



Aberdeen to Ardnamurchan – A Coast to Coast Off-road Cycle

Just follow the thin blue line...



Day 1 – Aberdeen to Ballater

‘This bike ain’t gonna ride itself’ we told ourselves as the front wheels bathed in the cool North Sea for the photo posing. We then discovered our bike shoes were made of King Canute uppers as the pause for an extra photograph brought the tide in a tad further than intended. A push back up the sand to the breezy Aberdeen promenade and we were off. 260 miles to go. On the scale of epic adventures Shackleton, Fiennes, Beaumont or Cracknell would view this as an amusing warm up. For us office dwellers it was a tantalising dream emerging from the dark winter nights finally about to materialise.



Challenge number 1 – something that was as hard as the local granite - finding our way out of the docklands. Odd looking cargo ships nestled the harbour side as we dodged and weaved the boisterous traffic through to Duthie Park to find hurdle two. Where was the start of the Deeside Way? Luckily an eight year old walking their dog acted as a signpost for the start as hidden as platform 9 ½ at Kings Cross station. It felt like we really had started – the first section was a tranquil suburban idyll. Dappled sunlight, gorgeous houses, friendly dog-walkers and tantalising glimpses of the river Dee glinting metallically occasionally far to our left.

Obviously for our wild adventure this semi-urban gorgeousness and now easy navigation couldn't last forever, however it did set a lovely cruising pedal-pace to ease us into the mood. A Banchory coffee shop called upon us after a respectable time where we were propositioned by a local wondering if we'd like to buy his bike. Given we'd all recently invested in our own dream machines the poor chap would have been as successful if he'd tried to sell sea water to a trawler man. Our first mini-adventure was the navigation into and through the Blackhall Forest (which really should have a McGateau associated with it) with the ruffled and stony track driving up to get the hearts pumping frantically towards the tantalisingly named Muckle Ord. And what happens after a bit of uphill? Usually more uphill, but with a twist of the handlebars and onto the old military road we caught some tarmac and whizzed down towards an immediate contender for Place Name of the Day – "Slidderybree". A rural hamlet designed to ignite aspirations to a country haven and real living for the townies. The going was straightforward towards Aboyne when we met a sharp left onto the B976 and a huge bone of contention. We past a small wood called Knappy Park – and given the 'other halves' were entertaining two one year olds in Aberdeen - we now had a second contender for Place Name of the Day within the matter of



Epic always has a different angle on the world

a few miles. We'd let the ladies decide later. We rejoined the old Royal Deeside railway line at Dinnet with a fascinating highland feature of a sit-on lawnmower with a snowplough attachment resplendent on its nose. It was a place name to conjure with "If we dinnae dae it in Dinnet then we dinnae dae it at aw" could become an old Scots adage in years to come. They must be very proud of their lawns up here to continue with the trimming the meadows no matter what the weather.

It was around this point whilst in full on bumble-along-the-old-railway mode that Epic Eric (our Senior Logistical Consultant appointed in charge of Mileage, Top speeds and General Metrics who has an impressive back-catalogue of hillwalking, cycling and canoeing grand excursions) was asked our rate of progress. '10.3 miles an hour' was the instant reply. Nice. Not too fast, not too slow. 'And' added Epic, 'if we keep going at exactly this speed from when we start the day to when we finish the day for every day of this trip we will average 10.3 miles an hour'. Hmmm. 'How do you work that out?' asked our third member "Two Showers" John, our resident engineer and lover of a pre-cycle shower. 'It's awfully complicated to explain' un-explained Epic.

Onwards on easygoing surfaces through the Cambus O' May with the old railway cottages converted to homes as cute as a baby's giggle. We waved to some steam enthusiasts (do you call them Steamheads?) with real life Thomas the Tank Engine and laying a section of track with the aid of one forklift, four pairs of hand and an iron dedication. This struck a chord with us mountain bikers with the appeal of the 'singletrack'. At this point we were cruising with a somewhat poignant quadruplet of a river on our left, our cycle track, the rail track and then the road in parallel amiability.

