



CYCLING
CLIMBS OF THE
**DRAGON
RIDE 2023**

THE ROADS THAT MAKE THE EVENT

BY SIMON WARREN



Welcome to your exclusive guide to the climbs of the 2023 *Dragon Ride* where you'll find insight into the 10 key ascents that shape this great event. Taking in the best scenery South Wales has to offer the routes this year have been given a dramatic shake up.

As you can see everything has been turned on its head and for the first time in over a decade the routes are being run in a clockwise direction. I say everything but that's not quite true. The two signature climbs of the Devil's Elbow and Devil's staircase remain in place and in their correct orientation but everything else has been masterfully re-engineered to present you with a fresh and invigorated challenge. Unless you've signed up to ride the full *Dragon Devil* then you'll not manage to tick off all the climbs in this guide on your day out and let's face it, 300 kilometres is a hell of a long way. The opportunity to ride the one and only Devil's Staircase though, is a challenge many will not be able to resist.

Starting and finishing in the familiar surroundings of Margam Park all four routes now head out to the west before returning from the east and all start with the vicious twin ramps of Sardis Hill. This will shock the legs into action then a short while later following the junction at Glynneath the *Macmillian route* breaks away and heads east to Hirwaun. Continuing up Glynneath Hill the other three head on their way into the mountains in search of giant

climbs and wide open spaces. Just after the 50 kilometre mark those on the *Medio route* split to immediately take on the full 8.9 kilometres of Bwlch Bryn-Rhudd which leaves the *Gran Fondo* and *Dragon Devil* heading west to face up to Black Mountain. Although not my favoured side, this climb is still a huge challenge and although it lacks the signature curves and bends of the northern face it does pass through arguably better scenery as it crosses the spine of the ridge. What you miss climbing the north side you'll get to enjoy descending as you flow through its sweeping corners on the rapid passage into the valley where at the 84 kilometre mark the *Gran Fondo* separates to leave just the brave to head north to find the Devil's Staircase. The 'Staircase' is etched into British cycling folk law having found fame and notoriety via its inclusion on the parcours of the Milk Race many years ago. There's some grainy footage on Youtube that's well worth checking out if you like scenes of powerful Russians grinding impossibly big gears up 25% slopes. Not to mention 1980's cars being pushed uphill by hordes of spectators as they stutter to a halt on the vicious gradient. This long excursion north is of course worth it not just for the climbs but the approach road to the Staircase is simply sublime and seems a million miles from anywhere. Looping back south the *Dragon Devil* links back up with the *Gran Fondo* on the foot slopes of Bwlch Cerrig Duon which they tackle

together before merging with the *Medio Fondo* to take on the remainder, and the toughest part of Bwlch Bryn-Rhudd then making their way to the timed climb, the Devil's Elbow. You know instantly that anything labeled 'Devil' is going to present a challenge and the Elbow certainly does. Climbing gently through the valley on the narrowest of roads through the gnarled scenery, it's hard not to gulp when you see the final bends come into view. Ramping up the first left hand hairpin you better get yourself ready for some serious time in the pain cave. You've got to give this one all you have, if not to top the leaderboard or post a good time on Strava but just to beat your mates. The added impetus an officially timed section gives is not to be underestimated and it will spur you on to dig as deep as you can. Once you've given your all up The Elbow continue south to meet up with the Macmillan route and together all four line up to do battle with the final two huge obstacles, Rhigos and The Bwlch.

There's no point in being fresh for the journey home and the more you leave on the road the more calories you can consume afterwards so smash it up these climbs. Once crossed it's all down hill to the finish, the perfect way to end a tough ride.

So which ever route you have chosen to ride I hope you enjoy the climbs of south Wales, enjoy the unique character of each one, soak up the scenery they take you though and of course the challenge of beating these famous roads. Simon.



