

## **UNDERSTANDING CYCLE TOURISTS**

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**Cycle tourism in the UK is now a reality. Already worth £285m annually, it is a market that is set to continue apace in the future, thanks largely to the opening of the 10,000-mile National Cycle Network.**

**Despite this impressive growth, little is known about the people choosing to undertake cycling holidays and even less is known about their reasons for doing so. So what are these cycle tourists like and what makes them tick? And how can tourism marketers and planners successfully attract cycle tourists? This report attempts to answer these questions.**

### **Cycle tourism in the UK**

The total UK leisure cycling market is estimated to be worth £635 million a year, with cycle tourism in general contributing £285 million. Cycle holidays, where cycling is the main purpose of the holiday, account for £142 million of the annual total (Sustrans, 1999).

Already a sizeable market, cycle tourism and cycle holidays are predicted to enjoy considerable growth over the coming decade (Keeling, 1999). Much of the predicted increase in trade is attributed to the development of the Sustrans-inspired National Cycle Network (NCN). This 10,000-mile countrywide network of cycle-ways will be complete by 2005, and already some 5,000 miles have been opened. Funded in part by a £43.5 million grant from the Millennium Commission, the National Cycle Network provides a level of cycle infrastructure previously not seen in this country.

In terms of its structure, the NCN is divided into a number of routes, the longer of which have been mapped and given names such as the C2C, Kingfisher Trail and the West Country Way. One of the aims of such mapping and product development work has been to encourage tourist use of the routes.

There is already some UK evidence to show that this is starting to pay dividends. Research on the C2C, which runs from Whitehaven to Sunderland, shows the route accounting for annual tourism revenue of approximately £1.5m (Cope & Doxford, 1998).

In order to better understand the potential market for such routes, a number of authors have produced reports looking at the characteristics of cycle tourists (Beioley, 1995; Lumsdon, 1996; Countryside Commission, 1995; Cope, 1999). Although these are useful studies, little work has been conducted into the underlying reasons why people undertake cycling holidays.

It is in response to this lack of research into cycle tourist motivations that this paper details not only the characteristics of cycle tourists but also their route choices and motivations.

### **What do we mean by cycle tourists?**

For the purposes of this study, cycle tourists are defined as people who undertake a self organised holiday that includes at least one overnight stay and for which cycling is the main purpose of the holiday (Countryside Commission, 1989). Those selecting packaged cycling holidays have been excluded on the grounds that this market is predicted to remain significantly smaller than the independently organised sector in the UK.

### **Characteristics of cycle tourists**

The results presented below are based upon a sample of 766 cycle tourists. The sample was derived from people ordering cycle route maps from Sustrans for use whilst on a cycling holiday. A small questionnaire slipped inside the maps was used to identify members of the sample who could be defined as cycle tourists and those willing to take part in further research.

- Cycle tourists are far more likely to be male than female.
- They are predominately aged 45 and over, with the largest proportion in the age range 45 to 59.
- Cycle tourists are likely to have been on a similar holiday previously.

## **The motivations of cycle tourists**

A series of 11 in-depth interviews was conducted with cycle tourists. A checklist of possible motivations was used as a guide to questioning. The definitions of motivating factors were derived from the previous studies (Crompton, 1979; Tinsley & Kass, 1979; Crandall, 1980; Leisure Consultants, 1992; Countryside Commission, 1995; Simonsen & Jorgensen, 1996; Ritchie, 1997; Ryan & Glendon, 1998).

The motivations to undertake cycling holidays varied, but can be summarised as follows:

- The idea of challenge is a major driving force.
- The quality of the scenery is of primary importance to cycle tourists, with a preference for wild and unpopulated areas.
- In contrast to their active nature, cycling holidays are seen as mentally relaxing.
- Cycle tourists enjoy getting away from crowds but enjoy the company of others whilst cycling.
- Cycling holidays are generally not used as a way of getting fit.
- Exploration is important, but the pressure of reaching daily destinations means few visit specific tourist attractions.
- Cycling holidays allow nature to be experienced in a unique way that is different to when walking or driving.
- Cycling holidays are often a chance to have a break from family responsibilities, with trips taken with friends rather than family.
- Cycle tourists do not consider taking cycling holidays for environmental reasons.

The following are short extracts from the interviews that typify responses:

The concept of challenge was often cited as a reason given to undertake a cycling holiday. There was a high degree of physical challenge, with references to hills, climbs and terrain being given as the source of the challenge.

