

Cycle Touring the UK & Ireland



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Cycle Touring the UK & Ireland

2 072 Kilometres – 43 Days







Thank You

I am grateful for the kind generosity of strangers and the random acts of kindness I experienced during our cycle tour of the UK and Ireland. It was a humbling experience.

I also thank Ed and Esther for allowing me to use their photographs in this book.

A massive shoutout to Esther, who provided the hiking gear and who never hesitated to join me on our crazy adventure.

My sister Amanda played a significant role in documenting my travels by keeping my journal entries and photos well-organized. Without her, there would be no record of my journey.

I am much indebted to Val Abrahamse, my friend, for taking care of my personal and financial matters back home while I travelled the world. Her conscientious efforts made it possible for me to achieve my dream.

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THE UNITED KINGDOM AND IRELAND

Cape Town, South Africa – London, United Kingdom

I called several SAA offices to inquire about transporting a bike by plane. The consensus was that I had to bring the bicycle as part of my luggage and, based on the price quoted, I feared the cost of the flight would be a pricy affair. My essential items weighed 25kg, and so did the bike. Eventually, I arrived at the check-in counter with my bank card in hand and was relieved to find the payment was a much smaller once-off fee. What a huge relief.

Chelmsford

The wheels of the plane touched down in London at 6h30, and I was stiff and puffy-eyed from a 12-hour flight.

I was picked up from the airport by my friend, Eddie, whom I had met during the 2005 Tour d'Afrique ride. Since we were early, we had plenty of time to explore the Chelmsford area where Eddie lived. A much-needed walk led through a pleasant, wooded area. I found this quite surprising, considering how densely populated the island is. In the following days, I would discover that, despite being overpopulated, this island offers more hiking paths than anywhere I have ever visited.

Later, we went to the village to look for a cycling map, but to no avail. I had assumed it would be easy, but unfortunately, that was not the case.



Chelmsford - East Bergholt – 66 Km

As always in a new country, I was eager to get going. Still, it wasn't until after midday that we cycled out of Chelmsford. Eddie kindly accompanied me and led the way along a rural path, passing through Maldon, famous for producing Maldon Sea Salt. However, I was fascinated by learning that Maldon was the starting point for canalising two rivers flowing from Maldon to Chelmsford in 1797. This discovery also marked the beginning of a multitude of surprises I would encounter during my cycle north.

Eventually, we pedalled through the historic market town of Colchester, which claimed to be the oldest recorded town in Britain and the first Roman capital after the Roman conquest of Britain in AD43.

Despite being May, the weather remained wintry, and it rained throughout the day. All this rain made for a very picturesque and green countryside. The many villages we encountered were steeped in history and jam-packed with charming double-storey, semi-detached, red-brick houses reminiscent of children's book illustrations. As a cyclist, it felt like a dream come true, and it was a completely different experience from the open spaces of Africa.

We kept our eyes peeled for the elusive Sustrans cycling maps I encountered online and imagined would be readily available in the UK. That night, we camped near East Berg between Colchester and Ipswich, and I realised there wouldn't be any rushing through the beautiful and historical UK.



East Bergholt - Aldeburgh – 70 Km

Eddie and I got underway shortly after 9.30 a.m. and headed to Woodbridge via Ipswich. Our route passed through an exceptionally scenic area of woodlands, estuaries, rivers, farmlands, mudflats, and heathlands.

At Woodbridge, a cycling map of the area was discovered. However, the map made the ride even more confusing, as it indicated all the small farm roads, and we were never quite sure if we were on the right track. Half the day was spent studying the map, but we still went around in circles and didn't make much progress.

Towards the end of the day, we headed towards Leiston where the map indicated a campsite. However, upon arrival, we found that the park only allowed caravans, not tents. It must be mentioned that the property was rather large, without a soul in sight. I guess rules are rules, but I still thought this was slightly over the top.

Moving on from Leiston, the scenery remained breath-taking, and it was understandable why the area was included in what is known as the "Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty". Biking through the multitude of villages encountered without exploring was practically impossible.

Although the weather was marginally better than the previous day, it was still freezing. Even though it rained all night, we encountered no rain on this day. It, nevertheless, remained freezing. By evening, a private campsite was discovered on a farm at a pittance, a far better deal than the one we visited earlier, which was without a shower.



Aldeburgh - Corton – 62 Km

Once again, a rural road led to Walberswick and Southwold, located on the banks of the River Blyth. The buildings in these ancient villages are made of stone carried from the beach. We decided to explore and enjoy the local brew before continuing to Lowestoft. Fortunately, this was done without encountering Walberswick's phantom coach, drawn by headless horses and driven by the murdered Tobias Gill, who was hanged in the area in the 18th century.