A gentle end through to Ballater and back to Headquarters Number 1 for the first day to be ticked off and to close serenely in the calm aftermath of the Ballater Highland games.

Day 2 – Ballater to Linn of Dee

Bike Star-Date Two kicked off with John Two-Showers living up to his name maintaining his reputation as the cleanest cyclist in town. We hopped on the mean machines, over the latest and rather grand, Ballater Bridge of 1885 vintage, replacing the three previous ones, and hung a right towards Glen Muick. The countryside around here is just sublime. Greenery abounds, the sparkling river, the fresh scent of pine on a summer morning. The warmth of the day hugged us up through Bridge of Muick and we slalomed down to cross the River Muick. We paused by a mini-blight on nature's finery with a curio of a concrete salmon-ladder lending a hand to our fishy friends' labour upstream. At some point we must have arrived at the back door of the Balmoral estate as the standard of track became royally smooth and a heave up a brow unveiled a glorious panorama northwards.

The back of Balmoral beyond

And a cracking descent. The wind was still whistling in our ears as we landed at the Lochnagar Distillery and enquired about coffee. 'Not here' outlined the polite if perhaps over-attentive curator. 'There's no coffee till Braemar'. Not quite a disaster, and were we down hearted? Mildly miffed perhaps. It might be appropriate to have a rant

about the Scottish Tourist industry but I shall desist. For now. Anyhoo, downhearts were uplifted by a blast of downhill, then the opposite of downhill with a huff and a puff. We detoured up Glen Gelder out on the highly scenic wild and probably normally windy moorland behind the rather majestic Munro of Lochnagar. It certainly looked a tempting route to cycle on up the glen and then get the walking boots on and head for the hills. But we didn't. More fabulous, jingling descents through the forests and a brief road stint before we hit the Braemar metropolis. A coincidental meet up with the families in a coffee house (the coffee house was both open and welcoming it's worth noting) rendered happy faces even

more smiley. The day's cycling was brought to a jolly end with a whizz up to the Linn of Dee via Mar Lodge. A minor incident occurred in the woods beside Linn of Dee where we were drawn to a section of appealing footpath adjacent to the road beside a steep slope to the river below. Two Showers managed to take

a

Marvellous Mar Lodge

tumble in the heather avoiding a horse-pat on



the path – luckily no damage done to John, his bike or the horse-pat and we were now set up for one the big wilderness days.

Day 3 – Linn of Dee to Kingussie.

An epic of a day. A real mountain biker's day. The chaps in the rather brilliant bike shop in Ballater had told us so and they were right. From Linn of Dee we were out of the car to the balmy shelter of the morning and on the bikes faster than a Shimano Rapid-fire gear shifter after discovering the midge count was exorbitantly high. The sojourn up to White Bridge is just lovely. An easy going classic highland glen with a gentle tinkling river, smatterings of woodlands and rolling mauve hillsides rising in majestic timelessness. We past some campers not having fun in the morning sun as they performed the highland ritual of the Midgie Dance. We heaved a perpendicular right where the



Near Geldie Lodge

Dee meets the Geldie burn and soaked up the remoteness as the woods disappeared in our wake. A nifty bit of navigating by Two Showers avoided us having an early paddle as the main drag headed over a ford the river towards the ruins of Geldie Lodge. Epic and I had been so deep in conversation that the track heading off west was barely noticed. The conversation was of course riveting. I had dropped a map from my back pocket at the Linn of Muick section and retraced around 500m to collect it. A round trip of 1000m. Should I have used Epic's bike - since this was the official route length measurement vehicle and added a further 1km to our route – or would this be against the whole principle? Two Showers had now got his wireless cycle computer activated and this gave us a comparison to Eric's daily mileages. However the two of these route mileages differed by about 200m on yesterday's distances. Had Epic performed a 200m 'wheelie' where his front wheel with the motion sensor was not spinning round? Ah the points to ponder. Pondering disappeared in a puff of concentration as the path narrowed to boggy and rocky singletrack. Hard concentration with mind and body in fusion for 'rideable' sections, then a 'Technical' section (i.e. push the bike) followed by a 'Very Technical' section (i.e. carry the bike) and the expanse of heather and peat condensed to what was immediate in front of us. The path thinned in places and would have been quite a challenge in mist. It was enough of a challenge in fine sunshine – and quite wonderful. We dipped down to streams, balancing on rocks, admiring the raw beauty of Scotland's crust. Some sections would have been utterly

impassable after heavy rain – the sweeping burns being on relatively low flow after a parched few days.

