



WORDS JOHN WHITNEY PHOTOGRAPHY JOBY SESSIONS

# Jersey boys

*This cycling-crazed Channel Island packs plenty of punch in its 45 square miles*

**A**s someone with a seriously wonky compass (navigational, not moral), whose response to getting out of self-dug holes is to always turn, Derek Zoolander-like, to the right, I embrace all opportunities to ride on islands. They've been the setting for some of my most memorable writing jobs for *Cycling Plus* – the Azores and the Faroe Islands spring to mind. I can keep my Garmin switched off, meander down any lane I like for as long as I like, knowing the ocean will stop me straying too far out of bounds. So, it was an instant yes when Condor Ferries came with an invite to sample its wares with a trip to the Channel Island of Jersey.

After a torrid winter for Brits, we set sail from Poole on the Monday of

the week where spring was seemingly bypassed altogether with the hottest April day in almost 70 years. That didn't save us from choppy waters; the outward trip aboard Condor's high-speed Liberation boat was accompanied by the soundtrack of people discreetly hurling into the supplied paper bags. For the return journey, mercifully, the Channel was more like a back-garden pond. Still, being used to cross-Channel travel that takes all night, the brisk 4.5-hour trip to Jersey (via Guernsey) freed up precious bike time for our brief two-day visit.

Helping me to, ahem, try Jersey on for size was James Patterson, the youthful president of the far older Caesarean Cycling Club (established 1935), one of five fee-paying clubs (plus an under-18 youth academy) on this cycling-passionate island. →



**Right**  
An appropriately-named place to refuel during the ride



My first encounter with a Jersey cyclist had been at the end of a week-long sportive in the Dolomites in 2014. I was curious then how someone hailing from an island of just 45 square miles and a highest point of 143m could put in such a strong performance in the mountains.

### James' bay route

The 'Round the Bays' route that James had in store would answer my question, a clockwise loop of the island that hits the major bays and beaches and shows off Jersey's best side. It has a profile that looks like the power profile of an interval session, a succession of violent ups and downs with little room for respite. We roughly tracked the same route, minus a few of the bigger roads that were sacrificed in the name of a happy photographer.

Round the Bays is the name of a 52km road race, held every July more or less every year since the 1930s. James says that it is Jersey's most

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prestigious race, "the one everybody wants to win". Like most years, James will be on the start line this summer, gunning for the win.

He's made a late start in 2018 in peaking for the race and hasn't had the best of winters on the bike, struggling for motivation to train, and in one of those troughs that many riders experience having hit their goals the previous summer. In his local bike shop, where we went to get a rear wheel skewer after I'd inexplicably left mine on my street back home at the start of the journey, both shop workers feigned shock at the sight of seeing James on his bike.

**Top**  
Radio Tower was once home to Germans during World War II, now home to holidaymakers

"They're making out like I'm never on my bike, which is an exaggeration!" insists James. Last summer he competed in the mountain bike race of the Island Games, the international multi-sport biennial competition for islands of under 150,000 people (all four of the largest Channel Islands – Jersey, Guernsey, Alderney and Sark – compete). Despite being less well known globally, James says it attracts more newspaper and television coverage than the more established Commonwealth Games. A young Mark Cavendish pipped Jersey's own Sam Firby to gold in the criterium at the 2003 Island Games over the water in Guernsey – but only because of Firby's folly of celebrating before he'd actually crossed the line.

It also turned out that James had competed against our guide, Hogni Rúnason Øster, from our visit to the Faroe Islands last summer. He found it a fantastic experience – one that he hopes to repeat again when the Games return in Gibraltar next



summer. The event is a unique opportunity for amateurs like him to compete in their chosen sport on an international level and, alongside the recently-contested Commonwealth Games, where Jersey is represented independently, and the fiercely contested inter-insular races with neighbouring Guernsey, it does much to fuel the cycling culture here.

### Petrolhead paradise

There's a decent network of off-road cycle tracks, particularly the stretch connecting St Helier and St Aubin. It's welcome, too, because although confident roadies have little to worry

about in negotiating even Jersey's busiest A-roads, for the less experienced who need coaxing out onto bikes, the bike path makes for a good jumping off point.

It was surprising to see so many cars on the roads, but, like the Isle of Man in the Irish sea, Jersey is a haven, according to James, for petrolheads. He should know, being one himself. Of cycle paths, he thinks that, "if you build it, they will come," wittingly or not quoting Kevin Costner in *Field of Dreams*.

The beginning of our ride kept us off the main A1 road and on the bike path straddling the seafront. Tread carefully when the tide is in as the waves battering the sea wall can often breach the defences, leaving you with sodden shoes, or worse.

In St Aubin, we cut inland and onto the first of many climbs, which marks the point where the Round the Bays road race will start. The fresh sea breeze disappeared, as did my arm and leg warmers, for my first bare-limb cycling of the year – a

### LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

**Distance:** 68km

**Grade:** Medium. The hills are plentiful and occasionally back-breaking but you've hit the summit before they've done too much damage.

**Download:** <http://www.mapmyride.com/routes/view/2026614484>

### GETTING THERE

We travelled with Condor Ferries from Poole. Condor Ferries operates a year-round service to the Channel Islands from Poole with its fast ferry Condor Liberation, alongside a conventional ferry service from Portsmouth. To book and check current prices, visit [condorferries.com](http://condorferries.com) or call 0345 609 1024.

