
WHERE: Southern Uplands, Scotland
START/FINISH: Portpatrick/Stranraer to Edinburgh
DISTANCE: about 180 miles
PICTURES: Alamy (main photo) & Rob Ainsley



GREAT RIDES

SOUTHERN UPLAND SOLITUDE

Journalist **Rob Ainsley** and two friends spent four days riding empty tracks and roads from the Rhins of Galloway to the Firth of Forth in Scotland

Britain, crowded? Not in Galloway. We cycled for hours along roads without seeing a car, even a sheep, the only sound the chirping of spring birds, or perhaps of Mark's rear wheel. We crunched for miles along deserted forest roads amid lochs and mountains and past the occasional digger with keys temptingly left in. We camped wild and stayed in bothies knowing the nearest people were at least five miles away.

It was one of the most enjoyable trips I've ever done, anywhere in the world: a four-day coast-to-coast across one of Scotland's underrated marvels, on- and off-road. It involved awesome scenery, an epic pub stop, a goldrush, and high jinks with spades.

Wilderness ready

'We' were me, Mark and Simon, long-time chums with lots of travel experience in and out of the saddle. Individually or together we've biked all the standard End to Ends and Side to Sides, so when Simon suggested this self-sufficient, mostly off-grid Scottish traverse from Stranraer to Edinburgh – roughly following the Southern Upland Way footpath – space materialised in our otherwise crammed diaries. A flurry of emails discussed the most weight- and space-efficient supplies to pack. Pot Noodles and single malts featured prominently.

Simon was on his Giant TCX cyclocross bike with 32C knobby tyres, his Carradice panniers a miracle of Russian-doll packing: sachets of dried food stuffed into mugs slipped inside kettles wrapped up in waterproofs. Mark was on his son's hardtail MTB, a 29" Specialized Hardrock – hang

on, it only seems five minutes since his lad was a toddler – with a more spontaneous approach to luggage sequencing.

I was on my shopping bike, my ancient Ortliebs holding such necessities as notebook, pencil case and tape measure. (You never know when you might have to document sub-standard cycle facilities.) Well, I say shopping bike; it's my workhorse option, a Specialized Crossroads hybrid with sturdy 38C Schwalbe Marathons, front suspension (albeit frozen since 2007) and a heavy-duty rack. Yes, it has mudguards and a bell (of limited effectiveness for clearing the road of livestock). But it can haul a week's groceries for two over York's potholed side streets, so a pile of camping gear over fire-roads was no problem.

Our route-finding was similarly varied. Simon did the GPS stuff, his ingenious route programmed in detail into the Garmin (plus alternatives, which were to prove useful). I had a £2 remainder-bookshop road atlas with biro additions culled from OS maps. Mindful of weight, I discarded used pages as kindling for the bothy fire.

Roughstuff touring

Ah, that bothy. White Laggan, it was, on the first night, after dawn trains and a 60-mile cycle from pretty Portpatrick on the south-west coast. After cobweb-clearing, spirit-lifting moors east of New Luce and one of the trip's many glorious downhills, the tarmac had given up somewhere in Glen Trool. It's one of many little-touristed, little-known places here that would be hectic honeypots if they were a few miles south in the English Lakes.



DO IT YOURSELF

› You could do this with a bivvy bag if you avoid midge season – June to September, with July and August being the worst – or have some kind of midge net. Check out midge conditions at midgeforecast.co.uk. If the wilderness experience doesn't appeal, you can stick mainly to roads, stay in B&Bs, and still enjoy awesome scenery – overnighting for instance at Stranraer, Dalry, Moffat and Innerleithen. But book ahead: settlements are few and far between.





» But Scottish forest roads can be tough going, thanks to the chippings that dress the otherwise easy, flat and well-graded surfaces. Downhill is no problem – any decent touring bike will take them in its stride – but uphill you waste your energy spitting those stones backwards; it's walking pace whether you ride or push. I got so irritated at one point I took a stick and drove some golfball-sized ones as far as I could. Perhaps that's how the game was invented, by a frustrated wagon driver of antiquity.

Starry, starry night

So it was after eight when we squelched up to the bothy, a boggy quarter-mile push off the track (which is part of National Cycle Route 7; but don't try this bit on your skinny-tired road bike). Bothies are a sort of open secret: former shepherds' huts in far-flung locations, left unlocked as walkers' basic shelters for free, with bare stone or earth floors, and no water or electricity. But they're dry, walled and roofed, with sleeping platforms and maybe a fireplace, and there'll be a stream nearby. And possibly spades, for – well, if you have to ask, you maybe don't want to know the answer.

We got our fire going following some diligent tinder-collecting and log-slicing. The tin hut next to the bothy had a trestle and collection of saws, some with teeth, and proved a handy bike shed. (Casual theft is not a problem.) The evening was perfect cosy camaraderie by the roaring flames; those instant noodles, which to tired cyclists

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tasted Michelin-standard; chat and laughter over a few drams; and a blissfully sound night's sleep by the embers, the panoramic view and long soft sunset all ours. Serenity, comradeship, contentment. Cycle touring – and life – gets no better.

This is a star bothy, in every sense. During my nowadays inevitable 3am hop outside for a leak, the clouds parted briefly to reveal a breathtaking night sky: a Galloway speciality. As your eyes adapt, the searchlight constellations and glittering Milky Way feel richly textured, three-dimensional, against the velvet-black background. You realise how light pollution almost everywhere else has destroyed the simple but profound pleasure of stargazing. But here, right by the bothy, are large wooden viewing chairs, angled to let you recline and enjoy the same spectacle that's enthralled humans throughout our existence. I didn't take advantage of them during this nocturnal exercise though: I wasn't exactly clothed, and the thought of splinters loomed large. And it was freezing cold.

