

This is a copy of the report that I sent to Sustrans while returning from my journey along Route 1, from Dover (Kent) to Orkney islands in Northern Scotland. I received kind answers from several Sustrans employees, and some of the issues mentioned here might have been settled since then.

This text is posted on my website for information only.

Hello Sustrans,

after I cycled the entire NCN Route 1 from Dover to Orkney in 28 days last July, I'm hereby sending you some observations. I'm a French speaker, so please bear with me for all my mistakes and "strange expressions" while I'm writing in English, thank you.

Thank you Sustrans !

First of all, I'd like to thank Sustrans for the incredible work that has been accomplished in signposting Route 1 across the whole country. I cannot figure out the total number of road signs and stickers that this represents. Great job indeed ! Moreover, the selected roads/tracks/paths are really excellent all along when the matter is to get cyclists safely crossing the country. Given the heavy traffic on most English roads, including B roads and even many rural roads, finding a safe itinerary must have been quite a challenge and certainly couldn't be achieved without a great deal of local search for quiet roads.

Safety vs distance

This comes at a cost, though : it more than doubles the distance when compared to the shortest car ride. Altogether, I rode exactly 2567 km (1595 miles) from Dover to John o'Groats. Some days, when the weather is bad, the landscape boring, the headwind strong or the cyclist a bit tired, it can be appalling to see you have to ride 20 miles to the next town when the road sign indicates 10 miles to car drivers. So it is as well when you know your destination is to the North and Route 1 keeps heading south...

I have to say that, among the 14 European countries in which I cycled so far, I can't remember any cycle route that would increase as much as Route 1 the distance between two geographical points. This is indeed a sad observation regarding sustainable mobility in UK and demonstrates the absolute need for determined citizen and political action to initiate an immediate and radical change in public opinion.

General drivers' behaviour is safe

On the other hand, British drivers are without doubt the most respectful towards cyclists, at least according to my own experience. I did not cycle in Holland so far, but I felt safer on any section of Route 1 than I had in the past while travelling in Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Germany or Switzerland - not even speaking of southern or eastern European countries,

where the situation is known to be worse. Of course, I did not try to ride on a busy A road, where my appreciation of driving behaviours would certainly have been different. What is sure is that in 32 days of presence in UK, I could not report more than one or two dangerous driver's behaviour - which is far less than during any of my previous bicycle journeys.

Where are the cyclists ?

This good news about safe driving is a bit surprising, not because one would have a negative "a priori" opinion regarding British people, but just because there are very few cyclists in UK when compared to continental European countries such as Germany, Switzerland or France. While I was preparing my journey with the help of Sustrans website, I was telling myself that this must be quite a "cyclists' country". Because the national cycle route network seems so developed, at least when looking at your general map, one would think he'll meet hundreds of cyclists every day. Not at all. In the southern half of the route, I met/came across no more than around ten to fifteen other cyclists travellers. That is in about two weeks and over 1500 km ride ! The same can be said about local cyclists on a day tour around their home : for each single cyclist I have seen in UK, I would have come across ten at home...

This was a sad discover for me, as it made me once again realize that I'm involved into a very marginal activity, although no one can ignore the fact that we have to change our way of life and decrease our ecological footprint if we want our children to have a future.

Luckily, the general number of cyclists increased as I entered Scotland. Many more travellers (fully understandable when considering the great unspoiled Scottish environment) and day-tourers up there ! In fact, if I were not so much interested into full cross-country journeys, I would have considered cycling in Scotland only instead of Great Britain in its whole.

Urban areas

According to me, one of the most negative aspect of Route 1 is the large number of urban areas it drives through, some of them being very long and boring (to say the least), among which the Sittingbourne-Gillingham-Rochester-Gravesend-Dartford agglomeration in Kent, Hull-Beverley, Middlesbrough-Stockton on Tees, Sunderland-Tynemouth-Whitley Bay-Blyth-Ashington (around 100 km from near Peterlee to Cresswell, one of the worst !!!), Edinburgh-Dunfermline (60 km from Dalkeith to Townhill) and Aberdeen. Most of the time, the city centre is OK, but getting there means tens of kilometers of spoiled environment (litter everywhere, industrial polygons, power lines all over the place, etc), heavy traffic, and ugly suburbs. I leave aside London, which is not so small and not so clean but hey, it's London and we want to see it (again and again) !

I think it would be nice to propose alternative routes that avoid urban areas for those of us who prefer nature and countryside to the madness of cities and their suburbs. Maybe you already provide such diversions on your website, but I travel "disconnected" and did not see any such signposting on my way.

Signposting

Preliminary note : as I just wrote, I travel "disconnected", with no mobile access to the web, so I cannot check on Sustrans website for direction. Therefore, I need good maps (see below) and accurate signposting to find my way across the country.

Considering the enormous amount of road signs and stickers, as previously said, I consider that Route 1 signposting is near to excellent. Nevertheless, with or without cycle maps, any cyclist will get lost at least once a day, and more often if the day ride includes urban areas, even smaller ones. I have experienced it many times : I easily arrived right into town/city centre, but then could not find the way out and sometimes spent more than an hour to get back on the Cycle Route because of missing signposting.