Cycling Climbs of the Dragon Ride: A Road Cyclist's Guide, Text, photographs, design and illustrations copyright © Simon Warren 2022 | www.100climbs.co.uk

LEGEND

UNDERSTANDING THE FACTFILE AND RATINGS

LOCATIONS

On each factfile you will see a small colour coded graphic of the four Dragon Ride routes. On that graphic, highlighted in white you will also see the location of each particular climb. You can use this to see which climb appears on which route and whereabouts on that route it appears. Only one route features all ten climbs but all four contain three of them.

TOP TIP

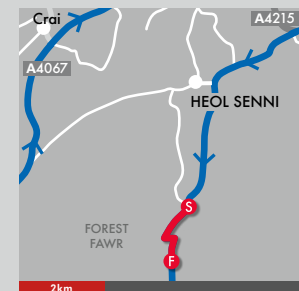
Each Factfile includes a brief tip to help you get to the top of it in the best shape, together with the climb's key statistics and of course the map to show where the climb starts and finishes. Also is the approximate time needed to ride each hill, timed over the distance marked, this time will be slow for some but fast for others, so see how you fair.

FACTFILE

TOP TIP Keep a steady pace until the steep bends come into view. When you arrive at the first bend ride wide to the right to minimise the gradient and conversely at the next one ride to the left.

LENGTH 1825m
 HEIGHT GAIN 188m
 AVERAGE GRADIENT 10.3%
 MAXIMUM GRADIENT 17%
 APPROX CLIMB TIME 11mins

INCLUDED ON **MACMILLAN 100** **MEDIO FONDO** **GRAN FONDO** **DRAGON DEVIL**



RATINGS

The climbs are all given a rating out of ten, ten being the toughest and you may notice the scores of some have changed from their appearance in my previous books. This is because I'm rating them in the context of the event, so naturally the Devil's staircase now gets a 10, instead of a nine as it had previously held. The rating is an amalgamation of gradient, length, the likely hostility of the riding conditions, and the condition of the surface.



MAP KEY

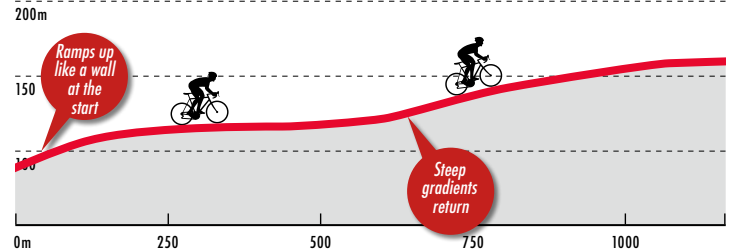
- Ride Route
- A Road
- B Road
- Minor Road
- Rail line
- Hill route
- Town
- Scale



SARDIS HILL

PONTRHYDYFEN, PORT TALBOT

The first change on the new routes will hit all riders after 15 kilometres in the saddle and although short includes two nasty little ramps. Heading east to west on the B4287 from Pontrhydyfen to Neath, Sadis Hill kicks up from the junction with Ton Mawr Road and within a hundred metres hits around 14%. The pitch of the slope is further accentuated by the tall brick walls either side which are remnants of an abandoned railway bridge. Continuing to rise harshly past a couple of houses it's not too long before you reach the gentle middle section. Take the chance to catch your breath here as before you know it the second ramp arrives to take you to the top. Longer than the first hard stretch but not quite as steep it begins abruptly then fades as you approach the summit. Passing over a small bridge, the trees either side recede and the houses of Cimla begin before you arrive at the top at the small crossroads.



FACTFILE

TOP TIP Don't go in all guns blazing on the first steep ramp or you will suffer towards the top, leave any heroics for later in the day.

