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Tour de Yorkshire

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Tour de Yorkshire

The Tour de France is the toughest sporting event in the world – but you don't have to be an elite cyclist to experience the exhilaration of its Yorkshire route.

In 2014, the Tour famously visited Yorkshire for two days. But we wouldn't recommend you follow its route unquestioningly. Much of the course followed busy A-roads, closed specially for the occasion. Wide enough for high-speed racing and for the train of vehicles that follows the cyclists, they make for miserable riding at other times of year.

But Stage 1, through the Yorkshire Dales, also followed peaceful, narrow lanes through this delightful part of England. By piecing these together with a few linking roads, you can enjoy all the challenge of the Tour – without the traffic.

And that's exactly what we've done here. We've taken the highlights of Stage 1, modified the route a little, ridden and mapped it. We think it's a terrific route – and you can tell your friends you've climbed the same hills that Chris Froome and (before he fell off) Mark Cavendish tackled.

How hard is it?

We'll be honest: these are serious hills. But they're no harder than popular bike routes like the C2C, and though steep, they're few in number. Climbing Buttertubs or Whipperdale Bank will tax you, but they're worth it for the scenic descent and long valley cruise on the other side.

If you've just bought your first bike, this probably isn't the route to spin your tyres on. (Though we'd love you to prove us wrong.) For anyone who's happy to cycle 30 miles in a day, and is prepared to tackle the odd hill, it's eminently doable.

What sort of bike?

The route from Skipton through the Yorkshire Dales to Ripon is all on-road, so a road bike will be fine. From Leeds to Skipton, and from Ripon to Harrogate, we suggest you use canal towpaths and old railway paths as an alternative to the A-roads followed by the Tour cyclists. Though these will mostly be ok for road bikes, the towpath is a bit narrower and bumpier as you get towards Skipton, so those with skinny tyres might want to detour onto the roads instead.

A hybrid will cope with the full route, and you'll appreciate the 'granny gear' if you have one. A mountain bike would cope with the surface, but you might find the hills a stretch!

How many days?

Tour de France cyclists covered 120 miles in Stage 1 of the Tour. Our route is slightly longer, at 130 miles. Fit cyclists could do it all in two days, but we'd suggest taking three or four days, giving you a chance to enjoy the Dales at leisure. After all, there are some lovely pubs along the way.

If you don't have time to do the full route, we'd suggest concentrating on the Dales from Grassington to Leyburn. This is the most scenic part of the Tour's three-day visit, and a delightful ride in its own right.

How busy are the roads?

In the Dales, most of the roads are narrow and fairly quiet, especially outside holiday season. We've therefore been able to follow the route closely, with a few tweaks to avoid A-roads. Between Aysgarth and Hawes, for example, we follow the lovely quiet road on the north side of the Ure valley, rather than the busier A-road on the south side.

That said, some traffic is unavoidable without going miles out of

the way: from Skipton up to Grassington, for example, the B-road can be busy with holiday traffic. The good news is that the promise of the Tour has drawn hundreds of two-wheeled adventurers to these roads. As a result, local drivers know to look out for bikes. As long as you're suitably lit up at night, you should be fine.

Outside the Dales, the official Tour route followed major A-roads which are unpleasant to cycle at any time. We've therefore taken a little more artistic licence here, following the Leeds & Liverpool Canal towpath and country lanes from Leeds to Skipton, and local cycle routes between Leyburn and Harrogate. Needless to say, the Tour peloton won't be cycling down the canal towpath in July, though we'd like to see them try.

How do I get there?

Leeds and Harrogate both have direct train services from London (run by East Coast - you can book bike spaces online) and a wide range of local trains. You can also skip the first leg along the canal towpath, and go straight to the Dales by taking a train to Skipton – again, there are a few direct services from King's Cross.

Is it signposted?

The official route, as followed by the Tour de France cyclists, is signposted with permanent brown signs – though not with the fastidiousness of a National Cycle Network route. But since this will lead you onto very busy roads, we'd recommend it only for the hardened road-warrior.

Our alternative route isn't signposted, but armed with a print-out from *cycle.travel's* journey-planner, you shouldn't find it difficult to follow. We've highlighted the key directions in bold, and also suggested a few possible detours in italics.

Why 'Tour de Yorkshire'?

It's the name we gave this route when we devised it. Since then, ASO (organisers of the Tour de France) have announced their own professional cycling event with the same name. It's not the most original of names, so we can't blame them. (But we had it first.)

Leeds to Skipton

Good news: you can cycle from Leeds to Skipton on the flat, through superb scenery, without meeting a single car. This is all thanks to the **Leeds & Liverpool Canal**, a winding trans-Pennine waterway whose towpath is open to cyclists. There's a direct path to the towpath from Leeds station.

