



*Feature*

# READY TO ROAM



**JO GIBSON**

*Mountain biker*

Jo is a jack of all trades – XC, enduro, endurance riding, and bikepacking

ADVENTURE CYCLING IS FOR EVERYONE BUT IT'S EASY TO BE HELD BACK BY DOUBTS. **JO GIBSON** JOINED EIGHT OTHER WOMEN ON A BIKEPACKING JOURNEY OF DISCOVERY



**Left:** nr Güéjar Sierra, Jo and Kate O'Brien  
**Right:** Kate and Sarah LeGrand, Sierra Nevada National Park  
**Below:** Morning after at the bivvy



**EXTRA ENERGY**  
 Not sure if you've got the legs? Visit [cyclinguk.org/article/great-rides-caledonia-way](https://cyclinguk.org/article/great-rides-caledonia-way)

**W**heels and pedals and Allen keys were scattered at my feet in the Spanish alley. I set about building my bike for the first time

**ever, surrounded by new companions doing the same, each of us offering or accepting tentative help. We were in the Sierra Nevada for The Adventure Syndicate's Spring Gathering.**

I'd seen an advert for it while browsing my phone on holiday. The picture was of four women riding into the mountains. The text read: "We will gather together a group of women who have some experience of travelling long distances by bike (i.e. are capable of riding for a full day) and inspire, encourage, and enable them to ride out fully self-supported to sleep for one or two nights in the Sierra Nevada mountains."

"I think I need to go," I said to my partner, pushing my phone across the table to him.

"Can you afford another holiday so soon?" he asked, after glancing at it.

But this was not a holiday. I could not say what it was – training camp, adventure, self-discovery? – I just knew I needed to go.

**HOPES AND FEARS**

The first evening, bikes all built up, we were sitting around a long table, replete with Alice's tomato risotto. Adventure Syndicate Director Lee Craigie handed out paper squares and pens. Would we write down our hopes and fears for the week? Chairs scraped as, one by one, we stuck our apprehensions onto the refrigerator.

"Would anyone like to share theirs?" Lee

asked. I considered the words that I had posted up, cop-outs about being "too slow" in place of deeper fears that I didn't have the words for. Janet spoke first, telling us that she has Parkinson's Disease.

"I'm right-handed but I have to do everything with my left," she said, with a little laugh. "If I have to do a right-hand corner, I might scream."

As she looked around wide-eyed, I wondered how many of us would be here in Janet's position. Encouragement and support were shared around the table and the laughter steadily resumed.

Next morning, we climbed to the village of Güéjar Sierra as a group, stretching out down the 8km climb. After coffee we split up. Kate, Lee, and I headed further up the hill to find a rocky singletrack descent while the others clocked up road miles.

I followed Lee up a stiff climb, admiring the pom-poms of almond and cherry blossom scattered about the parched valley. Mid-descent, as I was kneeling to release air from my tyres to improve the ride over the trail's rock gardens, the scent of rosemary enveloped me. I thought of delicious stew – and forgot the intense need to perform that was dogging me.

But Janet and Helen had a bigger day out. They took a route that they thought would be complete, only to find the tarmac ending: the road was unfinished. It was the longest ride Janet had ever done.

Staggering into the kitchen that evening, Janet's assessment was raw. "My eyelashes hurt, my skin hurts, my eyeballs hurt!"

Yet she helped prepare dinner, then showered and headed out for jazz and Drambuie while I crawled into my bed.

**TO BOLDLY GO**

Jenny Graham – Adventure Syndicate Director, unsupported round-the-world record holder, and one of Cycling UK's 100 Women in Cycling – joined us on day two. I watched her disappear towards the Sierra Nevada National Park and told myself: "It's a mind shift. That's why you're here. All you have to do is pedal."

As we reached the plateau, Jenny talked about racing the Arizona Trail 750. She's a diesel engine, she said; she just keeps going. So I was surprised when she told me how she is intimidated when men arrive on the start line wanting to race her.

