

**8-PAGE
GUIDE TO
CYCLING FOR
WOMEN**
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WOMEN ON WHEELS

A guide to cycling for women by CTC
– the UK's national cyclists' organisation

Words: Alix Stredwick. Photos: Robert Smith & Jason Patient

**TOP REASONS TO RIDE
BIKES FOR WOMEN
WHAT TO WEAR
CONFIDENT CYCLING
WOMEN'S HEALTH
INSPIRATION & INFORMATION**



Note: The information in this guide shows what you can do, not what you must do. All you really need is a bike.

FITNESS

Debbie Burton runs the Minx-girl women's cycle clothing website from her home office near Bath, Somerset. Off-road cycling is her favourite, especially mountain



biking and cyclo-cross. But she rides on road too. 'I believe in riding your bike everywhere you can,' says Debbie, who began to compete in triathlons after cycle commuting in London.

Debbie rides a Surly Crosscheck cyclo-cross bike to get between meetings and to the local newsagent for a paper. 'The lanes often get muddy and have an uneven surface that my racer doesn't like, so this bike is ideal.'

Although it looks like a road bike it is much sturdier and heavier and can cope easily with the road surface. 'I'm finding it a bit dull at the moment as the most exciting stuff I am doing is riding the towpath to Bath,' Debbie sighs. 'I'm not doing enough off-road, which I love.'

When Debbie had her first

child she stopped biking and could immediately feel her fitness slipping away. 'I used to do five hours a day, then I was doing nothing and I was miserable. Going out cycling again, even as transport, makes me feel happier

for the rest of the day'. She finds that she is regaining fitness 'by stealth'.

Debbie is aiming to get back into endurance

mountain biking events with a team, which she enjoys for the camaraderie. Regular cycling of any kind is good preparation for this, Debbie reckons: 'If you ride any bike regularly, even if you're not mountain biking, when you do off-road stuff you will find it easier to cope with technical things like log hopping.'

'I believe in riding your bike everywhere you can', says Debbie, who is regaining fitness 'by stealth'

TOP REASONS

CYCLE TOURING

Sarah Parry-Jones has been cycle touring for 20 years. She started cycling to school with her friends when she was 14 and has never looked back.

'My first tour was after my O-levels on the Isle of Wight. I went with some friends on my 3-speed Raleigh. We chose the Isle of Wight because we thought it was flat. We soon discovered that it's not!'

She has since toured all over the UK, as well as in France, Tenerife, Finland, Uganda and Zimbabwe. Tenerife was her favourite. 'We got a cheap package holiday when it was cold and wet here and put our bikes on the plane for free. We spent two weeks cycling around Tenerife and La Gomera sleeping on beaches or camping wild. We spent ages cycling to the top of Mount Teide, which is about 4,000 metres, and couldn't understand

why it was such hard work cycling on the flat road around the amazing volcanic plateau at the top. We had never experienced the effects of altitude before – it makes your legs go weak.'

Her bike is an Orbit Romany, which cost £900. Favourite equipment includes a Brooks leather saddle, Ortlieb panniers, and a Terra Nova Solar 2 tent. Top of the list, though, is a Rab down jacket. 'It weighs nothing, packs down small and is warm as toast. It's ideal in the evenings. It makes a good pillow too.'

When touring she rides 50-60 miles a day, and says that it's the freedom of cycle touring she values most. 'You can stop or divert somewhere whenever you like. There's a sense of achievement arriving at new places under pedal power.'

A £900 tourer is great but not vital





COMMUTING

Hawah Bunduka is training programme co-ordinator for an international health charity. She cycles to work in central London from her home in Lewisham. 'I've always had a bike,' says Hawah, who bought her 'not very nickable' town run-around bike when she was in Namibia and shipped it back to the UK. In three years of being locked up on the street, it hasn't yet been stolen or vandalised.

'I don't cycle every day, especially in winter,' she says. 'Driver behaviour seems to get worse then and conditions aren't always pleasurable.' When she does commute by bike, she values the 'head space' that it offers. 'It's time that you spend just with yourself.