From Leeds to Bingley, this is a busy cycle highway with a solid surface to haste you on your way. Beyond there it gets a bit more rural, and you'll be cycling along a narrower earth track. For the leisure cyclist on a hybrid, this is no problem at all. *On a road bike, we'd recommend you peel off along National Cycle Network route 69 into Silsden, then follow country lanes through Farnhill and Bradleys Both, which will take you to the main road into Skipton.*

The towpath is also known as the Aire Valley Greenway, and is set for further improvement as part of Leeds' Cycling City plans. The canal slowly climbs the Aire Valley through a series of locks, none more dramatic than at **Bingley**, where a staircase known as the 'Five Rise' is one of the wonders of the waterways.

Near Shipley, the canal passes Titus Salt's 'model village' of **Saltaire**. Built as a humane community for his millworkers, its uniform architectural style has remained unspoilt. It's no longer a dry village, though, and Fanny's Ale House is the finest boozier en route from Leeds to Skipton.

(Note that improvement work is planned for the two-mile stretch from Rodley, so you might be temporarily diverted onto nearby roads – follow the signs.)

Skipton to Aysgarth Falls

The gateway to the Yorkshire Dales, **Skipton** is a lovely market town recently named by the Sunday Times as the best place to live in Britain. We can see why: picturesque but down-to-earth, arty but unpretentious, posh delis rubbing shoulders with Morrisons and a bustling market.

We leave the canal towpath here and head into town. By the church, at the end of the main street (before the castle), turn left on the **B6265 towards Grassington**. Follow this out of town over the bypass.

This is where we join the Tour de France route proper. It's a great choice of route by the Tour organisers, a steady climb up the very attractive valley of Wharfedale. The first few miles can be busy, especially at weekends, but the traffic thins out as you get further up.

Cracoe marks a brief encounter with the Way of the Roses and the Yorkshire Dales Cycleway; there's a café and pub here. Continue on the B road to **Threshfield**.

Here, the official route takes the B6160 to Kettlewell. However, we can't resist a scenic detour on the **B6265 to Grassington**, one of the jewels of the Dales and a great place to stop for coffee and cake. Take **Grass Wood Lane** north out of the village, passing the Toffee Shop and Grassington Lodge. This is parallel to the official route on the other side of the valley, but quieter.

Rejoin the B6160 at Kettlewell, and follow this narrow road up the valley through the tiny villages of Starbotton and Buckden, each with their own pub. This will be one of the finest places to watch the Tour come through, and campsites are duly springing up along the valley.

(If you really want to tax your legs, you can turn left at Buckden, following the sign to Hubberholme, and continue over the hill road to Hawes. Yorkshire's highest pass, this is a superbly scenic Dales lane – but not an easy one!)

Continuing along the B6160 past the White Lion pub at Cray, we meet the first proper climb of the 2014 Tour: Kidstones Pass. The gradient suddenly lurches upwards and the bends tighten, but it's worth it for the glorious long descent from here to the River Ure valley. Keep following the road downhill, past the Old School Bunkhouse, until you reach West Burton. Here, fork left on a road signposted **Aysgarth (light vehicles only)**. One final short, steep climb – we won't mind if you get off and push – takes you up to the A684 road. *(The Tour cyclists will be going to Aysgarth via Thoraby, but we thought we'd save you a bit of climbing.)*

Aysgarth Falls to Muker

The official Tour route goes up Wensleydale on the busy A684. We choose to follow a quiet minor road on the other side of the River Ure; there's less traffic, more to see, and a couple of cafés on the way.

First, though, we follow the A684 for a few hundred yards uphill to **Aysgarth Falls village**. Turn right to the falls themselves, down an exceptionally steep descent (25%). Even though it means losing your momentum, you'll want to stop at the bridge at the bottom to see the water tumbling down the river. There's a footpath immediately afterwards should you want a closer look, and tea-rooms both here and at the visitor centre.

Climbing back up from the river, you'll see the Wensleydale Railway station – but no railway! This heritage railway project aims to reconnect the East Coast with the Settle & Carlisle railway, but as yet the trackbed here remains untouched.

Turn left at Carperby, then follow the valley road with signs to Askrigg and Hardraw. **Askrigg** has several friendly tea-rooms – look out for the old Cyclists' Touring Club above one of them. Ignore the first sign for Hawes, which will take you back on to the A684, but continue up the valley until you've passed the Sedbusk turn. *From here, you can turn left over the river to visit Hawes.*

Turn right up the Buttertubs Pass, signposted to Muker. This is back on the Tour route for the second climb of the day – and, arguably, the highlight of the first Tour stage. A wide, well-surfaced road all the way over to Swaledale, it begins fairly gently but soon gets steeper. There are superb views from the High Abbotside vantage point: we envy whoever grabs this spot to watch the climbers battling their way up!

But the sharp descent will be as much a draw as the climb. The valley falls away on the right, separated by only a flimsy barrier. Watch out for the sharp bend halfway down. It ends at a T-junction, where you turn **right on the B6270**. You can recover your nerves at the pub in Thwaite, or continue along to postcard-perfect Muker with its tea-rooms, pub and church on the hill.

