

# 1 Planning and preparation

All those attempting a long walk (139 km /87 mi) should prepare carefully, especially if tackling it unsupported or solo. The Ridgeway terrain and gradients are not particularly challenging, but even experienced walkers need to plan for necessities and emergencies. Drinking water and public toilets are available only in certain places along the route: see pages 61 and 62 to find out where.

Some sections of the route, notably in the western half, are quite remote and there is very little shelter, so be prepared for exposure to sun, wind and rain. There are few seats, or even things to sit upon, other than the ground. Also, the first village on the route (Ogbourne St George), which you reach after the first 15 km (9 mi), has no shops of any kind.

Furthermore, cyclists should note that while the more bikeable western section does not present too many steep gradients, its chalky soil and boulders do become very slick when wet. At any time of year, parts of the trail have ruts that may be deep: inexperienced mountain-bikers can expect a topple or two.

The remainder of this section helps you make four major planning decisions, and deals with other practical issues:

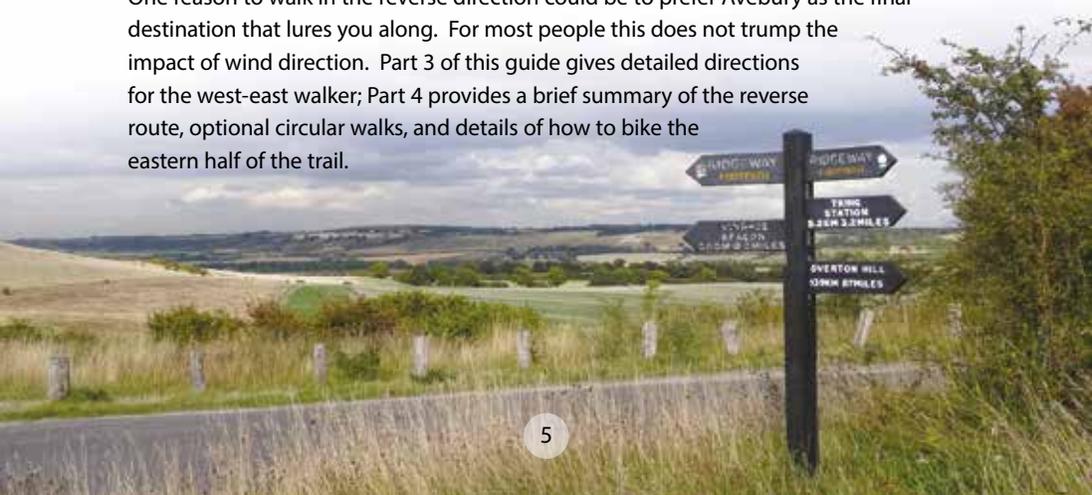
- whether to travel west-east or vice versa
- whether to walk, cycle or combine the two
- the best time of year to make the journey
- how to stage and time your trip.

## Which direction?

The vast majority of people walk The Ridgeway from south-west to north-east. This allows the prevailing wind from the south-west to help rather than hinder. The exposed nature of much of the downland makes this an important factor, even more for cyclists than for walkers. As always, be sure to check the weather forecast before you set off.

West-to-east also allows you to spend time at Avebury and its stone circles and barrows before you join The Ridgeway. This can help to spark your imagination about the ancient people who used this route.

One reason to walk in the reverse direction could be to prefer Avebury as the final destination that lures you along. For most people this does not trump the impact of wind direction. Part 3 of this guide gives detailed directions for the west-east walker; Part 4 provides a brief summary of the reverse route, optional circular walks, and details of how to bike the eastern half of the trail.



## Hike or bike?

This book is mainly aimed at people who walk The Ridgeway in a single expedition. However, there are many options to split it into sections and to cycle parts of it. In particular, if you split the route at Streatley you could cycle the western half and walk the eastern. Part 4 covers these options in detail.