It's a great chance for "me time". Hawah wears general sporty gear on the bike and gets changed on arrival at work. 'If you're going to get sweaty, I'd advise sorting out all your requirements for showering, getting changed and storing extra clothes, before you start cycling to work,' she says.

When she commutes by bike, Hawah values the 'head space' that it offers. 'It's a great chance for "me time";' she says

Hawah's favourite part of the journey is the river front view going over Tower Bridge. 'I could use the Transport for London cycle maps to find more scenic routes, but I tend to use the main roads.'

Her advice for other cycle commuters is simply to behave like traffic. 'Don't scrape the kerb or apologise for being there. Confidence, even on main roads, comes with riding for a while, and being assertive.'

TO RIDE...

Cycling is fun, and there are as many good reasons to ride as there are cyclists. The experienced women cyclists here embody just four of them. Be inspired to make your first steps: look where it can take you.

FAMILY CYCLING

Phillipa Oates and her sons Elliot (10) and Felix (8) cycle every Sunday with the Ripon Loiterers, a North Yorkshire CTC section that Phillipa started. On rides of 20 miles or so the boys ride their own bikes. For longer rides, or if they're in a hurry, they all ride together on a Thorn Me'n'U2 triplet.

'I set up Ripon Loiterers when we moved here five years ago and I was "Johnny-no-mates". I desperately wanted to get out cycling with the boys but had little local knowledge.

'It was so easy to do: the local paper took a photo and put a note below asking people to contact me. Within a few days I had a call from a family with another Thorn triplet, and from several others. We organised some rides and it took off!'

They've been cycling as a

family since the boys were babies. Phillipa bought the triplet six years ago. Since then they've had holidays on it in Spain and Italy, travelling on the European Bike Express, and many UK trips.

Phillipa always wanted to be a cyclist, but was daunted by 'the Lycra-clad fast crowd'. She adds: 'I got involved with Uxbridge Loiterers almost by accident. I couldn't bear being stuck inside with two small children, and the local bike shop told me about this wonderful group of leisurely cyclists, who welcomed us and tolerated our stop-start style.'

So long as they get plenty of stops and snacks the boys enjoy their cycling. 'I have trained them to say "Wow, what a spectacular view!", but I'm not sure they mean it as that's usually followed by "When's the next sweet stop?"'



The boys have their own bikes, but on longer rides travel on the triplet

Since buying the triplet six years ago, Phillipa and the boys have had holidays on it in Spain and Italy, plus many trips in the UK

Women require a shorter reach to the handlebars than men of the same height

You don't have to be an expert to ride a bike any more than you need to understand engines to drive a car. This advice on bikes and clothing will equip you with the knowledge to get what you need from your bike shop – and not be fobbed off.

BIKES 4 WOMEN



can reach £1500 but it will last a lifetime. Many shops, however, have a fitting service.

BIKE BITS

Ah, la derriere. It can be a pain. Here men and women are clearly different: on average, a woman's 'sit bones' are 3cm further apart, so women need wider saddles for good anatomical reasons. Some folk swear by Brooks traditional leather saddles that mould to your bum (in time); some recommend the new types with holes in strategic places to relieve pressure on important bits.

Pedal cranks have been standardised to suit the 'standard' man's 32in inside leg. But the average woman's inside leg is 29in, so women need shorter cranks – 155 or 160mm long rather than the standard 170 or 175mm. Few bikes have them; they will need fitting afterwards, at additional expense. Handlebars should be narrower. If you're a petite road racer you might even end up with child-size drop handlebars. Some designs of brake levers can be adjusted to bring them closer to the bars for smaller fingers.

Items that can improve cycling comfort include an 'anatomic' saddle and a stem riser



Cycling is an ideal activity for time-pressed women keen to stay in shape and be happy and healthy. It lets you exercise while on the way to work or the shops. It's fun and it doesn't demand much in the way of expense or fitness levels to get started. So you'd expect that at least as many women as men to enjoy the benefits of bikes.

Not so. In the UK, half as many women as men cycle, and women don't cycle as far. Other European countries have a far healthier gender balance – and lower obesity levels as a result. The first step, of course, is to get a bike.