LENGTH 1140m
HEIGHT GAIN 71m
AVERAGE GRADIENT 6.3%
MAXIMUM GRADIENT 14%
APPROX CLIMB TIME 4.5mins



INCLUDED ON **MACMILLAN 100** **MEDIO FONDO** **GRAN FONDO** **DRAGON DEVIL**

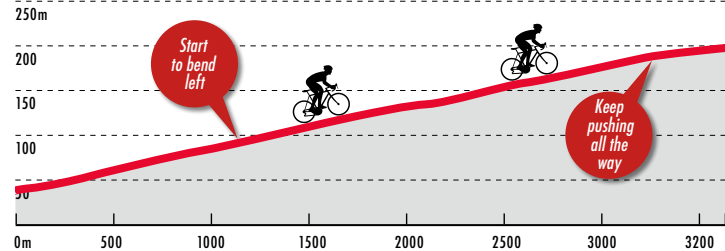




GLYNNEATH HILL

GLYNNEATH, NEATH PORT TALBOT

This climb appears minor in the grand scheme of things, but underestimate it at your peril. Arriving early on the three longer routes it will give your fresh legs their first chance to settle into a nice climbing rhythm. Once you've negotiated the junctions in Glynneath the road bends right then rears up to disappear into the cover of trees where, with the last house behind you the reasonably busy road, lined with thick foliage either side, settles into its solid 6% gradient. Heading in a direct straight line there's no let up in the degree of the slope, nor in the amount of trees that obscure the view you are working so hard to enjoy. At roughly half distance there's a left hand kink in the road and you enter the next long straight that will take you to the summit. Ahead almost the entirety of the remainder of the climb is in view which gives you an idea of the work needed but could also be a hefty psychological blow.



FACTFILE

TOP TIP This climb may look insignificant and short when compared to others on the route but it must still be treated with respect. Unless you can sustain a full gas effort for 3km then take it steady at the base.

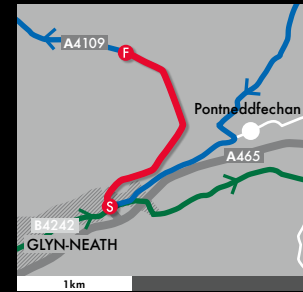
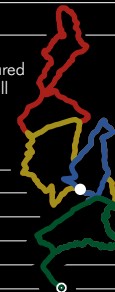
LENGTH 3200m

HEIGHT GAIN 171m

AVERAGE GRADIENT 5.4%

MAXIMUM GRADIENT 13%

APPROX CLIMB TIME 12mins



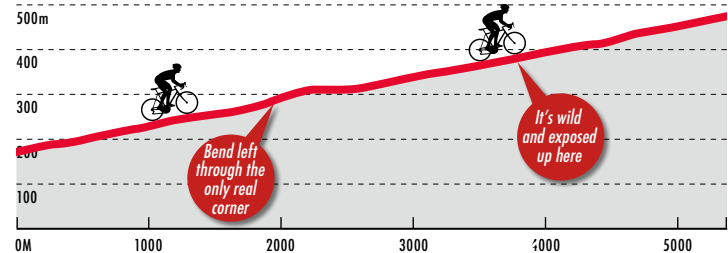
INCLUDED ON **MACMILLAN 100** **MEDIO FONDO** **GRAN FONDO** **DRAGON DEVIL**



BLACK MOUNTAIN

BRYNAMMAN, CARMARTHENSHIRE

Reserved solely for those riding the *Gran Fondo* and *Dragon Devil*, Black Mountain is the first real big test of the day. Although not the classic side of the mountain this is still a fantastic road to climb that crosses the spine of the mountain and immerses you in some of the best scenery Wales has to offer. It's a kilometre into the slope before you escape Brynamman and enter the open land but from then on it is pure bliss. After two kilometres the road bends left as it rises above the valley below on your right. Meandering across the featureless landscape, exposed to whatever mother nature has in store the majestic strip of tarmac gradually makes its way towards the summit. With no markers on the horizon, no sharp bends or features to focus on the ascent is a test for the mind and body. Grind out whatever gear you can on the consistent 6-7% slope all the way to the exposed plateau then get ready for the exhilarating descent.



FACTFILE

TOP TIP Your legs will be well warmed up by now yet still relatively fresh so give it a good blast up here, what's the worst that can happen?

