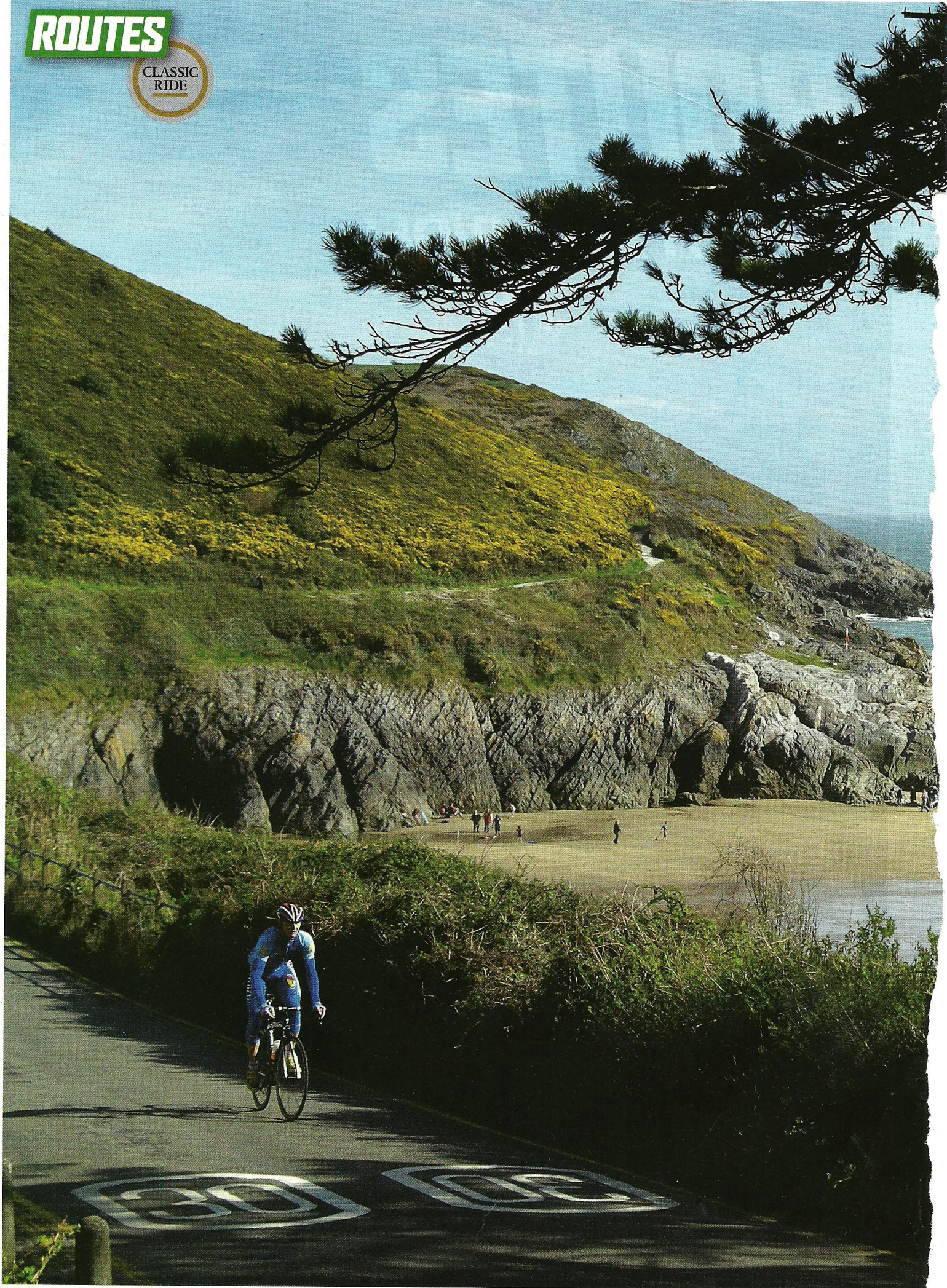


Gower rangers

The Gower promises scenery and history in equal measure. Giles P Croft sets out to explore this feature-packed, pint-sized peninsula

ROUTES

CLASSIC
RIDE



Nestled in a curve of South Wales coast, the Gower peninsula is easily accessible and yet a world away from the hustle and bustle of modern life. Gwyr means 'curved', and the 70-square-mile land mass does just that, projecting like a comma into the Bristol Channel from the city of Swansea. Its position ensures special dispensation with the elements – frosts are rare and it's often spared the brunt of the weather coming in off the Irish Sea. With one of the most spectacular coastlines Britain has to offer and enough historical landmarks to fill a textbook, it's easy to see why the Gower was bestowed with the first ever Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty award in 1956.

Back then the area was largely deserted, and even with today's steady stream of holidaymakers it still manages to retain the feel of a land that time forgot. There are only two main roads heading down to its western reaches, but despite this, with a little local knowledge it's possible to spend the day exhausting yourself in the back lanes, riding from one spectacular view to the next. Local rider Jeremy shows me the way.