THE BIKE

Bikes are inexpensive but, unless you buy secondhand, they are not cheap. Expect to pay £150-plus for a new one. Avoid front suspension unless you're paying around £250 or more, and full suspension under £500. Don't buy a bike that's uncomfortable, whether or not it's fashionable. And never buy a bike that's the wrong size.

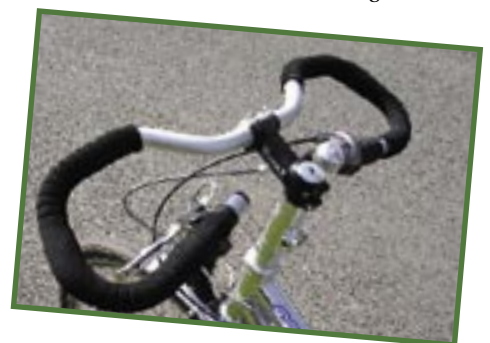
Most bikes are built for men's dimensions: women simply come in smaller sizes. Women do not, on average, have longer legs than a man of the same height, but a lack of 'serious' bicycles in small enough sizes makes it easier for leggy women to get into cycling.

Hence the myth, amongst cyclists, that women are generally like that. So all you short-legged women out there: don't worry, you're normal!

Although the reasons for this are not obvious, women cannot generally lean so far forward on a bike, which has implications for our reach to the handlebars. In general these need to be higher and closer to the saddle than for a man of the same height. Reaching too far can eventually cause back pain or knee/hip problems if you are doing some serious cycling. So make sure you get a bike that fits, and don't be fobbed off by 'well, you can stand over the frame so it must be okay', which you'll get from some shops.

You could adapt a man's bike by fitting a shorter handlebar extension to bring the bars closer to you, or you could buy one specifically for women. There are plenty around at all price ranges. If you are keen and you have money to burn you can get one custom-built.

Roberts of Croydon and Longstaff Cycles in Newcastle under Lyme are famous for their women's frames and will talk you through the options and measure you up. Prices for custom bikes





WHAT 2 WEAR

If you're pootling round town or doing a gentle family 'amble' along a converted railway track, you may not need any special clothing at all. Just tuck your trousers into your socks and away you go. If you have a chain-guard you won't even need to do that.

If you have a continental-style skirt-guard over the back wheel you can wear your best frock if you like. In the UK, skirt guards are rare but with utility cycling rising in areas like London and York, they're on the increase. You'll see them on imported Dutch bikes and on roadsters from Pashley (www.pashley.co.uk).

For more strenuous efforts you'll be thankful for cycle-specific clothing, without raised seams, and for non-sweaty tops. Nowadays there is a fairly large range of funky women's clothes; it doesn't have to be tight Lycra.

TOPS

If you'll be flogging up a hill, 'keeping up with the traffic', or riding for several hours it's a good idea to wear all synthetic layers. Cycling gear really will wick away the sweat but it is important that every layer is synthetic, and layers are the key. If you start off your commute a bit cold, then remove a layer when warmed up, you will arrive fresh and dry, with only rosy cheeks to show you cycled.

TAILS

Roll up your trousers, buy some ankle-bands or invest in some

pedal-pushers. Or get a couple of pairs of decent women-specific cycling shorts: you can get non-shiny versions that don't make your thighs look like sprawling black puddings.

Wear a pair under a stretchy skirt and in the winter swap them for cosy leggings that look like thick tights. Or try one of the marvellous 'skorts' on the market: cycle shorts with a wrap-around skirt that may be detachable and have deep pockets to keep small items like keys handy. Baggy mountain bike shorts with a padded seat liner or a Lycra inner-short are another option.

On a fully-equipped roadster, you can wear what you like

SHOES

I've cycled 16 miles in thigh-high pointy-toed boots but I wouldn't recommend it. (I'd also recommend thoroughly checking the time of your last train home.)

Regular cycling will soon ruin your best Jimmy Choos so use trainers for casual pedalling and better still invest in some special cycling shoes. They'll be stiff-soled, which is better for your feet and the efficiency of pedalling. You can get some reasonably 'normal'-looking – if your usual look is a bit rugged or sporty – cleated shoes, which let you mix walking around with click-in SPD pedals.