The fact is that in urban areas, we need more road signs than in the countryside : lots of crossings, heavy traffic, pedestrians and other sources of distraction catch the cyclist's interest, making it likely he doesn't notice one smaller blue road sign. After having cycled a while without seeing any signpost, you end up telling yourself you missed one road sign, hence cycle back and here comes the trouble...

I personally lost my way due to not enough or inaccurate road signs in the following towns and cities (from south to north) :

- Sittingbourne, Kent (not enough !!!)
- Harlow, Essex (don't remember what was wrong, but noted down this town)
- Maldon, Essex (not enough)
- Hull-Cottingham, East Riding Yorkshire (diversion via A164 cycle lane not properly signposted)
- Whitby, North Yorkshire (information board needed just before Larpool Viaduct over River Esk, explaining diversion via Cycle Route 165 which branches off Route 1 here + better Route 165 signposting from Whitby centre to Ruswarp for those who want to visit Whitby before continuing on Route 165)
- Stockton-on-Tees ("Castle Eden Walkway" doesn't mean anything to cycle travellers, please change it to name next town instead or even better, direction "North")
- South Hetton, Durham (coord. 54.801501,-1.404909 / a single faded out signpost in a kind of wasteland leads into an empty industrial polygon without subsequent road signs ; in fact, this is the alternate route via Seaham ; a more direct route to Ryhope is to the left, via the same "old railway" path and is not indicated)
- Edinburgh (couldn't find the right way out until Cramond, but followed a nice coastal path suggested by somebody I asked for direction ; had to carry my heavy bike up and down two long series of stairs along river Almond though)
- between Kinross and Wester Balgedie, Perthshire and Kinross (not a single Route 1 signpost on the trail along Loch Leven, although several paths branch off)

In rural areas, signposting could be improved in :

- off-road section between Great Limber and Barnétby-le-Wold, North Lincolnshire (the initial track subdivides in several places, and without any signposting or landmark it's difficult to determine which subsequent track is Route 1)

- Leuchars to Tayport, and particularly the off-road section through Tentsmuir Forest, Fife/Scotland (no signposting).

Back to the start of my journey, the road sign right at the exit of Dover chaotic ferry harbour (near Cliffe Court Hotel), indicating an "Alternative wheeling route to Deal" via the cliffs, should be removed or at least completed by a warning about the series of steep stairs awaiting the cyclist, which will have to carry his bike, no matter its weight... I had asked about this alternative route at the Tourist Information Office in downtown Dover, but no one mentioned the stairs !

Another observation I would like to share is the fact that signposting efficacy could be greatly improved by adding explicit direction to the simple arrow and number 1 : in this respect, always mentioning "North" or "South" on road signs (or just "1N" and "1S") seems to me the best option, understandable even for those who do not use a map and hence don't know the name of next town. It happened to me more than once to get lost for a while, meaning travelling out of Route 1, before arriving to a crossing with Route 1 signposts and having to decide which direction I should follow. As Route 1 is often "zigzagging" and not always heading to the direction you would imagine, it can indeed be very tricky to determine which side you have to go in the absence of any other information. I once went wrong, near Portlethen, after having asked a local person and ended up riding more than 10 km in the rain before understanding I should have gone the other way...

Note that this has already been implemented in some areas of Scotland, where NCN road signs mention "1 North" or "1 N", and it makes things much easier.

Cycle maps & general orientation

It has been impossible to find cycle maps North of Scarborough, neither in bookshops nor in Tourist Information offices. Given the good quality of signposting (with the exceptions mentioned above), using cycle maps is not an absolute necessity to ride Route 1. Nevertheless, having tried both options (with and without cycle map), I think it is more comfortable to have a cycle map, as you can foresee where the Route will be heading to and therefore lower your concentration on spotting the next road sign - which in turn gives you more liberty to appreciate the landscape/wildlife/sky colour/etc or just live in your thoughts. Moreover, a good and detailed cycle map makes it possible to decide to take a shortcut (out of cycle route) from time to time.

I hope that Sustrans pocket cycle maps like the ones I used in Suffolk, Norfolk and The Fens can be developed for the whole Route 1 and made more widely available along the way, as they are very handy, accurate enough and not too expensive.

When I did not have a cycle map, I relied on my three Michelin 1:400'000 road maps on which I had previously circled with a pencil all villages & towns through which Route 1 is passing. This proved useful for general orientation, but of course was not detailed enough to avoid getting lost. At least, when I found myself out of the cycle route, I knew which town/village I had to head for in order to get back on Route 1.

Of course, I have been asking my way many times to local people, who always proved very friendly and willing to help (great people !) but most of the time didn't know anything about NCN cycle routes, even though they lived right on it. In this respect, my most striking experience was with the owner of a bicycle shop situated on Route 1 just south of Humber Bridge. To my question about whether they were selling cycle maps, the lady answered that it was the first time she was asked for this. Very surprised by this answer, I told her that her shop was actually "sitting on" NCN Route 1, the longest cycle route in UK, and that one can see the signpost from the front door of the shop. "Really ?" was the last word I heard before leaving this hopeless place...