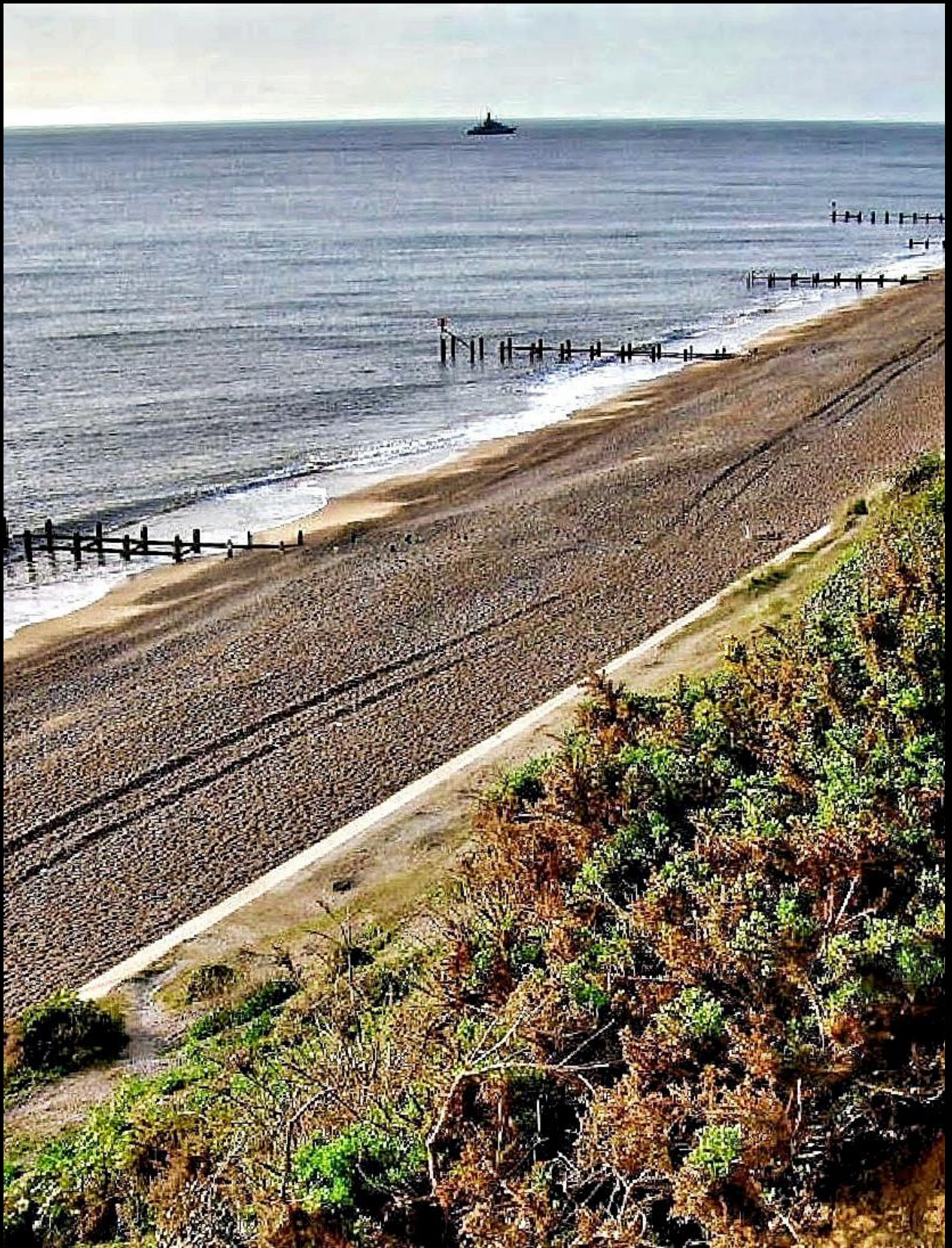
Lunch was French fries smothered in curry sauce, which appeared immensely popular and surprisingly delicious. Afterwards, the road took us to Corton, where we arrived shortly before it started drizzling. There seemed no end to the dreadful weather. In the icy conditions, I wore every piece of clothing I possessed. We found solace in the cosy pubs, which were much more comfortable than sitting huddled in a tent.

The campsites varied greatly. Some were well equipped with manicured lawns, toilets, and showers, while others only had a bathroom and no other facilities; the prices indicated the facilities available.

Corton - Cromer – 67 Km

Being May, the days were long, and the daylight lasted until 9:30 p.m., which was fantastic as we didn't have to worry about setting up camp in the dark.

From Corton, we slowly made our way along the North Sea coast past Great Yarmouth, where I found an internet cafe. The French fries in



the town square fuelled our ride to Cromer, situated on a fast-eroding coast. That said, Cromer remained a pretty coastal village with a lovely seafront, pier, and lighthouse.

The big difference between cycling in the UK and riding in Africa is that, in Africa, any cycle tourer is an enigma. Children come running across the fields to look, wave or beg, and people are curious and want to know where you're from and where you're going. They can't comprehend why anyone would do such a thing without payment. In the UK, you're just one more cycle tourist on a loaded bike.

The night was spent at an expensive campsite with showers quite far away. It started drizzling but, thankfully, not before we had a cup of soup and a bread roll. Unfortunately, it heavily rained all night.

Cromer - Sandringham – 118 Km

We set out in a drizzle, which continued throughout the day. It was a rain-soaked ride to the station, where Eddie was to catch a train home. However, he decided to ride to Norwich instead, as it offered more options. After saying goodbye to Eddie, I pointed my bike towards King's Lynn.

Later that day, I found a Sustrans map (Route 1 Harwich to Hull), which was quite helpful. I spent the rest of the day biking past magnificent estates, ancient castles, and striking churches. They were all equally impressive and boasted a history dating back thousands of years. The route was well-marked, and I had an excellent day of riding despite having trouble with the bike as the gears kept slipping.



Sandringham - St John's Fed End – 32 Km

The campsite I stayed at was expensive but well-equipped. It had laundry facilities and a shop. Thus, I ended up leaving later than usual because I used the washing machines and dryers, which took a while.

It was late by the time I left, and I only cycled a short distance to King's Lynn, a substantial town with all the necessary shops, including a bike shop where I could adjust my gears. I also bought an odometer and a mobile phone. At first, I thought of staying at the hostel, but it was closed. By then, it was already quite late, but it wasn't dark until 9:30 p.m., so I could reach St. Johns Fed End, which had a beautiful campsite, bar, and restaurant.

