



On your bike

MOUNTAIN BIKING IS FUN FOR ALL THE FAMILY – THOUGH NOT EVERYONE WILL BRAVE THE JUMPS.

A quick trawl of the daily papers can make for depressing reading on the state of Scottish health and fitness. There are countless stories about the rising level of obesity, especially among children who choose computer screens and fast food over fresh air and vegetables. Then there is the compensation culture, which has spread from America, the doom-mongers cry, wrapping young Scots in cotton wool, suffocating the sense of adventure and imagination that once made this country great. Finally, we have the neglected Scottish countryside, moan the opinion pieces. Why do we have all these laws allowing natives to roam free over its unparalleled beauty, when most of the population dare not set foot outside the Central Belt?

While these headlines may be eye-catching, they do not tell the whole story. The booming industry that surrounds mountain biking in Scotland is one such fly in the pessimist's ointment. America may have sent Nintendo, cheeseburgers and litigation our way, but she also shared with us the craze of mountain biking, which is currently one of Scotland's fastest growing sports.

The attractions are easy to spot. Aside from the health benefits, MTB, as it is commonly abbreviated, gives the rider a chance to test his or her nerve to the limit in some of the most glorious scenery in the British Isles. It is an affordable sport: a decent bike will cost a few hundred pounds, but aside from the cost of parking, most trails are free to the public. It is an activity that every member of the family can enjoy together. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, mountain biking is cool. In the same way that the skate boarding, BMX and snow boarding scenes capture the imagination of the bored teenager, so mountain biking gives street cred to the rider who wears the right gear and pulls off the most outrageous moves.

'You just have to wonder where these kids might be otherwise, if they weren't riding their bikes up here,' says Emma Guy, who runs the MTB centre at Glentress Forest near Peebles. Her 'Hub in the Forest' hires and sells biking equipment to the public, providing an Alpine-style café for the après-cycle. We were stood at the top of the Freeride Park, where thrill-seekers can hone their technical skills over jumps, ramps, skinnies (thin logs) and berms (sling-shot turns). 'There is so little for young

people to do in this part of Scotland and mountain biking provides one means of keeping them out of trouble.'

Sat gingerly on my hire bike at the top of the tricks park, I was happy to watch the riders in action rather than take the plunge myself. Emma, a 37-year-old ex-professional who represented Scotland at downhill mountain biking, was less timid, giving the young lads a lesson in style and control as she flipped from one jump to the next. Along with her fellow Scot Tanya Brunger, also an international biker and local of the area, Emma set up the Hub in the Forest in 2002 to catch the wave of enthusiasm for the fledgling sport. Nowadays, over 200,000 visitors come to Glentress every year, swarming from all across the globe to enjoy its unrivalled scope.

For those of us not yet skilled or courageous enough to brave the Freeride Park, what else does Glentress have to offer? 'Follow me,' Emma replied knowingly, leading the way down a green run, which was much more suited to my limited experience. 'We have varying levels of difficulty for each level of ability,' she continued, cycling along a smooth, sloping woodland path as the sun twinkled through the canopy above our helmets. 'It



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is modelled on the Alpine ski piste system, with greens and blues for beginners and novices leading to reds and blacks for intermediaries and experts. You could spend a whole day on just one colour, such is the scope in the forest. There are few places in the world, even in the US,

Left: Mountain biking is cool. Above: Getting into the right gear.

Canada or New Zealand, where you can find this much freedom in scenery like Glentress.' In total, there are 35 miles of tracks open to the public.

I was there on a sunny Sunday morning, so it was perhaps no surprise that every run was dotted with families and groups out for a weekend pedal, but this is a common sight for Emma. 'The attraction for families is that they can send older kids off on one route, while maybe attaching a younger one on a tag-along bike or even a baby wagon. We get a lot of guys come out from Edinburgh to let off a bit of steam on the more difficult runs, while the quieter runs allow a chance to get some peace and quiet after a busy week, or to catch up on some gossip with a friend in a private environment. And there can be no finer way to exercise a dog.'



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The Hub provides hire bikes, as well as selling all the paraphernalia that a modern biker might need. For the recreational sportsman, this might include a bike, helmet, water bottle and pump. For those a bit more serious, there are body armour suits, energy gels and the coolest apparel such as top-labelled pants, T-shirts and jackets. Far from the stereotype of the pale, podgy teens in football shirts playing snooker or darts in the Great Indoors, everyone here has a healthy glow.

Glentress is part of the Forestry Commission's 7Stanes initiative to make the south of Scotland a world-renowned destination for mountain biking. The seven centres or 'stones' are situated across the Borders, Dumfriesshire and Galloway, funded and maintained by the various councils, enterprise groups and conservation bodies in the area. Following the degeneration of many of the traditional industries, especially textiles and wool milling, the plan is to regenerate the district through tourism.

VisitScotland has been quick to latch on to the attraction of mountain biking in its quest to position Scotland as the outdoor centre of the world. Over the last decade, an infrastructure of facilities, accommodation and support has grown in tandem with the business opportunities that outdoor pursuits provide. A small commute between the leading venues in Scotland – small compared with the summer Alps or Rockies – plays into the nation's hands.

Nowhere is this more prevalent than at the annual three-day World Cup at Fort William, where the leading downhill



mountain bikers risk body and soul on the course that winds between the gondola pylons at Aonach Mor in the Nevis Range. The 400 competitors thrash down the obstacle course at speeds that demand at least a broken collar bone in return for an accident. 15,000 spectators headed to the Highlands to climb the course and gawp at the riders as they steam on by. A truly international event, the whole town rocks for days on end, with the bars and hotels full at a time of year when the summer hiking season is slowing down.

This year, Scotland boasted her first world champion as 18 year old Ruaridh Cunningham won the junior title, beating rivals from Sweden and New Zealand to the biggest cheer of the weekend. Like so many others, he honed his skills on the paths above the Hub in the Forest.

'Yes, Ruaridh used to train here,' said Emma, as if it was just another chapter in a long line of success stories. 'I am sure there will be many more like him. We get some excellent female riders here too, who will hopefully enjoy the same experiences as Tracey and I. When we started out, there weren't any competitions for women in this country and very few for men either, which shows how far the sport has come in the last 15 years.'

As we made our way back down to the Hub's café, we dodged round a teenager, aged maybe 16 and weighing the best part of 20-stone. He was pedaling his way over to a group of friends, a huge grin on his flushed face. 'That's made my day!' said Emma, her own smile every bit as wide. 'That's what this place is really all about. I mean, where else will a guy that size be able to exercise at his own pace in such a relaxed setting. I'm going to be enthusing about him all day!'

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Clockwise from top: Colourful mountain bikes; Preparing for the ride ahead; Flying high; Making sure the head gear is secure; Biking is a sport for all ages; Solitude in the forest; Time to rest those weary limbs.

FIELD FACTS

For more information on the Hub in the Forest, telephone 01721 721 736 or visit <http://www.thehubintheforest.co.uk>

For 7Stanes, visit www.7stanes.gov.uk

For the World Championships in Fort William, visit www.fortwilliamworldchamps.co.uk