



St Cuthbert's cave

Northumberland

The Sandstone Way

You need plenty of energy for this 120-mile trek across Northumberland. **John Whittle** and friend Rob took some extra: 625Wh batteries

The Sandstone Way is designed as a north-south route, starting in Berwick-upon-Tweed and ending in Hexham. There are various 'official' permutations; the route Rob and I tackled was 198km with 3,408m of ascent. We did it over four days in the heatwave of July 2022, not long after Storm Arwen, using 625Wh Bosch-powered e-bikes.

A-to-B journeys require serious logistics: getting to the far end, recharging riders (and bikes), leaving transport at A or B, and getting back to collect it. We booked our accommodation in advance and travelled light.

The start was hot and windless. After a glorious ride down the coast to Holy Island, we pedalled into the Kyloe Hills and the beautiful, simmering interior of a silent, baking world. Rob, a retired GP, watched over our health, insisting we drank enough. We crawled into our first night's stop bloodied and beaten.

Local refreshments and large helpings of pie and chips saw morale climb, however. In the purple, misty dawn of day two we undulated through stunning landscapes, waiting in the shaded hills above molten Rothbury as the temperature topped 40°. We glugged down another seven litres that day.

The riding varied from very technical to quiet country lanes, using a long ingenious chain of tracks and paths.

There was no 'hike a bike' and, after day one, we saw no sign of anyone else. The preloaded GPS kept us nearly on track throughout. What the maps do not reveal is the 170-plus gates...

Disaster struck when we discovered that Storm Arwen had blasted the forests of day three into an impassable tangle. Two elderly, sunburned riders on electric bikes attracted generous local advice. Thanks to that we cruised into Bellingham, avoiding the worst of Simonside Forest and enjoying the best mountain biking of the route.

Our last day was shorter but hilly, with fierce climbs and more gates. As the temperature eased, we sped through wild Hadrian's Wall country to Hexham.

It's not a route for the timid, needing good navigational skills, the tenacity to find one-night-only accommodation, and help dodging blasted forests. If 2023 is as hot as 2022, make sure to drink lots of water if you ride it.



Cheviot Hotel, Bellingham



The first stop after just 14km

France

French fried

When **Nick Murphy** finally rode the *Ardèche sportive*, it was in 35°C heat



HAVING ENJOYED

MANY holidays in the Ardèche in the south of France, I had long wanted to ride in the *Ardèche sportive*: a four-day festival of cycling in which 10,000 enthusiasts take on one of numerous

routes around this scenic département.

At the age of 66 and used to cycling in the relative flatlands of Suffolk, I chose one of the easier routes: a day ride of 125km with 2,500m of climbing. So it was that I arrived at the start town of St Félicien in the middle of June 2022, with temperatures already approaching 30°.

After 14km and the first of five challenging climbs, the pattern for the day was established: eat, drink, recover, and cool off with plenty of cold water on the head and feet. From the first summit came the relief of the descent, with sweeping curves and welcome breezes.

As the day wore on and the heat increased, the climbs became ever more challenging. Yet although there was the occasional 'Garmin auto-pause of shame', I never had to resort to getting off and walking. Reward for the climbs came not only from the fantastic descents but also the stunning Ardèche scenery.

I finally rolled into St Félicien after 11 hours – seven cycling, four stopped to cope with the heat. It was a really satisfying achievement, helped by fantastic organisation.

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