

CYCLING HOLIDAYS

Easy

Novice or pro, there's a cycling holiday for every ability, writes Laura French

Whether it was running, puzzling or – yes – knitting, the past 18 months have seen us all desperately seeking new hobbies to while away the lockdown hours, and I probably wasn't the only one who decided to dust down an old rusty bike and get cycling again.

If your clients found themselves doing something similar, why not suggest a cycling holiday to show off their rekindled pedal power? Open spaces, fresh air and unspoilt natural landscapes make biking holidays a good bet for anyone seeking a socially-distanced, fitness-boosting break. There's an array of options too, from gentle, leisurely rides through scenic pastures to challenging climbs up steep mountain slopes.

We've picked out some of the best from across Europe and grouped them by ability, from barely-touched-a-bike newbie to Tour de France wannabe.



Château de Chambord, in the Loire Valley, France

CHATEAUX OF THE LOIRE INNTRAVEL

Fairytale castles, rolling vineyards and enchanting villages come together in the Loire Valley, and there's nothing quite like seeing it all from two wheels.

Clients have the chance to do just that on Inntravel's six-night self-guided cycle tour, which starts in the charming town of Azay-le-Rideau then meanders through Villandry, Ussé, Fontevraud, Chinon and beyond.

"For a beginner-friendly cycling holiday adventure overseas, it's hard to beat this region," says Alison Hall, head of product at Inntravel. "While the terrain is gentle and approachable for all abilities, it is the views and countless chateaux that will take cyclists' breath away."

Book it: From £885 per person based on two sharing, including six nights' B&B accommodation, three dinners, bike hire, luggage transfers, route notes and maps. inntravel.co.uk

CONTRASTS OF PUGLIA HEADWATER

From the conical trulli houses of Alberobello to historic wine towns, farming hamlets and talcum-white beaches, Italy's Puglia region is acclaimed for good reason – and Headwater's self-guided cycling trip offers adventurous types a chance to explore the best of it from the saddle. The seven-night trip combines rides through fertile landscapes, olive orchards and rugged coastlines with memorable stays that range from a 12th-century former courthouse to a 17th-century farmhouse, ending in the coastal town of Monopoli for a well-earned aperitivo in the old town square. And if newbie clients need reassurance, it's rated 1+, which the company deems 'suitable for those who haven't touched a bike in years'.

Book it: From £1,479 including accommodation, some meals, bike hire, luggage transfers and maps. headwater.com

TREASURES OF THE DANUBE EXODUS TRAVELS

With its historic cities, imposing castles and verdant forests, the Danube has earned a solid reputation among the river cruisers of the world, but it's not only from a ship that this 1,770-mile river can be explored. Exodus Travels offers a gentle, eight-day self-guided cycling trip from Vienna to Budapest taking in the best of the Danube's riverside settlements, including Bratislava in Slovakia and Gyor and Visegrád in Hungary, giving clients the chance to combine Austria's elegant capital with storybook villages, baroque buildings, opulent basilicas and more at their own, leisurely pace.

Book it: From £1,029 including four-star accommodation, daily breakfast, bike hire, route maps and luggage transfers. exodus.co.uk

ASK THE
expert



Frank Cheshire,
cycling product manager,
Intrepid Travel

"My number-one tip for an agent is to sell the experience even more than the physical aspect of cycling itself. In reality, the bike is just a tool that allows you to travel slowly and more richly. Cycling offers the ultimate experience for all your senses and gives people the chance to get closer to the destination without a car or coach window between you and the place you are riding through. For example, most people driving through Provence will marvel at the sight of endless fields of lavender. On a cycling trip you see it, smell it and even touch or taste it. That's the difference a cycling holiday offers."



Moderate



James Adkin, cycling

programme manager, Explore

"Sales are not back at pre-Covid levels, but as we emerge from lockdowns we have seen web visits and bookings picking up, especially for summer 2022. There is a dual effect: not only is the prospect of exploring by bike in clean fresh air more appealing than busy built-up places, but since lockdown a lot of people have also become more active in their everyday lives. There's been a huge uplift in UK bike sales and cycling in general, and many of our customers want to carry this on and are considering a cycling holiday – perhaps something they never thought about before. We've added several cycling tours in response, including Cycle Hadrian's Wall, which has proved really popular, our Coast to Coast trip across the north of England, and new trips in Poland, Spain and the Balkans."



Mljet, Croatia

CYCLE CROATIA AND THE BALKANS

INTREPID TRAVEL

For more-experienced cyclists looking to up the pace a little, the Dalmatian Coast is an excellent bet, with climbs offering rewarding views over the Adriatic. Intrepid's 14-day tour spans three countries and runs from Split to Sarajevo, taking in Brač Island, Hvar, Dubrovnik and beyond. Other stops include Montenegrin port town Kotor, the fourth-century city of Nikšić and the lakeside town of Plužine, with Roman ruins, medieval towns and Bosnian villages greeting guests along the way.

