



● Before her French tour, Rhona had never cycled further than 26 miles



LOCH ERIBOLL

This Scottish sea loch was one of the highlight's of Tony Pearson's British tour

AS WE LEFT Durness, the heavy grey sky above looked as if it might fall about our ears. Below it, there was a glimmer of sunshine in the east, just above the dark landscape. However, the roads in this most northerly part of Britain are few and far between. Our road took us not east towards that bit of blue sky, but south along the shores of Loch Eriboll.

We were four weeks into our circumnavigation of Britain. It just got better every day. At the head of the loch, where the menacing sky seemed to crash down on the tumble of mountainous peaks, we turned a full 180 degrees and headed north along the narrow undulating road of the opposite shore.

An hour later, we still didn't seem to be any closer to that tantalising sliver of clear sky. Roads in north west Scotland can be frustrating, with their twists and turns, but we relaxed, taking the time to absorb this landscape of wild mountain and loch. Even the light drizzle that began to fall couldn't dampen our mood. We stopped to catch our breath at the top of a sharp rise and grinned at each other like children at a magic show.

Later that day, we pitched the tent in the jaws of Skerray Bay, overlooking Neave Island. We had finally chased down that elusive sunshine. The gloomy grey skies were a fading memory. We sat by the beach watching sand martins swooping into their nest holes just feet from us. The piercing cries of oystercatchers contrasted with the wash of gentle waves lapping on the shore. There was just time for one more brew before the sun went down.

Châteaux & gâteaux

Rhona Challenor's first taste of cycle touring was a gentle exploration of the Loire Valley

Until a year ago, I'd only pottered about by bike – one rescued from a skip. Then I replaced it with a brand new Dawes Mojave. It was brilliant, and I wanted to cycle more. But I was nervous about the idea of cycle touring; my longest ride had been 26 miles. Then I spotted a holiday in the Loire Valley that entailed cycling only a few tens of kilometres per day, with our luggage transported for us between quaint hotels in attractive French towns. I've always wanted to visit the châteaux of the Loire; this tour looked ideal.

I went with my partner Julian. Cycling through the gently rolling countryside

between châteaux, churches, and the odd abbey was the best fun I'd had all year. I was impressed by the number of cyclists and the courtesy of the few motorists we encountered.

In part, we followed the Loire à Vélo – a cycle route, part off-road, between Tours and Angers. It forms part of a 2,400km trail linking Nantes with Budapest.

I was amazed how different the châteaux we visited were from each other. My favourite has to be Ussé, where the fairytale design inspired the Sleeping Beauty story. Each day's little details were engaging too. We saw a dachshund being given a coiffure on a gatepost, and dodged chickens on a country byway.

Even after visiting a château or two, there was plenty of time to just watch the world go by, sipping a jus d'abricot or eating the most intense tarte à l'orange imaginable. Of course, calories from patisseries don't count with all that cycling!

If this is what cycle touring is all about, bring on the next one.



● The Loire à Vélo route is partly traffic-free



● Bike buses and cable cars mean that it's not essential to ride uphill for great views

Ride the Dolomites down

At 78, Joan Green wanted an easier way to enjoy cycling through European mountains

One more go at the high mountain passes of Europe, skimming past the snowy peaks and hurtling down the passes, but without the effort of the uphill grind: that was the plan. We would ride the bikes down and get the bus or the cable car back up.

I'm 78 now and my partner, Robin, is 84. Last year, yearning for one more trip in the mountains, we chose the 52-kilometre downhill ride in the Dolomites from the Tre Croci pass near Misurina to Cortina and then on down to Calalzo di Cadore in the direction of Venice.

We went in mid June, when the wild flowers were at their best. The meadows left us stunned with their beauty. There was fresh snow on the mountain tops and warm sun on our limbs. In nearly 60 years of cycling, this was probably the best ride of my life.

Taking the bus up from Cortina, we started off in the high Dolomite peaks near Misurina. Having swooped down again, we spent the night back in Cortina, and next day wound our way



● With meadows in bloom, June is an ideal time to visit

through cliffs, clefts and valleys. About halfway down is Pieve di Cadore, the beautiful birthplace of the artist Titian. His house still stands and is a museum.

We avoided detours on difficult gravel paths by using the hard shoulder on the road. The drivers are used to cyclists and caused us no trouble.

We started from Cortina about mid-morning, took our time and had plenty of breaks to admire the views. We arrived in plenty of time to catch the 5.30pm bike bus back again.

We could have continued on down to Venice, but stopped at Calalzo because there are buses back from there every hour. With bikes, the cost was less than six euros each, a bargain for one of the most scenic bus rides I've ever taken.

DELUGE OVER THE DEE

Sometimes you have to cut a ride short, as Phil Poyser found on a wet day in Wales

THE OMENS weren't good: it was our cyclists' away day and two of the lads were already delayed, whilst the rest of us twiddled our pedals in the border village of Bangor-on-Dee. Under slate grey skies, we set off over the Dee by the Roman bridge and, after all of 2.5km, pulled in for a brew whilst the wanderers caught up. The waitress service was topped with smiles. Maybe this trip would be memorable after all? It was, but for the wrong reasons.

By the time we reached Trevor Basin, where narrow boats queued to cross Telford's magnificent Pontcysyllte Aqueduct, the steady drizzle had given way to proper Welsh rain, running in enthusiastic rivulets from the foot of Yr Ochr.

Granny rings engaged, but only marginally daunted, our damp and dirty dozen began the climb up cobbled paths, past straggling cottages, towards the broadleaf woods above.

At last, we sailed down to Chirk, brakes working overtime. Over lunch at the orangery near Gebowen, we stripped off the drenched kit, tucked into main courses, and watched the weather worsen.

With food and only 50km under our belts, the consensus was 'Home, Dave'. We headed back, only half our itinerary completed, with plans to return after the monsoon season. Croeso i Gymru? Maybe in 2015!



● A pause in the rain on the Telford aqueduct



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