St. Johns Fed End - Boston – 56 Km

I encountered a surprising number of people who had piercings and tattoos. It seemed like everyone had six nose rings, which made me feel downright old-fashioned with just one. The UK is a remarkable place with a diverse mix of people.

While en route to Boston, Eddie surprised me by driving from Chelmsford to visit. We had lunch together, after which he returned to Chelmsford.

It was interesting to note that most people in England never made eye contact or acknowledged one another. However, in Eddie's search for me, they knew the exact time of my arrival and departure. There was much pretence going on. LOL!



Soon after Eddie left, the heavens opened, and rain came gushing down. I succumbed to temptation in the market and harbour town of Boston and booked into a hotel at a substantial fee. It's surprising what a person will do when it's wet and cold.

One of Boston's most intriguing features is not only its rich history, spanning centuries, but also its unique position along the Prime Meridian.

Boston - Woodhall Spa – 48 Km

The following day, I reluctantly vacated my cosy room. Unfortunately, due to the high room rate, I couldn't stay another day, so I made my way towards Woodhall Spa, which is only 32 kilometres away. Mid-morning, the bike's rear rack broke loose, causing the tent, sleeping bag, and panniers to land on the road. Mercifully, this happened right in front of a boat shop, and the helpful owner tightened the screws. Such a fantastic job he did, the rack was still in place at the time of writing this journal 15 years later.

The remainder of the day brought pleasant riding, meandering across the Fens and along rivers featuring large boathouses. I soon learned that predicting the weather was quite tricky. It changed almost every half hour, with one moment being sunny and the next requiring taking cover from the rain.

Once in Woodall, I found no spa and only a few dilapidated buildings. The cold north wind brought a constant drizzle, which called for a day of hiding. I thus stayed put, and sadly the weather thwarted my plans to explore The Viking Way, a 237-kilometre long-distance footpath that passes through Woodhall Spa.



Woodhall Spa - Barton-upon-Humber – 75 Km

A missing road sign made me take a wrong turn, but a helpful man came to my aid and let me know I was heading in the wrong direction. So, this is proof that people did, indeed, notice one. The day also marked the first time I encountered hills in the UK.

Unfortunately, dreadful weather again marred the day, and I never spotted any camping facilities. Consequently, I proceeded to Barton-upon-Humber, situated on the Humber River. The town is dominated by the Humber Bridge, an impressive 2.22-kilometre single-span road suspension bridge. It was also the first day I met other cyclists at camp. Despite the challenges, it was a memorable day in the saddle.

Humber Bridge - Hornsea - 48 Km

The bridge was rather impressive and peering over the edge gave me vertigo. Once across the bridge, a coffee shop provided coffee and muffins.

Unfortunately, reaching Hull also indicated the end of my cycling map. It turned out a frustrating day navigating as finding cycling maps was far more complex than ever imagined.

Finally, in desperation, I rode towards the seaside town of Hornsea, which didn't have much apart from the seafront promenade and the ancient church of St Nicholas. Still, a campsite outside Hornsea allowed pitching a tent and gave shelter from the miserable weather.



Hornsea - Beverley - Malton - 74 Km

Despite the frustration of the previous day, this turned out a good day. A shop in Hornsea had an excellent cycling map, and the day's first stop was the charming market town of Beverley. I snatched a few pics of the impressive Anglican Church, built around the tomb of the Bishop of York, who founded the monastery.

Cycling into Malton was in arctic conditions, and I weakened at the sight of a B&B. The establishment consisted of a ground-floor pub with rooms above. In the pub were friendly people who invited me to join them for beer. However, their accent was so strong I couldn't understand a word they said. I thus finished my drink and instead went to a restaurant in the town square where it wasn't necessary to converse.

I thought it quite bizarre being in the home of the English language and the regional accent so heavy that it was impossible to comprehend.

Malton – Boroughbridge - 50 Km

Departing pretty Malton, with its market square and abundance of old buildings, was after midday as I finally located an internet café. Unfortunately, the ATM retained my bank card, which took the best part of the morning to retrieve.

Eventually, my chosen path took me through timeless villages and high moorland areas dotted by rivers and valleys. By then, I was in no mood for exploring and called it a day in Boroughbridge, a small settlement with an old well and a main road lined by the familiar scene of typical terraced houses under red-tiled roofs.



Boroughbridge – Leyburn - 48 Km

After getting going, my first stop was at the renowned three standing stones, known as Devil's Arrows – the stones are recognised for their historical and cultural significance. It's believed they originally formed part of a stone row of five. The fourth stone was reputedly broken up in 1582 to build the bridge over the River Tutt, and the fifth lost in history. They date from the early Bronze Age, over 4,000 years ago. The stones were most likely used as a kind of astronomical alignment or by sun-worshippers from the Bronze Age.

The day started promising, but the stretch between Borough Bridge and Leyburn turned out to be the most challenging day of the trip. The route led straight into a ferocious wind which blew me all over the road. It even took pedalling on the descent in my small gear. I called it quits at the first sign of a campsite, as the next camp was considerably further than I wanted to go that day—a good thing, too, as my early arrival gave me time to do my dreaded laundry. Gosh, I never imagined cycling in the UK would be this challenging.

Leyburn - Middleton-in-Teesdale - 56 Km

After leaving Leyburn, I found myself in a beautiful part of the country. The pleasant weather added to the charm of the countryside, with no wind or rain to spoil the day.

As the weather was lovely, I stopped in Richmond, home to a magnificent castle. The building of the castle began in the 1070s, and today it is England's best-preserved Norman castle. After exploring the castle, I continued towards Bernard's Castle, a ruined medieval castle constructed between 1095 and 1125.



