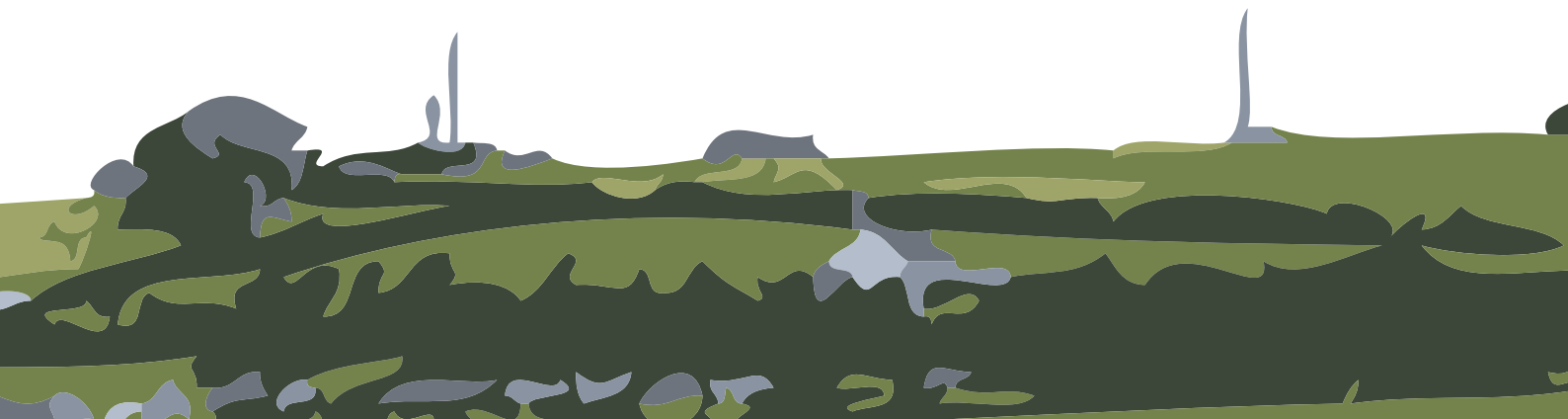


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Hadrian's Cycleway

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Hadrian's Cycleway

If you're tempted by a coast-to-coast ride, but fear that the hills will be too much for you, Hadrian's Cycleway is the one to choose.

Never too difficult and with great scenery along the way – from the wild coast to the rugged beauty of Northumberland – it's the ideal short-break tour. Market towns such as Brampton and Haltwhistle are lovely places to stop, and the bright lights of Newcastle round off your stay.

It broadly follows the route of Hadrian's Wall, which started near Carlisle and ended at Tynemouth, near Newcastle. Whereas the C2C climbs 600m above sea level, and the Way of the Roses touches 400m, Hadrian's Cycleway doesn't go much above 250m.

Yet there's still a taste of the Northumbrian wilds, particularly around the Roman forts of Birdoswald and Vindolanda. The route darts back and forth from the wall, preferring quiet roads to historical fidelity, but if anything, that makes it more enjoyably varied.

The full Hadrian's Cycleway starts on the Cumbrian Coast at Ravenglass. We concentrate here on the coast-to-coast section, from Carlisle to Newcastle, which has the best scenery and is the easiest to get to. If you have more time, you might consider adding the 87 flat, coastal miles from Ravenglass to Carlisle to your holiday.

How long does it take?

It's 83 miles from Carlisle to the mouth of the Tyne, so two or three days for most cyclists. Add another two days if you're starting at Ravenglass. (But the really keen have been known to do it overnight!)

What bike do you need?

Any bike: the route is mostly on tarmac. There's just one short bumpy section at Vindolanda, and a gravel path shortly before Haltwhistle where the road runs parallel.

How do I get there?

It's an easy route to access by train, with mainline services at either end. Virgin's express services run from north and south to Carlisle, from where local trains pootle down the coast to Ravenglass. You'll need to book in advance on the Virgin trains, both to secure a cycle space and to get an affordable ticket. The coast line is friendly and the guards are used to bikes.

Newcastle has connections to most parts of Britain. Again, you'll need to book in advance to get a good price and a cycle space – particularly on the CrossCountry services, which have very poor bike accommodation.

The entire route is paralleled by local railway lines (Ravenglass–Carlisle and Carlisle–Newcastle), so you can easily catch a train back to your starting point or bail out halfway if need be.