## What is the best time of year?

The Ridgeway can be walked at any time of year, in part because of its relatively southern latitude and modest altitude. Winter not only brings shorter days (8 hours of daylight versus 16 in summer) but also a greater risk of adverse weather – especially for camping. Whether under foot, wheel, or hoof, frozen or muddy ground is less pleasant, although the ground is mainly free-draining and the entire Ridgeway is very well-maintained. However, for those who can go at short notice, with a good forecast and suitably weather protected, there is the attraction of wide views over downland snow- and frost-scapes.

Autumn brings warmer hues to ground and vegetation, and early autumn in particular can be a visual treat in woodland when the leaves are turning.

Nevertheless, most travellers will opt for spring and summer for the longer days that allow more time to be spent at places such as Avebury and various side-trips en route. Many time their trips to enjoy the flowering of the bluebells in May, or to see the acres of field poppies from June to August. Surprisingly, you are unlikely to find the trail itself busy even during high summer, though you will need to book accommodation four to six weeks in advance.

If you can set off at short notice, try to avoid going after prolonged periods of rain: in places the ground can become very muddy.

## Stages and timing

Reasonably fit walkers can complete the route in six to eight days. The western half of the route can be biked in 1-2 days; the eastern half can be biked partly on, and partly parallel to, the route in a further 1-2 days.

There is much to experience on The Ridgeway, so set a pace that you will find relaxed and enjoyable. This will determine, in part, how you stage the sections.

Factors to bear in mind are distance and grade in each section; whether you will be walking, cycling or perhaps a bit of both; the timings of any private or public transport at the start and finish; how long you want to spend in and around Avebury (please read pages 24 to 28 before deciding); where you will be sleeping (e.g. in a bed & breakfast or hotel, a hostel or a tent); the weight you will be carrying and whether you will use a baggage transfer service; and where you will obtain food and water.

Be particularly aware of the lack of onroute resources in the western half of this route, although neighbouring villages are typically no more than a kilometre or two offroute.

Your stages will be based on many factors, some of them personal to you or your group. Table 1 presents typical timings that suit a high proportion of walkers and cyclists.

Table 1 shows distances in miles (red) and kilometres (blue) and suggests where to start and end each day. If in doubt, give yourself more time. And if you have come from afar you should probably include an extra day for contingencies, including any issues that arise with public transport.

The six-day walking option includes two long days – 27.9 km (17.3 mi) and 27.2 km (16.9 mi) – which some walkers will find challenging. Bring walking shoes or boots that are well-broken in. There's a railway station at Goring & Streatley, the halfway point, making the route easy to split. For general advice on long-distance walking please refer to our *Notes for Novices*: see page 62.

**Table 1:**

Spread the distance over 6-8 days (walking) or 2-3 days (cycling)

Number of days:	6		7		8		2		3	
	km	mi								
Overton Hill	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Ogbourne St George	15	9	15	9	15	9	•	•	•	•
Uffington	26	16	•	•	21	13	•	•	40	25
Sparsholt Firs	•	•	•	•	•	•	68	42	•	•
Court Hill	•	•	21	13	21	13	•	•	•	•
East Ilsley	28	17	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Streatley	•	•	21	13	15	9	•	•	•	•
South Stoke	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Wallingford	25	15	•	•	22	14	•	•	61	38
Watlington	•	•	25	15	•	•	•	•	•	•
Chinnor	•	•	•	•	18	11	71	44	•	•
Princes Risborough	27	17	18	11	•	•	•	•	•	•
Wendover	•	•	•	•	18	11	•	•	•	•
Tring	19	12	19	12	•	•	•	•	37	23
Ivinghoe Beacon	•	•	•	•	10	6	•	•	•	•

## Accommodation and facilities

Your options for accommodation include various hotels and B&Bs (typically some distance offroute), two bunkhouses and a hostel, and plenty of campsites. The table on page 8 indicates the main facilities available on or near the route as of 2014 and our dropdown map shows campsites. The National Trail *Companion* and official website offer listings: the website is updated frequently, the *Companion* biennially: see page 62.

