

UP NORTH - IN OCTOBER

Three of us took the Friday evening train to Oban. I felt a bit cheated as I like the scenery on that journey, but a compensation was getting out in the dark sharp air that smelt of pine needles, to join the queue at the tearoom on the platform of Crianlarich Station - a welcome consideration by British Rail!

There was no problem settling into Oban YH and next morning, we awoke to a cloudless sky, and had breakfast at the window overlooking Oban Bay (just like favoured guests at a boarding house!).

As the sun rose, the autumn colouring came to its exhilarating hues, and remained a joy to behold for the whole week. After a pleasant sail to Craignure and the half dozen cars or so had passed, the road was quiet - until the next ferry brought another half dozen vehicles. As we cycled along, we enjoyed the wildlife: every bay had a heron waiting for its next meal to arrive; buzzards glared down upon us from the top of telegraph poles, and we had an enjoyable half hour watching seals sunbathing on the rocks. We crossed to Iona for the afternoon, and were glad to see the white sandy beaches still clean and unpolluted. After a visit to the Abbey, we enjoyed the light on the west side of the island as the sun set: the machair was like a golf course - indeed, someone had laid out a few holes for the game. We sailed back to Fionnphort for B & B near the pier. During the evening we learned that whilst it's quieter in winter, Iona still attracts visitors from Australia and New Zealand.

Next day was misty - a Colin Baxter scenario - as we came round the west and north of Mull, climbing and dipping into wee glens among the trees and out again on to open moor, to find B & B at Tobermory. It's unfortunate that some of our youth hostels are closed in October when the weather can be excellent.) On Monday, we crossed to Lochaline, the inner loch had lots of yachts at anchor, and up through Morvern where we spotted deer on the hill. Round Loch Sunart and over to Loch Sheil, Loch Moidart, and Loch Ailort, still a quiet and very beautiful road. As darkness fell, we joined the Mallaig road where the 'roadmakers' were adjusting it again, chiselling away at the rock with huge machines: Margot's camping headlight was most effective in locating Garramore YH for the night.

On Tuesday we crossed the Narrows to Armadale on Skye, looking through the glasses for any sign of the family at Samadalan. We turned up by the Gaelic College on Sleat and over Donald's lands where we watched deer roaring in defiance of any contender for his hinds, and wondered how long such an age old ritual had taken place on these hills. The views back to the mainland were striking - but turning westwards, the views of the Cuillin were spectacular! Again, the road climbs and dips into wee glens where the trees remind you of those at Cosford - browbeaten by the Atlantic westerlies so that they cling and grow round the hillsides rather than upwards. If you've never had an October visit to this part of Skye, believe me, it's a 'must'!

We stayed at Broadford YH where the warden had had a very busy season and was looking forward to a peaceful winter. The road north of Fortree was dramatic looking up to the Old Man of Storr, and visiting the Kilt Rock. Ellishader, a museum in an old croft, had a very interesting display of fossils and artefacts from the 'old way

Afterwards, we negotiated the Quairaing (which means Margot and Richard cycled up while I walked!); on the summit we chatted with two walkers from Edinburgh, colleagues of Margot in the LDWA. We then enjoyed the long swoop down to the comfortable Uig YH where we met up with three of the Clyde North Section CTC, also enjoying the Indian Summer.

It was good to explore new by-ways of Skye since they are now mostly under tarmac, and on one of the desolate moors, we saw an eagle being buzzed by a crow.

After a night's rest at the plush Kyleakin YH we crossed to Kyle and made our way by Kintail and Glen Sheil, to continue down colourful Glenmoriston where the trees were ablaze with all shades of orange. We showed Margot the grave of one, Roderick Mackenzie, who died saying he was the Prince, thus confusing the Redcoats and allowing Charlie another getaway! The Great Glen appears so lush after the islands, because of the huge trees - a lovely sight. We stayed at Loch Lochy YH - now under new management - and were sorry to hear that Mrs Fraser had suffered a heart attack, but was convalescing at home. We hope that charming lady is now well (one of our favourite wardens, that band of folk who influence our travels so much with their friendly care and attention, and to whom we owe so much).

Our last day, Saturday, turned out to be one of the most exciting days of cycling - crystal clear showing the Mamores and Monadhliaths at their best. Making towards the hulk of Ben Nevis, we turned at Spean Bridge where folk were out in their gardens enjoying the warm sunshine, and as we reached the summit above Roybridge, the lochs were a deep blue. Magic all the way!

Instead of going over to Dalwhinnie, we made for Kingussie and the Ruthven-Insch back road and in the deepening dusk, the moon came up over Glen Feshie. Hats and gloves were now on against the chill air, but it was with reluctance that we turned for Aviemore Station, but we agreed that coming along Speyside had been a fitting finale to such a week.

I had gone up north with some trepidation, wondering how much cold and wet we might have to endure - and a bit envious of those off to warmer climes - but I can honestly say there's no place on Earth I'd rather have been that week than UP NORTH!

Margaret Russell
CTC Lothians
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