Carlisle to Haltwhistle

Arriving at **Carlisle**, Hadrian's Cycleway eases you into your coast-to-coast challenge. It's traffic free for the first mile, with the route well signposted from the station; it then settles down onto little roads along the Eden valley. There's one hill just before **Brampton**, a friendly market town with a good range of cafés.

The priory, church and cycle-friendly café at **Lanercost** are worth a stop before the route climbs up to our first glimpse of Hadrian's Wall. (There's a short one-way split in the route, but it's clearly signed.) The route runs alongside the wall for the next three miles, with impressive views over the Irthing valley to the south.

Birdoswald Roman fort is tamer and more manicured than Vindolanda (coming later), but it's still remarkably well preserved 2,000 years on. There's cycle parking in the main car park.

A new traffic-free path runs beside the railway line after **Gilsland**, after which comes the steepest hill on the whole route. A gravel path has been built alongside, but to be honest we found the tarmac surface on the road more comfortable. The corollary is the two-mile descent into Haltwhistle, which is pure fun.

Haltwhistle is an old-fashioned town with a particularly good line in butchers' shops. The Tourist Information Centre is now housed in the library, but is closed over the winter.

Haltwhistle to Corbridge

The Pennine Cycleway meets Hadrian's Cycleway at **Haltwhistle**, and the two routes share a common path for the next seven miles. At first it's fairly uneventful, but at **Bardon Mill** it kicks uphill, climbing back towards Hadrian's Wall.

The two cycleways split at a lonely T-junction known as Smiths Shield. Note that there's a pub, youth hostel and the Northumberland National Park visitor centre at Once/Twice Brewed, half a mile further along the Pennine Cycleway.

Vindolanda is the real deal, the most impressive site along Hadrian's Wall by quite some margin. So much wilder than Birdswald, this remote outpost of the Roman Empire has been extensively excavated. A small number of new-build wooden structures help you imagine what life must have been like for the Gauls who received a (no doubt unwelcome) posting to this windswept fort. A vast number of relics – coins, leather, and the famous tablets – are housed in the newly renovated museum.

The road is roughly surfaced past Vindolanda, preventing motorists from using it as a scenic cut-through. Half a mile of climbing later, you reach the highest point of Hadrian's Cycleway.

It really is all downhill from here. Six exhilarating miles of descending on a largely straight road take you to the banks of the River Tyne, which the route will follow closely all the way to the North Sea. A path beside the railway provides a safe approach to Hexham.

Hexham is perhaps the finest town on the route. Its magnificent abbey dominates the town centre, though the most impressive feature is buried below – the Saxon crypt. St Mary's Chare is a particularly appealing street with cafés and a handy bike shop.

Leaving **Hexham** requires crossing the river on a busy main road bridge. Still, it's not far to Corbridge, a smaller, attractive town, uniform in its stone buildings and slate roofs.

Corbridge to Tynemouth

One of the delights of Hadrian's Cycleway is the gentle approach to urban Tyneside. From Prudhoe to Tynemouth, the route is almost entirely traffic-free, following the north bank of the River Tyne. Motorists have to contend with roundabouts and retail parks, ring roads and red lights. The cycle route glides serenely into town – sometimes green, sometimes built-up, but always interesting.

First comes seven miles of quiet lanes from Corbridge to **Ovingham**. Then the route briefly crosses the Tyne on a rickety road bridge, to join the Wylam Waggonway – a tramroad dating from the 1740s, well before the railway age. This has become a justly popular route, and is usually busy with cyclists. You'll see a couple of boats on the river here, too. In fact, cars are the one mode of transport which are conspicuous by their absence – apart from a brief tangle with the roads at the derelict Whitehouse Enterprise Park.

Newcastle's riverside panorama is famous the world over, with seven bridges in the space of a mile. The newest, the Gateshead Millennium Bridge, is reserved for cyclists and pedestrians: you could choose to cross here and follow the southern bank to South Shields for an alternative finish. Staying on the north bank leads you to the Hub, a new riverside cycle centre with café, workshop and a programme of events.

The final miles of Hadrian's Cycleway see it climb above the river onto a railway path – watch out for glass. There are dramatic views back down to the river and the site of the old Swan Hunter shipyard.

Tynemouth marks the end of Hadrian's Cycleway, but the start of several more adventures – Coast & Castles and the notoriously challenging Reivers route among them. You can celebrate your achievement in local style with fish, chips and a pint, or return to Newcastle to paint the town red. Bear in mind that bikes aren't allowed on the Tyne & Wear Metro, but you could take the Shields Ferry across to the south bank, and return along NCN route 14 for a change.