There was also a more personal expression of the idea of challenge, with cycling holidays offering a challenge on other levels, including the overcoming of illness and disability or the effects of ageing:  
*“As far as I’m concerned it’s a physical challenge, it needs to be something where, for the last couple of hours of the day, it’s a good distance so you know you’re going to be riding a full day.”*

Cycling holidays were not generally seen as a way of getting fit, although there was an acknowledgement that the holiday was physically active. Fitness was often quoted as a reason for cycling *per se*, rather than going on a cycling holiday.

*“I enjoy cycling anyway. I like being fit so the idea wasn’t to do that on holiday, to get fit.”*

The chance to explore an area was important, although a distinction was made between exploring an area and exploring specific attractions.

Few used cycling holidays to explore specific attractions or places, it was more the serendipity of coming across places along the route. When probed as to why this was so, the pressure to reach daily destinations and/or mileage was given.

*“With the type of mileage we did, it was rare. We did 60 miles a day. We stopped a bit in Caernarfon but it’s difficult when you’ve got bikes... the weight, all the stuff on the bike as well. It was OK to just have a quick ride round Caernarfon but it’s not easy. And if you stop at a café or something, you sit outside just to keep an eye on the bike.”*

Despite their physical nature, cycling holidays were considered relaxing. Some interviewees drew a distinction between physically relaxing and mentally relaxing, considering cycling to be the latter. Other respondents preferred to describe them as exhilarating and engendering a sense of wellbeing.

There was only moderate agreement that cycling holidays were a ‘get away from it all’ holiday.

*“Any kind of exercise de-stresses you, you end up getting rid of the stress doing anything. So cycling just takes you out of yourself.”*

Relative isolation was important for cycling holidays, with getting away from crowds being cited in a number of interviews as being important. Interviewees wanted to experience isolated scenery with other cycle tourists, rather than experience it on their own.

*“You never see anybody, we never did... all the roads were completely empty.”*

Scenery featured prominently in descriptions of the best experiences whilst on holiday. The lack of people and the wildness of the scenery were the important factors that underlay their enjoyment.

*“...came to the top of the hill, turned a corner and there was this beautiful reservoir, just... you’d no idea it was up there. It was just out of the blue, surrounded by trees and the sun, it was a gorgeous blue sky, the sun came down and hit this reservoir and we all stopped and took a photograph.”*

Respondents made reference to the fact that they experienced nature in a different way whilst on a bike. They saw things that they wouldn’t be able to see if exploring by car and went to places they couldn’t get to by other modes of transport.

*“You’re that bit higher, you can see over the hedges, you can see the scenery – it’s just a really nice way to see places. You see far more than any other way. If you walk, what are you going to see? Five-ten miles, that’s it. If you’re in a car, you pass through it and it’s gone.”*

The sample reported cycling holidays as being a chance to do something for themselves. It was often seen as an escape from their familial role as mother or father.

*“I think the cycling holiday is more for yourself, than it is trying to make it as interesting for other people. You can be very selfish on a cycling holiday. If someone is not enjoying it, that’s up to them.”*

The desire to have fun was a major factor in the selection of cycling holidays. Indeed, it was often an unprompted reason for going on a cycling holiday. Interestingly, respondents often explained the non-participation of family members in cycling holidays in terms of “it wasn’t their idea of fun”.

*“It makes you feel pleased with yourself when you’ve done it, but it’s just good fun.”*

The desire to have an inexpensive holiday was not conveyed strongly for any holidays that were undertaken. This is despite the fact that cycling holidays tended to be centred around youth hostel or bed and breakfast accommodation, rather than hotels.

Of other rational factors, the ease of access to the cycling holiday was occasionally mentioned as an issue, often because the time available for the holiday was limited.

*“...it was easy, we’ve got a friend in St Bees. Scarborough is not that far away from Huddersfield. It’s kind of relatively easy to get to. So it seemed the natural thing to do.”*

Cycling holidays were a great source of discussion with family and friends. Anecdotes of challenging experiences often featured in post-holiday conversations. Particularly where cycling holidays were taken with friends, the holiday remained a topic of discussion throughout the year.

*“So it does, yes, get talked of by friends and acquaintances. It’s almost a recruitment package.”*

Even when prompted, there was little evidence that cycling holidays were undertaken because of their perceived environmental benefits.

*“I think sometimes, if you’re not careful, it puts people off because they think they are being sold an environment package, i.e. you’ll see X numbers of rare daisies. It’s not why people... or not why I’m there.”*

*“...we are all green-minded but that wasn’t a consideration.”*

Enjoying the company of others whilst cycling was an important aspect of cycling holidays. Cycling holidays were generally taken with friends rather than family. Reasons for the non-inclusion of family members included absence of an interest in cycling, differing standards of cycling and that it was “not their idea of a holiday”. Only in one case was a cycling holiday undertaken alone.

