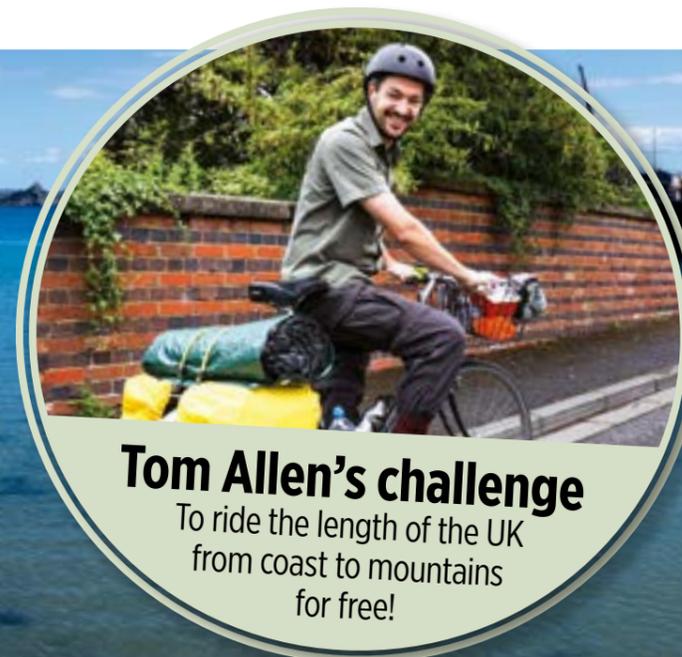


**CYCLING
ACTIVE
THE VALUE
ISSUE**

Touring on tuppence



Tom Allen's challenge
To ride the length of the UK
from coast to mountains
for free!



Putting off a cycling adventure because you think you can't afford it? It's time to meet a man who rode hundreds of miles without making a single cash transaction...

Words: David Bradford Photos: Tom Allen

Don't take money, don't take fame, don't need no credit card to ride this... Hang on there, Mr Huey Lewis, we'll let that clunky double-negative slide, but where in the world does rail travel require no form of monetary outlay? You were obviously intending to write a song about the bicycle but couldn't make the lyrics rhyme. Gotcha. Ah well, not to worry, we'll do the job for you — with the help of Tom Allen, a young man who earlier this year set out to prove that riding hundreds of miles needn't cost a single penny.

It's one thing keeping your touring costs down by opting for aluminium over titanium, campsite over Hilton, Aldi over Rapha, or even a dog-eared map over hi-tech sat-nav but Allen's objective was far more radical than that. He wanted to prove it was possible to ride the entire length of the country, from Land's End to John o' Groats, without carrying any cash at all. And no, Huey, no credit cards either.

Thirty-two-year-old computer science graduate Allen is no reloading

vagrant; he is an experienced adventure cyclist and writer who made an educated estimate that riding the best part of 900 miles spending zero pounds zero pence would be an interesting test of resolve, charm and bartering skills. Naturally, an initial outlay on bike and camping kit was unavoidable — Allen allowed himself a grand total budget of 25 quid.

Now, I know you don't need to spend a fortune to procure yourself a serviceable bike, but seriously, what kind of steed do you get for a mere pony?

"I went to the tip and found a bike that was mostly working beneath all the grime," explains Allen. "I cleaned it up and got all the parts needed by asking cyclist friends for spares. I also went to a household recycling centre at the end of the festivals season, where people dump all their camping gear. I got a tent, sleeping bag and mattress."

Sleeping in bedding deemed fit only for the dump by its former owner may seem a dive too far down the garbage chute of extreme parsimony for some,

but it was just the start for Allen. He salvaged unwanted essentials from Freecycle, and even made his own camping stove from a beer can (find out how here: tinyurl.com/c6584fd).

Free spirit

At this point, I have to admit I'm amazed at just how cheaply it's possible to cobble together the basics for a bike tour — and I'm mildly embarrassed that my £1,000 hybrid has racked up less mileage in its life than Allen's free bike did in a single week. Was shaming cyclists like me part of his plan?