This was really good stuff. Tough, rugged and hard but rewarding. We paused at a grassy oasis to eye up the next section and Epic took a slow motion tumble with the bike falling on top of his knee. It looked nasty. As if his broken rib wasn't enough! He had had an unfortunate incident with a slippery root by Loch Lomondside in a training outing three weeks previously. A patch up, some men's sympathy and onwards. Eventually we broke through past the bleak beauty to some decent track and the edge of meadows and dotted woodlands. Down to a the river and a ford. The bike shop chaps had advised that the high walkers track on the steep glen slopes was pretty ropey and they had ended up fording the river. We decided likewise as the path was precipitous and I recalled walking on it a few years ago where erosion then had been challenging. And that was without a bike.

So we took the plunge – socks off, shoes back on as per 'best practice' and splashed merrily over the first section. A quick dry, up on the bikes again and onwards. A few hundred metres and another ford. The same routine – a long section angled across the water to a most amazing wilderness meadow. We sat and had a break, absorbed the sunshine and were mesmerised by the sheer volume of butterflies. 'I've never ever seen so many butterflies in one place' observed Epic, before addenduming – 'except perhaps Butterfly World'. It was a very special place, munching on flapjack, drying what we could and just 'being'. And there were very few places that would be better for just 'being'. Long swaying summer grass, Scots pines behind us, steep slopes of mottled grey and rustic olives across the river.

It would be an easy place to over linger, instead we finally decided the lingering was over, picked our way over some narrow track beside the river and before us unfolded Glen Feshie. A super place. A one-time residence of Edwin Henry Landseer the artist of the iconic 'Monarch of the glen' and curiously also the sculptor of the lions in Trafalgar Square. Anyhoo, oor Edwin had a butt-and-ben here in days of yore, not far from where the current bothy lies at Ruigh Aiteachain. It wasn't hard to imagine the inspiration for his famous painting came from here – adopted by Glenfiddich whisky amongst others. Although there was a distinct lack of deer!

We past a small group out strolling – the signs of civilisation – it seems their hippy appearance tied in with a pastime of gathering magic mushrooms. I'm sure it's more dangerous than Mountain Biking picking wild mushrooms. Nick Evans of 'The Horse Whisperer' fame almost fatally poisoned his family in Aberdeenshire despite being an experienced amateur mycologist gathering chanterelles.



Glen Feshie - Mind the gap

A very pleasant bumble through the woods brought us back to our old friend the river Feshie. And a technical challenge. The quaint wooden bridge had some apparent deficiencies so we let Two Showers, our resident real life structural engineer, assess its capabilities. After a brief survey and with minimal reference to lengths of the tangent vectors fulfilling the axioms of a norm, the conclusion was that the 10m missing section of span rendered the bridge undesirable to cross.

So we waded the ford just

downstream. Soaked again. By this point we had developed the term 'Aqua Technical' to describe the beyond 'Very Technical' stage involving Uisge. Epic was making good use of his canoeing knowledge by this time, weighing up the ripples and eddies and being a generally very useful chap to send ahead to check for unexpected deep sections.

The going from here was brim full of pleasantness – a road section, a dive through the woods – a broad meadow with gliders floating high above. We passed the historical and eye-catching Ruthven Barracks – a place of tumultuous history, one time residence of the Wolf of Badenoch, burned by three thousand retreating Jacobites in 1746 and essentially unchanged since.



In a hop and a skip we'd whizzed to Kingussie and found a beer garden with the requisite essentials. Sunshine, beer and a rock to start to dry out our shoes.

