

Knoydart Tour – 11th June to 20th June 1999

Day	Activity	Mileage	Time	Grade	Rating	Accomodation
Fri	06:00 travel to Loch Lochy					
						Loch Lochy YH
Sat	Road to Murlaggan Glen Deisary / Mam na Cloich Airde	20 9	2 6	10	****	
						Loch Nevis
Sun	Mam Meadail	9	7	9	****	
						Inverie
Mon	Mam Barrisdale	8	6	9	*****	
						Barrisdale
Tue	Loch Hourn	7	5	7	*****	
(30-miles to Loch Lochy)						Loch Hournside
Wed	Gleann Dubh Lochain / Glen Arnisdale Road to Ratagan	8 20	5	7	****	
						Ratagan YH
Thu	Road to Loch Lochy	31				
						Loch Lochy YH
Fri	Car to Inverness	70				
						Cawdor
Sat	Car to York					
						York Rally
Sun	Return Home					

Report on Knoydart Expedition, June 1999

A couple of years ago I suggested that I was interested in some roughstuff in the Knoydart peninsula, one of the most remote areas of Scotland between Loch Nevis and Loch Hourn (the Lakes of Heaven and Hell), north of Mallaig. Stony silence (appropriately enough!).

Then early this year Mark asked me if I'd ever done the trip as he quite fancied it: so now it was going to happen and two more volunteers quickly appeared and June seemed like a good time being light and before the peak of the midge season.

The agreed strategy was to allow plenty of time for flexibility, take two tents, two stoves, enough food for five days camping in the wild and to restrict ourselves to two panniers each which would minimise the number of trips if double carrying was needed (bikes and baggage separately). We would also take front suspension mountain bikes with less than 600 miles, each, under their wheels prior to the trip.

The intrepid foursome set out from Loch Lochy Youth Hostel, in due course, and were almost immediately off road on the Great Glen Cycle Way, on the West bank of Loch Lochy, heading for Loch Arkaig. Not far down here Kevin discovered that the pads on one of his V-brakes were worn down to the metal - not impressed after four months use - so we dug out some spare blocks and duly fitted them.

At Loch Arkaig we joined a classic Scottish single track switchback road beside the Loch - it looked flat on the map, but progress wasn't as fast as might have been expected from the comfort of the Warwickshire armchair. We lunched halfway along the Loch and arrived at the start of the track up Glen Dessiary in mid-afternoon to be greeted by a sign banning cars and mountain bikes. Someone had crudely scraped out the mountain bike bit: we treated ignored the sign, but we did obey the sign limiting us to 10mph. About three miles later by Upper Glen Dessiary Lodge the track stopped and it would be nearly two days before we rode our bikes again: we progressed steadily up the narrow path easing our bikes over boulders until we reached the summit of Mam na Cloich-Airde at about 1500ft.

The original plan had been to camp the first night at the foot of the pass by Loch Nevis, but the descent of Mam na Cloich-Airde was much rougher than the ascent, with two and three foot boulders to negotiate in between the peat bog. It was clear we wouldn't reach the Loch that evening and at about 8 o'clock we found a patch of flat dry grass next to a small loch which provided a perfect camping spot with ready access to fresh water.

On Sunday morning we set off again down Mam na Cloich-Airde and soon found ourselves heading into a narrow gorge - we could see a path going up the side of the valley and didn't want to believe it was our route. Clearly we needed to do a bit more climbing before continuing the descent to Loch Nevis.

We finally reached the valley bottom by an inlet of Loch Nevis and had the delightful experience of cycling along a sandy beach, covered in mussel shells, into the next inlet. A loose rope bridge offered a river crossing to some ruined houses at Carnoch below the foot of the pass to Gleann Meadail. It was necessary to hump our bikes about eight feet up some huge stone steps to get onto the bridge, slithering down some slimy wooden slats to the centre of the swaying catenary and then uphill, over some missing slats, to get off on the far side. Just to instil confidence there was a notice saying the bridge was in a dangerous state and used at one's own peril.

Lunch was called for, followed by what we expected to be the hardest part of the journey. Ahead of us in the next one and a half miles was a climb of 2000 ft - an average 1 in 4 gradient. Generally the surface of the path was better than Mam na Cloich-Airde, with fewer boulders, but being six inches wide meant walking in the heather with bike on the path, or vice versa. In the rocky sections the effort of lifting the back wheel of a loaded bike up each rock step proved too much for all of us and we resorted to double carrying, finally reaching Mam Meadail at about 6 o'clock.

Gleann Meadail proved to be a classically shaped glacial valley and provided a beautiful descent to the end of the day, some parts were even rideable. A decision was made to camp for the night a few miles short of Inverie where the path was bridged over the river and there was the promise of a nice run in to Inverie in the morning.

Hardly had we stopped when the local midges descended in a great black cloud: more were arriving as fast as the first drowned in our midge repellent. We quickly put up the tents and all dived into one tent with the midge screen up. We cooked a meal inside in comfort, relaxed after the day's exertions and considered our plans.