My next destination was Teesdale, a typical British market town. It had a market area and the familiar sight of terraced houses lining the main street. Surprisingly, the village also had a campsite with friendly caretakers who offered me coffee while I pitched the tent. Their kindness added to the already pleasant day.

Middleton-in-Teesdale – Chollerford - 61 Km

Although it was a beautiful sunny day, the first since my arrival in the UK, biking was challenging. The way towards Chollerford led over the North Pennines with hills of 20% gradients. However, the landscape was picturesque and dotted by heather moors, deep valleys, rivers, hay meadows, and timeless stone-built villages.

The going was immensely slow, with a few hills requiring walking the bike. The road climbed out of the valleys only to descend into another. I churned my way up the steep hills, eventually reaching the famous Hadrian's Wall, which I had imagined to be the Scottish border, but that was not the case.

A cyclist met along the path pointed me towards a campsite where various hikers, hiking the Hadrian's Wall Route, were camping. The many long-distance hiking routes I encountered made me want to follow suit. I discovered I was firmly on the Pennine Hiking Trail, Britain's best-known and most demanding route.



Chollerford – Bellingham - 25 Km

In great weather, I left Chollerford, soon getting to the point where a decision had to be made to either veer west or east. The plan was to head towards Glasgow to visit my friend Esther, and heading west would be the obvious route. Still, I thought cycling the East Coast would be a pleasant way to spend a day or two.

Eddie tracked me down and it became a short day of riding. We pitched our tents at Bellingham, which is famous as a stopping point along the Pennine Way trail and a favourite amongst cyclists.

Bellingham – North Berwick – By Car

While Eddie was travelling in a car, it made little sense for me to ride my bike, so we loaded it on the car's roof.

The United Kingdom is a fascinating region with a rich history. We passed by many castles and visited a few, all of them equally magnificent. Eventually, our journey took us to Scotland, and I was amazed by its natural beauty and stunning coastline.

By the end of the day, we arrived at North Berwick, which offered a comfortable B&B. The town was charming, with old stone buildings, narrow lanes, and a fascinating history.



North Berwick – Glasgow – By Car

In the late morning, we left the lovely North Berwick and drove towards Glasgow, where my friend Esther lives. Eddie dropped me off at Esther's apartment and then returned to Chelmsford. It was great to see Esther again, who was still her usual lovely and talkative self. We spent the next day chatting away and, by evening, I got a taste of the Glasgow nightlife by visiting a pub for beer and food.

Glasgow

While enjoying a few beers, we made plans to hike the West Highland Way. Esther's habit of always having three of everything made it super easy for me to borrow a backpack and hiking gear. We packed our bags, including tents, sleeping bags, food, stove, pots, and other essentials, and were all set for our long hike.

The West Highland Way, spanning 95 miles (153.8 km), is Scotland's first long-distance footpath. It passes through some of the country's most stunning and dramatic landscapes. I was bursting with excitement and felt privileged to have the opportunity to walk this famous route.

Milngavie - Drymen - 12 Miles (19 Km)

Early morning, we caught a train to Milngavie, a short distance from Esther's house (barely four stops). Half the train's passengers disembarked at Milngavie, seemingly doing the West Highland Way. I didn't expect to encounter so many people. I also didn't expect to see them only carrying small day packs.



Our first walk was a 19-kilometre meander from Milngavie to Drymen, a well-marked, easy, flat route. The path was wide and, therefore, no chance of getting lost. The first section of the way was through beautiful deciduous woodlands across many streams. Our trail passed numerous villages and halfway we popped in for lunch and beer.

Our first night's camp was at a farm about 1 mile (1.6 kilometres) before Drymen. Luckily, the farm offered a cooking shelter, which came in handy as it started pouring upon arrival.

Drymen - Rowardennan - 14 Miles (22.5 Km)

Departing Drymen was via a pleasant stroll through the woods. Our path soon brought us to Conic Hill and our first taste of the Scottish Highlands.

En route to Balmaha, we once again stopped for lunch and beer. From Balmaha, the path proceeded along the shores of the famous Loch Lomond, and I couldn't be more excited. The views across the loch and towards the mountains were unsurpassed. We rambled past Ben Lomond and through ancient oak woodlands. Again, the views were spectacular and impressive.

Towards the end of the day, our path spat us out at Rowardennan, exactly where we wanted to be and a place that sported a hotel, hostel and wild camping. Esther opted for the hostel, which was wonderfully comfortable and warm.



Rowardennan - Inverarnan - 14 Miles (22.5 Km)

On leaving the hostel, we heaved our heavy packs and heavy they sure were. My dear friend had a knack for packing the whole caboodle, plus the proverbial kitchen sink. The young man at reception looked at her in utter amazement and inquired if she knew about the transport service. We only then learned that hikers use a transport service to send their packs to their next destination.

It didn't take much convincing to send our packs by van to our overnight stop. The other hikers looked at us in disbelief as we came sauntering past, casually swinging small plastic bags containing the day's provisions. By then, we were well known for carrying the large backpacks.

Again, the path followed Loch Lomond's shores and passed through more natural oak woodlands, where I even spotted wild goats. The area was very much associated with Rob Roy MacGregor, and there are countless stories about him, but I wasn't sure if they were all true.

The trail was considerably hillier than the previous days, and it was a good thing we weren't carrying those heavy packs. Camping was at Bengals Farm, a place with a great bar/restaurant and cooking shelter, a blessing in the dreadful weather.