Day 4 - Kingussie to Fort Augustus

A quiet drink, a game of pool, some good pub grub and the next morning for some reason Epic's head seemed to be as sore as his knee. Fortunately the combined distraction meant his cracked rib was not so much on his mind. Still, only the Corrieyairrack Pass section today.



The What Mountain Bike route guide refers to it as ‘an unrelenting, high-level route, a full mountain expedition’. Did that daunt us? Hell no. Virtually undaunted in fact. Must be the hangover. We had a comfortable few miles up through Laggan and with a stunning view up Glen Shirra. Surely this is the Glen of Tranquillity in the adverts – it looked mellow and moulded from raw beauty. After Melgarve Bridge the prospect changes dramatically with the start of the real climb. The surface was as rough as a drunken apprentice’s cobbled street and it was often easier to push than to pedal. Sweat oozed and muscles groaned. Every now and again a mercifully smooth section materialised and we would pedal gratefully. It felt grand to be on such a classic mountain pass traverse. Epic misjudged a stream crossing and ended up with a wet foot. Just the one on this occasion. A raven and a peregrine falcon exchanged messages above us at one point, and a few walkers were venturing out. And after the real climb came the even steeper classic zigzag up to the col. We sat in the middle of the knobbly track looking back and had a snack. A final push and then onto the bikes again and relief as the col eased to horizontal. We stopped briefly for a photo – slightly misty but some views.

The next section left us stunned. We were convinced that there would be more ups and a path as unrideable as the ascent – but no. It was glorious, glorious descent. An utterly amazing and thrilling 6 miles or more of awesome downhill. Challenging, technical, focus



The Corrieyairrack conquered

inducing and occasionally white knuckle, but fast flowing but highly rideable. Just a fantastically exhilarating experience – a couple of close shaves with the sharp changes in surface and the scenery of Glen Tarff and glimpses of Loch Ness sliding in and out of view.

We sat outside the Locks at Fort Augustus feeling smug and downing coffee and cakes. Our slick car shuttle arrangement then had us on to the new Headquarters in Glencoe and a re-union with the families. And drying out Eric’s shoe.

Day 5 - Fort Augustus to Fort William

A Fort to Fort day. And our prospect of a ‘rest day’ – we thought with what should be a flattish Caledonian Canal and the Great Glen Way. It turned out to be not quite as smooth as expected. The muddy clag and slippery roots at the side of Loch Oich was unexpected and a bit of slog. It was made slightly more pleasant seeing the unfeasibly huge loads and glumness of the long distance walkers on the Great Glen Way. The real grit in the Vaseline of the day was the demoralising outlook from one local of ‘there’s no coffee shops until Fort William’. Now I didn’t want to rant about our local friendly Tourist Industry, but really. Mid-summer, peak tourist season and at the Watersports Centre at Loch Oich the draw of a ‘coffee served all day’ sign was clarified by the receptionist as ‘probably about 11.15 when she arrives’. Then the Floating Pub at Bridge of Oich also claimed to be ‘open from 11am’, but ignored even calls into the cabin. Still the Loch Lochy track was hugely enjoyable. The intermittent stream of walkers on the track was broken at one point by a group of road cyclists taking the quiet route up the lochside. We passed the entrance to Achnacarry – a Mackie’s Ice Cream sign almost tempting us to the Cameron Museum along with the significance of the site for commando training during the Second World War. With a drive

and focus of which to be proud, we desisted and pressed on manfully. Loch Lochy itself has a stretch of the Great Glen Way that dips down to kiss the shoreline at one point and the



A passing outdoor clothing model poses by Loch Lochy

weaving in and out of the trees was quite special – not forgetting stunning water-level views up the Loch. Our plight of the coffee deficit was shared with a German backpacker at Gairloch. His response with a smile was ‘ah – I vill haff to make my own then’. Which evoked the burning question ‘Do you have three extra cups?’. A cruise on the flat canal side brought the first glimpse of the sea. The path follows the shoreline over an impressive wooden footbridge and we followed our noses into Fort William and the hubbub of tourists and a continental market on the high street.