Court Hill Centre, Wantage Down



Table 2: Facilities along The Ridgeway

Section	Place	distance along route*		distance offroute**	B&B/ hotel	pub/ café	shop	campsite	hostel/ bunkhouse
		miles	km	km					
	<b>Overton Hill</b>								
3-1	Marlborough			7.8	✓	✓	✓	✓	
3-1	Beckhampton			3.3	✓	✓			
3-1	West Overton			1.5		✓			
3-1	East Kennett			0.6	✓	✓			
3-1	Avebury / Trusloe			2.6	✓	✓	✓		
3-1	Broad Hinton	4.3	7.0	3.0	✓	✓	✓		
	<b>Ogbourne St George</b>	9.2	14.8	1.0	✓	✓		✓	✓
3-2	Liddington	14.9	24.0	1.2		✓	✓		
3-2	Foxhill	16.7	26.8			✓			
3-2	Bishopstone	18.3	29.4	1.2	✓	✓			
3-2	Ashbury	19.9	32.1	1.1	✓	✓			
3-2	Woolstone	21.6	34.8	1.8	✓	✓			
3-2	Uffington	22.1	35.5	4.0	✓	✓	✓	✓	
3-2	Down Barn Farm	24.0	38.7	1.0	✓			✓	
	<b>Sparsholt</b>	24.9	40.1	2.7	✓	✓			
3-3	Letcombe Regis	27.8	44.8	2.1	✓	✓			
3-3	Court Hill	28.4	45.7	0.5	✓	✓		✓	✓
3-3	Wantage	28.4	45.7	3.6	✓	✓	✓		
3-3	East Ilsley	35.1	56.5	3.0	✓	✓			
3-3	Compton	36.5	58.8	2.0	✓	✓	✓		
3-3	Aldworth	39.3	63.3	2.5	✓	✓			
	<b>Streatley</b>	42.4	68.3		✓	✓			✓
3-4	Goring	43.0	69.2		✓	✓	✓		
3-4	South Stoke	44.1	71.0		✓	✓			
3-4	North Stoke	47.1	75.8		✓	✓			
3-4	Wallingford	48.3	77.8	1.0	✓	✓	✓		
3-4	Crowmarsh Gifford	48.3	77.8	1.0	✓	✓	✓	✓	
3-4	Nuffield	52.1	83.9		✓				
	<b>Watlington</b>	57.7	92.9	1.8	✓	✓	✓	✓	
3-5	Lewknor	60.1	96.7	1.0	✓	✓			
3-5	Chinnor	63.2	101.7	2.0	✓	✓	✓		
3-5	Princes Risborough	68.7	110.6		✓	✓	✓		
	<b>Wendover</b>	74.6	120.1		✓	✓	✓		
3-6	Tring	80.0	128.8	2.0	✓	✓	✓		
3-6	Aldbury	83.0	133.6	1.7	✓	✓	✓		
3-6	Ivinghoe	84.9	136.7	1.8		✓	✓	✓	
	<b>Ivinghoe Beacon</b>	86.5	138.9						

\* distance one-way to approximate centre of the place

\*\* distance along route from Overton Hill; for places offroute, this is distance to best place to turn off

Although this table lists many locations offering accommodation, be aware that most places are small villages, many with very few beds available. So book early – especially in the popular summer months. If, while you are planning, you find that places close to the route are fully booked, do not give up hope: a modest taxi fare may take you to more distant lodgings that have space, and some B&B hosts will arrange pickups and drops if you ask. Some people are happy to carry their own belongings, but you can also prebook a baggage transfer service: see page 61. If you prefer to delegate your arrangements, there are many tour operators who will organise a complete Ridgeway package for you, making all your bookings, at a price. These are listed on the National Trail website: [www.nationaltrail.co.uk/ridgeway](http://www.nationaltrail.co.uk/ridgeway).

