



Freshwater Bay

ISLAND CYCLING

THE ISLE OF WIGHT HAS AROUND 200 MILES OF CYCLE TRACKS, BYWAYS AND BRIDLEWAYS, MAKING IT THE PERFECT SETTING FOR CYCLISTS OF ALL ABILITIES. GISELLE WHITEAKER PUSHES THE PEDALS.



Sandown Bay



Appuldurcombe House

Across the globe, countries are attempting to balance coronavirus infection rates while they try to reboot their struggling tourism industries, but with regulations around entry, testing and quarantine changing daily, often at short notice, international travel is a bit of a minefield. It's enough to put even a seasoned traveller off an overseas jaunt.

I'm not quite comfortable yet with the notion of international travel, but in an attempt to fulfil a literal definition of overseas, I find myself sitting on the deck of the Red Funnel ferry to the Isle of Wight. Technically, the Solent is a strait, rather than a sea as such, but it's tidal and that's good enough for me. It's also a lovely sunny day and no masks are needed on the outer deck, which feels like a delicious slice of freedom.

My boyfriend Elio and I are on a bit of an adventure. In our desperation to get away, we'd decided on the Isle of Wight, but struggled to find any accommodation at all, let alone something within budget. Then I stumbled upon Windmill Campersite, which promised it was one of the quirkiest glamping sites on the island. With no way to book on the somewhat retro web page, I'd hastily fired an email off pleading for any accommodation at all – secretly hoping the repurposed helicopter would be available – and been rewarded with a two-night booking in "Percy – One Bike Night".

As the name suggests, Percy is for cyclists. Elio's bike is wearing a coat of cobwebs in a corner of the garage. I don't own one. Some online detective work led me to the only cycle hire shop in Cowes, Two Elements. Bikes and helmets booked, we'd dug out a sleeping bag, packed ultra-light into small backpacks and walked onto the ferry at Southampton.

Spilling off the ferry in East Cowes, we make our way to Two Elements and collect our steeds for the weekend. We have a seven-mile cycle ahead. Within minutes we're on National Cycle Route 23, which travels from Cowes to Sandown, utilising a disused railway line. The majority is along a mercifully level forested path, sunlight filtering through the trees. Occasionally we catch glimpses of water through the branches, inlets where boats bob on the water and mudflats tinged with green algae. It's more enjoyable than either of us expected.

It all goes a bit downhill when we reach Newport, but not literally. We've been using Google Maps to navigate, the phone tucked in the pocket of my leggings with the volume on high. Google stops talking in Newport – the battery is depleted. As we wheel our bikes onto the kerb, Elio's backpack strap gives way and the back trim bursts, leaving a gaping wound in the top of the bag, which rolls off Elio's back. We look hopefully along the road for a coffee shop of some kind where we can recharge, in both senses of the word. No such luck. There's a car yard, though, and the man on duty kindly agrees to plug my phone in for ten minutes. While we wait, I fashion a new backpack strap from an old shopping bag and before too long we're back on the road, once again heading in the right direction.



The firepit at Windmill Campersite



The Shower Shack and Windmill Campersite

Windmill Campersite is worth the effort, even though it's an uphill cycle. The family-run site more than lives up to its boast on quirkiness. Along with the Westland Wessex XT469 original 1965 Falklands "Rescue" Helicopter that now sleeps a family of four, there are shepherd's huts dotted across the farm property, a static 1970s Spitscreen VW Campervan called Bollywood, and Percy, which looks suspiciously like a milk float with walls and roof added. There's a cinema inside a silo; a laundrette that was once a Robin Reliant; and an honesty shop inside an old truck. Big Bertha BBQ and the Spudomatic, which look like they have been constructed from scrap metal and imagination; and a kitchen and dining area inside a double-decker bus make up the dining area. The highlight is the Shower Shack, an ablution room with disco lights, music and an emergency Manilow button.

We take a picturesque stroll to Carisbrooke village for supplies and, by the time we return, Big Bertha has been lit and the smell of barbecue is wafting in the air. Families are sitting in designated eating areas and around the firepit, separated by COVID-mandated screens. Overexcited children run around in circles and as we tuck into juicy steak sandwiches cooked on the grill, a dog sits by us with pleading eyes. There's a community feel to the outdoor dining area, people bonding as they warm their hands by the fire or teach each other Big Bertha's tricks.

Over the next few days, we peddle around as much of the island as we can manage, sometimes under blue skies,



Percy - One Bike Night



Beach huts on Gurnard Bay

There's a cinema inside a silo; a laundrette that was once a Robin Reliant; and an honesty shop inside an old truck.



Steephill Cove near Ventnor



The Westland Wessex XT469 at Windmill Campersite

Our fellow guests at Windmill Campersite look at us with amazement when we tell them we're cycling.

often in the rain. We fly downhill to Newport for coffee; visit Appuldurcombe House, a masterpiece of English Baroque architecture begun in the early 18th century as the seat of the Worsley family, now a graceful shell; and explore the pebble beach at Gurnard, fringed by green beach huts.

Our fellow guests at Windmill Campersite look at us with amazement when we tell them we're cycling. "Are you cyclists?" one woman asks, and in unison, we give an emphatic "No."

By the time we leave, though, we have quads of steel and our bottoms have moulded to the shape of our bike seats. That's when I check the email from Stewart at Windmill Campersite and realise cycling was a suggestion, not a directive. While I wouldn't have chosen it without that misunderstanding, I would now. In fact, I'd recommend it. ■