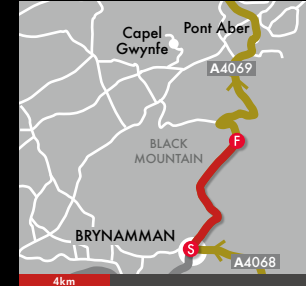
LENGTH 5320m

HEIGHT GAIN 308m

AVERAGE GRADIENT 5.8%

MAXIMUM GRADIENT 10%

APPROX CLIMB TIME 18mins



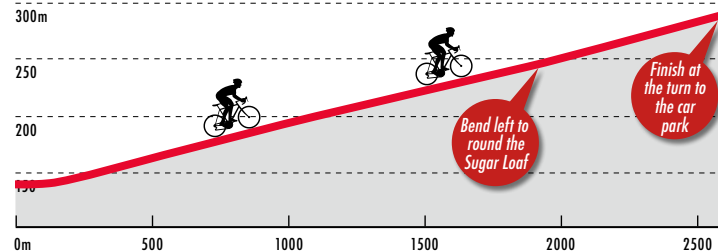
INCLUDED ON **MACMILLAN 100** **MEDIO FONDO** **GRAN FONDO** **DRAGON DEVIL**



SUGAR LOAF HILL

CYNGHORDY, CARMARTHENSHIRE

The name Sugar Loaf comes from the rounded cone shaped form that refined sugar was sold in up until the late 19th century and the moniker isn't unique to this hill. There are others in Wales as well as around the globe, of course most famously, Sugarloaf mountain in Rio, Brazil. Those of you brave enough to tackle the *Dragon Devil*, will, or should be, focused on your impending ascent of the mighty Devil's Staircase so would be wise to soft pedal over this lump. The slope begins to rear up just after the village of Cyngordy then assumes a steady 6% gradient just about all the way to the top. First of all heading due north then with the Sugar Loaf (you may not see the resemblance) in front of you, it bends harsh left then sweeps right. Passing between tall conifers and jagged rock faces the climb has a slightly exotic feel as you next bend right to summit adjacent to the turn for the car park.



FACTFILE

TOP TIP You'll not want to burn any matches on this climb, you're a long way from home and with the Devil's Staircase waiting for you just stick it in a small gear and soft pedal from the base to the top.

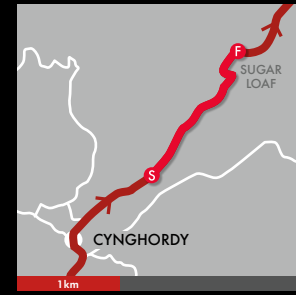
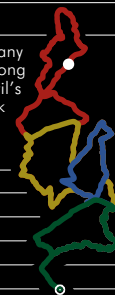
LENGTH 2600m

HEIGHT GAIN 153m

AVERAGE GRADIENT 6%

MAXIMUM GRADIENT 12%

APPROX CLIMB TIME 9.5mins



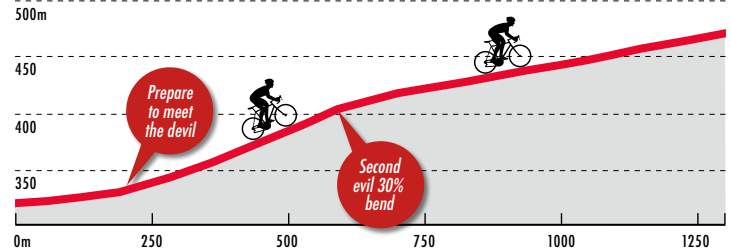
INCLUDED ON **MACMILLAN 100** **MEDIO FONDO** **GRAN FONDO** **DRAGON DEVIL**



DEVIL'S STAIRCASE

ABERGWESYN, POWYS

Deep in the wilderness lies a hill that needs no introduction, the Devil's Staircase, and it's the opportunity to tackle this beast that will lure many to sign up for the 300km of the *Dragon Devil*. Be warned though, this road can devour the freshest of legs, never mind those with 190 kilometres of riding in them. Leaving Abergwesyn, rising gently through the isolation you reach a couple of bridges in the rocky valley then ahead the road disappears into the trees past a weathered sign warning of the upcoming perils. Straight away the narrow surface pitches up to 25% as you grind your way into the eerie conifers to reach a left hand bend. The road levels a little here, allowing you to catch your breath, but then it's straight into the next incredibly tough stretch, which ends with a sharp almost unrideable 30% right-hand bend. After this it backs off a bit, but there's still a good distance of very tough climbing before you can finally relax.