"[As a travel writer] I try to make cycle touring as accessible as possible, to evangelise it, but the one thing that people see as an obstacle to long-distance travel is a lack of money."

For Allen, making a tiny budget stretch

"I went to the tip and found a bike that was mostly working beneath all the grime... I got parts from friends"

need not be an onerous challenge. "There are ways of making a cycling tour very, very cheap." Which led him to ponder: "How can I show that the tour itself doesn't need to cost an awful lot of money? I thought, maybe I can cycle the length of the country for 100 quid. Then I thought, no, I'll try to do it for free, do it properly."

Doing it properly would mean spending no cash at all; the only other self-imposed rule was that he would use no means inaccessible to 'normal' people, i.e. he wouldn't call in favours from fans and followers of his blog (that's right, Huey, "don't take fame"). Money and publicity-swayed freebies were off-limits, leaving just blagging, cadging, negotiating and of course tapping-up of family, friends and friends-of-friends for free hospitality along the way.

Favour of the month

So, how did it go? "The bike and the kit did what they needed to do. I had a couple of mechanicals; a couple of punctures and a couple of broken spokes. A community bike workshop [in Bristol] fixed the bike for free, replaced the cables and tuned up the gears for me."

But what about the burden of survival, the imperative to forage for

free food and find safe, suitable places to sleep?

"I was on the road for three weeks and I probably stayed with friends and family for about a week in total. Obviously when I went to someone's house, they'd feed me, they'd give me breakfast and a few bits and bobs to take with me, so I'd try and stockpile the stuff that would last and keep it in reserve for when I had no food."

Honest Tom

Allen is evidently not from the Bear Grylls school of adventuring; he confesses immediately the parts of his adventure that were comfortable, and makes no effort to dramatise or dress them up as tougher than they really were. I'm forced to ask directly: there must have been some horrible bits?

"Yes, there was one day in particular I remember. I'd arrived in a place called Whitchurch, in Shropshire, and I'd eaten everything I had." He recounts finding himself alone and hungry with few signs of life on the street and no open shops. "It was really grim. I didn't want to go into the working men's club and ask for free food... I ended up cycling out of Whitchurch, along a canal, and going to bed without dinner and having no breakfast in the morning."

From left to right: Bike cleaned up and ready to go; admiring St Michael's Mount; on a remote country lane in Devon; receiving a free bike fix courtesy of Bristol's Life Cycle UK; camping outside Whitchurch; Working for food at Burnley FC

The morning brought intensified hunger and wild determination: "I cycled back into Whitchurch — absolutely starving! There were no limits to what I would do, so I cycled past the local Iceland supermarket, and I thought, I've heard about this dumpster-diving business. I went round the back, jumped into the skip and found a couple of big bags of out-of-date carrots, so I spent the rest of the day eating raw carrots."

The thought of surviving on binned vegetables doesn't make me want to rush out on a coast-to-coast ride without my wallet, but Allen is persuasive in his argument that touring without money forces you to confront some basic truths about human existence.

"It's all about human contact when you've got no money," he says. "Self-sufficiency is a bit of a myth really; unless you're dropped into the middle of Alaska out of a helicopter, it all boils down to communicating with other people to help you find what you need."

For Allen, communicating meant stopping at shops, pubs and farms and bargaining for food and hospitality by offering to help out, wash up or fix someone's bike. He admits that his charm offensive didn't always work. **12**



How to tour for free

Tom Allen's top five tips for zero-expenditure cycling

1. Be realistic about what you really need to carry with you and what's an unnecessary luxury. A couple of spare inner tubes are essential; bundles of energy bars are not.
2. Forget the false notion of 'independence'. Without cash, you rely on others' kindness and hospitality. Completely. So learn to elicit generosity — a very useful life skill.
3. Barter. The best way to acquire a free lunch is by offering something in return. Everyone has a useful asset to offer, even if it's simply a willingness to wash up.
4. Ditch the plan. Without money, you have less control of your trip. Let instinct and others guide you; embrace the unexpected.
5. Appreciate the simple things. The best aspects of a bike tour are the views, the laughs, the sharing of experience, the sense of achievement — all of which are free.