I think it would be a good thing to inform local population about any official cycle route that drives through their area, for example through a leaflet in their mailbox, illustrated by a sketch map. Tourist Information Offices should be contacted too, as most of their employees, used to catering for motorized "mass tourism", do not know ANYTHING about cycle routes, which I consider a shame when a NCN route is passing through their place.

Information available through Sustrans website map (notices)

Before departure, I wrote on my road maps some of the notices (yellow caution sign) that appear on the map view of Route 1 on Sustrans website

(<http://www.sustrans.org.uk/ncn/map/route/route-1>). A part of this information should be updated (listed here from south to north, along with other suggestions) :

- the Roydon-Harlow stretch should be highlighted on the online map, as it is fully signposted (no cycle route break)

- just before Norwich "Rough bridleway, suitable for MTB only" --> also suitable for hybrid/trekking/travel/touring bikes with 29" wheels like mine (which is NOT a mountain bike, see pictures on my website)

- shortly before Wells-Next-the-Sea "Rough bridleway" --> VERY rough bridleway and SHARP stones, but still OK for touring bikes IF equipped with puncture proof tyres

- Scarborough to Whitby (The Cinder Track) "Only suitable for mountain bikes, Route eroded" --> it is NOT so bad, and as before perfectly suitable for touring bikes, although some parts can become muddy after rain ; a leaflet is available at the Tourist Office in Scarborough, very inconveniently situated INSIDE a shopping centre ; apart from the leaflet, the staff at the Tourist Information Office don't know ANYTHING about cycling the Cinder Track !

- Sleights/Briggswath to Aislaby (Route 165) --> please mention "VERY ROUGH and STEEP bridleway", anything else than a mountain bike without luggage will have to be pushed uphill ; in general, climb gradients along this cycle route exceed what a European cyclist is used to, even in a hilly region, and this fact could be mentioned on the website

- in Seamer (Route 165), the road direct to Stainton (Well Lane/Seamer Rd) should be defined as an official cycle route for those who travel Routes 165/65 as an alternate to the missing section of Route 1 between Whitby and Staithes ; this road is quiet, safe and shorter than the useless detour via Hutton Rudby

- Johnshaven to Inverbervie (Aberdeenshire) --> the 4-5 km of off-road track on the coast is rough in some places (stony path), and a loaded bike may have to be pushed here and there, still it is OK for touring bikes and a better option than A92 and its fast traffic

- Stonehaven to Portlethen (Aberdeenshire) --> there is no need to travel as far out of the way as Maryculter via Wedderhill ; instead of turning left on Wedderhill, the cycle route should continue straight to the crossing with A90 and get into Portlethen via Bruntland Road as I did myself
- according to me, advices like "dangerous crossing", "busy crossing" or "tram lines" are not relevant as these situations will be rightly assessed by the cyclist once on the spot and knowing about them in advance doesn't make sense
- in general, it should be emphasized that ANY long distance travel along Route 1 requires at least a touring bike with true puncture-proof wide tyres like Schwalbe Marathon Mondial ; lesser quality tyres WILL result in punctures on off-road tracks.

Accommodation

Unfortunately, cheap accommodation is rare and/or difficult to find along Route 1, making UK one of the most expensive country where I have been cycling. In particular, I was disappointed that the informations I gathered prior to departure on www.bedsforcyclists.co.uk were largely incomplete and did not mention many campings situated right along Route 1. Looking for accommodation in late afternoons has thus been one of the challenges of this journey and I regret it.

There are for sure plenty B&Bs, even in most remote locations, but at 30-40 pounds a night for a single person, this cannot be taken into consideration as a regular overnight option.

Regarding accomodation, Aberdeen is probably the worst place I've been in UK : the very few reasonably priced places are full much earlier in the day than in any other city and the Tourist Information Office staff are neither helpful nor do they provide a good free city map. Cyclists should therefore be advised to AVOID planning overnight stay in this city, unless they have booked their accommodation in advance.

YHA/SYHA, private hostels and bunkhouses are most of the time excellent value. Nevertheless, the general policy at YHA/SYHA to require advance payment when making a booking by phone for the same evening is really unfair, to say the least, as it means you cannot book if you do not own a credit card. Business is really killing everything ! Luckily, there are still some friendly hostel staff who, after a few explanations over the phone, accept to take the booking even without advance payment.

Best sections of Route 1

- Canterbury to Whitstable
- London and Lea Valley
- Suffolk and Norfolk
- Scarborough to Whitby (Cinder Track)
- Sleights to Great Ayton (North York Moors, Route 165, but tough climbs !)
- Melrose to Middleton (beautiful Tweed Valley and Moorfoot Hills)
- Banff to Inverness (Moray Firth coast and hills after Nairn)
- Ardgay to Melvich
- Orkney Islands, and above all Hoy !

I hope that this information can be useful. Some of it will be posted on my website, anyway.

Thank you for your attention and your great job on promoting sustainable mobility.

With my best regards,

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