

FEATURE
Family ride ideas



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WORDS DAVE BARTER

Family values

Mum or dad is a keen cyclist; everyone else is indifferent. How do you get from there to a whole family on wheels? **Dave Barter** has some ideas

Keen cyclists can find themselves isolated if their family doesn't share their enthusiasm. I was no exception. The others had lapsed as I'd become obsessed. How could I persuade them to love cycling like I did?

Chatting to a clubmate, he said that the Tour de France had transformed his wife from cycling widow to fan after she'd attended a single stage... So a few weeks later, on holiday in France, I dragged my family away from the beach to watch the Tour flash by. I enthused about the race and the riders. I couldn't even dream of keeping up, I said.

'That's what it's like cycling with you!' said my wife Helen. 'You don't realise how hard we find it. Sometimes it feels like we're in a flippin' great race.'

I'd hoped to open her eyes by showing her the Tour. Instead, she'd opened mine.

DOWNSHIFTING

Cycling obsession creeps up on you. One minute you're eyeing up a shiny new model in a bike shop window; the next your garage is full of bikes and all of your spare time has vanished. There are benefits: improvements in mental and physical health, along with a new set of friends and challenges to tackle. But what about the family? What happens when they're left behind as you stride

confidently into the cycling world, glibly assuming that they're going to 'get it' as well?

My family watched initially with interest as I discovered mountain biking, then road cycling, followed by racing, time trialling and lightweight touring. The interest morphed into resignation as I pushed myself harder. Within a few years of catching the bug, I found myself a lone cyclist in a family of four.

It wasn't just me. Cycling internet forums were peppered with posts along the lines of 'How to get the other half on the bike as well?', along with the more sinister posts discussing methods of hiding expensive cycling purchases from the partner.

Helen was adamant that even my shortest rides were too hard and tiring. Our two children had no interest in imitating a father who returned from five-hour rides soaking wet and physically destroyed...

I needed to bring the 'fun' and 'family' back into cycling, and turn it into something that we could all share.

THE RIGHT BIKES

They all needed better, well-maintained bikes. I don't know why it hadn't occurred to me before. I took my lightweight, well-tuned bikes for granted. On the rare occasions that we did ride together, frustration would set in as the road went uphill. I'd glide upwards

while Helen and the kids would flail around in a cacophony of poorly shifting gears.

Less experienced cyclists seldom have the ear or feel for a correctly set up bike. If you want your family to enjoy your hobby, you must shoulder the burden of bike maintenance. Each outing required a quick pre-ride check of their machines for rubbing brakes, gears that had ceased to index, or rattles that they 'thought were meant to mean to sound like that'.

The others were years behind in terms bike quality too. The kids were riding heavy, bottom-of-the-range hand-me-downs with few gears, poor brakes and small wheels. A cycling friend picked up my son's first geared bike: 'Blimey, that feels heavier than two of my road bikes put together.'

I forgot about my own cycling fleet for a while and turned my attention to the family's bikes. They were all measured up and many hours were spent researching upgrades and potential replacements. As an obsessive cyclist, it's tempting to go overboard and specify machines that fit your needs more than the rider's. I put the high-end cycling catalogues aside: the children simply needed functional, lightweight machines that would grow with them and be robust enough to stand a few knocks. Islabikes proved an ideal solution for the pre-teen children: >



“I HAD FOUND A NEW PLEASURE IN CYCLING: ENJOYING THE ENTHUSIASM OF OTHERS”

lightweight, 26-inch wheeled, and within the range of a modest wallet.

It was a little more difficult fitting Helen out until I realised that not every cycling bug leads to full-blown obsession. There's a market flooded with cheap secondhand bikes discarded by owners who'd bought them with good intentions. She was soon the proud owner of a lightweight machine in excellent nick, costing a third of the shelf price. I spent time with the family setting up their bikes, getting saddle heights right and making sure that everything was properly oiled and in tip-top working order.

WHAT PARTNERS & CHILDREN WANT

Next we needed an objective, something to ease them back into the fold. This took planning. The only way they would enjoy my hobby was to partake on their terms.

My son Jake was keen to come and share 'gnarly' mountain bike trails with his dad. He had no interest in riding for fitness: he wanted an adrenalin fix, with boasting rights for school. Wife Helen was the polar opposite. She saw the benefit in riding to keep her fitness levels up but backed off as soon as things got a little tricky under wheel. Daughter Holly wasn't enthralled by cycling for its own sake and was best coaxed by the offer of a reward at the end of a ride: a pub meal, a large ice cream, or a promise of alternative entertainment, such as a water park or Go Ape session.

A holiday in Scotland saw us camping near the mountain bike trail centre of Newcastleton. This time I was prepared. We arrived with our bikes and examined the trail centre map. Colour-graded trails were well marked against effort required and rider ability. We each in turn shared what we'd want to get out of the day. No surprises: Jake wanted challenge and Helen and Holly wanted a nice scenic ride. Me? I simply wanted to see three happy riders.

All of the trails intertwined and with a bit of planning we could separate and regroup during the day. It worked a treat. I rode with every single family member and at times



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In the photos

6 Many kids would rather be mountain biking

7 Don't just ride. Who doesn't like stopping for cakes?

8 Graded routes at trail centres let you choose rides to suit

we were laughing together as a four. The trail centre removed the worry of cars and came with the added bonus of other riders prepared to help out when Dad wasn't there to advise on a strange rattle or best way to go.

We ended the day with a meal in the evening sun. There was a new atmosphere in our chat. The girls were laughing at a wrong turn taken, whilst suppressing their pride in having ridden a long steep hill up to the centre. Jake had enjoyed leading me down the twisty trails. And I had found a new pleasure in cycling: enjoying the achievements and enthusiasm of others.

QUIETLY CONFIDENT

Back home, I needed to keep the momentum going – without the requirement of a trip to an off-road trail centre. Out came the maps and I scoured the local area for routes that would meet our shared criteria:

- quiet enough for us to ride and chat easily;
- a hint of challenge or cycling interest;
- some form of 'reward'.

Fortunately, we are in reach of several Sustrans off-road routes on disused railways. These were perfect. We could ride to them on quieter roads, and then let those with a bit more enthusiasm ride on ahead with no fear of losing the dalliers behind. And we'd stop at a pub part way. These rides had the added advantage of instilling basic roadcraft in

those who hadn't grown up on the roads in the way that I had. Gradual acclimatisation was the key.

Local cycling clubs offered family-oriented events too. Chippenham Wheelers ran sessions at the Castle Coombe race track, where the kids could be coached in bike skills and try their hand at cycle racing. This was a real hit, as the kids were with other cycling kids, and they were constantly encouraged by club members throughout the events. We've even tried track cycling.

Over the last few years, we've moved from a dysfunctional cycling family to a household where bikes are moving to the core. The children now have a new sense of liberation as their bikes are a pleasure to ride and will carry them quickly to friends' houses or out-of-school clubs independently of their parents. Bikes are integral to our holidays, either transported or hired.

Ultimately, the person who's changed the most is me. I still head out for long, hard rides and my family still consider me mad. But we've discovered that there's a wealth of events, clubs, trails, traffic-free routes and open roads ready for family cyclists too.

This year sees us all sign up for the 'Summer of Cycling' initiative (summerofcycling.net), where cyclists can win prizes by encouraging others onto the bike. I know I have made progress when the rest of my family are spreading the word. ☺