

Beauty and bleakness

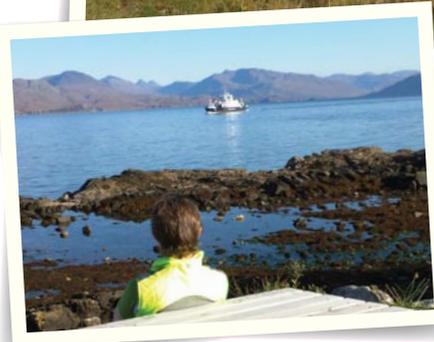
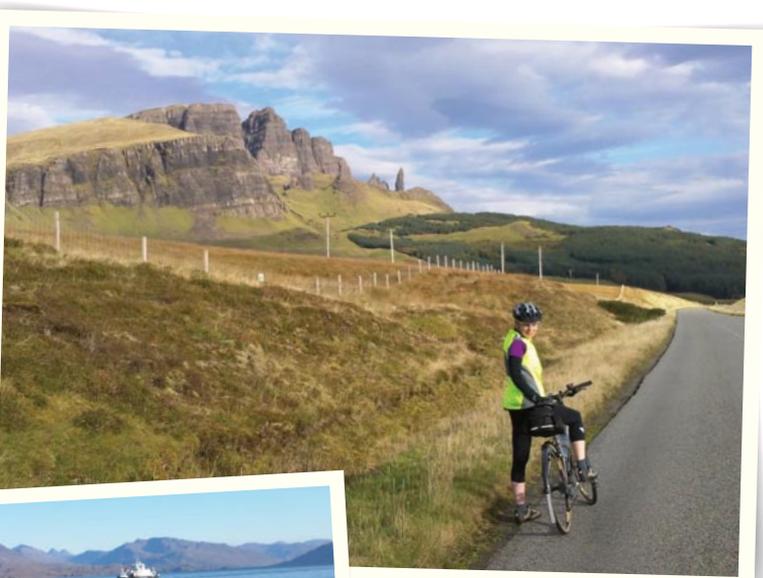
Maxine Rogers explored the Scottish Highlands during the splendour of autumn

After one visit to Scotland, my husband Paul and I knew we would soon go back. In early October we did, this time with friends. I don't think we could have picked a better time to go. Autumn's palette had saturated the hillsides in colour, layer upon layer of reds, golds and greens, rich and deep. The grass, now turning, seemed like shards of amber lit from beneath, and the water in the lochs seemed to combine steely coldness with deep blue mystery.

Whilst Paul rode the West Highland Way with the lads, my friend and I rode through

the exquisite Glen Etive. There we saw a herd of red deer, led by a magnificent 12-point stag. The herd's riverside location was peaceful yet raw and weather-beaten. We felt the wildness and the weather ourselves, for it poured down as we rode. A double rainbow set against the stormy grey sky, reminding us that this valley was indeed a pot of gold.

Paul and I finished our holiday together on the Isle of



Skye. We rode along and across the Trotternish Peninsula, passing the Old Man of Storr. To our east and offshore, the myriad of small islands making up the archipelago of Raasay

seemed to float in the misty sea, the giants of the mainland mountains rising behind them. We rode through a windswept landscape dotted with little houses, many of them former crofts, squat and sturdy, and testament to the conditions they stood firm against.

Now we are home, it's clear that we will be soon be back in Scotland again. We just need to avoid the midge season!

This sportive life

Once persuaded to enter one, Michael Bennett was bitten by the sportive bug

Escaping the crowds and exploring the more remote parts of these beautiful islands is for me the real appeal of cycling. That's why I have, until recently, steered away from mass participation rides, which have become so popular. Riding with hordes of cyclists, on pre-ordained routes, designed to achieve trophy distances? To me it was the antithesis of the best that cycling offers.

That was until last June, when a friend who lives in Northumberland persuaded me to make the journey north-east from Manchester. He had signed us both on for the Northern Rock Cyclone Challenge, a multi-distance ride around the hills and lanes that stretch north and west from Newcastle.

Having been a reluctant starter, I am now a sportive enthusiast. In fact, I have rarely enjoyed a ride more. I rode the wonderful 63-mile route, which was designed for its scenic appeal. There were well-stocked feed stations and the marshalling was well organised. There were also shorter (33 miles) and longer (104 miles) rides available.

Despite the 3,500 cyclists signed up for the event, it felt more like a club ride with friends through a beautiful part of the world that was completely new to me. The countryside of Northumberland has a great deal to offer the cyclist – scenic villages and rolling countryside, combined with challenging hills that rise to windswept moorland. It's all here, and all accessible to any reasonably fit rider.

My view of this type of event has now completely changed and I am planning to structure my 2011 season around several sportives, in particular a return to the Northern Rock Cyclone, this year on 25th June.



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