Breaking The Cycle

Representation and diversity in photographs of cyclists

September 2024





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Abstract

This report analyses 100 'family cycling' images sourced from Google UK's Image search, including past year results up to 13/11/23. We looked at who was represented in these images, including apparent gender and ethnicity of adults and children, clothing and settings depicted, any visible disabilities, and the presence of any larger bodies. We did not find any images depicting clearly visible disabilities among riders, and images of larger bodies were rare. Usually, people depicted were white, and this became more noticeable when excluding images clearly from non-UK contexts (e.g. Latin America, East Asia). Helmets were usually worn (especially in images showing a clearly UK-based context) but cycle-specific clothing or high-visibility clothing was less commonly portrayed.

The images typically appeared to portray cycling as engaged in by a version of a 'nuclear family' of one man, one woman, and one to three children (aside from, for instance, some showing group rides or events), although a minority showed one adult with a child or children. Where only one adult was depicted, there were roughly equal numbers of men and women shown. Hence, cycling as a family pursuit was not gendered, but the two-adult family shown as engaging in cycling was implicitly a 'traditional' heterosexual family.

Motor vehicles or pedestrians were rarely shown as being potentially present in the same space as people cycling; however, no images showed separated cycling infrastructure. Instead, the images implied that there would be no pedestrians on rural paths and no cars on rural roads. Almost all 'family cycling' environments shown depicted greenery and most did not show buildings. These findings suggest a need to diversify images of 'family cycling' in relation to visible disability, body size, family structure and ethnicity. Authorities and other organisations should also consider collating, sourcing, and using images of newer cycling

infrastructure allowing families to cycle separate from motor traffic and pedestrians.

Introduction

In higher-cycling countries like Japan and the Netherlands, cycling is a normal mode of travel for young people, perhaps unsurprisingly as they are unable to drive (Goel et al 2022). However, among children in the UK, cycling is rare outside a few higher-cycling localities, such as Cambridge (Goodman et al, 2019). Cycling by UK mothers with their children has been described as a 'proto' rather than a full-blown practice (Rahman 2024), recognising its unusual and challenging nature, by comparison to walking or car use. Rahman's and other work (e.g. Aldred and Woodcock 2015) points to the high levels of safety clothing and other 'gear' often seen as necessary to cycle in the UK. This can be off-putting by requiring a substantial amount of pre-planning and purchase of specialist items, even without the involvement of children which is perceived to require even more 'kit'. By contrast, cycling in the Netherlands tends to simply involve getting on a cycle, for adults and children alike.

The lack of diversity among cyclists has been highlighted as (Aldred equalities issue and Mazumder 2024), demonstrating the unequal nature of cycling environments in the UK and the need to address both general and specific barriers to cycling. Some research has highlighted a corresponding lack of diversity in representation. For example, a study of London transport and cycling policy documents found many implied that 'cyclists' and 'disabled people' were two separate groups (Andrews et al, 2018). Few images in such documents depicted non-standard cycles that may be used by some disabled people, such as tricycles or e-handcycles. The authors comment (2018: 149) that "If disabled people as cyclists are not explicitly included in policy documents and cycling promotion - both textually and in

images – this may feed a belief that disabled people cannot or do not cycle".

As well as potentially reinforcing stereotypes of who can and cannot cycle, some promotional material may also reinforce assumptions and/or discriminatory views about the societal desirability of wider types of bodies, relationships, and identities. For instance, an award-winning advertising campaign that ran in Manchester in 2006 (still regularly cited positively online) contrasted the 'Fast Lane' for cyclists with the 'Fat Lane' for those using motorised transport. The campaign constructs speed as inherently desirable (with a blurred cyclist shown in a narrow, painted cycle lane) and fatness as inherently undesirable. The impact on wider societal attitudes of these messages is of concern, given research suggesting that seeing negative representations of larger bodies can lead to people expressing more fatphobic attitudes (e.g. McClure et al, 2010). Conversely, advertising studies have suggested that positive and non-objectifying representations of larger bodies can increase wider uptake of 'health-related products' among women generally (Naidu et al, 2023).