*“...it’s the social side, we do eat and drink well while we’re out there as well and we meet friends that some of us probably only see once a year.”*

### **Implications for the marketing of cycling holidays**

The results of this research offer some initial information that allows the more accurate targeting of the benefits of a cycling holiday to potential cycle tourists. These are outlined below.

#### **Marketing implications**

**Cycle tourists are young at heart, not young.** The age profile of cycle tourists shows that the majority are aged 45 years and over. This fact needs to be reflected in marketing literature, particularly in the selection of imagery.

**Promote cycling holidays as a chance to experience nature.** Marketing literature aimed at cycle tourists should emphasise the idea of being immersed in scenery. Text should emphasise the multi-sensory nature of the experience by highlighting not just sights, but smells and sounds. Contrasts with travel by car will resonate with many potential cycle tourists.

**The solitude desired by cycle tourists is relative,** with a wish to escape the crowds contrasting with the social nature of cycling holidays. Therefore, images showing cycling tourist groups pausing to take in a particular part of the scenery should be accentuated.

**Show cycling holidays as a social experience.** Given the importance placed on being with friends and/or family, imagery should show couples and groups of cyclists rather than solitary riders. As the findings indicate that cycling holidays are more often than not taken with friends rather than family, depicted groupings should reflect this.

**Highlight cycling holidays as a break from responsibilities.** Cycling holidays were described by a number of respondents as a chance to have a break from familial responsibilities. Marketing materials should reflect this and acknowledge that cycle tourists see cycling holidays without the family as a short break, whilst reserving the main holiday for the family.

**Deal with the challenge factor.** As has been stated, the challenging nature of the routes undertaken whilst on a cycling holiday were seen as a major positive attribute by most of the respondents. However, further research needs to be undertaken to ascertain whether the challenge aspect is appealing to current non-cycling tourists. The predominance of male cycle tourists may suggest that the challenging nature of routes is putting off a larger percentage of potential female cycle tourists than males. In this case, less challenging routes may need to be developed and marketed to attract women.

**Cycling holidays may be ‘green’ but that’s not how they are perceived.** Whilst many within the tourist industry highlight cycling holidays as a sustainable form of tourism, it is apparent that the people going on such holidays do not see them in environmental terms. Careful consideration should, therefore, be given regarding the importance of ‘green’ issues in marketing materials.

#### **Product implications**

**Encouraging cyclists to visit attractions.** Many visitor attractions are currently not visited to a large extent by cycle tourists. If cycle tourists are to be encouraged to visit, then secure, enclosed cycle parking provision is required. Cycle stands are not sufficient due to the perceived danger of luggage being stolen off bikes.

Given the high use of drinking and eating outlets, attractions should consider en route signage promoting access to their restaurant/café rather than the attraction itself. In the longer-term, the development of non-linear routes that encourage exploration of an area in more depth may be beneficial to visitor attractions.

**Cycling holidays currently attract the ‘devoted’.** Cycle tourists are very likely to have gone on a cycling holiday previously. Only 20% are taking their first cycling holiday. Tourism planners need to address how people who have never been on such a holiday can be encouraged to do so. The re-packaging of existing routes in different ways may be beneficial. A series of circular routes that can be accessed over a number of days from one accommodation base, rather than a linear route that requires different overnight accommodation each night, may also prove fruitful.

#### **Conclusions**

Cycle tourism is a burgeoning market in the UK and one that is predicted to continue to grow. If marketing efforts are to be optimised, there is a requirement to understand the characteristics and needs of cycle tourists. This paper has provided some initial findings regarding these areas.

As has been seen, cycle tourists do not conform to the active holiday market stereotype. They are predominately aged 45 or over and see cycling as relaxing and as a unique way to experience nature and relative solitude. At the same time, however, here is a high incidence of cycling holidays being a challenge.

This research also identifies an interesting trend, that cycling holidays are often taken with friends rather than family members and are considered a short break holiday rather than a main holiday.

What this research shows is that those involved in promoting cycle tourism – tourist boards, local authorities, cycling organisations and cycle holiday companies – need to base their decisions on a clear understanding of the market. The best way to achieve this is through a programme of detailed and comprehensive research.

A further programme of quantitative research is planned by the author to provide further insights into the market and to confirm the validity of these initial findings.

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