bike or chain-store special, get a second opinion from a friendly bike shop. The start of the climb to Whinlatter is not the time to discover that you brought the wrong bike.

How many days?

Four days is standard. Three days is fine for the experienced cyclist, but the second day is gruelling with a succession of beastly climbs. Consider taking five days or more, and really enjoying the countryside. Only the superhuman will attempt two or (shudder) one days.

Is it suitable for a first-timer?

The C2C might be Britain's best-known route, but it's far from easy. The hills are as steep as you'll find anywhere.

Hundreds of first-timers tackle it every year, and most of them are glad they did. Taking five days over it will greatly add to your enjoyment. Still, some people embark on the challenge woefully under-prepared – we encountered a novice cyclist in Whitehaven who was being shown how to use gears by her ride leader!

Don't be put off, but do also consider Hadrian's Cycleway and the Way of the Roses – two equally epic, but much more approachable, coast-to-coast rides. You can always come back next year for the C2C.

Should you take a support vehicle?

Backup cars/vans are increasingly common, especially for groups. They're a delightful convenience: they haul your luggage up the hills, making the cycling easier, and they're always ready to refuel you with bananas and energy drinks.

On the other hand, if you believe in sustainable transport, it's not exactly 'one less car'. And there's a great satisfaction in rolling up at your B&B at 6pm under your own power.

The choice is yours, but there's one thing we'd say: don't let your

driver follow the cycle route. Rather, he/she should use main roads, and rendezvous with you at prearranged points (such as the top of each hill). A convoy of support vehicles on the little lanes of the C2C makes life less pleasant, and more dangerous, for other cyclists.

On or off-road?

Where there's a choice, you'll almost always want to follow the on-road option. The off-road 'braids' are great for full-on mountain bikers, but not the rest of us. Some are notoriously uncyclable. The one exception is the grouse-moor track avoiding Stanhope, which requires some pushing but is enjoyable nonetheless.

Around Whinlatter, whether you're approaching from Whitehaven or Workington, the main route follows gravelly forest tracks. They're easily manageable (unless you have a road bike), but don't go overboard with the descending – it's all too easy to take a corner fast and end up in a pile of gravel and limbs.

The railway paths through the lowlands at either end are generally tarmac and make for very easy cycling. Do watch for broken glass in urban areas.

Where to start and finish?

90% of C2C riders travel west–east. In theory, this gives you the advantage of the prevailing wind, and slightly more forgiving hills. In practice, we invariably encounter a 'beasterly easterly' headwind anyway, and (apart from Whinlatter) we don't think the gradients are much different either way.

There are two main start points on each coast: Whitehaven and Workington on the west coast, Sunderland and Tynemouth on the east. The most popular combination is Whitehaven–Sunderland. Workington is a little easier than Whitehaven, but less picturesque. Tynemouth itself is an interesting area, and you can enjoy a trip into Newcastle, but the route itself is less rewarding than the Sunderland option.

You can, of course, vary the route in many other ways. For a slightly easier ride, we'll admit to a liking for a Carlisle start, following NCN 7 south to pick up the C2C at Penrith.

Mixing with other cyclists

Even in the depths of winter, you're sure to meet other C2C cyclists on your ride – it's that popular. There's a great sense of camaraderie, especially at the tops of hills. Fellow riders are always happy to pass on advice about favourite cafés and pubs, and any impromptu diversions required.

Don't get competitive. It's tempting to see a yellow jacket three bends ahead, and tire yourself out in a futile attempt to catch them up. Or you might be tempted into a foolish overtake on a blind bend or steep hill. If (for whatever reason) you'd rather be clear of a group cycling at the same pace as you, just stop in a café for half an hour and let them get ahead.

Stay safe

Most accidents on the C2C happen on descents. Take it carefully, especially on the gravel sections. Be confident with your brakes and don't apply them too suddenly. Every year, the air ambulance is called out for C2C cyclists: make sure you're not one of them.

How do I get there?

The Cumbrian Coast branch line has stations at Whitehaven and Workington. Though the two-carriage trains have limited

bike space, the guards are adept at squeezing C2C cyclists on. If you're coming from further afield, though, you will need to book bike space on Virgin's West Coast route.

