

Scotland End to End Cycle

Medical research is mainly funded by the Government, Industry, or charities. The charity that I'm involved with is the Neurosciences Foundation. It supports early-stage research into neurological conditions – see www.neurosciencesfoundation.org.uk. We are going through a phase where we need more in our coffers to fund projects and studentships. Ideally a generous benefactor or organisation will make a substantial contribution, but smaller amounts add up and like similar small charities, we rely on individuals to hold fund-raising events. I saw the Scottish End to End Cycle organised by Peak Tours as an opportunity to do this, and so signed up for it. Contributions can still be made via the website.

I wanted this to be in memory of Dr Aled Evans, who was a dearly loved colleague in the Department of Clinical Physics where I worked. Aled was the kindest individual, well-liked and respected by all his colleagues. He died from a glioma. This is a condition that is within the remit of the Foundation and so combining the tribute and the charity made sense.

You have to build up fitness for an event like this and a training schedule was provided. It involved going for increasingly long rides. I was lucky that the weather was OK in June and the training was almost enjoyable at times.

The event

Day 1 Penrith to Thornhill 78 miles

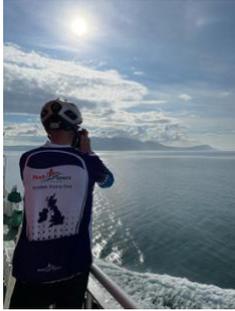
Maybe Penrith is not the obvious choice to start a Scotland End to End Cycle, but in fact Penrith was in Scotland until 1092. It was not long, however, until we were in Scotland as we know it. The day ended at Thornhill.

Nearby is a memorial to Kirkpatrick MacMillan, the inventor of the first pedal driven bicycle. I really didn't know that, but it's true; well, as true as much of the stuff we read in history books. He is buried in the village churchyard at Keir Mill.

Thornhill is certainly one of the cleanest places in Scotland.



Day 2 Thornhill to Brodick 67 miles



This was the easiest day. Early on we had a brief stop at the Barony A-Frame at Auchinleck. It was built in 1954 and is the only remaining one of its type in the world. It had two sets of winding gear, one to bring up coal, and the other to lower and raise the miners in the shaft. We finished the day with a socially distanced sail on the ferry from Ardrossan to Brodick. No effort!



Day 3 Brodick to Oban 75 miles

From Brodick there was a steady climb and then pleasant decent into Lochranza for the ferry to Claonaig and the ride up the Mull of Kintyre. In the end however, this was the day that we just wanted to get out of the way. It poured. Even with waterproof overshoes our feet were soaked. Sadly, our complement was reduced by one as a cyclist came off at a slippery corner and fractured his pelvis and left arm. The Peak Tour Guides were very professional and managed to get him to hospital very quickly. We had to acknowledge that we were in the west of Scotland and that rain at some point was a likelihood. The other days were OK and there was even some sunshine.

Day 4 Oban to Mallaig 75 miles

We caught a very early ferry to Craignure on Mull followed by a short flat cycle to Fishnish for the ferry ride back to the mainland. We passed through Strontian, which is as close to physics as I could manage.



The hills were getting more challenging, but the scenery compensated for that. When we reached Mallaig to the left were the hills of Rum and to the right an alternative form of transport



Day 5 Mallaig to Kinlochewe 76 miles

A pleasant day. We had what are called brew breaks half-way through the morning and afternoon rides, making each leg around 20 miles before a refuelling stop. One break was at Sheilaig. Here they have an excellent example of sustainable fishing. They used to fish for herring, but now it's Scottish langoustines and Dublin Bay prawns. Fishermen have to use creels and there is a limit to the number of creels that each boat can use. Females with eggs are put back into the sea. The creels have an escape hatch so that the smaller prawns can get out.

Day 6 Kinlochewe to Ullapool 75 miles



We had an interesting visitor at the start of the day. Until quite recently the pine marten was the rarest mammal in the country. Now the scenery was starting to get breath-taking, despite the fairly low clouds. Just after the final brew stop of the day there was an opportunity to take a break and explore Corrieshalloch Gorge. I'd been there before, but couldn't pass by without visiting it again. It is 60 m deep and 10m wide and is a classic example of the power of melting ice.



Day 7 Ullapool to Durness 69 miles

Cul Mor, Suilven and Canisp were among the peaks that we didn't quite see, but the cloud gave the place a special atmosphere. At a break at the Rockstop Café we saw round the Exhibition Centre. There was an interesting difference between the photo on the wall and what we saw. Blue and grey. Both have their place.



Tired, but elated, we finally reached Durness. There had been talk of going for a swim, but going for a highland refreshment was more appealing.



The cycling



I have a Paralane FOCUS bicycle. It's not top of the range but is quite adequate for an event like this. The disc brakes were a big help on descents. The narrow roads with passing places, along with the camper vans, lorries and ditches at the side of the road, added to the challenge.

Being skinny, I prefer hills to flat cycling, but when it got to over 15% I started to hum '*Take it to the limit one more time*'. If only I was an Eagle. You do get a sinking feeling when you reach a bend in a climb, look up, and see that there's much more to come. We gave one of the toughest climbs the gaelic name of Aughphorphoughsaig!

I've now had a few days to recover and can look back on the highs and lows:

Lows

1. Day 3.
2. The road surfaces on the last three days were appalling. Some cyclists felt that this really spoiled the event for them and they wouldn't recommend it to anyone. There are old signs noting the contribution of the EU to the infrastructure in the north-west. Presumably the UK Government is now providing similar funding? It would be nice to know.

Highs

1. The companionship of 19 people that I'd never met. We all enjoyed each other's company. There is a finale at Durness where we sit down for a meal. You've maybe experienced situations like this where you think ahead and ask yourself who you would like to sit beside. Here my answer was 'I really don't care'. Anyone will be good company.
2. Completing the challenge. It was a challenge. I was glad there wasn't an eighth day. But what is life without challenges?
3. A literal high in getting over the climbs. Most days we have well over 4,000 ft of ascent and some of the climbs were long and steep. At times I felt close to my limit, but maybe that's how it should be.
4. The scenery in Wester Ross and Sutherland is breath-taking, even in the mist. In fact, it might be better in the mist. I can't really describe it adequately. I think that's for poets and artists.

Dave Wyper July 2021.