In this context, we decided to investigate images of family cycling, to examine representations of 'families' and individual family members, and to study what kind of cycling they were shown as doing. The idea was to look at what kinds of depictions came up when someone in the UK searched for family cycling. Would they find diverse online representation? Would - for instance - a Black family, or a family headed by two men, see images that looked something like their own household? Or would they find images that both represented wider assumptions about 'the family' in a UK context, and more specific assumptions about who cycles (and doesn't) in the UK? Arguably, diversity of representation is particularly important in contexts where take-up is unequal, as those who may already feel unwelcome in cycling environments would benefit most from seeing examples of people like them riding. This thesis is broadly supported by literature from advertising (Campbell et al 2023) although there is relatively little research on the portrayal specifically of active travel.

Our broad research questions guiding the project were:

- What kind of family structures are represented in images of 'family cycling'?
- In terms of ethnicity, visible disability, and body size, how diverse are the images of family members depicted in these images?
- What kinds of cycling is shown, in terms of cycling environments, cyclists' clothing, and types of cycle depicted?

Methods

On 13th November 2023, we searched Google UK's Image Search for family cycling, for results from the past year. We then saved the first 100 images, plus ten to allow for duplicates or images judged invalid in some way. The image dataset reduced to 100 after removing duplicates (2 images), graphics and icons (7 images), and one image with no people.

Both researchers coded the photos against a set of initially agreed categories. Any discrepancies were discussed and criteria were refined to remove ambiguity as far as possible. This included replacing interpretation with more descriptive coding – for example, we were initially using an urban/rural category, but this proved to be interpreted differently by the two researchers. Accordingly, the category was changed and became two separate codes, 'presence of buildings' and 'presence of greenery', which showed very high levels of agreement.

Where we did not reach an agreement (for example on gender, ethnicity, or whether a person was an adult or a child), these were added to the photos that were coded as 'unclear'. Generally, we were aligned on people

characteristics, but found it more challenging to determine environment characteristics, such as whether the setting was separated from pedestrians and/or cars. The latter to some extent reflected a common lack of clarity over cycling environments in the UK and some other countries (e.g. Egan and Philbin, 2021).

Stock photos were identified using Google Image Search's 'find image source' feature. If the source was a public stock photo library, such as iStock or Shutterstock, we classified them as stock photos. We did not count any private photo libraries by organisations as stock photos. 31 of the photos were stock photos, and 59 were not stock photos. 10 were unclear.

Results

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Family structure

Of the 100 images, nearly three in five (58) showed two adults. The next most frequent configuration was one adult with one or more children (26 images). Only six images did not show any adults, while only nine showed three or more adults.



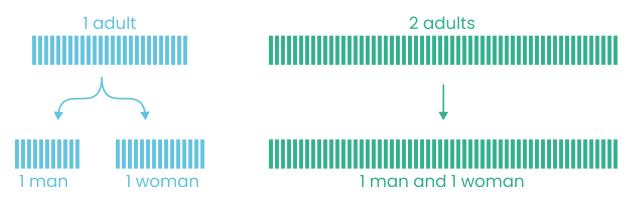
Similarly, the typical number of children shown was two (63/100), while almost all the rest (31) showed either one or three children.



This suggests that in most cases, the image was likely to be read as depicting some kind of nuclear-type family (two-parent family, single-parent family, or one member of a two-parent family; accompanied by one to three children).

	Number of children						
Number of adults	0	1	2	3	4	Total	
0	0	3	1	1	1	6	
1	1	8	14	3	0	26	
2	2	5	46	5	0	58	
3	0	0	2	3	0	5	
4	0	0	0	1	1	2	
5	0	0	0	1	0	1	
9	0	1	0	0	0	1	
10	1	0	0	0	0	1	
Total	4	17	63	14	2	100	

Of the 58 images showing two adults, all showed (by our judgement) one man and one woman. Of the 26 images showing a single adult accompanied by one or more children, 11 were men and 15 women.



Thus, the 'family' images suggested that cycling was most likely an activity carried out by a heterosexual, nuclear family; or that it might be carried out by one adult with children (implicitly perhaps a single-parent family or an activity involving one adult from a larger family). In the latter case it was roughly equally likely to be an activity led by a male or a female adult. In other words, the family that cycles is depicted as being gendered (where two adults are shown in parental roles, they are uniformly opposite-gender), but the practice of cycling with children itself is not.

