

**I**t began as a low rumble in the distance, rising in pitch and volume until with a roar it was upon us. The bothy's walls shook and its corrugated roof bowed upwards, before shuddering back into place as the wind tore on up the valley. The next blast was louder and fiercer... Kim thought the roof might go and hurriedly stuffed his gear into his backpack. Andy and I huddled deeper into our sleeping bags instead. Gradually the wind's banshee howls gave way to a hammering tattoo of rain.

Two days before it had been so different. In northern Scotland, even in late August it's light by 5.30am, and an hour after that the sun had cleared the trees surrounding the campsite and coaxed us out of our tents. Soon we were pedalling over the Caledonian Canal bridge, past the yawning car-drivers waiting for the petrol station to open.

These would be the last cars we'd see for the next three days, because we left the outskirts of Fort Augustus behind and turned north off the tarmac onto the remains of one of General Wade's military roads. The stony track soon turned into grass and gravel singletrack winding steadily up through the pine trees. With a long day ahead of us and packs stuffed full of tents, sleeping bags and three days' food, we were happy to settle into a steady granny-gear rhythm, with occasional pushes water-cooled by the dew from trail-side bracken.

Once clear of the trees, a jeep track followed a pylon-line over the crest of the moor and down to the road in Glen Morriston. A riverside lunch-stop in the birch trees, then a bit of searching around to find the right turning and we were back on the trail and heading north again. Though some yards off the road the Old Drove Road sign was clear enough, so rounding a bend we were surprised to find the trail blocked by a six-foot high gate.

### **Wild camping**

More easy fire-roads led over the next ridge, and though the hoped for bivvy spots around the tiny lochans of Beinne Baine proved to be inhospitably boggy, a few miles further on we found the perfect spot.

Sheltered by three magnificent scots pines, yet open enough for a breeze to keep the dreaded midge away, there was just enough room beside the stream for two small tents. Even better it faced west, and we dozed, cooked and dozed again in the warmth of the evening sun, until

# Biking mountains

With mountain bikes, tents and big backpacks, **Al Churcher** and two companions set off from Loch Ness on a journey into the Western Highlands





(Photos, clockwise)  
Carrying tents and provisions meant big packs; Two of them wore waterproof socks for the fords... and the rain; The perfect pitch – west facing, no midges

beneath gathering cloud it finally slipped away behind the mountains of Kintail on the horizon. Tomorrow we'd be right amongst them.

Despite the long northern gloaming, we were asleep by nine and slept soundly until the unmistakable patter of rain on nylon five hours later. Soon the patter became a drum roll, easing only for the first of a series of lashing squalls. From seven o'clock we took advantage of any lull to poke a head out of the flysheet, each time finding not only the mountains lost in impenetrable cloud and rain but also the forest a few hundred yards below us. Just when it seemed we were going to be pinned down for the entire day, a break in the cloud appeared and by 9.30 we were back on the trail.

Once in the forest, the logic of keeping to the widest fire-road served us well,



until the steepest drop of all (naturally) led round a bend to a total dead-end. Luckily our second choice was the right one, and a long eastwards zig took us cruising down past the Hilton Lodge and its gillies' and foresters' cottages to a westward zag down to the blacktop at the tiny hamlet of Tomich on the River Glass.

Follow the Glass northeast for some ten miles to Erchless Castle and it becomes the River Beauly – its serpentine meanders flowing on to the Beauly Firth, Inverness and the sea. Follow it upstream and west as we did and it becomes the River Affric, linking the longer finger-like lochs of Beinn a' Mheadhoin and Affric itself – and lending its name to what many believe is the most beautiful of all Scottish glens.

### When midges attack

After my last trip to Scotland in August I'd sworn never to return again in what we jokingly refer to as summer, when you're either being eaten alive by midges or hiding from the rain. Today the pines and lochs had their own sombre beauty, even though the lakes were more often than not hidden by trees and the hill-tops by mist and cloud. There was a total absence of wind. And when the rain returned the midges came too – so much for the 'either/or'!

