

Feel the wind in your hair and get on track for scenic cycling in the Dales

Tom Marshall dons his Lycras and has a close shave with the countryside

» We were in the village famed as the place Julie Walters and Helen Mirren disrobed in britcom *Calendar Girls*, on the last day of our Yorkshire Dales cycling trip.

Kettlewell was yet another picture-perfect riverside scene of stone cottages, quaint bridges and red telephone boxes – it had become a running joke that every village was even prettier than the last.

We chatted to a shaven-legged rider sporting the full Team Sky Lycra ensemble of triple Olympic champion and Tour de France contender Bradley Wiggins – like a schoolboy who wears not just the shirt and shorts of his beloved football club, but even the socks proudly pulled up tight over his knees.

This man was clearly too keen – but for a moment I envied him. I considered how sweet it would be to glide along without the wind resistance from my hairy calves holding me back.

What had I become?

Only four days earlier I had reluctantly pulled on my own skin-tight combo for the first time – feeling as uncomfortable and exposed as Miss January might have – and now I was contemplating taking a razor to my legs.

Keen to leave the city behind, two friends and I were tackling the Yorkshire Dales Cycleway, a 130-mile route that circles the entire national park, starting and ending in Skipton.

Undaunted

Signposted throughout and sticking mainly to traffic-free roads, it seemed perfect for first-time bike-trippers like us – although that is not to say we were undaunted. We had heard it could get quite hilly.

After catching a morning train – three hours from King's Cross – we were raring to go and only momentarily paused to admire Skipton Castle as we spun out of town. There would be plenty more sights where that came from.

As we hit the Dales proper the sun came out and everything clicked into gear. We were in lower Wharfedale, home to the beautiful waterside hamlet of Burnsall, where we scoffed cake and were scoffed at by a weather-beaten, middle-aged Yorkshireman who had covered half our five-day trip by lunch.

After a breezy ride we reached Malhamdale's stunning limestone scenery, which boasts Malham Cove, a spectacular 70-metre-high cliff, waterfalls and the dra-



■ A view looking towards Askrigg



■ One of 17 viaducts on the famous Settle to Carlisle railway, in Dent



■ Tom Marshall (right) with friends Miles (left) and Tom, in front of striking Ingleborough

matic limestone ravine Gordale Scar.

We stayed at the River House in Malham, a former Victorian country house. Owners Ann and Alex Roe say the secret to a good B&B is "a warm welcome, a comfortable bed and a good breakfast", and they most certainly delivered on these counts. The en-suite rooms were clean and tidy and the place had a wonderful dining room where the breakfast was superb – I have never seen such a neat fried egg – so it was no surprise to hear the owners are both chefs by profession.

Fuelled up, we faced our first difficult climb leading to Malham Tarn, the highest natural lake in the Pennines. It may have taken a while – but the important thing is we stayed in the saddle.

Buoyed by our success, we added a few extra miles with a detour to picturesque Arncliffe – with its central triangle of stone houses overlooking a pristine green, so

perfect it feels like a film set.

Back on the cycleway, we skirted the Pennines on our way to the caving hotspot Ingleton. Bunking just outside town at the beautiful Nutstile Farm, we caught a glimpse of rural life at this working dairy and sheep farm with a B&B sideline.

Hairpinned decents

Approached via a pretty tree-lined path that slopes down to the farmhouse, its cosy rooms overlook meadows where cows graze under the imposing sight of Ingleborough mountain, one of the Yorkshire Three Peaks. Curious guests are welcome to watch the twice-daily milkings – while farmer Stephen Brennand has not missed one for nearly three years.

The next day we passed miles of dry stone walls, struggled up energy-sapping climbs into austere heathland, and flew down exhilarating, hairpinned descents. Cobbled Dent was easy on

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the eye but brutal on the knees, while the road from Wensleydale to the northern wilds of Swaledale was breathtaking, climbing to around 500 metres before cutting through craggy limestone and plummeting to Gunnerside.

Here we stayed at the lovely School House, a Grade II-listed former school master's

house run by Jackie Lanier and her Texan husband Barry.

They have done a great renovation job, blending the new and the old with modern fittings alongside exposed stone walls and wooden beams, ripping up the carpets to reveal original stone flooring.

Beginning in bracken-

Where to stay

■ River House

Warm welcome at four-star guest house in stunning limestone scenery with tip-top breakfast courtesy of chef owners

Address: Malham, BD23 4DA

Tel: 01729 830 315

E-mail: info@riverhousehotel.co.uk

Web: www.riverhousehotel.co.uk

Tariff: Bed and breakfast from £40 per person per night

■ Nutstile Farm

Glimpse the rural charms of farm life amid stunning scenery and watch twice daily milkings under the gaze of Ingleborough

Address: Ingleton, LA6 3DT

Tel: 01524 241 752

E-mail: info@nutstile.co.uk

Web: www.nutstile.co.uk

Tariff: B&B from £27.50ppn

■ School House

The old and new combine as original stone floors, bare walls and wooden beams complement modern chintz-free decor in quaint village

Address: Gunnerside, DL11 6LD

Tel: 01748 886 874

E-mail: schoolhousebandb@hotmail.co.uk

Web: www.gunnerside.info

Tariff: B&B from £35ppn

■ Racehorses Hotel

Find comfort and excellent kitchen a cut above your average country pub, overlooking stunning River Wharfe and *Calendar Girls* country

Address: Kettlewell, BD23 5QZ

Tel: 01756 760233

Fax: 01756 761036

E-mail: info@racehorseshotel.co.uk

Web: www.racehorseshotel.co.uk

Tariff: B&B from £40ppn

filled moors, the next day saw us race a group of students doing John o' Groats to Land's End before reaching Kettlewell.

The Racehorses Hotel, our last stopover, is a splendid 18th century inn with views over the River Wharfe and the scenery immortalised in *Calendar Girls*.

The spacious rooms were complemented by a top pub and restaurant – we were blown away by the kitchen. My friends gleefully devoured the pan-fried salmon, while the veggie curry matched up to Indian restaurant quality – a rare feat for a pub.

After five days in the gorgeous and ever-changing scenery of lush woods, cobble villages, craggy rock faces and barren upland landscapes, I was well and truly smitten with the Yorkshire Dales – and above all the sport of cycling.

We were already planning our next jaunt before we left Skipton – now where did I put that razor...