

A cyclist wearing a dark blue jersey with a bright green stripe and a black backpack is riding a mountain bike on a gravel trail. The trail is set in a valley with rolling green hills and a stone wall in the background. Another cyclist is visible further ahead on the trail. The sky is overcast.

Trail blazing

From its stupendous climbs and devilish descents to its magnificently wild scenery, adventure doesn't get better than on the Trans Cambrian Trail in mid-Wales

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I'm not a religious chap, but I swear I've just met an angel. OK, so this smiling messenger hasn't offered any angelic words of wisdom. Instead, she's given me something far more valuable and comforting: a whacking big mug of steaming tea and the biggest cream scone I've ever slapped eyes on. Oh, and she's called Belinda.

For the past goodness-knows-how-long, I've been grunting and grinding my bike up a never-ending steep hill through the drizzle and endless ankle-deep mud and, to be honest, I'm done in.

So, to find a cafe emerging from the gloom at the top of the hill, where the Blessed Belinda has given me such a warm welcome is, frankly, nothing short of a miracle.

It's mid-afternoon and I'm in the remote and empty heart of mid-Wales on the first day of the Trans Cambrian Trail, an epic 170km monster of a mountain-bike ride right across the roof of Wales from the English border to the Irish Sea.

If you've never heard of the Trans Cambrian before, you're not alone, as apart from a couple of beardy and gnarly-looking blokes, few folk have ever heard of it either.

Suffice to say that if you like your outdoor action served up in great slabs of adrenaline-fuelled adventure, then you're missing out, as the Trans Cambrian is one of the best and toughest mountain-biking rides to be had anywhere in the UK.

The fastest time for completing the ride is an inhuman nine hours – we are going to take it a tad easier with a three-day crossing, staying in friendly hotels and pubs along the way with our luggage ferried ahead, leaving us to just carry daypacks.

And we're off...

The action begins easily enough in Knighton, a small market town just inside the Welsh border. A robin sings a note of encouragement as our group of ten riders heads out into the bright early autumn sunshine and tracks west along minor roads by the side of the river Teme to the village of Knucklas.

From here things crank up quite a few gears pretty quickly with a steep and sweaty climb up a grassy hill.

The climb is worth the effort, as once out of the valley, the view dramatically opens up all around us, with lines of vast rounded hills and moorland stretching out into the distance in every direction.

Remarkable, too, is the complete absence of any sign that people live here.

"We're in Powys, the biggest county of Wales, and few people live here, which is why we call it the empty land," explains Phil, our locally based guide, as we gather together for a quick breather.

"This remote and wild feel is what makes mid-Wales such a special place, as it's something you'd never get in honeypots like Snowdonia and the



Brecon Beacons," adds Phil.

With a stiffening westerly breeze, we push on, gradually climbing along the broad ridge that disappears into the distance. The riding here is fabulously fast and flowing, with the track swooshing up and down like some never-ending rollercoaster.

Each lung-busting rise is followed by a scream-out-loud downhill which ends in a vast and dodgy-looking puddle that looks like it could easily swallow you up whole. Awesome. And accompanying us just overhead are endless squadrons of red kites and ravens that play and hover effortlessly in the wind.

Soon, we reach Beacon Hill, a local landmark from where Phil leads us down from the windswept moors to the heavily wooded valley below and the tiny village of Llanbadarn for lunch.

"The Trans Cambrian dates back to 2003 when UK members of the International Mountain Bike Association linked existing bridleways, drovers' ways



EACH LUNG-BUSTING RISE IS FOLLOWED BY A SCREAM-OUT-LOUD DOWNHILL WHICH ENDS WITH A VAST AND DODGY-LOOKING PUDDLE

and quiet backroads together into one east-to-west route across Wales," says Phil over a buttie and a brew.

"There's no guidebook to the trail, but the IMBA does have an online map, although the navigation's really sketchy and there are no signposts, so not that many people ride it," adds Phil.

It is soon time to saddle up and head back onto the bleak tops, which involves a long steady climb on a back road.

Once out of the valley, we dive into a vast forestry plantation, bombing up and down the labyrinth of broad fire roads.

By now the wind has dropped, but the drizzle has begun, as we make the grunty and muddy climb up to Belinda's cafe that is housed in the village hall and community centre in the tiny and isolated hamlet of Bwlch-Y-Sarnau.

It is here that we learn it's thanks to Phil and his Trans Cambrian tours that the village hall is still running, after their local authority grant had been axed.

"Phil always drops in with his groups and this brings in just enough money to keep us going," explains a grateful Belinda. "If we didn't have the village hall, then we wouldn't have a community."

Recharged and refreshed, we leave Belinda's for the final push through the

forest and fog, before hitting the road that whizzes us downhill to a warm shower and cool beer in our overnight stop of Rhayader.

Just keep moving

With 50km covered and countless climbs ticked off, it has been a tough day. But this is just a warm-up for the brutal 70km day that is to follow.

Phil is upfront about this the next morning over breakfast: "It's going to be a long one," he admits with a wicked grin, "but if we keep moving we'll be fine."

Morning mist tickles the tree tops as we pull out of Rhayader on a deliciously smooth and mud-free cycle-path that leads to the Elan Valley and its network of vast reservoirs. So far, so easy.

Not so easy, however, is the beast of a climb out of the valley that Phil has charmingly and accurately called Puke Hill – most of us opt to push up.

