



D.I.Y.
Do it yourself
IN A WEEKEND

Brechfa Forest

Mountain biking with luxury accommodation and someone else to clean the bike? Yes please. **Katy Dartford** tries a ski chalet style mountain biking weekend in Carmarthenshire



WITH flood warnings across the UK in February, I'd picked an interesting time to go mountain biking. Then again there aren't many better activities when it's cold and wet, and few better places than the Welsh hills to do it. Determined not to be beaten, I headed to Carmarthenshire to tackle some marked and 'off-piste' trails in Brechfa Forest – alpine style.

I've done a fair bit of mountain biking and the part I don't enjoy is driving home wet and tired at the end of the day, then having to go out into the cold again to clean the bike, before trying to dry my clothes in time for the next day's riding. But this time it's going to be different. While exploring Brechfa's trails I'll be staying with the company MudTrek, which looks after guests like you would be in a fully catered ski chalet.

It's late when we arrive at MudTrek's base. We are greeted by Nikki and Jason Mulvey, who own the company, and they show us into one of two barns that came with their 200-year-old home that they've converted into accommodation. Nikki and Jason set up MudTrek about two years ago, with Nikki cooking the meals and Jason, an MIAS mountain bike instructor, doing the guiding. Both were professional singers, but hung up their microphones to run their dream business in the country. Nikki serves us dinner of stuffed mushrooms and smoky sausage cassoulet and we are left to settle in, with the winds rattling around the barn promising a challenging day ahead.

After a full English breakfast the next morning, Jason sets up our bikes. He has a fleet of full suspension Bionicon Alva 160 all-mountain machines and is the



Groovy green trees (but be careful of the roots)

FAST FACTS

What: Mountain biking in style
Where: Brechfa Forest, Carmarthenshire, south west Wales
How long: Two days
How tough: There are rides for everyone, from easy blue and green trails, to black ones, to 'off piste'
Look out for: Gloopy puddles, geometrically adjustable mountain bikes and delicious home-made cooking



Rip it up: blasting down the trails on day two

first UK-based hire station for them. He also shows us a special trick. By pressing a button on the handlebars and leaning either forward or backwards you can alter the bike's geometry by about five degrees, while riding. On the uphill this makes the frame more vertical so the climbs are easier; on the downhill it's more stretched out, shifting the body backwards and the arms out into a better downhill position.

Nikki has made us packed lunches and we set off with Jason into the drizzle, straight from the house to the trails. With low cloud in the valley we can't really see the views, but I'm busy concentrating on getting up the steep incline to the forest entrance anyway. We climb for about 350m up Mynydd Tre-Beddau until we reached Brechfa

☹ I grit my teeth, alter the bike's geometry, sit right back off the saddle and go for it ☹



Trail or river? Mountain biking's a great wet weather activity

Forest West, where there's a marked trail. And this is where the fun really starts. Instead of turning on to the trail, we head on to an unmarked one. Cycling along a narrow fire road we have to duck under low trees, and then we reach the first puddle. Sinking deep into it I pedal hard to avoid slowing down and plopping in. The rain really starts to pelt down as we head through more gloopy puddles before reaching a canopy that protects us from the elements.

The ride turns out to be a roller coaster, through narrow gullies, puddles and over technical, loose shale. We cycle around the outskirts of a wind farm that apparently has 10 turbines, although we can barely see one. After more gloop we reach a trail formed by water erosion, with rocks and deep ruts that look likely to throw us over the handlebars if we're not careful. Then it's the final narrow downhill so I grit my teeth, alter the bike's geometry, sit right back off the saddle and go for it. My brakes screech so loudly I shout back at my friend Paul to stop chasing my tail, only to realise it's my own bike. But somehow I make it down, and despite the rain, winds and visibility it's been an exhilarating day. Besides, the weather doesn't matter when we can leave Jason to look after the bikes and return to the barn to warm up, eat more delicious food and relax.

The next morning is bright and fresh and we can finally enjoy the scenery. We drive to the forest and ride a combination of the trails for a mix of undulating paths and sweeping bends on the blue, and steep, scary berms on the black. Finishing on a surprisingly technical blue descent, we head back to the Range Rover for an 'après-bike' of cheese and pickle sandwiches. This is the life. **AT**

NEED MORE INFO?

Get there

Brechfa Forest is in Carmarthenshire, south west Wales, and it's easy to get to from the end of the M4. MudTrek is just before Brechfa Forest on the left; with SatNav the postcode SA39 9EH should get you there.

MudTrek

MudTrek offers fully catered mountain biking holidays and delivers an experience similar to that traditionally offered for skiers at resort chalets. The package combines accommodation, food, transport to and from rides, and 'off piste' guiding. It has two barns, sleeping between six to eight people. Generally each barn is hired in its entirety (as reflected in the prices below), although there are a couple of weekends a year where individuals and smaller groups can take a room or rooms and share with others of a similar riding standard.

For two people, the prices are £295 per person for two nights; £495 per person for four nights or £625 per person for seven nights. It gets lower the number of people in your group, down to £115 per person for two nights if there are 14 guests sharing both barns; £215 per person for four nights; or for seven nights it's £365 per person. See www.mudtrek.com.

Bike hire

Bike hire is not included. MudTrek has a fleet of Bionicon full suspension bikes; it costs from £30 a day to hire one.

Additional guiding

A two-night package includes one day of guiding, a four-night package includes two days of guiding and a seven-night package includes three days. If you want to bolt on any extra guiding it starts at £50 per person for a half day for groups of up to eight.

What to take

You'll need waterproofs, suncream (if you're lucky), a rucksack to carry your lunch and spares, a water bottle or hydration pack, glasses and gloves suitable for riding and a well-maintained and serviced bike and a helmet, unless you're hiring through MudTrek (there's a secure lock-up for guest's bikes). Plus stuff to relax in in the evenings. The map is OS Explorer 186 (1:25 000) Llandeilo & Brechfa Forest.

Non bikers and other activities

If there are non-bikers in your party there is excellent walking in Brechfa Forest and from the doorstep of MudTrek, and dogs are welcome (and there's a dog sitting service). Brechfa is near the western edge of Brecon Beacons, the southern edge of the Cambrian Mountains and the Pembrokeshire coast.

Other operators

Bikebrechfa also offers bike hire and guiding, see www.bikebrechfa.co.uk.

More info

For more on the trails at Brechfa and others in south Wales, see www.cognition.co.uk.