As we climbed higher, my mood lightened. I felt overwhelmed by possibilities instead of pressures. My legs were spinning freely towards the wide sky and the sharp disc of spring sunlight.

"What are you afraid of?" Sarah asked when I explained I was worried about embarking on the solo ride I had planned for day three.

"Well, having a mechanical, getting lost, becoming too tired to carry on."

"Can you deal with those things?" Sarah

Photos: Jo Gibson



**Above left:** Lee and Jenny on the bivvy ride  
**Above right:** Jo riding home after the bivvy  
**Left:** Sunset at the bivvy above Granada

▶ watched me, smiling, eyes narrowed against the morning sun.

“Well, mostly. I have two maps. I think the route is pretty simple. I know it’s all downhill on the Sierra road. I have my phone and a charger in case there’s a problem. Yes, mostly I can deal with those things.”

But as I looked out over Monachil, having found height easily on the intricate backstreets that line the hillside, I knew I could not deal with it. It was not mechanical trouble, map reading, or fatigue: I was simply terrified of being alone.

I could have gone with Kate, Fiona, and Sarah but this solo ride – into the mountains to find a gravel track that looped back above the rugged singletrack of day one – was my choice. To me, the gathering was a place to push boundaries.

When I told Jenny I was afraid, she said she would meet me on the other side, at the start of the singletrack. This knowledge gave me something to hold onto.

### A PERSONAL JOURNEY

If there are such things as good climbs, the 20km drag up to Tocón is one of them. I meandered along past juicy cacti and velvet blossom. I was on the right track; Wahoo said so and Komoot agreed. But my breathing came rapidly, my chest felt drum-skin taut. I looked at the jagged rock walls that were drawing up around me the higher I climbed.

In Tocón, the only thing missing was tumbleweed. The bar was shuttered, the streets deserted: a dead-end place. There was only the gravel track that led me anonymously into the hills, taking me deeper into nothing. “This is beautiful,” I told myself as I stopped to take in a green valley scored and patchworked with terraces. It was; I just couldn’t feel it.

“So, how was your ride?” Jenny smiled.

“I’m in bits,” I told her, unable to manufacture the enthusiasm she would have had. “The

### Your next night out?

Any of these off-road routes could work for a one-night bikepacking adventure; they’re under 30 miles. Visit [cyclinguk.org/article/10-road-routes-uk](https://www.cyclinguk.org/article/10-road-routes-uk) for details and GPX files.

#### 1 Cycling UK’s Surrey Hills loop

Beginning at Farnham Great Pond, this loop takes you through nature reserves and former fortifications.

#### 2 Princetown to Burrator Reservoir, Dartmoor

Takes in some of the best parts of Dartmoor, through varied moorland terrain, on- and off-road.

#### 3 Longdendale and the Etherow Valley, Derbyshire

From the charming Old Glossop Conservation Area, this heads out to

explore the Victorian dams of Longdendale in Derbyshire.

#### 4 Hebden Bridge to Summit, Pennines

Takes you high above the Calder and Roch valleys as you explore ancient trails. There are some rocky, technical sections mixed in with scenic canal towpath.

#### 5 John Muir Way, East Lothian

Beginner friendly, this will also suit more experienced families with older children cycling independently, or children in trailers.

#### 6 Dundonnell to Poolewe, Scottish Highlands

Lee Craigie lets us into the secrets of the Highlands with this challenging 26.4-miler, which can be broken up with a bothy stay.

#### 7 Ludlow to Wenlock Edge, Shropshire

Isla Rowntree, the children’s bike designer, lives in Shropshire; here’s one of her favourite ‘rough stuff’ routes.

#### 8 Moors above the Holme and Colne Valleys, Pennines

Ride through the *Last of the Summer Wine* backdrop, and visit a spectacular vineyard.

#### 9 Aviemore loop, Scottish Highlands

This route is one of Chris Boardman’s favourites, taking you out onto Highland trails.

#### 10 The last line of defence, Surrey

This follows the General Headquarters Line, a defensive ‘stop line’ of pillboxes – which are still visible today – using existing byways and bridleways.