FACTFILE

TOP TIP Hold back a touch up the first steep ramp then ride wide right round the first corner for a brief rest. Next you must commit 100% to the next vicious corner where once through you're over the worst.

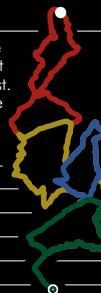
LENGTH 1300m

HEIGHT GAIN 151m

AVERAGE GRADIENT 12.5%

MAXIMUM GRADIENT 29%

APPROX CLIMB TIME 8mins



INCLUDED ON **MACMILLAN 100** **MEDIO FONDO** **GRAN FONDO** **DRAGON DEVIL**

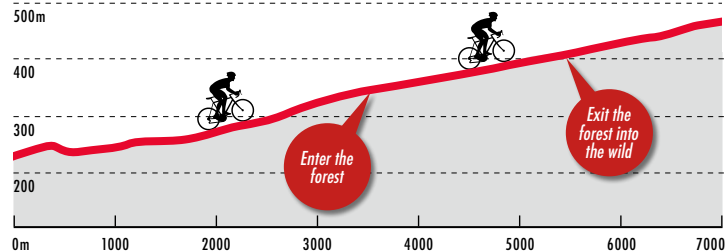




BWLCH CERRIG DUON

TRECASTLE, POWYS

If you only ever make one crossing of the Brecon Beacons – make sure it's this one. To sum up its upper slopes in a single word, they are idyllic. A brand new climb to the Dragon Ride you'll only get to see its wonders if you sign up for the *Gran Fondo* and *Dragon Devil* and your passage across starts just after Trecastle. Leave the A40 and head south on Chapel Street to start the climb after crossing the River Usk. Between the hedgerows and fields the road snakes left and right then after four kilometres you enter the Glasfynydd forest and your surroundings change. Farmland is replaced by conifers as the gentle slope continues to head upwards then after crossing a cattle grid you enter the wild. You're now just 500 metres from the top so make sure as you climb you look around as there is absolutely nothing to spoil the view – nothing. It's just you, the sheep, the road, the hills, and the sky. Total bliss.



FACTFILE

TOP TIP Don't go too hard on this one as you will want to save your legs for bigger battles ahead such as the Devil's Elbow timed climb.