Ethnicity, visible disabilities, and body size

The images were coded and analysed for categories related to ethnicity, disability, and body size. These classifications are all necessarily somewhat subjective and broad-brush. They can only be based on judgements about appearances (and many disabilities are of course not visible). This analysis did however make it clear that a norm was in operation here too – white ethnicity, a lack of visible disabilities (judged through the presence of adapted cycles frequently used by disabled people, such as tricycles), and thin to slim body sizes (a lack of larger bodies).

Specifically, none of the images showed anyone with a visible disability. In terms of body size, only 8 of 100 images showing people showed one or more people with what we have termed 'larger bodies', as opposed to those we would term thin to slim. In this case, all were adults, usually one of the adults depicted having a larger than usual (for these images) body size.

larger bodies depicted

As the authors we would suggest that the (rarely depicted) 'larger bodies' in the image dataset were likely in fact to be more representative of the UK adult population than those usually depicted in our set of images. For instance, those usually depicted in the image dataset appeared to us to be dress size 10-12, whereas the average UK woman wears a dress size 16.

For ethnicity, the picture was apparently more diverse. Of all images, 79 showed only white people. By comparison, 20 showed at least one person not judged to be white, and in one case this was unclear (coder disagreement).

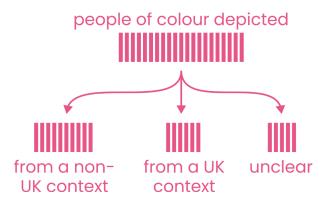
only white people depicted

people of colour depicted



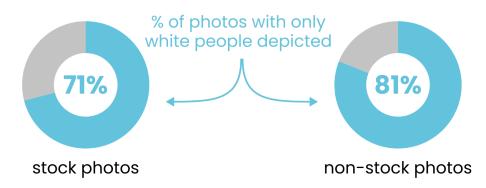
However, the picture became more complicated when the source of the image was examined. Of the 21 images that

included people of colour, around half (ten) were clearly from a non-UK context, while only six were definitely from the UK (the remaining five were unclear).



For instance, picture 9 (entitled "How to Buy a Secondhand Bike", from Cycling UK) showed what appeared to be two Latin American girls in a landscape containing cacti, picture 40 was a stock photo showing a small East Asian girl riding a bike with her parents, with the location being marked as China, and picture 46 comes from a Canadian parenting magazine, showing a Black woman riding a bike carrying one child with another accompanying her. These images also contained visual clues to the context likely being non-UK (the cacti being the most obvious).

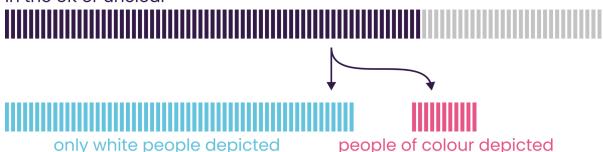
When looking at the differences in representation between stock and non-stock photos, in 71% (22) of the stock photos everyone seemed white. This was true for 81% (48) of the non-stock photos.



This small difference could indicate some demand to diversify representations to which commercial providers are responding. However, this also meant that many photos portraying Black, Asian, or mixed-race people were unlikely to be relevant to the context of the articles in which they were published (for example picture 23).

Of the 100 images, 69 were judged to be clearly either in the UK or the location was unclear. From these 69, 58 (84%) showed only apparently white people and 11 showed at least one visible person of colour.

in the UK or unclear



For instance, picture 50 (BikeClub.co.uk) shows four small children (and no adults) cycling in the Lake District, one of whom is a person of colour. Picture 7 (National Trust) shows two adults and two children, at least three of whom appear to be Black or with mixed heritage, and picture 23 (Cycle Derby) shows two adults and two children, again mostly visible people of colour.

Cycling environment

We categorised the 100 images by various characteristics related to the cycling environment, including to what extent they showed an environment separated from cars and/or pedestrians, and the actual presence of cars and/or pedestrians. All in all, it was relatively easy to identify infrastructure that indicated clear separation from cars or pedestrians but we found it harder to distinguish between 'no separation' and 'unclear'.