Afterwards, a walk across the river took us to a bar believed to be more than 300 years old. The place had a fantastic atmosphere, made even more so by a cosy fire and a massive wooden table. It became an excellent night of singing and drinking copious glasses of red wine in the company of other hikers. So much fun was had I left my wallet in the pub!



Inverarnan - Tyndrum - 13 Miles (20.9 Km)

The next morning, in a panic, I returned to the pub to search for the wallet and discovered the wallet was still there. What a relief! By then, everyone knew the South African had lost her purse (how embarrassing). With my wallet in hand, Esther and I set out toward our next destination.

The route followed the River Falloch and passed spectacular gorges, waterfalls and rapids. We soon got to the old military road built towards the end of the 18th century. Our walk followed this road (mostly a narrow track by then). The views were made even more magnificent by the hills, which took on a blue/purple shade and were covered in bluebells.

The trail further led past an area known as "the king's field", where legend has it that in 1306, Robert the Bruce (from Brave Heart) suffered defeat by the MacDougalls.

Though the landscape was unsurpassed, the dreaded midges appeared (smaller than a mosquito but more ferocious, "wee buggers", Esther called them). These biting insects were all over the place, and as Esther hiked in short sleeves, she was covered in lumps and bumps. They had the knack of getting in everywhere, in your hair, ears and nose.

The day's amble continued to Tyndrum, where camping was at "By the Way". We trundled into the village, well known for its Green Wellies Shop. Here, one can find the whole shebang, from hiking gear to food. Esther and I picked up two small backpacks, as hiking carrying a plastic bag wasn't comfortable.



Tyndrum – Kingshouse - 20 Miles (32.1 km)

There were two routes to Kingshouse. Regional knowledge told us to opt for the longer one. The alternative option was hilly, and you never argue with locals. Albeit the walk was a long one, it remained relatively flat.

Our track led us through forestry plantations, which were a tad muddy in places. I understood why wearing hiking boots was better than running shoes. In the process, we crossed Rannoch Moor, which provided spectacular views of various Munros (mountains over 3000ft) and distant lochs.

Descending into Kingshouse, Glen Coe and Glen Etive's magnificent mountains came into view. I'm sure there must be excellent skiing here in winter and some fantastic rock climbing.

That night's camp was at Kingshouse, which only offered wild camping and no facilities, and it was better to remain in the pub until bedtime.

Kingshouse – Kinlochleven - 8 Miles (12.6 km)

A short stroll brought us to Kinlochleven via an area peppered with some of Scotland's most impressive peaks. It made me wish I was a rock climber. Still, following the old military road, the path reached the highest part of the trail via the Devil's Staircase. This was also the first day the sun was out and the views were genuinely magnificent.

Once at Kinlochleven, the tents were pitched at McDonald's. The village was picture-perfect and home to a large ice climbing centre.



Kinlochleven – Fort William - 13 Miles (20.9 km)

The way climbed steeply out of Kinlochleven through woodlands and joined the old military road. Esther brought a beer as refreshment, which we drank at an ancient ruin. The other hikers must've thought us slightly weird by then, as we were constantly canning ourselves laughing. They most likely suspected us of being pissed all the time. Nevertheless, there was no dull moment hiking with Esther.

Upon arrival at Ford William, we didn't, like nearly all others, go straight to the campsite, but first wandered about town searching for pizza and beer.

Ben Nevis - 12 Miles (19.3 km)

The following morning, we put off getting up until about 09h30 as the weather was dreadful. However, one can't remain cooped up in a tent for too long and, in the end, no other choice remained but to don our wet weather gear and head up the legendary Ben Nevis. The starting point was at The Visitors Centre and it was suspiciously quiet. No other hikers were encountered along the route, which didn't surprise us. The fog was low, and the constant drizzle made hiking unpleasant.

The path up the mountain was less steep than we envisaged. I was surprised at how quickly the landscape changed from green rolling hills to rocky terrain. Reaching the top, I was equally surprised to see a large snowfield in mid-summer. Needless to say, we snatched a few pics and then hurried back to lower ground—all in all, a seven-hour stroll led directly into a cosy pub providing beer and food. Mission accomplished.



Glasgow

Following our little adventure, we returned to Glasgow, where plans were made for Esther to join me on a two-week cycle ride in Ireland. Although Esther had a bicycle, it hadn't been used for quite some time and needed more than a spray of WD-40 to bring it back to life.

With the bicycle serviced and panniers purchased, we loaded the bikes and were ready for our next adventure.

Glasgow, Scotland – Belfast, Ireland – 16 km

Getting to Ireland involved cycling from Esther's house towards Glasgow Central Station to catch a Stranraer train. This was where the fun began and Esther, not used to the bicycle and panniers, fell over, not once but three times between the house and the station. Looking around, Esther was lying on the ground, her bicycle on top of her, resembling a beetle, legs kicking in the air. All this happened in peak hour traffic, but Esther was undeterred by the staring eyes. She got up, dusted herself off, looked them in the eye and laughingly declared, "Take three!".

At Stranraer, the Belfast ferry took us across the North Channel, where our arrival was at around 16h30 (peak time) and where Esther proceeded to fall over once more. The reason for all this falling over was Esther's bike being too big and her legs too short to swing over the middle bar. It was, therefore not so much falling off the bicycle but more falling over.



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Nevertheless, we laughed so much that tears were streaming down our faces. Surprisingly, we managed to cycle the six kilometres north to set up camp. By evening, Esther referred to her bike as Silver as it bucked and kicked and appeared somewhat unwilling to see Ireland.