With careful pacing, you could instead pitch your tent at commercial campsites – refer to Table 2 and our dropdown map, and check the above website for updates. Note that there are no campsites between Watlington and Ivinghoe. Book a B&B or seek permission from a farmer to pitch your tent ‘wild’ on his land.

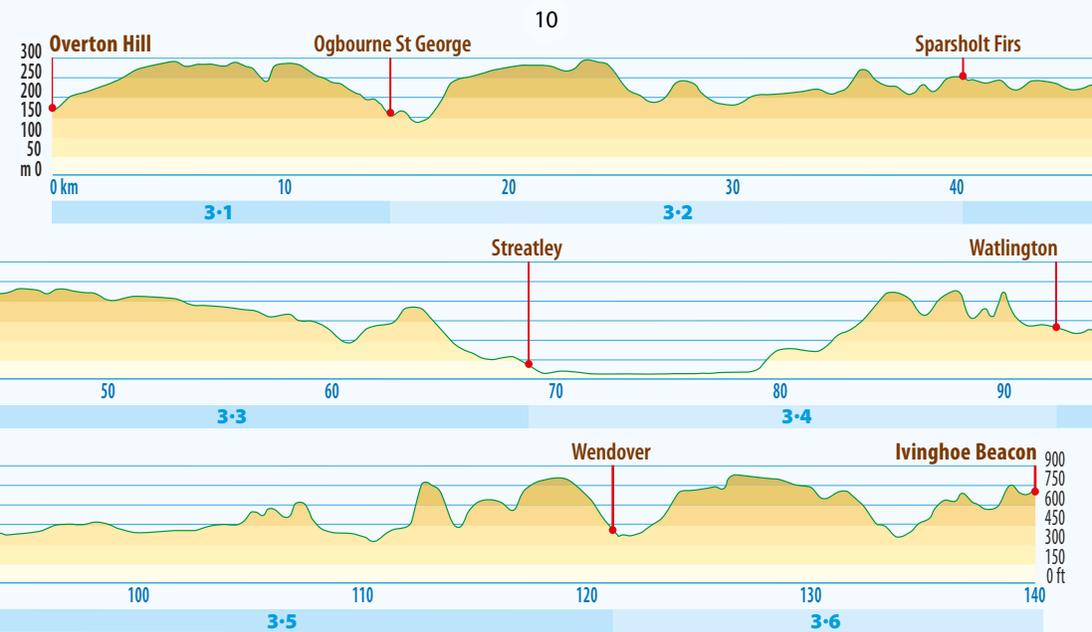
‘Wild camping’ means camping anywhere other than a commercial camp site. In England all land, even a footpath, is owned by some person or organisation. You must obtain landowner permission before pitching a tent; otherwise the landowner (or representative) may move you on at any time of the day or night. Follow the widely accepted *Guide to good camping*: see [www.nationalparks.gov.uk/visiting/camping](http://www.nationalparks.gov.uk/visiting/camping).

## Terrain and gradients

Whatever the weather, you can expect the full range of underfoot conditions, from grassy or muddy paths, through faint gravelly tracks, to potholed lanes and tarmac (sealed) roads. Wear waterproof footwear. A particular feature of the western half of the route are the deep ruts – often 15 cm (6 inches) or more in depth – and there may be half a dozen in parallel. These ruts will challenge walkers, let alone cyclists: don’t break a leg or twist an ankle miles from the nearest habitation!

*Deep ruts near the start of the route*





Above is The Ridgeway's profile, section by section. Apart from a few short sections where the gradient may reach 12.5% (one in eight), the route is not particularly steep. As already mentioned, cyclists are able to follow The Ridgeway fully only on its western half. Much of the eastern half can be travelled on smoother tarmac surfaces – off The Ridgeway but within a few miles of it.