72 images clearly showed people cycling somewhere separated from car traffic, whether this was a shared or a cycle path, a park, or a playground. In 19 cases it was unclear whether cycles were separated from cars (e.g. it was difficult to tell if a route was a small rural road or a cycle track) and in

nine cases a road or street was shown that clearly could potentially involve mixing with motor traffic.

separated from car traffic

mixed with car traffic



unclear

We attempted to categorise separation from pedestrians similarly, but it was extremely hard because although many off-road paths were probably shared use, generally shared use signs were not shown to indicate this. Only four images, however, showed a route that was definitely separated from pedestrians. Of these, one showed cyclists standing on their bikes in a roadway, one showed cycling through a forest, and two showed a cycling event in at least one of which the roads were closed to general traffic. Aside from this last image, not one showed a cycling environment clearly separated from pedestrians and motor traffic (e.g. a separated cycle track such as London's Embankment Superhighway).

We also looked at the wider environments depicted in the images. 98 of 100 showed some form of greenery – usually this appeared to be a rural area although sometimes a city park or river route was depicted. We considered that only 18 showed buildings of some kind. Only 3/100 showed any car traffic, with a further one showing a car parked on a drive. Hence, although in some cases infrastructure was shown which might have involved sharing with motor traffic (e.g. rural roads), the actual presence of motor traffic was rarely shown.

greenery shown



buildings shown



pedestrians shown



cars shown



Only 8-9 of the images showed any pedestrians (one was unclear and showed an event, perhaps a 'Dr Bike' where cycles are fixed for free). We defined 'pedestrians' as someone shown as likely to be travelling 'on foot¹', so including adults stood next to children on bikes, but not for instance a dismounted cyclist wearing a helmet standing with their bike.

Of the eight images that clearly depicted pedestrians, one showed a small girl standing by her bike in the middle of a busy pedestrianised shopping street, one showed a family in a playground with two adults on foot and three children on bikes, one showed a man pushing a small boy on a bike, one was in a park with a bike being fixed and a pedestrian in the background, one showed a small girl on a bike in front of two adult pedestrians, one showed cyclists by a canal with boaters on the other side, one showed a barely visible pedestrian on a footway at the back of an image highlighting a group of four 'adventuring' cyclists, and one showed a beach path with pedestrians in the background.

Thus, only the last showed a scene implying (not depicting) adult cyclists interacting with pedestrians. Where children were shown possibly interacting with pedestrians (the girl on the shopping street, the girl in front of two adults), these were two very young female children, not for instance adolescents. The lack of potential pedestrian interaction shown is notable given that off-road cycle routes are often shared with pedestrians in the UK and many other countries.

Clothing and accessories

We looked at the way that people cycling were dressed in the images. Here there was a clear pattern. Mostly, adults and children were shown wearing helmets, but they tended to be dressed casually with high-visibility and cycle-specific clothing (defined as items such as branded cycling tops and

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¹ This would have also included those using wheelchairs or using a mobility scooter, but none were seen in any of the pictures.

leggings) much less commonly shown. Cycling was thus depicted more as a leisure pursuit than as a sporting activity, albeit a leisure pursuit requiring the use of helmets. Specifically, 26 images (just over a quarter) depicted any unhelmeted cyclists.

unhelmeted cyclists depicted



Of these, only 19 images showed any unhelmeted adults, and only 14 showed any unhelmeted children. For instance, image 110 shows an off-road, rural path with a group of two adults and two children cycling together in everyday clothing. The adults are not wearing a helmet, but the children are. More typically, all people in this kind of an image would be shown wearing helmets. Of the unhelmeted images, only 7/26 were UK, while 11 were non-UK and the remaining 8 unclear. The 'typicality' of helmet-wearing was strongest where the image is clearly showing a UK context, and least strong while showing a clearly foreign or more generic context.