For the journey home, Newcastle has excellent rail connections, and Sunderland hourly trains north and south. The Tyne & Wear Metro doesn't take bikes, so you might need to backtrack for your final few miles.

Whitehaven to Keswick

Many cycle routes begin with nothing more than a modest blue sign. The C2C has a towering metal sculpture on the seafront slipway, where it's traditional to dip your back wheel in the water, and a market cross-like shelter where your group can get their kit together for the hills ahead.

No hills yet, though, as the first ten miles (give or take some backstreets in **Whitehaven**) are all high-quality tarmaced railway path, adorned with bike sculptures and idiosyncratic metal signs. Even when minor lanes take over, the gradients are fairly tame, with one or two sharp ascents but nothing too taxing. (Take care on the descents, though, as it's easy to misjudge a corner especially with other cyclists about.) It's a beautifully designed route; you're cycling through the northern Lakes, but without the massive climbs you might expect. Tree-lined sections burst out into giant mountain views, and roadside farms have honesty boxes for homemade flapjacks.

This idyll is rudely shattered at **Whinlatter**. After High Lorton (mile 21), the hills loom up ahead of you, and there's no way round. Three miles of climbing, on minor road, B road and forest track, take you over from the Cocker to Derwent valleys. Sharp descents and steep bends on the forestry road mark the summit, from where the route turns back on itself to the welcome (and very busy) Siskins Café.

The final descent from the café is gravelly, steep and very twisty. Don't take chances. The reward is an easy, level five miles into Keswick with several tempting pubs along the way (the Middle Ruddings has excellent beer and cider). **Keswick** itself is the capital of the North Lakes, a thriving, outdoor-focused town which makes an excellent overnight stop for the four-dayer.

Keswick to Penrith

There are no stratospheric climbs in these 20 miles, but they're hillier than a map might suggest. Despite the inescapable drone of the A66, they also offer some of the finest moments on the whole route.

The exit from **Keswick** is on a railway path, part of the old Cockermouth–Keswick–Penrith line – one of Beeching's most unforgivable closures. The route then ducks onto a cyclepath alongside the A66, which is convenient if hardly interesting. Still, on Britain's premier long-distance route, it jars to be told 'Cyclists Dismount' just for a truckers' layby.

The dogleg to **Mungrisdale** may look unnecessary on the map, but it's a terrific four miles of riding on tiny gated lanes. (Leave half an hour for a brief stop at the Mungrisdale pub.) At Greystoke, don't miss the welcoming cyclists' café on the edge of the village. The hill in Newton Reigny has a speed readout sign that triggers for bikes as well as cars; anything in double figures is more than respectable.

The last two miles into **Penrith** are on a delightful traffic-free route through a college, under the railway and motorway, and then onto back streets. The official route avoids Penrith town centre. Much smaller and quieter than Keswick, it's a worthwhile stop with an attractive market square and useful shops for provisions.

Penrith to Garrigill

The C2C's central section is where the really tough climbs fall (or rise). There's a tough warmup out of Penrith itself, but believe us, it gets tougher.

The lanes around the Eden Valley are enjoyable and not too hard, though there's a sharp ascent out of **Little Salkeld**. Looming to your right is the great bulk of Hartside, the best-known climb on the C2C. At Renwick, the route swings sharply right, and a red warning sign marks the start of the long, four-mile haul to the top.

Despite its reputation, **Hartside** is not the hardest part of the C2C, and certainly not the steepest. It's relentless, and all but the fittest will need to stop for regular breaks. But slow and steady wins the day, with the prize a coffee and cake in the café at the summit.

The 1250ft of climbing means there are superb views at the hairpins; it's generally well-surfaced; and the drivers respect cyclists, even on the A road section. The white cottage is the landmark that means you're almost there. Unless you're a really accomplished MTBer, don't be tempted by the off-road alternative route, which is rough and boggy in equal measure; stick to the road.

The descent is long, fast and hairpin-free. Don't miss the right-hand turn after three miles, after which the gradient sharpens considerably. There are good sightlines on this straight road so you can enjoy the downhill, but don't forget to stop in Leadgate at the bottom! The three remaining miles to Garrigill are more taxing, a series of little valleys imposing an undulating character.