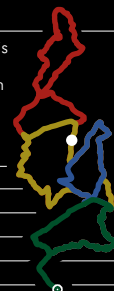
LENGTH 7000m

HEIGHT GAIN 275m

AVERAGE GRADIENT 4%

MAXIMUM GRADIENT 8%

APPROX CLIMB TIME 20mins



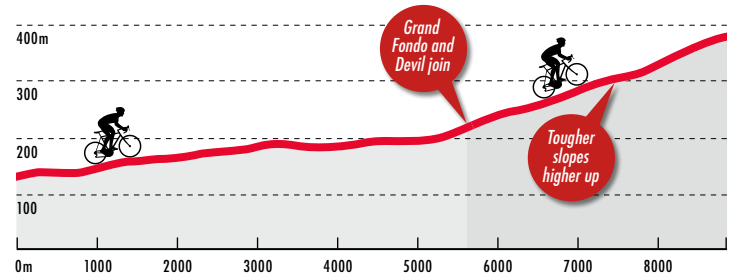
INCLUDED ON **MACMILLAN 100** **MEDIO FONDO** **GRAN FONDO** **DRAGON DEVIL**



BWLCH BRYN-RHUDD

ABERCRAF, BRECKNOCKSHIRE

To get the full force of this climb you need to ride the *Medio Fondo* as this route follows its course right from the base in Aber-craf some five and a half kilometres before the *Gran Fondo* and *Dragon Devil* routes join. The early slopes are very shallow as you pass from one village to another all the way to Glyntawe where the scenery begins to open up and the routes merge. Passing the turn to Trescastle you continue on the A4067 to traverse the Fforest Fwar, the slope now noticeably increasing in pitch. On the smooth wide road you inch up between the high valley sides that funnel you towards the summit and once you're pedalling comfortably you should be able to maintain a similar speed all the way to the end. As the road sweeps round to the right you'll notice the slight V cut in the horizon ahead, this is your goal and is reached after a couple of slight kinks in direction and an ever so slightly tougher finale.



FACTFILE

TOP TIP Take it steady through the villages on the lower slopes to save your energy for when the gradient increases higher up the climb.

LENGTH 8900m

HEIGHT GAIN 253m

AVERAGE GRADIENT 3%

MAXIMUM GRADIENT 8%

APPROX CLIMB TIME 21 mins



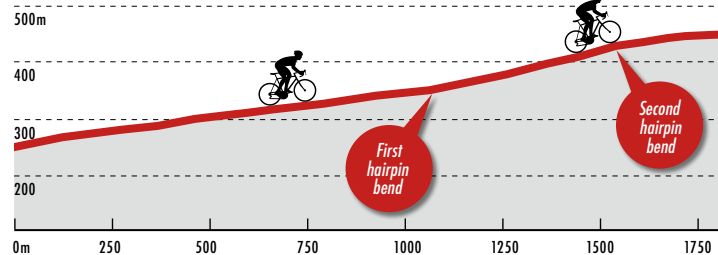
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THE DEVIL'S ELBOW

HEOL SENNI, BRECON BEACONS

Apart from the fact that it appears on three of the four routes, it's no wonder the Devil's Elbow was picked for the 'timed climb' competition as its vicious slopes epitomise the harsh beauty of hidden Wales. With its crumbling surface and neglected rusting barriers it weaves through beautifully rugged scenery presenting one of the toughest challenges of the event. To start, leave the small village of Heol Senni, follow the river south, and begin the climb adjacent to a right-hand junction. The narrow strip of tarmac climbs and winds through twisted trees either side, easing a pinch as you cross the first of two cattle grids. You feel like you're in a truly isolated wilderness here as the road gradually climbs steeper up to two wicked hairpins: first sharp left and then sharp right, with a remorseless stretch in between them. Round the second hairpin and it eases to finish at the brow where the beauty of your surroundings will soon sooth any pain.



FACTFILE

TOP TIP Keep a steady pace until the steep bends come into view. When you arrive at the first bend ride wide to the right to minimise the gradient and conversely at the next one ride to the left.

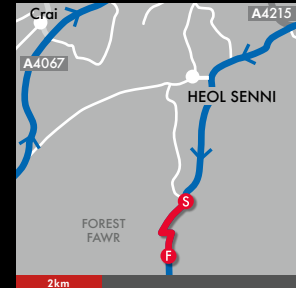
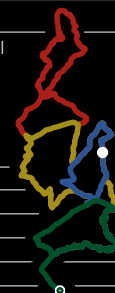
LENGTH 1825m