**Left:** Leaving the bivvy, watched by a herd of cows  
**Right:** Kate O'Brien about to begin the rocky singletrack descent of day one



**WOMEN'S BIKES?**

Visit [cyclinguk.org/womenspecificbikes](http://cyclinguk.org/womenspecificbikes) for our take on whether they're essential

► ride was great, it's just there are other things going on. It's not the ride..." I paused, took a chance: "It's a terror of abandonment. A childhood thing."

We were pedalling again: "Are you getting help with that?" she called over her shoulder as the track narrowed. It's hard to bare your soul while negotiating rock gardens or a herd of goats grazing steep switchbacks.

That evening the house was vibrant. Fiona was on a high, having taken Lee's Juliana full-suspension bike into the National Park. Janet had enjoyed a day

off. Helen had made it back from the hot springs to affirm that its population of naked hippies was going strong. Alice and Lee had been to the coast.

I watched Jenny's demonstration of kit for our upcoming bivvy night and made careful lists of food and equipment, yet couldn't share the communal joy. Something kept me apart, something I didn't understand then but I now recognise as shame.

the creeping cold. This was Janet's first ever time camping – and she was doing it without canvas, beneath a sky torn by shooting stars.

**BEYOND BOUNDARIES**

Two months later, rain blowing from the east, I was pushing my bike up a hillside, 90 miles into the 148-mile Capital Trail, a bikepacking route out of Edinburgh. Fast riders do it in well under 40 hours. I just wanted to know if I could finish it. On that hillside in the rain, I didn't think so. But all I had to do was keep going...

Back home, my ride complete, I found myself heartened each day watching the progress of Janet's training for the North Coast 500 on Facebook, and following on Strava the bothy trips Kate was making. Holding on to a new belief that my own story might be worth telling, I was beginning to feel part of a bigger tale.

As I draft this piece, I am checking dotwatcher.cc. Jenny Graham is battling the Highland 550, the toughest of the UK bikepacking routes to attempt against the clock. She has fought horrific weather conditions and is now in the 'great wilderness'. Her dot has moved little in the last ten hours. I hold my breath and wait for the stories she will have to tell. ●

**Expedition ready**

- Cycling UK has a mountain bike leader training course specifically aimed at those running multi-day bikepacking and camping trips. The Expedition Module is a two-day course that costs £168. To enrol on the course, you'll need: a Mountain Bike Trail Leader or Tour Leader qualification; to have completed an outdoor 16-hour first aid course; to have logged at least 10 overnight camps, preferably including wild country; and to have assisted in a minimum of two group camps.
- The course will extend your remit as a leader to cover multi-day camping rides. It covers: expedition equipment; riding equipment; expedition food; camp craft; planning and leadership; incident management; and supervising groups and rides.
- The next Expedition Module is on 9 August at the Debden House Conference and Camping Centre in Loughton, Essex. For details, visit: [cyclinguk.org/expeditionmodule](http://cyclinguk.org/expeditionmodule)

**FINDING MY VOICE**

Burdened with sleeping bags, mats, warm clothes, food and stoves, Kate, Fiona, Sarah, and I climbed easily up the road to Purche, striking a gloriously slow contrast to the road race that had flown through only days earlier. We stopped to examine the olives hanging in the trees and devour Janet's scones and wraps. We were climbing into the National Park to find a place to sleep for the night. There was no rush: we simply had to be there by dark.

Beyond Purche we were swallowed on a tongue of gravel that delved ever deeper into the rock canyons. Normally I hate climbing but my legs found a steady rhythm. I was thinking: if I could pedal into the Spanish countryside alone, as I had the day before, I could do that at home too. And if I could do that, what else could I do?

That evening, when we were all gathered on the hillside, we watched the sunset over the city, heated up couscous, cheese, vegetables, and hot chocolate over tiny stoves, and huddled against

**i More info**  
 Discover more about The Adventure Syndicate at [theadventuresyndicate.com](http://theadventuresyndicate.com)