Garrigill to Waskerley

Sorry, Hartside. You may not quite be a pussycat, but you're definitely domesticated. This next leg, by contrast, is where the C2C really shows its teeth.

Pretty little **Garrigill**, with its village green and olde-worlde pub, is the start of the most brutal climb on the whole route. Though just one-and-a-half miles long, it feels much longer; the desperately steep initial section becomes a relentless, grinding haul up to Flinty Fell. The descent into **Nenthead** is short and exhilarating. Should your brake pads prove not up to scratch, there's a bike shop in this old mining village, as well as pubs and a community-run shop.

A shorter, but still, steep climb on the A689 takes you to the minor road on which the C2C reaches its highest point. The summit, Black Hill, is also where you enter Northumberland. Don't miss the right turn on the ensuing descent, for one more, smaller climb before the strung-out valley village of **Allenheads**. This is a popular overnight stop for C2Cers, with a good pub at the far end.

Northumberland's brief flirtation with the C2C has one more hill left. A deceptive cattle grid looks like it should be the summit, but the climb continues until the County Durham border and a roadside sculpture. There's then a long, gentle descent to Rookhope: look out for the mine on the right.

Rookhope is a bike-friendly village with camping, pub, and even a church with a sign saying "Bless all cyclists on the C2C". It's here that the off-road grouse moor route starts. In good weather, this is worth considering if you have a hybrid or MTB, but do expect to push for parts of it.

Alternatively, cycle uphill past the church onto a lovely valley-side minor road. This gives excellent views, though at the cost of a tough climb up to the summit. Descend again into **Stanhope**, an attractive, down-to-earth town; accommodation is available, though evening meal options are limited. The catch is that you then have to cycle up the near-vertical Crawleyside Bank, so steep that descending traffic is provided with a sandy escape lane. The ascent becomes more manageable after the village and the cattle grid onto the moor.

Waskerley to Sunderland

It's all downhill from here. The climb out of Stanhope is the last one of any size on the C2C, taking you to 400m above sea level – and it'll take 37 miles of descending before you finally reach the coast.

For those who have struggled up **Crawleyside Bank**, the café in the old station building will be a very welcome sight. It's the start of a gorgeous, isolated railway path across the moors, stark and beautiful even in wet weather. The surface starts gravelly and a little puddly, but gains a new, smoother surface as the comfortable descent begins. Consider stopping at either the station café or the tea-room further along the railway, as there are fewer tempting refreshment opportunities in the urban reaches of the route which follow.

Just before **Consett**, the route meets a crossroads. Turn left for the alternative C2C finish via Newcastle, or right for Durham. (Newcastle-bound cyclists will actually be better off continuing for another half-mile to a better-surfaced link route.)

The main C2C goes straight on towards Sunderland. On balance this is the more scenic and enjoyable route, though the roundabouts and roadside paths of Consett might briefly convince you otherwise. Eventually, after Stanley, the route emerges into picturesque countryside once again, hugging the side of the hill to give good views to the north.

The railway path continues all the way through **Washington**, easy cycling all the way. Eventually the C2C drops down to the banks of the River Wear, with a small climb to awaken your legs – but nothing compared to the previous days' exertions.

There are on-off views of the Wear as you approach **Sunderland**; more traffic noise, too, as the Nissan plant looms on the left. The riverside Shipwrights Inn welcomes cyclists. When the path divides, be sure to take the rightmost fork along the riverside, rather than the northern braid past the Stadium of Light. The river route is unmissable: glorious views across the water, fascinating traces of industry, and Wearmouth Bridge looming ahead of you.

Passing under the bridge, 'Keep Going' installations encourage you on to the finish. There are views of former shipbuilding yards, in an area now being regenerated through projects such as the National Glass Centre. This is a popular path, so watch out for dogs and pole-toting anglers.

Eventually, after the marina, you'll have your first glimpse of the North Sea. The route turns north for a very short way to **Roker** beach, where a striking sun-inspired statue marks the end of the C2C. Haul your bike over the beach and dip your front wheel in the sea; then treat yourself to coffee, cake or chips at the cheerful refreshment kiosk. Congratulations. What will your next challenge be?