I've visited British Columbia, the Yukon, Alaska and the southern tip of New Zealand's Fiordland, but I can swear that blackflies, sandflies and all the other indigenous insect swarms of those far-flung regions have nothing on the man-eating Scottish Highland midge. Nowhere else have I seen cartoon clouds of insects obscuring peoples' heads. Nowhere else do white-skinned town dwellers receive instant 'sun tans' when every exposed inch is



“Blackflies, sandflies and all those other biting insects have nothing on the Scottish midge”

covered by joined-up midge-bites. Nowhere else do demented holiday makers run screaming to immerse themselves into any available stretch of water.

It took some time for them to find us. As long as we were pedalling we were as unaware of them as they were of us. As soon as we stopped they were upon us. We were prepared, however, and within seconds had donned our net hoods. The problem was that it was some hours since breakfast, so we'd stopped for a snack. Eating with faces covered in netting isn't easy, and we seemed to take turns at taking mouthfuls of nylon along with our cereal bars.

### Blazing fire, single malt

The fire road above the lochs rose and fell easily above the shoreline, and though a little claustrophobic I could see perfectly well through the midge netting – or I could until we started to climb, when my trapped breath immediately steamed up my glasses. Cleaning them off without stopping was even trickier than eating under the mesh.

A mile or so on and we seemed to have left the ravening hordes behind, but within minutes of removing our nets they were back. At least the rain had stopped. So instead of a 'coco' day (coats on, coats off) it became a no-no (nets on, nets off) for the next five miles, until we left the forest and Loch Affric behind us.

From the stalkers' cottages and the bridge across the river, the gravel road continued for another three miles beside the twists and turns of the river. Though the sky was still predominately grey, the cloud ceiling had lifted above the jagged peaks that now dominated every horizon, and every so often a patch of blue lit up the bare grassy slopes – along with our spirits.

A small wind-turbine continued to turn behind the green iron walls of the securely-locked Alltabei the youth hostel, but from here on out it would be singletrack right through to the west coast. That could wait for the morrow: it was already three o'clock, and two more miles of climbing with a fair bit of pushing would be enough for today.

Huddled into the hillside facing the great ridge of the Five Sisters of Kintail is the Camban bothy, a tiny mountain refuge. Expecting to find it either locked, or as is so often sadly the case even in such a remote location, full of rubbish – with the furniture broken-up and used as firewood – we'd planned to camp close by. Luckily for us, a hiker had left only that morning, having spent much of the past two days cleaning up and burning rubbish, even leaving a stock of (damp) firewood. With the cloud right back down and the midges gathering, we were more than happy to have the whole place to ourselves.

The larger of the two rooms was completely empty, and with its bare stone floors and walls, freezing cold. This didn't seem to bother the midges who streamed in through a small hole high up in the wall. But there were enough nails to hang our dripping rainwear, and with bikes safely garaged, with the aid of firelighters and kerosene we soon had a fire blazing, and stoves roaring next-door. Not that it ever got warm enough to take off my waterproof trousers, but it's miraculous what a bowl of instant pasta and a dram or two of Highland single malt will do.

### Following waterfalls down

Having made roughly 2,000 feet of ascent and descent on each of the previous days, we had less than 100 feet to climb up from the bothy to the 1,000-foot watershed between Glen Affric and Glen Lichd. From this bealach (pass) it would be all downhill to sea-level and the shores of Loch Duich. After the winds



(Top three) The riding surfaces ranged from easily ridden drovers' roads through to rocky singletrack that – with luggage – had to be walked. (Bottom) Defence against the midges

## WHAT TO PACK

**We carried MSR multi-fuel stoves and pans, and two good quality, lightweight mountain tents. As a rule, carry everything on your back – your bike will handle so much better and be a lot easier to push. I put a rear rack on the bike to carry a full-length Thermarest self-inflating sleeping mat. We all used down bags.**

**Do try everything out well beforehand – especially your rucksack. You'll need a big bag (e.g. 35-litres). Make sure you have some warm, dry kit for when you camp – and don't forget those over-trousers, midge-nets and insect repellent.**

**You'll need to carry food on a trip like this – at least two high-calorie dehydrated main-meals, and plenty of energy bars and gels. A tube of 12 Nuun electrolyte tablets is the perfect answer for keeping well-hydrated. They take up almost no space and will treat six litres of water.**



“The narrow path zig-zagged down above precipitous grass slopes and the vertical walls of waterfall-filled gorges”



(Above) The hostel at Alltabelleth; A locked gate on the Old Drove Road was just about passable; Hardtail bikes were fine for this kind of trip

and torrential rain of the previous night, every hollow in the path was a pool or puddle, and as we closed the door of the bothy when we left, the sounds of running water filled our ears.