As the day had progressed Kevin and I had become increasingly aware that our brakes were completely worn out. The combination of the poor durability of Shimano's V-brake pads and the aggressive conditions of grit, sand, peat and water irrigating the rims and the constant braking to control the bikes over the boulders had ground all our brake pads away to the underlying alloy. Our spare brake pads were all used up and the rims of our wheels were already being shredded. Shiela's brakes seemed OK, probably due to her bike being slightly newer than Kevin's, or mine and Mark seemed to have the perfect solution with a disk brake on the front and a hub brake on the rear wheels. It was essential that we got hold of more brake blocks, as soon as possible, and the only chance would be Mallaig which could be reached by ferry from Inverie.

After a night of rain the river rose about 18 inches. By no means a dangerous level, but it was still raining as we packed and rode into Inverie: a shame as it was a beautiful ride, but photographs were ruled out. Inverie is at the end of a six mile stretch of road, completely unconnected to the rest of the highway system of the mainland. We came to the conclusion that it wasn't classified as a public highway as a number of battered cars were to be seen with broken headlights and patches of canvas up to 6 inches long showing on the tyres!

A welcome cup of hot chocolate was offered in The Old Forge, styled as the most remote pub in Britain. They were clearly used to wet people arriving and lit the fire in the bar for us. A few walkers drifted in and we were by no means alone there. Inverie seems to be a thriving community of 70 souls, supporting an infant school with six pupils, a Post Office, a Tea Shop and a General Store. Very few members of the community have lived there for more than 20 years.

It turned out that the ferry runs twice a day on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays so we would be in time for the 3 o'clock ferry and enjoyed a splendid lunch chosen from a varied menu: the highlight being the local caught scallops. By the afternoon the sun had come out and the boat trip via Tarbet was a real treat.

Once in Mallaig we acquired an island ferry timetable and discovered that the nearest cycle shop was in Fort William, but managed to find a campsite which also hired bicycles. The proprietor had a box of assorted brake blocks, none of which was the right type but we bought a selection at 50p each and set about making them fit. Incidentally, Mark was also having some problems with his rear hub brake, which was not returning properly to the off position: I don't know if being submerged in a peat bog had contributed!

We considered Barra, which we had missed out a couple of years ago, or Rhum, but the ferry times made it impossible in the time available. So Tuesday morning saw us boarding the ferry for Skye with a beautiful ride up the Sleat Peninsula: that is until we hit the "improved" section near Broadford. Despite the absence of significant amounts of traffic, a swathe of rock and vegetation had been cleared, sufficient for a motorway, and a two lane road with perfectly engineered curves and gradients built up the centre: a touch out of sympathy with the environment.

Not far from Broadford Mark became aware of a bulge in the side wall of his nearly new Continental rear tyre: the canvas was almost worn away just at the rim and a small view of inner tube could be seen. Luckily another cycle hire business was able to come to our rescue.

A pot of tea later and we were soon on our way north, taking the old road over the hills from Stollamus, which had been abandoned in the 1930's. We had ideas of making camp in Strath Mor, but after soaking our newly dry feet in an endless peat bog, we decided to look elsewhere. A delightful road round the cliff edge provided a small flat spot with shelter, water and a surplus of midges: here followed a rapid tent pitching before diving in to cook our evening meal in comfort.

After a night of continuous rain we emerged to a midge free, but windy environment and set off for Sligachan, a few miles away, where we pitched our tents. It was clear that one of the tents would not survive the day in the wind so we took the tents straight down again and disappeared into the Sligachan Hotel for morning coffee. This developed into lunch followed by a sprint back to the Youth Hostel at Broadford. As the road wound up and down the headlands we found ourselves with alternating head and tail winds.

Thursday dawned fine and we enjoyed a pleasant climb through Glen Arroch and down to the Glenelg Ferry: this must be one of the last of the traditional turntable ferries, able to carry six cars at a time. Over lunch in the village of Glenelg, on the banks of the Sound of Sleat, we decided to pull in one last bit of roughstuff at the end of Gleann Beagg. Kevin decided that he was enjoying his newly dry feet and would go straight over Mam Ratagan to check out the Glen Shiel hotel.

We slowly climbed Gleann Beagg under clear blue skies, first on tarmac, passing a couple of Brochs (old fortified houses) and later on a rideable track. As predicted, it deteriorated into a bog trot near the Suardalan bothy. It was at this point that the cable to Mark's rear hub brake snapped, fortunately at the bottom of a descent. It would need a tandem length cable to fix it and Mark declined to tie two ordinary cables together as the front disk seemed OK on its own.

After a while we found ourselves on the opposite side of the river to a tarmac road. Rather than wallow another mile through bogs we decided to ford the river instead and have a clean up at the same time. A steady climb over Mam Ratagan was followed by a 1200ft descent at 1 in 7 to Loch Duich: especially exciting for Mark on a single, fading disk brake. We were welcomed at the bottom by a familiar figure standing in a bus shelter: a shame the hotel bar had closed at 2.30 and it was now six o'clock!

We enjoyed a gentle climb up Glen Shiel below the Sisters of Kintail as far as Shiel Bridge where we found a surprisingly secluded campsite behind the old bridge: night time traffic was pretty well non-existent anyway. Someone had clearly had a fire there before, so we followed suit to enjoy the absence of midges at the cost of being kippered.

On Friday we found ourselves, two passes later, back at Loch Lochy ready for a 70-mile drive to Cawdor, between Inverness and Nairn. Very welcome showers turned us into reasonably civilised beings again and we spent a very pleasant evening enjoying my sister's hospitality before the long drive south on Saturday.