AND FINALLY

'Get a good sports bra,' advises Hawah (see previous page). Always wear cycling gloves, for comfort and protection. And if you choose to wear a helmet, as with the bike itself it's essential that it fits properly.

You can cycle in heels, but it's easier and safer in trainers or dedicated bike shoes



TREK T30 (2005)

£250

Good value aluminium hybrid for town use, with mudguards, rack, partial chainguard and nice low gears. Contact: Trek UK 01908 282626, www.trekbike.co.uk



EDINBURGH REVOLUTION CADENCE SPORT

£235

Budget aluminium mountain bike that's genuinely off-road capable. Shorter top tube than the gent's, women's saddle, and 24 gears. Contact: Edinburgh Bicycle, 0131 331 5010, www.edinburghbicycle.com



ROBERTS AUDAX COMPACT

From £1195

Custom built steel bike that will fit you like a glass slipper. For audax, light touring, and day rides. Contact: Roberts Cycles 020 8684 3370, www.robertscycles.com



THORN VOYAGER CHILDBACK TANDEM

From £699

Great value tandem for one adult and a primary school age child. Double-childback triplet also available. Contact: St John St Cycles 01278 441500, www.sjcsycles.com



BURLEY BEE TRAILER

£200

Trailers are ideal for safely carrying one or two children (and/or the shopping). This is Burley's cheapest. Contact: Fisher 01727798345, www.fisher-outdoor.co.uk



BURLEY PICCOLO TRAILER CYCLE

£360

Cheaper tag-alongs give poor bike handling. This one doesn't so it's safer and easier to ride with. Contact: Fisher 01727798345, www.fisher-outdoor.co.uk



CONFIDENT CYCLING

Most women in the UK can ride a bike, but surveys say as many as 30% can't. If that's you, all you need is training. CTC can help – turn to the supplement's back page. If you can cycle, here are some ways to get extra confidence.

The Women's Design Service found in their Cycling for Women project that more than half of the participants had in been put off from cycling by a lack of maintenance knowledge.

MAINTENANCE

So what would you do about punctures? Prevention is one solution. Use puncture-resistant tyres such as Schwalbe's Marathon Plus. Keep your tyres pumped hard and avoid cycling in the gutter where debris collects. Or you could cut your losses and invest in a fold-up bike and always have a mobile phone and taxi number with you. In London's congestion charging zone there is a mobile puncture repair service, while CTC's Cyclecover Cycle Rescue is a breakdown assurance service similar to motorists' – for details tel: 0800 2112810, www.cyclecover.co.uk.

For a more pro-active approach, there are numerous community cycling projects in the UK that hold bike maintenance workshops, often at minimal cost. Seek them out on the internet, via your local CTC group, leaflets

in public places, or your local council may know about or even fund them.

Understanding how the bike works will open up the possibility of tinkering with it yourself to solve minor glitches with the gears or brakes. Plus you'll know the correct way to clean and oil your bike.

The Haynes Bicycle Book (£14.99) has good instructions on all these matters. Edinburgh Bicycle Cooperative's Interactive CD (£7.95, from www.edinburghbicycle.com) includes advice on bike set up and basic maintenance. For more detail, The Bike Inn produce a Cycle Maintenance video (£20 plus P&P, from www.bike-inn.co.uk, 01406 371273). The Bike Inn – based in Spalding, Lincolnshire – also runs one of the few national cycle maintenance training courses.

TRANSPORTING PRECIOUS LOADS

You can use your bike like a car to transport one or more children. Wait until you are confident about your own bike handling first, and practice riding a bike with an altered centre of gravity away from the traffic first. A 7-10kg sack of potatoes is a useful 'test load' for a child-seat!

When you're ready you can explore the possibility of: front or back child-seats (nine months to three years for the smaller front seats between



A mobile gives 'ball out' options, while cycle training can prepare you for riding on the road

you and the handlebars; up to four years for the back); trailers to carry two kids; trailer-cycles attached to the back of yours so that your kid can get used to cycling on the road; and specially-designed family bikes or tandems.

