

The Tarka Cycle Trail

Meeth to Barnstaple – Distance 24 miles

This is a spectacular cycling route set in an area of outstanding natural beauty. The route either commences or finishes in Braunton, however many choose to start in Barnstaple as you can arrive by train on the equally spectacular Tarka railway. From Dolton I sometimes cycle across to Eggesford and catch a train to Barnstaple. Make sure you book your bike on in advance though as room for bikes is limited. If you are joining from Dolton I suggest joining the A386 at Huish, cycle towards Merton before turning after a mile to Petrockstowe and then join the trail before you reach the village. This is well marked but beware - the stretch on the A 386 can be very busy with vehicles travelling fast and sometimes without due care and attention for cyclists; to be avoided, especially if you have young children.

Meeth to Torrington is a gentle ride of about 5 miles downhill, the surface of the cycle track is not at its best, however there is no need for anything other than a standard road bike. Along the way Marland School pupils have provided the art work for a number of benches and it is worth pausing to have a look at some of their decorative and interesting work. Much of this route goes through woodland which provides welcome protection in the event of inclement weather. Before you reach Torrington there's a café and bunk house at Yarde, an alternative to stopping in Torrington for many and an overnight stop for those going for longer journeys. When you reach the outskirts of Torrington there is a cycle hire outlet which also provides refreshments and on the other side of the track the "Puffing Billy" offers more substantial fare with plenty of seating both inside and out.

The Tarka trail from Torrington to Bideford is now at its best for the cyclist as the surface is well tarmacked and the gradient remains in your favour as you cross and follow the River Torridge as it approaches the sea. Linger on one of the bridges between the two towns and soak in the beauty of the very special scenery. It is not difficult to imagine Tarka the Otter living in these parts and for those who have read the book by Henry Williamson some of the more dramatic passages are easily conjured up as you cycle along and over this meandering and graceful river. The cycle path goes to East the Water opposite Bideford and here some friendly ladies offer yet more refreshments in some old railway carriages.

The final stretch hugs the eastern bank of the Torridge before skirting Instow and joining the River Taw. This stretch can be hard going if the weather turns, but there are many shelters with spectacular views. After about an hour you reach the outskirts of Barnstaple.

This route is well known, but is still a quiet, relaxing route which lacks the weight of numbers using, for instance, that along the River Exe to Starcross. You can select different sections suitable for your family, comfortable in the knowledge that anyone of moderate fitness can ride at ease along this former railway line.