The 'leisure' rather than 'sport' depiction was also reflected in the types of bikes shown. Only 9 photos contained road bikes (bikes with drop handlebars and thin tyres, designed for speed), whereas all other photos featured either hybrids (flat handlebars, a sturdier build than road bikes) or mountain bikes (MTBs) (flat handlebars with knobbly tyres and front or front and rear suspension).

road bikes depicted



In only three images, women had a road bike, and in only two photos, children had a road bike. In six out of nine pictures featuring road bikes, the road bike was ridden or held by a man, while the rest of the family had either a hybrid or MTB. Road bike usage was associated with a sportier image: in 7 of the 9 photos with road bikes people were wearing cycling specific clothing, whereas this was the case for only 9 out of the 52 photos with MTBs and 10 out of the 68 photos with hybrids. All the pictures with cycling specific clothing only

featured white people. In 2 of the 17 photos with cycling specific clothing there were people of larger body size.

Discussion

This analysis found that families represented in our image dataset in general appeared to be implicitly heterosexual-type nuclear families (two opposite-gender adults with a child or children). In some cases, a single adult was shown with children, which could have been intended and/or read as implying either a single-parent family or a single-parent activity. Given that these single adults were equally likely to be men or women, the latter may be most likely (only 16% of single-parent families in the UK are male-headed²). In any case, cycling is represented as an activity that a male parent or carer is as likely to do with children as a female parent or carer. Given the overall gendering of cycling among UK adults (three-quarters male) this may reflect a balancing of wider assumptions about childcare being a female task combined with assumptions about cycling being a male activity. In nearly all the pictures with a mix of different bikes, the man had the road bike. This might reflect the stereotype of the middle-aged male cyclist and suggest that men could often have more expensive equipment compared to other family members.

There was a lack of diversity of representation in terms of disability, body size, and ethnicity. Disability was starkest in its absence with no adapted cycles shown, although not all disabilities are visible and many disabled cyclists ride standard bikes. However, given widespread assumptions that disabled people do not cycle (Andrews et al 2018), the absence of visibly disabled cyclists may reinforce such assumptions. In terms of ethnicity, the representation was somewhat better, although ethnically diverse representations tended to disproportionately show non-UK contexts and

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² Office for National Statistics, <u>Families and households in the UK: 2022</u>

individuals, so a British person of colour might not feel represented by these images. Very few larger bodies were shown, and the typical size bodies shown appeared to be much smaller than the average size of people in the UK. Despite finding a relative lack of cycle-specific clothing in these images, the lack of larger bodies may still reinforce long standing assumptions about the 'sporty' nature of cycling in the UK (Aldred 2013), by constructing it as an activity that is only for the active, fit, and slim. These depictions also risk perpetuating the wider exclusion and marginalisation of fat people in public space, and the assumption that larger bodies are inherently unhealthy or unfit.

In most of the pictures, people had hybrids or MTBs, indicating that speed is not a priority in family cycling. While the clothing worn by cyclists was generally casual, helmets were typically depicted, especially in UK contexts. This represented a wider assumption that adults and especially children should always wear helmets while cycling, however safe the context (an assumption not typically found in higher-cycling contexts such as the Netherlands (Aldred and Woodcock, 2015). Even though these images seemed to seek to represent cycling as an everyday leisure activity, they showed it as an activity requiring head protection.

Notably, contexts shown were generally distinct from the typical UK cycling environment. Firstly, they tended to involve greenery and not to involve buildings, thus painting a rural rather than urban picture (perhaps a family cycling holiday is implied). Secondly, they very rarely showed interactions or even suggested interactions between cyclists and drivers and/or pedestrians, despite the lack of separated cycle infrastructure depicted in the images. Indeed, protected cycle infrastructure is notable in its absence, with rural and minor roads lacking cycling infrastructure, parks, waterways, and forests instead being much more common. In all, mixing with either motor vehicles (roads) or pedestrians (parks, waterways, forests) would be likely and quite possibly common, yet this is not suggested nor shown. This is likely to

represent a tacit acknowledgement that such interactions are potentially stressful and/or seen as undesirable.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

This is the first analysis to explore representations of 'family cycling' in online media shown to those using Google UK Image Search. While inevitably limited (and only representing one facet of under-representation), the results are important and should raise concern about the narrowness of some of this representation. Specifically, there is a need for authorities and other organisations to widen the range of images that they use to show 'family cycling', which may well include generating and sharing their own images.