Clyne incline

We start in Black Pill, half-way along Swansea Bay, which boasts a seafront cyclepath for the full five miles of its beach. This used to be the route of the world's first ever passenger-carrying railway, and the Junction café, where we start, was one of its stations. We instantly leave the bay behind and head gently upwards along a leafy cyclepath through Clyne Valley woods.

Before the mass of rail closures in the 1960s, this was part of the Heart of Wales line serving an industrial area that played a key role in the Second World War, manufacturing and transporting essential materials to Swansea docks and beyond – one of the reasons the city was razed to the ground over three nights of bombing in 1941.

Today it's a serene, sun-dappled section of the National Cycle Network (NCN 4) that runs all the way along the steep sided valley to Gowerton. We come off it in Killay, where the road rears up through a residential area. I've got my first sweat of the day on by the time we reach Fairwood Common at the top.

As we pass the last house and cross a cattle grid, we're cast out onto open moorland with the full majesty of the Gower stretching before us. We're also introduced to the prevailing south-westerly wind that will accompany us for the rest of the day. It's here

that you make the decision as to which side of the Gower to head out on: right for north, straight on for south. We choose the former, picking our way past sheep grazing on one of the area's many commons. About a fifth of the Gower is open access for residents to exert their farming rights, meaning we'll see animals roaming free all day long – something to bear in mind on fast descents.

The north-south divide is far from arbitrary. The geography of the two halves differs enormously and there's a historical boundary separating 'English' Gower Anglicana from 'Welsh' Gower Wallicana, which dates back to the Norman conquests and accounts for the presence of six castles. After hanging a right just before Llanrhidian, we find ourselves heading up onto Welsh Moor, before the tailwind pushes us all the way to Poundffald, a village named in both languages – 'ffald' is Welsh for 'pound'.

By now we've gained some height and the descent to the coastal road is fast and well surfaced. Back at sea level, we round the corner at Penclawdd to be presented with typical North Gower scenery: mud flats stretching across the Burry Estuary, boats beached by the low tide and wading birds picking through the marsh.

Taking the low-lying marsh road to Llanrhidian, we pass pillbox ruins and signs »

The Gower is home to some unique flora and fauna – and the destination of increasing numbers of discerning cyclists



The views along the coastal route take your breath away – as do the climbs to get to them



ROUTES

CLASSIC
RIDE

There'll be no grumbles when
you reach The Mumbles



warning us of unexploded ordnance. This area was once used for shelling practice, and in a way it still is: it's now home to the Welsh cockle industry. We're back into the headwind as we creep under the lea of a much older battlement, the Iron Age hill fort of Cilifor, before a short, sharp climb through Llanrhidian village itself and back onto the North Gower road.

The road out past Weobley Castle affords a splendid view across the estuary, all the way to the end of the road in Llanmadoc. If you're feeling peckish, the Britannia Inn here is renowned for its good food. As we crawl up a steep hill away from the village – the Bulwark is the site of another Iron Age fort – we bid farewell to the North Gower view. It's time to head south.

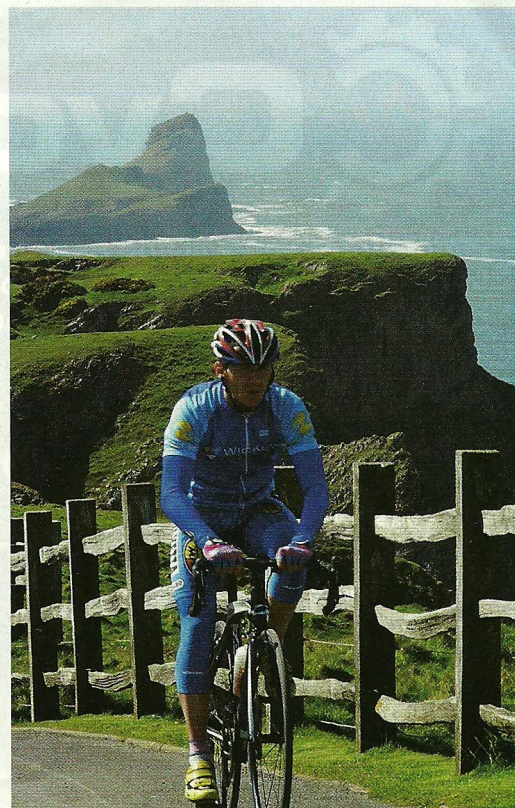
Bryn it on

To get to the other side, we skirt the lower slopes of Cefn Bryn, the distinctive sandstone ridge that runs most of the length of the peninsula. It's alive with yellow gorse as far as the eye can see, the only sound coming

from a pair of buzzards that soar above us. We could turn up to the top of Cefn Bryn for a panoramic view of most of the Gower, but instead head off towards our only out-and-back part of the day's ride.

We climb gradually through Pilton then Pitton, and soon come over the top at Middleton to reach the jaw-dropping vista at Rhossili. The land ends in the famous promontory of Worm's Head – a mile-long rocky headland accessible on foot for a few hours either side of low tide. Time to stop and admire the view while sampling the local delights inside the Bay Bistro.

