

BIKE RIDE: Reculver to Margate, Kent

ON THE TRAIL OF VIKINGS

Start from a site of ancient Roman history and end at a seaside resort that's a hotbed of contemporary art on this gentle, wildflower-filled coastal ride, says **Adrienne Wyper**

Named after the voyage of the reconstructed Viking longship – the *Hugin* – that sailed from Denmark to Thanet in 1949, the 31.5-mile Viking Coastal Trail opened in 2001.

For easy cycling, the nine-mile stretch of the trail between Reculver and Margate is perfect; it's the flattest section and almost completely traffic-free. You won't go hungry either, with cafés, kiosks and pubs (plus public toilets) en route.

SPRING UP HIGH

Reculver's twin towers are the remains of a 12th-century monastic church, built on the site of a Roman fort, now part of the village's namesake country park and SSSI. The towers have been a guiding landmark for those on land and sea for centuries and mark the start of this route.

On the chalky cliffs west of the village, wildflower meadows bloom in spring, with celery-scented alexanders and sea clover among the earliest. Migrating birds abound. Some are passing through, such as swallows, house martins, swifts and sandwich terns, while some stay to breed, such as yellow wagtails and sand martins.

COASTAL CRUISING

The bike ride heads east of Reculver, where a maze of waterways marks an oyster farm, on a site that has produced seafood since the monks were resident in the



The ruins of an early Roman fort – built to defend Saxon raids – are still visible next to the imposing twin towers of Reculver church

9th century. The single channel veering off inland is the River Wantsum, which silted up in the 16th century to create the Isle of Thanet.

The shingle beach turns to sand, backed by low chalk cliffs that cause your route to dip up and down. If sand obscures the path, you may need to get off and push.

Time your ride for low tide to go beachcombing. The shore's seaweed-strewn knobbly chalk reefs

are a Marine Conservation Zone, with shells like slipper limpets, oysters and whelks, and resident sea anemones, orange common starfish and tiny stalked jellyfish. In spring nudibranch sea slugs, like miniature feathered dragons, lay their eggs in rockpools.

Pause to watch windsurfers and kiteboarders ride the wind at Minnis Bay's broad sands and shallow waters, then whizz to Westgate with its two Blue Flag beaches – West Bay and St Mildred's Bay (named for Thanet's patron saint).

Round the final bend is Margate, seaside-resort pioneer of donkey rides and deckchairs. Margate is home to the Turner Contemporary gallery as well as 101-year-old Dreamland amusement park. Try a slice of award-winning GB Pizza and superb ice cream from Melt Gelato while strolling the beach and stone pier, passing one of artist Antony Gormley's statues, which becomes visible three hours before low tide.



Adrienne Wyper lives in Kent and loves walking, cycling and kayaking.