### WHERE TO STAY

We stayed at the Hotel de France ([defrance.co.uk](http://defrance.co.uk)), a spa hotel in the centre of Saint Helier, and a five-minute drive from the ferry port. There are plenty of good eating options, including Saffrons (fine dining with an 'Indian accent') and a brasserie, Garden View. For bikes, there's a secure lock-up in the reception area. For post-ride relaxation, try the Ayush Wellness Spa.

### FOOD AND DRINK

In Saint Helier, we ate both our evening meals in the hotel's Garden View restaurant, despite looking around town, unsuccessfully,



for other options. While the UK shares a currency with Jersey, the Jersey pound doesn't quite go as far as it does on the mainland. On the road, we ate at The Hungry Man in Rozel, which serves a variety of sandwiches (from gourmet burgers to crab sandwiches), cakes and drinks. As a cyclist, maybe steer clear of the Double Decker Health Wrecker if you want to make it up any of the steep climbs that take you out of town.

### BIKE SHOPS

Plenty of bike shops in Saint Helier, including Big Maggy's ([bigmaggys.com](http://bigmaggys.com)) and The Cycle Centre (JE2 3QA), where we picked up a skewer.

### TOURIST INFO

[jersey.com](http://jersey.com)

*The wind at our backs flung  
us from the south to the  
north in the blink of an eye*



momentous occasion, every season. It was all of 50m elevation over 300m, but the first climb of any ride is always enough to break into a sweat.

This was repeated twice in quick succession, before a longer descent in Corbière, past its lighthouse and an imposing, military-looking structure. Radio Tower was built during World War II by the occupying Nazis but – in a development that would annoy them no end – is today available for holiday bookings. In 1976 it was adapted by the government to monitor radio communications for vessels in the English Channel, and now has three double bedrooms, complete with all mod cons, with arguably the best panorama in town. You won't be shocked to discover that this prime piece of real estate doesn't come cheap, with high season prices currently at £2235 for a seven-night stay.

The descent rolls straight into one of the flatter stretches of road on the island, along the main road of the western coast. Often you would have a torrid head- or crosswind at this point but, the weather being what it was, the wind at our backs flung us from the south to the north in the blink of an eye.

From L'Etacq there was a succession of climbs to Rozel, each worse than the last. At Les Platons, the highest point of the island, James warns me off a dodgy corner as we begin the descent, one that has claimed his, and others, scalp on several occasions. With myriad tears on his jersey, the damage done is clear. "I was on my first road bike in months, cornering like I was still on my mountain bike."

An electrician by trade, there was plenty of spark in his form, despite his insistence of a less than vintage winter. Unlike myself, who'd spent



**Above left**  
John and James discuss their recovering form from winter

the second half of the winter travelling around India and eating my body weight in curry, James didn't look far from racing weight, clearly benefiting from a thriving club scene on the island. There are 115 members in his club alone, so he's never short of people to ride with, and a racing scene that is full to bursting. "It's sometimes hard to get the volunteers we need to put them on," he reckons.

When the islanders aren't racing each other, they look across the water to Guernsey to compete. Guernsey, he says, has had the better of recent duels and suggests its superior youth development programme is the reason why.

### Man up

But it's another British Crown dependency, the Isle of Man, that James thinks Jersey should look to as a role model. It's well documented

how much cycling talent that island has produced, with Cavendish leading the way. Despite Jersey's love for cycle sport and other surface similarities, they don't have a big history of producing top talent competing on a world-class stage. James thinks that a paid sport development officer (SDO) focusing exclusively on cycling would be a good start, rather than a reliance on volunteering and good will, as well as more opportunities for youth riders to race against stronger adults.

The (really) hilly stretch across the north of the island came to a close on the breakwater at St Catherine's, via a stop for lunch at Rozel's The Hungry Man for two very hungry men. From here, the road race route finishes with a couple of stingers through St Martin.

It had been a blast riding at leisure on a very pleasant spring day, I just wouldn't fancy negotiating these

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endlessly twisting, narrow, undulating roads at race pace.

Despite the many rues, and the odd école and boulangerie, Jersey feels far more English – Devon and Cornwall in particular.

James apologised for the condition of the roads, telling me to excuse the potholes. I told him he can't have been to the West Country recently, because Jersey's were snooker table-smooth in comparison.

As the road turns back south to complete the loop, it flattens out into



**Above**  
A chance to soak in the island's beautiful scenery

the easiest stretch of the island loop. Jersey is at its most eye-catching when skirting its perimeter but head inland and the promise of labyrinthine minor roads awaits.

Riding an island of such modest dimensions day in, day out, as James does, means established routes have to be repeated, and he admits it's difficult to plot long rides that don't double up on each other. The antidote to that is France, a short 90-minute ferry ride away, whether that means Normandy or Brittany, and is the favoured getaway for him and his clubmates, rather than the UK.

Given we could see the French coast – and that hottest April day in 70 years was still to come – jumping back onto the ferry and heading south to the port of St Malo and onto central Brittany seemed like the most sensible plan. Most definitely not an island, but a place I could happily keep turning right all day long. [PLUS](#)