

Mountain Biking Is Not For Me

We all know that shooting is politically incorrect. By contrast, what is it like to partake in a sport that is to physical exercise what organic muesli is to breakfast? I decided find out. Yes, I tried my hand (or should that be leg?) at mountain biking.

Don't laugh. (Why is it that most of my friend collapse in unseemly mirth when I told them I was going to inflict myself on a bicycle? Not even the RSPCA can prosecute me for cruelty to bikes, surely?).

I went to Halfords. "Gimme that one", I said to the youth behind the counter, who was oiling a fiendishly complicated set of gear cogs. Said youth was ridiculously skinny. He probably weighed less than my left leg.

I explained that I wanted something rugged and capable off-road - not unlike me, in fact. I beamed in anticipation. The amicable lycra-lout smiled to himself and directed me to a contraption with huge knobby tyres. It looked just the job - except for one truly alarming feature: the saddle. This was about the size and shape of a banana and as hard as concrete. It made me wince just to look at it.

I was shown an array of custom seats. I chose the widest I could see, filled with gel. It was duly fitted to the bike and off I went, a fully-fledged member of the muesli-munching fraternity.

"Get the horse into the trailer, we're going for a bit of socially-acceptable recreation", I said to my wife. She looked a bit doubtful. We drove to the Lake District, an hour away. I explained to her that I had researched a suitable bridleway route on the map. She looked even more doubtful.

In due course we got to the dropping-off point. I boldly mounted my iron steed. My wife started giggling. (Really, what is it with people?) And off we set. Up a damn great mountain called High Street.

Within minutes, I discovered the horrible truth. You cannot actually ride a mountain bike up a steep, soggy fellside. You have to push it. All the way. And that's not fun. At all.

I had imagined myself pedalling up gentle inclines, then gliding back down, the wind in my hair and the birdsong in my ears. In the event, my progress became a desperate struggle for survival. And marital relations began to get a bit strained.

The thing is, unlike me and my machine, the damn horse seemed to just float up the hill, effortlessly. I kept getting left behind. My wife seldom, if ever, looked back to see if I was OK. I kept having to resort to shouting for her to wait for me. But that made me even more out of breath... I think you get the picture.

At one point, in order to really scare my wife, I thought I would mimic the effects of heart attack. I sank into the heather, out of sight, and waited for the cavalry to arrive, full of consternation.

When, after a good 10 minutes, I cautiously raised my head and peered ahead, I found that my wife has simply ridden on over the horizon without a backward glance. I got back on my bike, a sadder and wiser man.

Eventually we started going downhill. But my hopes were dashed. I would get going for a few yards, hit a patch of sphagnum moss, stop, and then slowly topple over. I am sure that I heard somebody (and it could only have been my wife) stifling a laugh. My procession down the mountain disintegrated into something like Napoleon's retreat from Moscow. After 12 miles, when we got back to the car, I was a broken man.

I've had it with mountain biking. Shooting is far more civilised.

A Mitchell

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