Another drink?

We wildcamped the second night. Unintentionally. A lunchtime beer stop for just one quick one rather ran away with us. Well, self-sufficient cycle touring is all about

flexibility, isn't it...? St John's Town of Dalry was the scene of the crime (that's 'Dalry' pronounced 'Dal-rye', and 'Town' pronounced 'Village'): a place narrower than its name, lining a road junction and a pub. At its sunny outside tables, we got chatting to locals – passers-by, poachers, PhDs – one of whom we all rather fell in love with.

All walks of life were here. But by the evening – still there – we were hardly fit for walking, never mind cycling, so wildcamping up the road it was, despite local offers of floor-space. Scotland is more liberal than England in this regard – you can pitch tent anywhere within reason – so we were saving big on accommodation. Having just invested so much in the local economy, it felt a reasonable exchange.

Off-the-beaten-track Scotland is full of quirky surprises. And most of southern Scotland is off the beaten track. Forty miles behind schedule next morning, with heads and reputations surprisingly intact, we did some road shortcuts to the planned forest tracks, but still had a fantastic 60 miles of off- and on-tarmac pedalling. And on the wonderful road that slices through mountains up to Wanlockhead, Scotland's highest village, we got one of those quirky surprises. Alongside the river was a succession of parked cars and people





- Page 52 Burn flowing from the foot of the Grey Mare's Tail waterfall near Moffat in Dumfries and Galloway
- Page 55 left National Cycle Route 7. The stony forest-track surface is easy downhill but sometimes challenging uphill
- Page 55 right Altry Hill, southwest of Sanquhar. Shows a mile or two of pushing/off-road riding required to link tarmac/forest roads
- Left National Cycle Route 7 at Loch Dee, east of Glen Trool, near White Laggan bothy. Typical scenery of Galloway Forest Park.
- Below left Splendid and remote setting of White Laggan bothy, just south of Loch Dee off National Cycle Route 7 between Glen Trool and St John's Town of Dalry



THE EVENING WAS PERFECT: CAMARADERIE BY THE FLAMES; INSTANT NOODLES; AND CHAT AND LAUGHTER OVER A FEW DRAMS

» standing in the water, swilling plastic bowls. A washing-up flashmob, perhaps?

No: there's gold in them thar hills. They were nugget hunters. Indeed, the British Gold Panning Champs were taking place in Wanlockhead, so we took another unscheduled stop, judiciously limited to coffee and cake this time, to watch the action. Devotees talked to us at length about the different shapes and styles of pans. The Swiss have this controversial fast, shallow one, they enthused, for experts only, you know, look, here's the spec... Now I know how people feel when I tell them about frame geometry.

The bustle of the city

Scotland's landscapes have always been beautiful. As we kept remarking to each other with a smiling shake of the head, they're as good here as anywhere in the world, so how come there's so few tourists? But it's only recently that food and drink have caught up. My memories of trips north of the border in a previous century are greyed when I recall boring beer, tasteless coffee and stodgy food. Not now. In towns such as Sanquhar or Moffat or the cyclist

hub of Innerleithen, chic bistros and arty cafés serve up proper coffee, local real ale and gourmet brunches as gorgeous as the scenery. (Fans of haggis'n'chips and deep-fried Mars Bars need not worry: traditional cuisine still survives.)

Our trip ended in Edinburgh, with a rail-trail round Arthur's Seat and a sunny ride up the Royal Mile, whose cobbles proved even slower going than those forest tracks. (Princes Street's tramlines were a menace, too.) The grand, regal city felt bewildering after four days of near-wilderness. Ah, so this was where all the tourists had been.

This is a lovely route, perfect for an adventurous but accessible three- or four-day weekend. I'd actually done it before, the other way, solo from Dunbar to Stranraer, mostly on-road on my tourer. But it was even better and more spectacular this second time. And yes, I'd do it again.

It's astonishing that such fabulously explorable country, just an easy train ride away, gets so few visitors. You'll likely have it all to yourself.

Next time someone complains about Britain being overcrowded, bring them here. On a bike. ●

Fact File: STRANRAER TO EDINBURGH

DISTANCE: about 260km or 180 miles

ROUTE: Portpatrick/Stranraer – Glen Trool – Dalry – Sanquhar – Wanlockhead – Moffat – St Mary's Loch – Innerleithen – Edinburgh. Mix of roads, forest tracks (c20%), and pushing over footpaths linking them (c4%). Easy access by train to Stranraer and Edinburgh.

CONDITIONS: Springtime sun and cool cloud. Prevailing westerly tailwind, occasional northerly headwind. No rain!

BIKES & EQUIPMENT: Cyclocross bike, hardtail mountain bike and a hybrid, each with rack and panniers. The mountain bike perhaps proved the best option for our route, but the others were fine, as will be decent touring bikes. Full self-sufficient camping gear. Hip flasks.

MAPS: Essential: it's remote, and easy to get lost in the maze of tracks. GPS plus paper maps recommended. OS Landrangers 66, 73, 76–79, 82.

I'M GLAD I HAD... Thermals and warms. Even summer evenings can be cold!

NEXT TIME I WOULD... Bring binoculars for birdwatching and stargazing.

FURTHER INFORMATION: Mountain Bothies Association: www.mountainbothies.org.uk. Southern Upland Way (SUW): www.southernuplandway.gov.uk. Blog of SUW by mountain bike: bit.ly/1GjdUie

STRANRAER TO EDINBURGH