Though nothing compared to the night's excesses the wind was still gusting playfully by morning, but for now we were sheltered from the worst of its force. In any case the path was so twisting, steep and rocky, that after a mile of repeated, 100 yards on, 100 yards off, the wordless decision was made to walk it.

It was no ordinary walk. Sections of the narrow path zig-zagged steeply down above precipitous grass slopes and the glistening, vertical walls of waterfall-filled gorges. Even without bikes and the ever-present wind you'd need to keep your eyes firmly on the path's slippery rocks.

After the west-coast railway reached Kyle in 1897, some drovers brought cattle up this climb en route to Glen Affric and the east. I don't know how long it took the drovers (nor the wastage rate of animals!) but it took us over two hours to come down the three miles to the Glenlicht climbers' cottage at the head of the gravel road to the coast.

Four almost flat miles of gravel should have been plain sailing, but with the wind roaring up the open glen it was anything but. Even in the lowest gears we sometimes had difficulty moving at all, and it was a head-down struggle every pedal of the way. Some way in front of the others, rounding a small rocky bluff, I was caught sideways on by a sudden gust and blown right out of the saddle. I struggled to my feet just in time to see the same thing happen to first Kim, then Andy.

We just avoided a repeat of this on the next bend, and suddenly there were the old 1960s' Shell petrol signs welcoming us to Morvich. From now on it would be tarmac all the way.



## Fact File From Glen to Glen

**WHERE:** Fort Augustus is halfway up the Great Glen between Fort William and Inverness.

**WHEN:** We went in late August. Mid-May to mid-June, or September/early October should have fewer midges and more settled weather.

**CONDITIONS:** Everything except snow, from bright sunshine to lashing rain and full gale-force winds.

**ROUTE:** From Fort Augustus north into Glen Morriston, then Glen Affric. SW then W along this to Morvich and Shiel Bridge on Loch Duich, then follow the A87/887/82 back to Fort Augustus. It was 50 miles off-road, then 43 on road.

**TERRAIN:** From well-surfaced drovers' roads to difficult singletrack, with over 3,000 feet of ascent and descent.

**BIKES:** Three good quality hardtails. Full-suspension is not worth the extra weight on this sort of trip.

**MAPS AND GUIDES:** OS Landrangers 25, 26, 34 and 35 (1:50k). Peter Koch-Osbornes excellent hand-drawn guidebooks for walkers and mountain bikers 'The Scottish Glens' (Cicerone Press), and Ralph Storer's 'Exploring Scottish Hill Tracks' (David and Charles) contain enough material for a lifetime's exploration.

### Back to civilisation

Perched on its rock, the magical castle of Eilean Donnan was only five miles to the north, with the Kyle of Loch Alsh bridge over to Skye just beyond that. Our road led eastwards – though first we had an urgent appointment with the all-day bacon and eggs breakfast at the Kintail Lodge. Then it was 43 miles of mostly tail-winded main road back to the start – crossing our outward route in Glen Morriston.

From the head of the glen at Invermoriston, we could have followed a rough section of the Great Glen trail through the forest back to Fort Augustus. That's what I'd do in future. But with the state of Kim's wheels, we opted to follow the Inverness road back along the shore of Loch Ness to Fort Augustus. Narrow, and far too slow for the holiday drivers anxious to overtake at any cost, these last five miles of busy road were the only ones where I felt that my fate was purely in the lap of the gods. I don't care how tired I am, how difficult the riding, or how bad our wheel-rims, another time I'd follow the off-road Great Glen trail back instead. Even if it meant walking the whole way...