## Waymarking

The Ridgeway is blessed with excellent and consistent waymarking, and on its western half there are only a few points where a wrong turn could take you miles offroute; the waymarkers mainly serve to reassure. On its eastern half, however, there are many more twists and turns to be navigated, and there are many other footpaths crossing yours and tempting you away. It is worth becoming familiar with the signage and staying alert: most people go offroute when they are distracted!

There are three types of waymark on The Ridgeway: fingerposts, discs and posts. Fingerposts are the most prominent – dark wooden-looking posts about two metres high, with arrowed 'fingers' indicating a labelled direction. Beneath a white acorn icon and the word 'Ridgeway' is a description such as 'footpath' in yellow, or 'bridleway' in blue, or 'byway' in orange, or occasionally 'restricted byway' in purple.

You will also see discs about 10 cm (4 inches) in diameter on posts about a metre (3 feet) high. Again, these are coded yellow for footpaths and blue for bridleways, and they typically also display an acorn icon.

These discs sometimes show arrows, which may be inclined slightly to indicate a change in direction. Or the discs may be accompanied by a white arrow painted on the post, or indeed by a blue arrow if you are on a bridleway. Finally, the way is sometimes marked solely by a post bearing the white acorn icon and a white arrow.



Don't worry if all this sounds confusing: if in doubt, just follow the acorn, which is the National Trail sign. The only National Trail to cross The Ridgeway is the Thames Path – which crosses at a lower level beneath the bridge at Streatley and Goring – unlikely to cause confusion.

Nevertheless, be vigilant at junctions. As explained above, the route intersects many other footpaths, byways, bridleways and cycleways. Sections of the route in the western half coincide with the White Horse Trail, and in the eastern half with Swan's Way, the Icknield Way, the Aylesbury Ring, the Bledlow Circular Ride and so on. On occasion, you may be tempted to continue ahead on a broad bridleway, whereas The Ridgeway turns off on an inconspicuous narrow footpath, so keep a lookout for signs.

On occasion, you may encounter fingerposts with an arm missing and be unsure where The Ridgeway goes. Close inspection of the fingerpost may reveal that a 'finger' has become dislodged, and the empty socket may indicate the direction to take.

Some signposts also indicate directions and distances to intermediate points e.g. 'Hackpen Hill 7 km 4.4 mi'. Consider this information: if it looks wrong then you are probably not where you think you are. And if you have not seen an acorn icon for 30 minutes or so, then you are probably no longer on The Ridgeway.



## Getting there and away

Most people will want to visit Avebury before starting the route from Overton Hill (2.5 km/1.6 mi away). Many will arrive in Swindon by train (e.g. via London Paddington) and take the number 49 bus to Avebury, which departs approximately hourly with a journey time of about half an hour. As of 2014, this was operated by Stagecoach and the last bus of the day left Swindon at 19.10. National Express operate a once-a-day direct bus service between London Victoria and nearby Beckhampton. In 2014 this left Victoria at 18.00 (arriving 20.40) and left Beckhampton at 08.20 (arriving 11.15).

After reaching Ivinghoe Beacon, most people return home via Tring station, with good connections both northwards (via Bletchley) and southwards (via London). If time and energy permit, you could simply retrace your steps along The Ridgeway for 5.7 km (3.5 mi). There is no easy public transport alternative to walking: to minimise effort, backtrack for 500 m and meet a pre-booked taxi at Beacon Road. Alternatively, from the Beacon descend carefully on a very steep path that heads west to the junction of Beacon Road with the busy B489. Turn left to follow the B489 for 1.5 km (0.9 mi) to Ivinghoe where Arriva's number 61 bus leaves approximately hourly and takes 15 minutes to reach Tring to the south-west. The 61 also links Ivinghoe with Luton to the east, with a journey time of 40-50 minutes. From Tring, the station is a further 2.5 km (1.6 mi) away: either walk or take the 387 bus – having previously checked its irregular departure times. Contact details for travel planning are on page 62.

### Selected rail links and stations relevant to The Ridgeway

*Not to scale*