Muker to Leyburn

The superbly chosen Tour route continues on this little **B-road along Swaledale**, perhaps the most picturesque of the Yorkshire Dales. It's a far cry from the wide, straight roads that often characterise the Tour's passage through France, and is sure to make for exciting racing.

For those of us taking a more relaxed pace, it's even more enjoyable. The road continues gently downhill beside the Swale, often passing very close to the riverbank. There's even a dose of whimsy to match this sublime landscape, in the shape of a village called Crackpot.

Follow the B-road all the way, ignoring separate signs for the Yorkshire Dales Cycleway. There's a small climb on the way into **Reeth**, a hilly village where shops and cafés are clustered around the village green. (The Dales Bike Centre is on the way in if your bike needs attention.)

Take the chance to refuel in Reeth, because there's another big climb imminent – Whipperdale Bank, aka Grinton Moor. **Follow the B6270 out of Reeth, then carry straight on in Grinton when the B-road swings left.** The climb begins immediately with the steepest gradient of the day. Then bear left towards Leyburn, rather than taking the Yorkshire Dales Cycleway to the right.

Grinton Moor is a military area, and red flags fly when shooting's underway. There's even a faded 'Learner Tank Drivers Under Instruction' sign by the side of the road. This means the raw beauty of the moor is largely unspoilt, and you'll have plenty of time to appreciate it during the long climb. Do turn back now and then to see the great views. There's a brief switchback as the route crosses a moorland stream; watch for oncoming traffic, as the bridge is very narrow.

It's a long, slow descent with occasional ups from here to Leyburn, **crossing the busy road to Catterick** on the way. The entrance to Leyburn isn't too attractive, but the town itself is a busy little place with interesting old architecture.

Leyburn to Harrogate

From here, the Tour riders will follow A roads all the way to Harrogate. This isn't our idea of a good time, so we suggest here a quieter alternative on minor roads and cycleways. Happily, it's not just quiet, but attractive too – and the terrain is much less taxing than the Dales. Harrogate is the stage finish and also the first railway station, but if you can arrange alternative transport, you might choose to finish at Masham or Ripon instead.

From Leyburn town centre, **take the A684 signposted to Bedale**. This is a busy road but tolerable: continue through Harmby, then **take the next sharp right onto a quiet lane**. Turn **right at the end of the lane** and follow the road, signposted with stickers as NCN route 71. When it bears left for Finghall, **turn right towards Newton-le-Willows** instead. Passing several junctions, ignore the left turn to Newton, then **turn right at a group of cottages, signposted Thirn**. Navigation is easy from here: **turn right at the end of the lane**, then **head due south on the road to Masham**. There are lovely views from the tree-lined lane over the Ure valley.

Masham is nationally known for its beer. The Theakston brewery was established here, but when the rest of the family sold out to Big Business, Paul Theakston struck out on his own and established the aptly-named Black Sheep Brewery. Now, the original Theakstons is back in independent hands, and both thrive in this tiny town with a vast market place – and several pubs where it would seem disrespectful to drink anything else.

The road **south from the Market Square from here to Grewelthorpe** is uninspiring but direct; *if you have time, you can follow the National Byway signposts via Low Swinton*. Turn **right by the Crown Inn in Grewelthorpe**, and continue on a much nicer road to pretty **Kirkby Malzeard**. At the crossroads by the Queen's Head, **take the National Byway south towards Grantley and Galphay**.

Here, you can choose between two routes. Ripon is a landmark on the Tour stage, justly prized for its old streets and soaring cathedral. It has much of the character of York, but without the crush of tourists. After Kirkby Malzeard, **turn left through Galphay**, then follow the undulating minor road towards the city (the last mile on a B-road). Then, on leaving Ripon, follow the **Way of the Roses route westbound** (NCN route 688), with its glorious stretch through the grounds of Fountains Abbey – all credit to the National Trust for welcoming cyclists. All of this is a bit of a diversion, but we think Ripon and Fountains Abbey are more than worth it.

Alternatively, for a more direct route on country lanes avoiding Ripon, continue south through Winksley, passing Aldfield, to Fountains Abbey. This route is signposted as part of the National Byway.

Follow the **Way of the Roses south from Fountains Abbey**, but when you come to a T-junction, leave the route to **turn left to Ripley**. A straight minor road deposits you on the B6165 just before Ripley. Then, from the village, it's plain sailing to Harrogate on the newly opened **NCN route 67**, a traffic-free railway path of which the highlight is the Nidd Viaduct – one of many reasons for those who appreciate industrial heritage to support the work of Sustrans.

For now, NCN 67 ends rather ignominiously by an Asda supermarket in Harrogate. But you can easily thread your way through back-streets to the characterful town centre. Yorkshire's answer to Cheltenham or Bath, Harrogate is an upwardly-mobile spa town famous for Betty's Tea Rooms – surely the plushiest in the county – and with a selection of designer shops. It's not too hoity-toity to welcome almost 200 sweaty Tour de France cyclists, though; and we reckon that if you tell the hoteliers and restaurateurs that you've followed the same route round

Yorkshire, they'll welcome you with open arms.