"We're quite private people in the UK. When a stranger comes along and says I'm doing this weird thing, we're quite stand-offish." He likens this to an instance from earlier in our interview where I'd had to pause the recording to brusquely despatch a caller who'd buzzed at the door. It's true: sometimes we're just too busy or self-absorbed to take an interest in strangers, and maybe we're missing out as a result.

People tend to have more time for unfamiliar favour-seekers in rural areas, according to Allen.

"I stopped at a farm that had a few workers, all quite low-key, and they were disconnected from the anonymity of urban centres. When I told them what I was doing, they said, 'You're completely nuts but we're definitely going to help you out because it's just such a cool thing that you're trying to do.' They had the time and presence of mind to engage with me, so I started looking for those kinds of opportunities."

Milk of northern kindness

He also found, in accordance with regional folklore, a geographical pattern to the levels of hospitality.

"[My success rate] was pretty low down in the south and in the West Midlands. As soon as I got past

Manchester and into the north, it seemed a lot higher."

Pie-yielding northerners notwithstanding, what about finding shelter and getting a decent night's kip to recover from the day's riding?

"If I couldn't blag my way into someone's house, I'd camp for free anywhere with the tent I'd got from the tip."

Really? But isn't it difficult in some areas to find a suitable pitch?

"No, it isn't difficult, it's just such a weird thing to do for most people. There are so many fears associated with it, but usually it's a case of turning off a main road, finding a gate, jumping over it and camping behind the hedge out of sight."

And you didn't get told to sling your hook (or less polite versions thereof) by angry landowners?

"No, that's never happened to me in seven years of cycle touring. It's obviously a fear for many people, but the fact is that after dark people don't roam around the fields looking for illegal campers."

Journey's end

As much as I admire Allen's resourceful pluckiness, I'm still not sure I could summon the boldness to take on a whole trip's worth of blagging,

The bottom line

The balance sheet after three weeks of money-free touring

Outgoings	
Accommodation	00.00
Food	00.00
Fuel	00.00
Repairs	00.00
Entertainment	00.00
Train ticket home	65.25
Income	
Labour: washing up	65.00
GRAND TOTAL	-£00.25

bin-raiding and trespassing. Was it really worth it? Did he make it to John o' Groats feeling inspired and full of hope for a post-consumer-capitalist utopia in which co-dependence renders money redundant?

"The original plan was to ride all the way to John o' Groats but I worked out that I didn't have the time to source the food and the contacts," he says.

Hang on, what? You didn't make it? "It didn't really matter in the end; I got to Edinburgh and I hadn't spent a penny on the way."

Surely it mattered a little; completing the full LEJOG would have added an

From left to right: Free hospitality made the trip possible; another job, another meal; taking a well-earned scone break; enjoying the peace in a Cumbrian back road; feasting off the last of the supplies; final destination Edinburgh

extra distinction to Allen's achievement, but granted, Land's End to Edinburgh is a seriously long way — especially with no money. As he says, the real point of the tour wasn't its specific itinerary or total mileage but the relinquishment of cash. It wasn't so much a utopian dream as a quest for a refreshed perspective on want versus need. When you've literally no money, it's impossible to hide from the basic truth that, beneath our private striving for stuff and status, we all depend on the same fundamental things: food, water, shelter and, crucially, each other.

"I set out suspecting that we've become a little bit too obsessed with cash in this country, and that it drives everything we do in our lives, but it turns out there are still some people out there who can think otherwise," he says.

Allen believes the trip really has lightened money's hold over him.

"Now, if for whatever reason I found myself penniless, homeless and with no access to money, I'd know what to do. I wouldn't panic. Real security comes from knowing you can get by without any money. It may not be very pleasant or predictable but it's possible."

For further details, check out Tom Allen's cycle touring blog at www.tombiketrip.com. **End**