Book it: From £2,675 including bike hire, support vehicle,

accommodation, activities and some meals, with departures from May 2022. E-bikes are also available.

intrepidtravel.com

SELF-GUIDED CYCLING IN MAJORCA

KE ADVENTURE TRAVEL

Majorca may be more associated with fly-and-flop beach holidays than cycling trips, but don't dismiss it. KE Adventure has an eight-day, moderately-rated trip taking in the salt lakes of Llevant, the white-sand beaches of Es Trenc and the caves of Porto Cristo before hitting the slopes of the Unesco-listed Serra de Tramuntana mountain range for some adrenaline-pumping inclines

and descents. It ends in Playa de Palma for a dip in the sea, with a stop on the way in the Roman winemaking village of Binissalem for a tipple or two.

Book it: From £840 including accommodation, some meals, luggage transfers and bike hire, with departures in September and October.

keadventure.com

PORTUGUESE WAY: COAST AND CAMINO UTRACKS

If hiking is the only thing you associate with the Camino, it's time to expand your horizons. This ancient network of pilgrimage routes might have its origins in

on-foot voyages, but the Camino has become a hotspot for bikers in recent years too, with cyclists pedalling their way from various starting points to reach the iconic Santiago de Compostela. For one of the most scenic routes, suggest UTracks' eight-day itinerary on the Camino Portugues, which wanders along the Atlantic Coast and then crosses into Spain, passing old fishing villages, medieval cobbled towns and verdant pine forests, showing an alternative side to these two scenic countries.

Book it: From £1,050 including hotels and guesthouses, some meals, mountain bike rental, luggage transfers and route notes. utracks.com





Cyclists explore the countryside around Ohrid

CYCLE MACEDONIA & NORTHERN ALBANIA EXODUS TRAVELS

For those after a real challenge, the mountains beckon – and if clients have already done the Alps, it's time to look to the Balkans. Crystal-blue lakes, dramatic gorges and emerald peaks characterise the landscapes of northern Albania and North Macedonia, with ancient, barely-changed villages scattering the valleys. Exodus gives adventurous types the chance to explore the best of them on this eight-day guided group tour, passing the spectacular Komani Lake, the Black Drin Valley, the Unesco-listed town of Ohrid and more. Scenic delights include ancient trading routes, winding mountain roads and steep, hilly climbs.

Book it: From £1,049 including hotels, guesthouses, cycling leader, bike hire and vehicle support, with e-bikes available on request.
exodus.co.uk

CYCLING COAST TO COAST EXPLORE

Biking holidays don't have to require a flight, of course, and for those looking to take on a challenge without a huge time commitment, Explore has the answer – a four-day coast-to-coast adventure through the north of England, starting in Whitehaven on the west coast of Cumbria and ending in Tynemouth on the shores of Northumberland. Highlights include pedalling along a

disused railway to reach the Lake District, crossing the dramatic Pennines and taking on the Waskerley Way, with challenging climbs and rewarding descents aplenty along the way, and daily distances ranging from 33 to 53 miles.

Book it: From £445 including three nights' guesthouse accommodation, breakfasts, tour leader and bike hire.
explore.co.uk

SELF-GUIDED CYCLING: THE CALEDONIA WAY WILDERNESS SCOTLAND

Elsewhere in the UK, Scotland's majestic peaks, shimmering lochs and stately castles are just as worthy a backdrop for two-wheeled exploration – and the 234-mile Caledonia Way cuts through the heart of such sights, ambling from the Mull of Kintyre to Inverness via a mix of off-road climbs, roads and cycle paths. The route can be followed independently, but for those seeking the luxury of a support driver, luggage transfers, a welcome briefing and bike maintenance, suggest Wilderness Scotland's seven-day itinerary, which takes in the Isle of Arran, Tarbet, Oban and beyond. Distances range between 30 and 62 miles a day, with plenty of jaw-dropping scenery to compensate for the effort – which is really what this cycling thing is all about.

Book it: From £995 including three to four-star B&Bs, support vehicle, bike hire, private transfers and more.
wildernessscotland.com **TW**

FIVE TOP TIPS FOR SELLING CYCLING TRIPS

Dan Jackson, UK agency sales manager for Exodus Travels, shares his advice

1. Listen to your client: Find out how much cycling experience they have and choose a grade accordingly. Softer trips with e-bike availability are a great option for those with limited experience or for families and groups of mixed abilities. Full vehicle support is also offered on many tours as a 'safety net' for those concerned about longer distances.

2. Don't pigeonhole: Many clients are in their 60s and we get customers of all ages, sizes and backgrounds.

3. Push the selling points: Bike breaks are a fantastic way for clients to get fit and immerse themselves in a destination.

4. Talk about guides: If you're selling an escorted cycling tour, highlight the advantages of having an expert leader who can share their knowledge and offer morale-boosting encouragement.

5. Reap the rewards: Cycling holidays are lucrative. We get a huge amount of repeat business (nearly 50%), so if you sell a trip, the client will very likely return to you and book another.



PICTURES: Shutterstock/Michal Szymanski; Michael Armstrong; Oly Pemberton