Cake scoffed, we head back down to Scurlage, safe in the knowledge that the wind will follow us all the way back to Swansea. The rugged coastline below our route is chock full of caves, coves, forts and ruins, most of which are accessible only by boat or serious rock scrambling. We plunge down to the water line once more at Oxwich Bay, another huge expanse of sand and possibly the most accessible of the Gower's beaches. It's lovely, but we then have to negotiate a



rather alarming stretch of 18 per cent gradient past Penrice Castle to get back up onto the South Gower Road, a theme that starts to recur as we yo-yo from one bay to another.

Just after Penmaen, I'm told to keep my eyes peeled, because off to the right there's a glimpse of the postcard-perfect Three Cliffs Bay, voted Britain's best beach in 2006. We plunge down to lovely Parkmill, home to the Gower Heritage Centre, then climb back up the other side through a wooded valley. At the top, an immaculately preserved lime kiln stands sentry at the roadside.

Caves and contraband

Names such as Hangman's Cross, Smugglers' Lane and Brandy Cove hint at the region's less salubrious past; it's no surprise to learn that the Gower's quiet location and a plethora of secluded coves and rocky shoals meant it was a hotbed of smuggling in the 18th century. At the bottom of Kittle Hill begins the tree-shrouded Bishopston Valley, which wends its way down to Pwlldu Bay, allegedly the busiest landing site for contraband in the whole of the Bristol Channel.

Back in the outer suburbs of Swansea's seaside conurbations, nothing detracts from the beauty of the beaches. They each retain their own character too, from the shade of Caswell's pine trees, to the quaintness of Langland's beach huts.

Bracelet Bay is our last port of call, a small, rocky harbour and home to Mumbles Lighthouse, standing for more than 200 years but powered by sunlight rather than coal these days. The two rounded islets here may be the inspiration behind the name of Mumbles, said to derive from the French word *mamelles*, or 'breasts'. From a distance it almost makes sense...

All that remains is to celebrate our finish with a trip to another of Swansea's famous landmarks: Joe's ice cream parlour. Sitting in the sunshine, we tuck into the creamy gloop and reflect on a superb day's riding on the peninsula, and heartily recommend both. >>



If you like castles
and ancient ruins,
you'll love the Gower

GOWER RANGERS

DISTANCE 96km/60 miles

DURATION 4-6 hours

GRADE Medium, with some short, steep climbs.

MAP OS Landranger 159 Swansea & Gower

GEARING 39/25, although a compact or triple makes the 18 per cent sections more bearable.

NEAREST STATION Swansea (www.nationalrail.co.uk)

FOOD AND DRINK There are cafés and pubs scattered throughout the Gower. Halfway round in Reynoldston is the King Arthur Hotel as well as the nearby Compass coffee shop.

'Fresh' Joe's ice cream is only available at three parlours, one of which is in Mumbles (www.joes-icecream.com).

WHERE TO STAY See www.visitswanseabay.com for guesthouses and self-catering. The www.gowerheritagecentre.co.uk also has self-catering options. If you want to push the boat out, why not join the Hollywood crowd at the five-star Fairy Hill Hotel (<http://admin@fairyhill.net/home.cfm>).

BIKE SHOPS In Swansea, Tredz ☎ 01792 702555 and Rees Cycles ☎ 01792 774945.

The Route

- 1 From The Junction café, head towards Swansea, cross at the lights and head up the Clyne Valley cyclepath as far as the Railway Inn. Cut across the car park and turn left onto the A4118, climbing through Upper Killay. Cross the cattle grid and turn right along the B4271 to Llanrhidian. Just before the main road in the village, turn right up onto Welsh Moor, taking the right fork at the T-junction.
- 2 Turn left in Three Crosses, climb through the village and turn left again past the Poundffald Inn. Descend through Y Wern and turn left onto the B4295. Follow this through Penclawdd and take a right turn in Crofty down to the marsh road. Continue on this road to Llanrhidian and turn right back onto the main road. In Oldwalls, take a right to Landimore and Weobley. Follow to Llanmadoc.
- 3 At the Britannia Inn, take a sharp left up and over the hill, turn left on the other side, then right towards Burry. Take the left fork at the grassy triangle and turn right at Fairy Hill. In Reynoldston, go over the crossroads, descend

and turn right onto the A4118, following this to Scurlage.

- 4 Turn right in Scurlage. Follow the B4247 until it ends in Rhossili. Return to Scurlage, turn right, then left towards Horton. Ignore the turn to Horton itself, and continue to a triangle in the road, then right towards Oxwich, to descend through a large hairpin.

- 5 Turn left at the crossroads. Follow the route up to Penrice Castle. Turn right onto the main road to Parkmill. Climb out of Parkmill and take the right turn down Vennaway Lane. Turn left at the bottom and go on down the hill. Climb the other side, take a right turn before the top along Bishopston Road, towards Caswell, and follow the left hander, then turn right to Caswell. After the bay, climb to Newton. Don't miss the right turn down Brynfield Road on the S-bend. Drop into Langland, go left and climb to the T-junction.

- 6 Join the main road but turn back up Higher Lane. Follow it until it descends down Plunch Lane. Turn left up Mumbles Road. You can view the route online at <http://snipurl.com/jpbef>. **PLUS**