WHITE VAN MAN

As a woman, you may be on the receiving end of the odd jeer, especially in the summer. The best advice is to ignore them. The jeerers will soon be gone. As a cyclist, only other cyclists will tend to be travelling at your pace – white van man will overtake and be gone, or else get stuck in traffic; pedestrians are soon left behind.



CLOTHES



HOWIES PADDLER TROUSER £15 (sale)
Calf-length cotton trousers that sit low on the hips. Fine around town. Howies 01239 614122, www.howies.co.uk



ENDURA SKORT £30
Cute and practical skirt and cycle short combination. Never worry that your bum looks big. Endura 01506 497749, www.endura.co.uk



ALTURA NEVIS WOMEN'S £50
Good budget jacket. Waterproof, windproof and fairly breathable. Zyro 01423 321224, www.zyro.eu.com



SUGOI ALLEGRA S/L JERSEY £46
High-wicking, sleeveless jersey with two rear pockets and front zip. Contact: www.sugoi.com or www.minx-girl.com



PEARL IZUMI MAIN-FRAME CROP £28
Comfy crop top that offers good support. Pearl Izumi Europe +49 7661 989 990, www.pearlizumi.com, or www.minx-girl.com



Most health advice for cycling applies equally well to women as men. But there are issues that tend not to get talked about in the male-dominated world of UK cycling.

A low stand-over height is easier in pregnancy.

When you've got your period you don't need me to tell you that you might feel like curling up and hiding from the world. But you'll feel better on the bike.

It's well known that gentle exercise can ease dysmenorrhoea (period pains) and furthermore, one of the best things you can do to combat hormonal fluctuations is to get regular physical activity. Plus you can feel a little better about those food cravings when you've used them up on the bike.

PREGNANCY

Generally you should hear encouragement about cycling when consulting your doctor – which is very important. But if you are carrying more than one child or you have high blood pressure you could be in a 'high

risk' category. Your doctor will advise you.

Obviously you should minimise the risk of falling off: cut down on those off-road descents and don't race-train in a pack. Be vigilant about avoiding dehydration and be aware that your joints will be a bit more elastic due to changes in collagen, so take note of any joint pain.

Some general hints include:

- Accommodate a big belly by raising the handlebars and perhaps temporarily fitting a taller stem.
- If changes in posture are a pain in the butt, try a wider, more padded saddle.
- In the later stages, be aware that your heart and lungs are working harder than usual. If you're too out of breath to talk, slow down.
- You may need to fit lower gears to the bike, or walk the hills.
- Use well-padded gloves and shift your hand positions frequently, as you'll be resting more weight on your wrists.

By the third trimester you'll find it more uncomfortable to ride anyway so you'll find yourself naturally cutting down. And on the whole not much change will be needed if your usual cycling is easy-going and low mileage.

SADDLE SORENESS

The issue of men's bits is well-documented but women can have problems too, if you're doing a lot of serious cycling or your bike is not set up right. Be aware of any discomfort and get it checked out immediately. Tinker with the saddle tilt as well as height. A tiny adjustment may be all that's necessary. If none of it works, you may want to take the plunge and splash out on a laid-back recumbent, famously kind to one's posterior.

EXTRAS

CYCLECRAFT, BY JOHN FRANKLIN
£9.99



Required reading for any new or returnee cyclist who will be riding on the road.
Pub: The Stationery Office (1997).

Contact: CTC, tel: 0870 873 0060, cycling@ctc.org.uk

TOPEAK JOE BLOW SPORT
£30



Inflate your tyres the easy way with a floor pump. This one has a sturdy steel barrel and base, pressure gauge and presta/

Schrader connectors. Contact: Extra UK 01933 672170, www.extrauk.co.uk

TOPEAK ROAD MORPH
£27



Floor pump ease of use you can carry on the bike. The solution for anyone with high-pressure tyres but low-pressure arms.