From here, things get steadily trickier and slower, as the trail becomes littered with boulders the size of large bricks, making it hard to find a clean line.

Plus, as we near the Claerwen reservoir, the trail gets increasingly wetter, until finally we are actually riding in the river – something which is hard going but a great laugh.

Once back on dry land, we have a brilliant long ride around the reservoir on a firm track where you can really let rip after the earlier stop-start trail.

However, a succession of flat tyres and mechanical issues with bikes means that we're slipping behind schedule, and by mid-afternoon Phil announces we're only half way and still have another four hours, 35km and two monster climbs to go.

The other bad news is that I suddenly realise my tanks are getting dangerously close to empty, and the thought of





another four hours in the saddle is really the last thing I need to hear.

I am, I admit, at my lowest point of the ride.

Grit your teeth and smile

The good news is I've been in situations like this before and know exactly what to do: fuel up with chocolate, chunk off those four long hours into more manageable targets of eight half-hour blocks in my head and, crucially, keep smiling.

Thankfully, this old trick pays off and sure, while it is tough, I keep going and even manage to enjoy the ride, which includes our first views of the deep blue Irish Sea and the dramatically wild, and remote mountain scenery of the Ystwyth valley high above Devil's Bridge.

It's a huge relief to reach the isolated village of Llangurig just before sunset, having been out for more than nine punishing hours – time to get some much-needed food, beer and a bed. Bliss.

After the day's brutal beasting, the following and final day is a (relative) breeze and we even get to play.

Our playground is the sprawling Hafren Forest down the road from Llangurig, where Phil knows some secret and sweet singletrack that lies off-piste to the official Trans Cambrian route.

Though short, the two downhill are little crackers and are a welcome diversion to the usual sweaty, muddy climbs.

Normal service soon resumes, however, and we quickly leave the forest for another long slog back onto the tops high above the village of Staylittle.

"We're now on the roof of mid-Wales," declares Phil at the top of the climb, "and we're at 514m, the highest point of the trail."

With the rolling moors stretching out into the distance and the dark hulks of distant peaks looming out of the mist,

this is a wild and dramatic place.

We have no time to linger, and below the jagged peak of Foel Fadian, Phil leads us down a cracking singletrack – the longest and most exciting downhill of the whole ride.

The heart-poundingly steep descent is our farewell to the bleak moorland, as at the bottom, we are spat out into a lush, wooded valley.

We are now on the home straight and spend the next couple of hours cruising through ancient woodland and past plunging waterfalls, before the final climb up another long fire road at the top of which we can see our goal: Machynlleth, the unofficial mountain-biking capital of mid-Wales.

"The recognised Trans Cambrian finishes about 12km away on the coast," says Phil. "However, I've tweaked the route to avoid the dodgy road that

you'd have to ride back on."

None of us is complaining, though, as it is starting to drizzle and with the end in a sight, we waste absolutely no time in barrelling down the final whizzy downhill.

Mud, sweat and tears

It has been one big mud-splattered, muscle-straining adventure from start to finish and yes, like all adventures, it has had its ups and downs.

So, what would Phil say to others thinking of riding the Trans Cambrian?

"The riding itself isn't technically difficult, so you don't even need to have done that much mountain biking before," says Phil in the drizzly car park in Machynlleth just before jumping into his taxi home.

"You also need to be happy riding for at least five or six hours a day in all weathers. Plus, crucially, you need to have a good level of fitness, so if you're a triathlete or swimmer you'll be fine," says Phil, finally.

By now the drizzle has turned to a steady downpour and I think back to Blessed Belinda's cafe and of other mountain-bike riders who'd be turning up on her doorstep, drenched and done in just like I'd been.

They needn't worry though, because thanks to people like Belinda, there'll always be a welcome – and, more importantly, a hot brew on the hillside to help them on their way.

Guided tours on the Trans Cambrian Trail run from April to October. The trip costs £295 and includes three nights' B&B, two nights' evening meals, plus luggage transfers between stops and return transport back to Knighton. To find out more or to book, visit mtb.wales/trans-cambrian.html or call 07790 761859



TOP TEN TIPS:

1 TRAIN. If you're going to enjoy rather than endure the ride, you must put the hours in training beforehand.

2 IF YOU'RE NOT USED TO spending five hours or more in the saddle, you could end up getting very sore in the nether regions, so take a tub of Sudocrem.

3 PACK HIGH-FACTOR SUNSCREEN. The chances are you won't need it but take it just in case.

4 DON'T BE TOO POSH TO PUSH. Some of the climbs are real beasts, so save your energy and get off and push.

5 IF YOU THINK THAT THE TRANS CAMBRIAN may be too much for you, then try the taster weekends that give you an idea of what riding in this part of mid-Wales is like.

6 KEEP YOUR ENERGY BARS AND SNACKS in your pockets, so you can feed while you ride.

7 DON'T LET THE LACK OF A DECENT mountain bike put you off riding the Trans Cambrian. You can hire a top-notch bike locally from £25 a day.

8 DON'T FORGET YOUR CYCLE GLASSES to cope with all the flying muck.

9 TAKING THE TRAIN is a viable option, as there are stations at the start and end of the trail.

10 IF YOU HAVE NOT ALREADY discovered them, a gillet works brilliantly on this kind of trip, so get hold of one if you can.