Belfast - Cushendall – 69 kilometres

The next day, it dawned bright and sunny. The weather was beautiful, and there wasn't a breath of wind. With Ol' Silver loaded and packed, our route followed the coast, an incredibly scenic ride, especially in such glorious weather. The road continued past numerous coastal communities and steep white, limestone cliffs. The coast was littered with ancient ruins, from the Red Bay Castle to the ruins of the Ardclinis Church.

Esther must've fallen over at least five times before arriving at the coastal village of Cushendall. At camp, she didn't bring the bike to a halt as most would but instead flopped over, to the surprise of the other campers. Good thing she wore a helmet. Still, 43 miles (70 kilometres) were managed that day.



Cushendall – Ballycastle – 32 kilometres

Packing up took forever and thus late when we cycled out of camp. Shortly beyond the village of Cushendall, a sign indicated a scenic route via Torr Head, which sounded rather lovely. However, the warning, "Not suitable for caravans and coaches", should've forewarned us. This part of the Irish coastline is separated from Scotland by the North Channel and the views are spectacular. Still, our chosen path came with incredibly steep hills. Esther claimed she didn't fall over that day as she walked her bike the entire way, resulting in blistered feet.

The descent into Ballycastle, a small seaside town in Ireland's north-easternmost coastal tip, was pure pleasure. After waiting at the bottom longer than usual, I rode back up to see if I could find my friend. I came upon her walking down the hill due to a flat tyre. The surprises were never-ending as we soon discovered Esther's bicycle wheels had no quick release and thus required a spanner. There wasn't much we could do but walk the bikes to the campsite. Every man in camp had a suitable spanner, and soon the wheel was off, and Esther was given a lift into town to buy a new tyre and inner tube.



Ballycastle – Castlerock – 64 kilometres

The following morning, started in the usual way, with Esther providing all the fun and drama. Loading up Ol' Silver, a bungee cord slipped and hit her on the lip. By then, Esther was covered in bruises and scratches from falling over and lumps and bumps from the "Wee Buggers" (mosquitos), but now she sported a fat lip as well. Leaving Ballycastle, the first stop was at the bike shop to purchase a spanner and new front tyre for Esther's bicycle, which looked equally worn.

The coastline of Northern Ireland is magnificent, and we stopped at Giants Causeway to explore this fascinating area. The causeway consists of about 40,000 black basalt columns from an ancient volcanic eruption. Weathered by 60 million years of wind, rain and storms, these unique rock formations form perfectly shaped horizontal sections. However, I found the legends of the area even more intriguing. The story goes, that a giant Finn McCool had trouble with his Scottish rival Benandonner. Furious, Finn grabbed chunks of the Antrim coast and threw them into the sea to form a pathway for reaching Benandonner. Benandonner was larger than expected, and Finn fled with Benandonner in tow. Finn was saved by his quick-thinking wife, who disguised him as a baby. On seeing the baby's size, Benandooneer thought better of it and returned to Scotland.

After a particularly long hill, Esther declared the trip was killing her and it would've been easier and quicker to overdose at home. Still, she continued a further 40 miles, and spotting a campsite at Castlerock, we packed it in. The lady managing the campground looked at Esther and allowed us to camp free of charge.



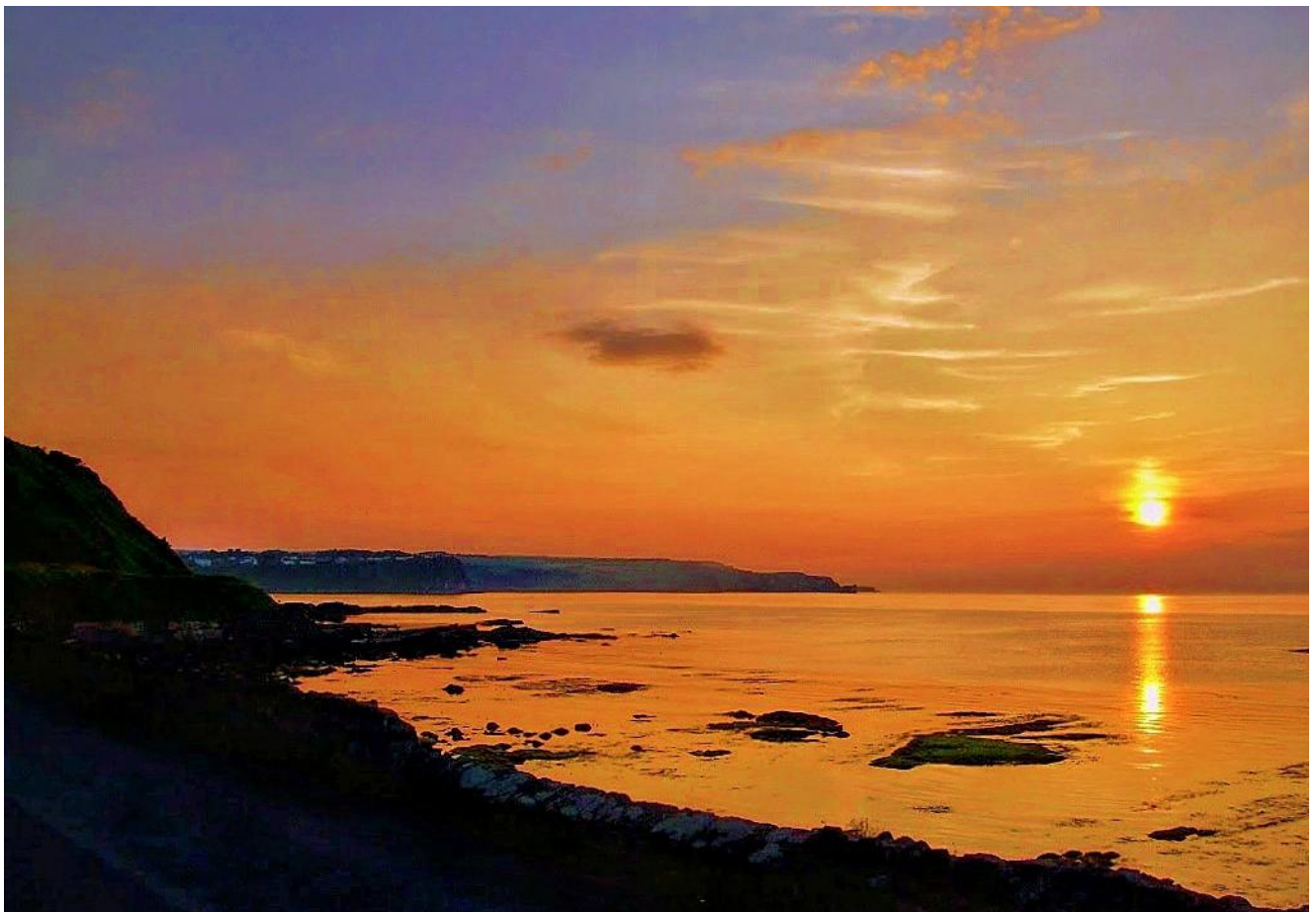
Castlerock – Quigley’s Point – 32 kilometres