The amusement on the high street was unintentionally provided by Two Showers, who was tail end Charlie (somewhat unusually for the speed king) and after Epic and I had eased passed a couple of PC Plods they nabbed John and ‘asked’ him to dismount. A no cycling zone. ‘They’re trained to look for suspicious people’ observed Epic as we found a cafe that was not only open, but welcoming and serving nosh. We soaked up some sunshine, ingested a double helping of coffee and arguably nutritional nibbles. A wander back up to the outdoor shops brought us past the continental market. Cheese sounded like a sumptuous little treat to take back to the ladies in the cottage. ‘Three cheeses for £5’ boasted the sign at the French stall. An enquiry as to what kind of cheeses were on offer brought the presumably accurate if somewhat unenlightening response ‘Zey are French cheeses’

A very pleasant outing to the sociable hum of the Clachaig pub blessed the evening ...two days to go!

Day 6 - Fort William to Strontian



Waiting for the ferry

Yet more warm and sunny weather greeted the morning and a flat calm crossing on the ferry to Camusnagaul. It wasn't to last. And we had the steepest road section in Great Britain to come. 'It's just a hill' opined Two Showers.

The shore hugging route from the Ferry round the South Side of Loch Eil had was awfully pleasant - mildly undulating and laden with herons. The rise and rise of the heron. We counted over a dozen. That's more herons than wild red deer (one so far). Mind you

we've seen more woodpeckers, peregrine falcons, frogs and cycling law-breakers than wild deer. That said, there's been more deer than open coffee shops between Fort Augustus and Fort William. Of course it could have been one spectacularly speedy and clever heron – constantly looping ahead of where we were peddling and then acting all nonchalant and statuesque.

We joined the main 'Road to the Isles' Mallaig road briefly with a detour to Glenfinnan to see the viaduct of Harry Potter fame, the Glenfinnan Monument of Bonnie Prince Charlie fame and the coffee shop famous in our minds for being open. There were busloads of tourists and by good fortune our timing landed us just in front so we nabbed the coffees and sat outside admiring the monument and the channelled view down Loch Shiel. Epic recounted a story where an older cyclist had stopped to help him with a mechanical hitch one day. The Good Samaritan mentioned he was inspired to keep cycling whenever he saw the faces at the windows of the coaches on tour going past – it was the ultimate 'broom wagon' for him (the vehicle that drives at a set speed behind a cycle race and 'sweeps up' those not maintaining sufficient speed).

The crowds evaporated a hundred metres from the car park and there was a gorgeous bridge and jet black broody pool where trout rose silently and beckoned us to the lochside track. The 14 miles skirting Loch Shiel were blissful – wild and stunning. The ups and downs may have been perceived by some as a gratuitous use of hills given it was beside a flat waterway. The feeling of wilderness and separation from civilisation amongst the apparent barrenness of the scattered rocky Scottish hillsides was only temporarily dented by a Post woman Pat squeezing her van past us on what was an excellent quality track. The Balmoral track builders must have been here. We'd been eyeing some dark, squally fronts threatening like a pack of hyenas further down the loch. The first wet spots motivated us to pile on the wet weather gear as it looked like it would be more than a passing shower. And it was. Polloch Tourist Information portacabin was a welcome respite as we sheltered eyeing the curious mix of locally knitted goodies with an honesty box, alongside an interesting



display about the approach to forestry management. The bikes still didn't ride themselves and as the rain wasn't torrential at this point we pressed on to 'the big climb' a one-in-five thigh burner up to the radio mast at 342 metres. It was more or less dry by the time we crested and the mist-straggled views opened up an atmospheric primeval landscape. A lady in a van with some houseplants paused at the top when we arrived. Her origins from Derbyshire couldn't fully disguise her Liverpool twang as it turned out she had lived in Bootle for 20 years – although almost as long in this remote outpost. She very kindly donated to our cause on hearing our story as we parted down the hill in different directions like a couple of Red Arrows peeling away from each other. A one-in-four descent sucked us in and the rain tap was turned up full. The road launched itself down the hillside and we held on for the ride. We dodged a council Highway Maintenance lorry labouring up the hill with a pretty lady driving – Two Showers John was quite taken by her as he mentioned her later – the acceptable face of Highway Maintenance. The very acceptable face. "She could just be quite High Maintenance though, John". Minutes later the Arundel