HEIGHT GAIN 188m

AVERAGE GRADIENT 10.3%

MAXIMUM GRADIENT 17%

APPROX CLIMB TIME 11 mins



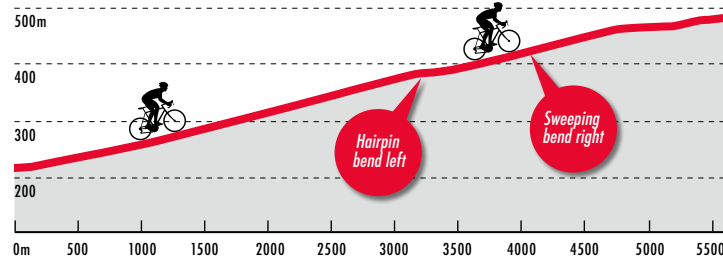
INCLUDED ON **MACMILLAN 100** **MEDIO FONDO** **GRAN FONDO** **DRAGON DEVIL**



RHIGOS

HIRWAUN, RHONDDA CYNON TAFF

This is the 'classic' way to climb Rhigos, riding north to south as it treats you to two fantastic hairpin bends that could have been plucked direct from the Alps. It's a solid climb although never too steep which starts in a dead straight line before bending left past the old Tower Colliery. The gradient increases as you enter the second long straight, after which the road twists right into a conifer plantation. Ahead you'll see the first of the two giant bends and if you look left you'll spy the road climbing above you. As you head into a smooth, tight bend and swing back round, the slope increases slightly and the views out over the valley open up. Easing slightly before the next turn but climbing steeper out of it, the pitch now ramps hard up the side of the mountain with a barrier on the left and a sheer rock face to the right. Sweeping round you now just have to push yourself on to finish over the brow past the car park on your right.



FACTFILE

TOP TIP Find a steady rhythm on the lower part of the climb in a comfortable gear and try and hold it all the way up.

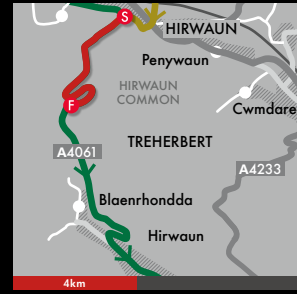
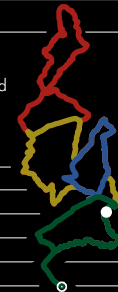
LENGTH 5600m

HEIGHT GAIN 268m

AVERAGE GRADIENT 4.8%

MAXIMUM GRADIENT 10%

APPROX CLIMB TIME 19mins



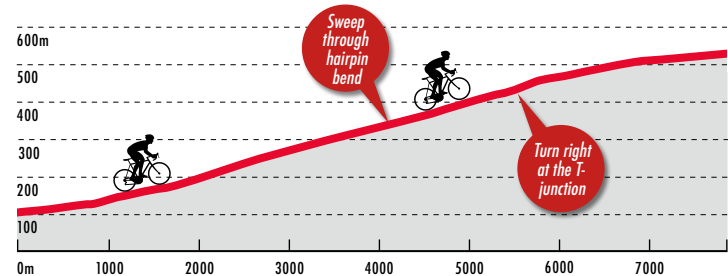
INCLUDED ON **MACMILLAN 100** **MEDIO FONDO** **GRAN FONDO** **DRAGON DEVIL**



THE BWLCH

TREORCHY, RHONDDA CYNON TAF

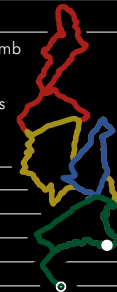
The shortest of the three ways up The Bwlch, the route from Treorchy is arguably the most beautiful and I have to say my favourite. It may not be quite as tough statistically as the southern flank but the scenery is just majestic. As you rise out of the valley you catch sight of the road high above making its way up the mountainside, a daunting view for tired legs but don't let the mind gremlins get the better of you, just get stuck in. The initial stretch is straight and steep and is the hardest part as there are no deviations to take your mind off the climbing. The first change in direction comes after two kilometres where the road bends 90 degrees right and begins to twist into the wonderful rugged landscape. A kilometre later comes the tight left hand hairpin, which delivers you into the long sweeping bend to the T-junction. Here turn right and continue to climb up between the high rocks to the summit which is still a couple of tough kilometres away.



FACTFILE

TOP TIP As this is the last big climb of the day legs will be tired so it may just be a matter of survival. Try and break the climb into parts using corners or landmarks as individual targets.

LENGTH 7900m
HEIGHT GAIN 363m
AVERAGE GRADIENT 4.6%
MAXIMUM GRADIENT 12%
APPROX CLIMB TIME 18mins



INCLUDED ON **MACMILLAN 100** **MEDIO FONDO** **GRAN FONDO** **DRAGON DEVIL**



Ride them all.

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