The following day, feeling refreshed, the first stop was at the Mussenden Temple, built in 1785 as a library; this tiny building was modelled after Rome’s Temple of Vesta. After that, a short ride led to Magilligan Point, where ferries departed for Greencastle. Our map indicated a track beside the ocean, but it was non-existent and left us slightly lost. At Quigley’s Point, the tents were pitched at the first opportunity to give Esther’s backside a rest. Once camp was set up, there wasn’t a great deal more to do but frequent the pub for a pint.

Quigley’s Point - Portsalon via Letterkenny – 91 kilometres

It rained all night, and on emerging, it took packing up in the rain to reach Buncrana sopping wet. We intended to take a ferry to Rathmullan but, to our dismay, found the ferry only started operating in three days, and I thought June was mid-summer.

I loved the foreign-sounding names of towns as we biked from Quigley’s Point to Portsalon via Letterkenny, a remarkable distance of 91 kilometres. Esther was getting stronger by the day and wasn’t falling over as much. Ol’ Silver was still creaking, squealing, and extremely unwilling on the uphill. Still, Esther showed no mercy and pushed on. From Rathmullan to Portsalon, the distance was only about 19 kilometres. Still, we took the scenic route and encountered a few nasty hills before a serious descent into Portsalon. By then, Esther’s hand was numb and entirely useless.



Portsalon

The weather turned even fouler overnight, and the conditions weren't only cold and rainy in the morning, but an icy wind blew in from the North. Nevertheless, the weather made it easy to stay put, and we both crawled back into our sleeping bags, zipped up the tents and read books for the remainder of the day.

By 5 o'clock, we had enough of lying in the tents and headed to the pub. The place consisted of a shop and pub (all in one), where a few people were sitting at the bar. Soon the singing began, and the evening became a jovial affair. It was three in the morning before arriving back at our tents. I guess it will suffice to say we had a good time.

Portsalon - Melmore Head – 59 kilometres

For obvious reasons, there was no rushing in packing up and 12h00 before eventually getting underway. The weather was horrendous; it drizzled, a strong wind blew, and it became bitterly cold. Still, we proceeded to tiny Carrickart, where we received information about a hostel not far from there. In arctic conditions, we headed in the direction pointed. I was frozen stiff; even Esther was in long sleeves. The Hostel was considerably further than we were led to believe. Still, we soldiered on up a steep hill to an extremely basic and remote hostel. At least inside, the place was warm as toast.



Melmore Head - Letterkenny - Belfast and Larne – 72 kilometres

Esther needed to get back to work, and we went to Letterkenny to see what public transport was available. From Letterkenny, buses departed to Derry, where they ran straight to Belfast. A shock, however, awaited in Belfast as it was packed. Each nook and cranny were fully booked due to a major international boxing event. Every B&B and hotel was chock-a-block, from the cheapest to the Hilton (we even considered that one). By then, the time was ten o'clock, and the weather was freezing. I suggested cycling the 6 kilometres north to our first camp, but Esther was not to be swayed. The staff at the train station was amicable and directed us to a B&B in Larne, where ferries departed for Glasgow. They even phoned to book the B&B and ferry and helped us on the train. What friendly people.

Larne - Oxford Island – 91 kilometres

We emerged to a scrumptious breakfast—what luxury! Our guesthouse was in a great location across from the harbour, making easy access to the ferry. Esther hopped on the 10:30 ferry, and after waving her goodbye, I pointed my mobile home toward Belfast and onto the road leading south.

The weather was good, and being Sunday, plenty of cyclists were out, all stopping to chat. I took the recommended path south, which followed the River Lagan to Lisburn. From there, a minor route ran via Moira to Oxford Island and Lough Neagh. I even came upon the Orange Order, band and all, in one of the smaller villages. I couldn't believe they existed in real life. I would've thought their supremacist values illegal in our modern-day. They most likely were practising for the annual march held around mid-July.



Oxford Island – Ballyronan – 72 kilometres

Fortunately, most Irish are friendly, even offering dope. How nice of them.