Centre magnetised us in for coffee and a late lunch. Our local Ardnamurchan Historian, Epic, informed that it used to be called Cosy Knits, a welcoming and open cafe with some classy local artefacts. We squelched to seats and watched the rain ease to merely thundering like the Pamplona Bull Run as we stretched out our food and coffees as long as we could. We were only a couple of miles from the hotel so eventually decided to take the plunge, as it were, re-donned the waterproofs and dived in, out the door. As we left our table we noticed a puddle around Two Showers which lead to a small stream across the floor. Not the drips from the waterproofs or rucksack as it turned out, but a squashed drink valve from his Camelbak. We forded the rivulets and made a run for it.

The hotel accommodation was fairly Spartan but welcoming and well set up for drying our gear. The sun came out 20mins later – Doh! A funeral wake was on when we arrived. The lady was from Bellagrove and had lived in the area a long time. Her granddaughter told us the old lady did not like the sun and enjoyed it when it rained. She was originally from Gloucester. It brought to mind the children's rhyme 'Doctor Foster went to Gloucester in a shower of rain, he stepped in a puddle right up to his middle and never went there again'. We took a photo for the granddaughter – her camera had fallen in a puddle. Well the weather was what Granny would have wanted. The hotel food was excellent - fresh, superbly cooked, Scottish and inspirational. A wee dram closed the evening prior to our final day – and more 'real mountain biking' to come by all accounts.

Day 7 – Strontian to Ardnamurchan Lighthouse

Breakfast was great, and we set off in the heavy drizzle with a nostalgic stop at Resipole campsite for a photo for Epic who had many summers there in his married days. And on to Acharacle where we broke the speed limit on the whoosh down – that's twice Two Showers

had fallen foul of the law. Why were we associating with such a character? Alas arriving in Acharacle we were too early for the coffee shop. Luckily the bakery was open and what a fine bakery too. We stoked up with pastries, kept the Gore-Tex on and headed for Kentra Bay. The rain flipped on and off and continually threatened. At times we baked inside our shells rather than stop to de-robe. The scenery through this stretch was very easy on the eye.



Singing cyclists at Singing Sands

We broke into the dripping forest towards the wonderfully named 'Singing sands' past an alarming sign warning of unexploded munitions. 'Mines' we were told by the Epic, The Ardnamurchan Historian and Oracle. At Gortfern the track became much less trodden, although there seemed to be a smattering of German hikers sprinkled wherever we went. There was some well practiced pushing and then carrying of the bikes as we launched up a footpath before cresting and having some wonderful if boggy singletrack descending close to a cottage at Eilagadale. We paused to chat to a lone MTB cyclist heading in the opposite direction. He was packed like a mule – a homemade tent included. He'd been to Mull and had a break from camping one night in a bothy – luxury apparently. I don't know how he handled the midges – we would have chatted more but the wee culicoides impunctatus varmint – the much more voracious highland midge – was active in the calm air within 7 or 8 seconds of stopping. Not that we were counting. A section of track and a road took us through to the wonderfully named Ockle reviving the concept of a Place Name of the Day. Wheeling through Kilmory and on to Fascadale we came upon a neat little bay with a group of frogmen and frogwomen looking like they were on a lunch break. And then up the hill on a

well defined track up to a moorland plateau. The well defined path branched in to options of less well defined paths.