Contact: Extra UK 01933 672170, www.extrauk.co.uk

VAR 425 TYRE LEVER



£7 Easier to use than most levers and includes a tyre re-fitting gadget that really works. Contact: www.bikeplus.co.uk

(or, in French, www.vartools.com)

BASIL CLIP-ON MESH BASKET
£16



Baskets make multi-modal trips easy, as long as you secure items

to prevent spillage. Contact: Cambridge Dutchbikes 00 31 20 612 3819, www.dutchbike.co.uk

TIMBUK2 METRO



£40 Striking courier bag that can hold A4 items. They do great yoga bags too. But

maybe not for the large-chested. Contact: www.timbuk2.com or www.minx-girl.com

WOMEN'S + HEALTH

INSPIRATION & INFORMATION

For general information there's a wealth of items on the internet. Two good sites are www.bikeforall.net and www.whycycle.co.uk. They will answer frequently asked questions and point you to further resources.

CTC has produced many excellent articles on cycling for women, including cycling in pregnancy etc. They are being made available for download from the CTC website as PDF files. (CTC Information Office staff can print out and post these to members without web access, on receipt of an SSAE.)

We can also recommend that you visit Cambridge CTC member Myra van Inwegen's bicycle pages, (com/bike/tips.html)

where you'll find lots of inspiration for women, including Chris Juden's ground-breaking test of bikes for small women.

Resources particularly helpful to women include www.minx-girl.com, which will inspire you with funky clothing and accessories that you can mail-order, and in a similar vein the US-based www.terrybicycles.com.

The London Cycling Campaign has produced a range of free information booklets that go into some details on topics such as cycling with children and getting started on a bicycle. Download from www.lcc.org.uk.

LEARN THE SKILLS

If you need to brush up on your cycling skills, or just need a boost to your confidence, a few sessions with a cycling instructor can work wonders. We can refer you to a local, female instructor.

Contact the CTC training team at training@ctc.org.uk or call 01483 520758. As well as on-road training, women-only off-road training sessions are available.

TOURING

Josie Dew, Anne Mustoe, and Dervla Murphy are prominent women cycle adventurers. Josie has a wonderful website where you can keep abreast of her escapades, at www.josiedew.co.uk. Anne Mustoe is a retired headmistress and world cycle-tourer. Her website is www.annemustoe.co.uk.

CAMPAIGNING

CTC campaigns to improve the UK's cycling environment – at a local as well as national level. CTC's Right to Ride volunteers run urban cycling groups, liaise with local councils on cycling matters, and much more. Why not become one? For information, call Cherry Allan on 01483 520735 or email righttoride@ctc.org.uk.

RACING

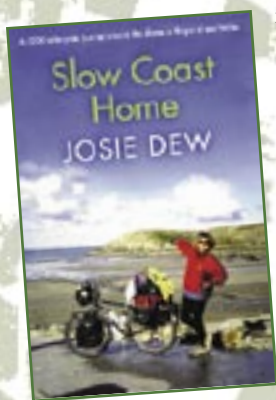
If you want to get into cycle racing then the Women's Cycle Racing Association is a good place to start. See www.wcra.org.uk.

Useful books include *Cycling*

for Women by Ed Pavelka (£7.20 from CTC Shop, www.ctcshop.com) and *Triathlons for Women* by Sally Edwards (£11.70 from CTC Shop, www.ctcshop.com). Both have excellent advice for women athletes.

CYCLING FOR WOMEN WEEKEND

CTC's first annual Cycling for Women weekend takes place on 4th-5th June 2005, with 'come and try it' events across the country aimed at new or returnee cyclists. Events by local clubs and trainers will be publicised on CTC's website right up to the weekend itself, so keep checking the site: www.ctc.org.uk, and follow the links: Go Cycling > Getting Started > CTC Cycling for Women Weekend.



GET MORE FROM CTC

CTC is the UK's national cyclists' organisation. CTC offers a comprehensive and specialised service for the leisure and commuting cyclist. We provide technical advice, information, a magazine, cycling related legal aid, insurance, organised tours, specialist mail order, and thousands of cycling events annually. CTC is at the forefront in campaigning to improve the UK cycling environment.

CTC membership costs from just £12 per year. Find out more

at www.ctc.org.uk. Join online or phone CTC Membership on 0870 873 0061. CTC members can obtain extra copies of this supplement. For details, tel: 0870 873 0060.

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