Lough Neagh is a freshwater lough and one of the largest in Western Europe. I thus decided to follow its shore to Ballyronan, situated along the northwestern shore. The path continued along tiny country lanes, past small settlements and farms. The lake has an interesting legend. It's claimed the lake formed when the Irish giant Finn McCool scooped out an earthen clod to toss at a Scottish rival fleeing Ulster via the Giant's Causeway. Finn's shot fell into the Irish Channel and formed the Isle of Man.

Ballyronan - Kesh (Lough Erne) – 101 kilometres

As usual, I packed up in the rain, but the weather soon cleared, and it became a glorious day of riding. The route headed west, sticking to the foothills of the Sperrin Mountains, via Omagh to Kesh. In tiny Kesh, it took biking up a serious hill to the campsite, only to find the place wasn't a campsite but a mobile home park with no camping facilities. Bummer. The owner was accommodating enough and allowed me to camp on a small patch of grass. He even unlocked a mobile home so I could use the shower and toilet.



Kesh and surrounds – 32 kilometres

Kesh is tiny, with a population of less than 1000, but with its location on Lough Erne, the village had a lively tourist trade. I stayed in the area to explore and cycled down the hill to another campsite where one could take walks around the lake and through the forest. I uncovered dried fruit, yummy, and proceeded to eat the entire bag. Talking about food, I consider myself the Queen of carbs. Still, I had nothing on the Irish, as I found them serving macaroni cheese accompanied by a portion of French fries. I kid you not! Another dish I thought surprising was a baked potato topped with beans, something even I considered a carbo overload, not to mention spoiling a good Irish potato!

Kesh - Donegal (Dun Na nGall) – 72 kilometres

The way to Ballyshannon followed Lough Erne and aided by a tailwind; the route appeared downhill. At Ballyshannon, I turned northwards along the coast to Donegal, still with a tailwind. My arrival was reasonably early and I set up camp at a hostel.



Soon after, Eddie arrived by car. As he wanted to travel Ireland but didn't bring his bike, we loaded my bike onto the roof and explored the rest of Ireland by car. Afterwards, I was sorry, as the chances of ever returning to that part of the world to cycle are practically non-existent.





In London, I tried my best to obtain a European visa, but all to no avail. I soon discovered that the Schengen visa is (for me at least) one of the world's most elusive visas. Not only was it necessary to apply in one's home country, but the application also required a full itinerary and paid accommodation.

I felt frustrated as nothing was going to plan. As my idea of cycling Europe fell through, it was time for plan B. After much deliberation, the next best option was to fly to Hungary (which didn't require a Schengen visa) and cycle Eastern Europe and see where the road led. Eddie took time off work, and we packed our bicycles and flew to Budapest, Hungary.



About this Book

This book accounts for my cycle trip to England and Scotland. There are hundreds of different ways and the course described is by no means the best. If the intention is to use this book as a cycle touring guide, then please keep the following in mind:

The distances

Daily distances in this book may not be the shortest as I occasionally deviate. The daily kilometres recorded were, however, accurate according to my odometer. The reading often varied from markers and maps, and sometimes over- or under-read. I always noted the kilometres at the end of the day, which might have included going to the market or searching for accommodation.

Time of year and date

This book accounts for my visit to the United Kingdom between May and June 2007 and many things could have changed; roads may now be in better or worse condition. The hills may or may not be as steep as described, but it sure felt like it at the time.

Insurance

A travel insurance policy is necessary to cover theft, loss and medical problems. Some policies specifically exclude “dangerous activities”, including scuba diving, motorcycling and even trekking. I don’t think cycling is considered dangerous but check the small print.

Clothing

We spent most days in the saddle, so make sure you have good quality, padded cycling shorts. I cycle in ordinary sandals, but one can use any comfortable footwear. The weather in the UK varies from freezing to sweltering, be prepared for all weather conditions and pack accordingly. Personal toiletries should include insect repellent and anti-chafe cream. I recommend using a cycling helmet.

The bicycle and equipment

Any bicycle will do as long as you are comfortable. I use an ordinary mountain bike with a Merida frame fitted with Shimano Deore bike parts, Alex wheel rims and Schwalbe tyres. The bicycle is fitted with Tubus bicycle racks. Panniers are expensive but essential items, and Ortlieb panniers are world-renowned. Make sure that you know how to fix a punctured tube. A phone holder for the handlebar is convenient for navigation as I use Maps.ME or Google Maps. Furthermore, a handlebar bag is essential for holding a camera and other items needed during the day.

Recommended further reading

Lonely Planet: The e-book is less expensive and a handy guide.



About the Author

Born and bred in Cape Town, South Africa, Leana was never much of a cyclist. Her love for cycle touring started in 2005 when she participated in the Tour D'Afrique, a race from Cairo to Cape Town. She bought a bicycle, flew to Cairo, and had no idea what she was letting herself in for. To her surprise, she cycled every inch of the way to Cape Town. On her return, she found it surprisingly difficult to return to regular life and decided to continue travelling by bicycle.

Leana, accompanied by Ernest Markwood, left Cape Town at the end of March 2007. What was intended as a long bike ride became an around-the-world cycle ride. In the beginning, they cycled together most of the time. Eventually, each found their own pace and direction in life and on the road.

In the process, Leana has cycled Africa twice, the Middle East, Europe (including the UK), Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, the Indian subcontinent, China, Southeast Asia and Australia. From Australia, she flew to Ushuaia, Argentina and spent the next few years cycling South, Central and North America. Afterwards, a year was spent visiting the larger islands, including Cuba, Jamaica, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, South Korea and Taiwan.

At the time of writing, Leana found herself back in Southeast Asia.

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The best routes are the ones you haven't ridden.



BEN NEVIS