These then spread out like veins dissolving to nothing but moor. Studious assessments of the map and the features around plotted us the most likely route across heather, rock and tussock. And still no track. Some was about cyclable for a few yards, then hop off the bike and shove once more. At least we weren't carrying a lot of gear

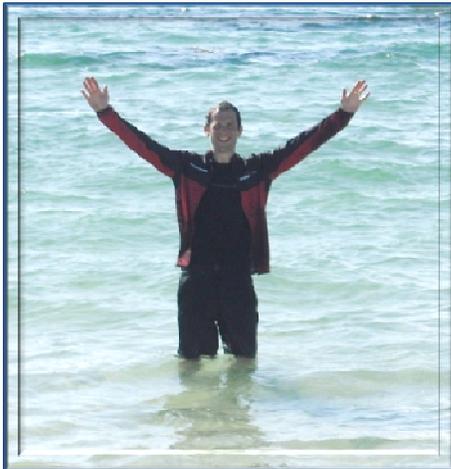


and a tent. We carried on like this for a while then headed for rockier higher ground to aim to get a better perspective. Even the GPS came out at this point as a double check. With various bearings we sank in the bog and contoured round a lochan picking out a white post as a marker. And it turned out a further white post a hundred metres beyond. Not quite a track so much as a route, however it did materialise into bits of path and then we squelched to a track which thrashed through the bracken. A junction and a left hairpin took us to a ford – Epic had abandoned any thoughts of keeping his feet dry and waded through without hesitation. John had a splash through on the bike through then on an up some interesting track – cyclable in places and yet another stream crossing. Eric waded on. Must get that chap some wellies for Christmas. John followed suit. It was my car waiting at the other end so I found a suitable leaping point leaning on my two wheeled walking pole and vaulted successfully. The bog intensified. Our swamp handling skills were fairly well developed by now, and it's surprising how deep the peat can go and the bike will still plough through it with a bit of brute force and control. There were some pedestrians up ahead which suggested smoother going. Sadly not. Weave here, pushing again - meander there – a slinky of an enigmatic dark water channel was mostly on our left as we picked and dabbed our way forward. At this point a most remarkable thing happened. John disappeared up to his waist into ink-black peaty waters. True Doctor Foster went to Gloucester stuff. 'I'm glad we sent him ahead to test out the depth' observed Epic. 'Me too – let's try a different way' having seen Two Showers haul himself out without too much drama. And his bike seemed unphased. 'I gather Specialized are going to be releasing a new bike next year called the Bog-Hopper'.

We caught up with the family out strolling who sympathised with Two Showers and informed us the track improved dramatically round the corner. And they were right. Decent track down to the croft remnants at Glendrian. An exhilarating careering sweep over a grassy meadow and a splash through a picturesque ford brought us to land rover trac+k and good going

round to Altnaha. Almost there. By this time in the day the day had turned to Doctor Jekyll. At Sanna Bay we picked past the dunes - the sun blazed, the sky sprinkled with summer clouds and families out in groups engaged with the kites and sandcastles and spades. Given the glorious white sands, turquoise opaque sea if you'd added some palm trees and a tequila bar and maybe a few thousand more people it would have been totally tropical. John decided to wash off the peaty residue and waded in up to his waist – quite intentionally this time. We're going to have to rename him Two Showers Two Soaks from now on.

The section round to Portuairk was a lovely coastal footpath. The views back across Sanna exceptional. The hidden, sheltered sandy cove with the Canadians looking like they were going skinny dipping. Pretty white cottages nestling sporadically. A few days later I met a chap at a BBQ who had holidayed in Portuairk every year for decades – the appeal was obvious for anyone who loved the sea and the outdoors. The smell of the post-rain sun-



teased heather and bracken was soothing, uplifting and heady. There's a steep drag out of the village and then a few ups and downs and wrinkles on the road, but with the end in touching distance we flew along. The lighthouse pokes its head up tantalisingly on the way, and slightly bizarrely last section has a set of traffic lights for a narrow twist round a rocky bluff. The traffic lights were red. It was quiet. Epic and Two Showers Two Soaks blasted on taunting the law once more on their two wheeled stallions. We'd made it. The sun still shone as we took the obligatory photos. We pushed open the door of the cafe – 'we've just closed, sorry' they told us. Too late for the coffee shop.

The Coast to Coast Trip raised £1500 for the Friends Of Chernobyl's Children.