Some such work has already begun. Disabled cycling charity Wheels for Wellbeing in 2023 created a free-to-use databank of images of inclusive cycling³; so far largely consisting of mostly white adults on diverse adapted bikes riding in a range of cycling environments in London. This important work marks a road towards broader representation; however, more needs to be done to diversify images of family cycling, too. This work should not be left only to charities. National organisations such as Active Travel England could take responsibility for sourcing and sharing a wider variety of such images, including those featuring people with larger bodies, different family structures, and more ethnic minority people cycling in locations that are clearly within the UK.

This analysis cannot tell us the impact of more or less diverse representations on people's attitudes towards cycling. However, it is worrying that people with larger bodies, disabled people, British people of colour, and LGBTQ+ parents and caregivers may look at such images and not see themselves represented. Ultimately, representation is only

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³ Bikeability, Wheels for Wellbeing launch Inclusive Cycling Photobank

one part of the picture in diversifying cycling. But it is still important. Advertising research has highlighted the role of diverse representation in shaping views about products, including improving feelings of inclusion and self-esteem for members of minority groups seeing themselves positively and authentically represented (Campbell et al 2023). In our study such representation was limited or even absent, compared to the representation of apparently heterosexual, white, non-disabled, and slim cycling family groups. Showing a wider range of individuals and groups cycling should form part of the UK's road towards more inclusive cycling.

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Appendix

List of images analysed

ID URL at which image can be viewed (as of 4 July 2024)

- 1 https://www.bikeradar.com/features/routes-and-rides/beginners-guide-to-cycling-with-kids/
- 2 https://www.kentonline.co.uk/whats-on/news/10-stunning-cycling-trails-to-try-this-summer-291216/
- 3 https://bobbinbikes.com/blogs/blog/cycle-routes-for-families-in-ke nt
- 4 https://www.zillertal.at/en/summer/family/biking-with-kids.html
- 5 https://www.thenewforest.co.uk/things-to-do/cycling/family-routes/
- 6 https://www.countryfile.com/go-outdoors/get-active/guide-to-easy-off-road-bike-rides
- 7 https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/visit/family-friendly/great-places-for-a-family-bike-ride
- 8 https://www.neilson.co.uk/beach/activities/mountain-and-road-biking/articles/cycling-children-benefits-family-bike-ride
- 9 https://www.cyclinguk.org/family
- 10 https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/visit/nottinghamshire-lincolnshire/cl umber-park/cycling-running-and-walking-at-clumber-park
- 11 https://widerexperience.co.uk/learn-to-ride-families/
- 12 https://www.visitdeanwye.co.uk/things-to-do/ultimate-family-cycling-adventure-experience-full-day-p1432641
- 13 https://www.cyclederby.co.uk/pages/bikeability-family
- 14 https://www.amazon.co.uk/Cycling-Days-Out-Traffic-free-Hampshire/dp/1906148244
- 15 https://www.cornishsecrets.co.uk/guide/10-of-the-best-family-cycle -trails-in-cornwall/

- 16 https://www.welovecycling.com/wide/2023/04/12/making-memories -on-two-wheels-creative-ideas-for-family-bike-adventures/
- 17 https://raring2go.co.uk/2023/07/how-to-choose-a-childs-first-bike-and-kit/
- 18 https://www.visitdeanwye.co.uk/things-to-do/young-family-cycling-adventure-experience-full-day-p1432651
- 19 https://www.boundless.co.uk/news-competitions/lifestyle/how-to-st art-cycling-as-a-family
- 20 https://provizsports.com/blogs/news/top-10-international-child-frie ndly-cycling-holidays?country=GB
- 21 https://www.eurobike.at/en/cycling-holidays/tour-type/families
- 22 https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=631259475772893&set=a.52 0088093556699
- 23 https://www.cyclederby.co.uk/pages/chellaston
- 24 https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/visit/50-things/no.-11-explore-on-w heels
- 25 https://firststep-sports.co.uk/2023/03/22/how-can-you-and-your-fa mily-save-money-by-cycling/
- 27 https://www.visitnorfolk.co.uk/post/best-cycling-routes-in-norfolk
- 28 https://www.exodus.co.uk/activities/family-holidays/cycling
- 31 https://www.eurobike.at/en/cycling-holidays/tour-type/families/aus tria
- 33 https://www.visitwales.com/things-do/adventure-and-activities/cycling-and-mountain-biking/family-mountain-biking
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