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In the photos

- 1 Making progress on better bikes
- 2 Almost at John o' Groats
- 3 Greta Green. Ben (left) models cut-off tracksuit trousers
- 4 Free ice creams at St Ives
- 5 Katrina at the Nevis Range gave them a cable car ride
- 6 First night's lodgings: a barn
- 7 'Pinky' the girls' mountain bike didn't make the whole trip
- 8 Peter in Wales offered a puncture kit and pump
- 9 Di at Nettleton Post Office: food, a card and a stamp



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PHOTOS GEORGE MAHOOD

END-TO-END



FOR
FREE!

Depending entirely on the generosity of strangers, George and Ben set off to cycle from Land's End to John o' Groats with no bikes, no equipment, no money, and essentially no clothes. **George Mahood** takes up the tale

We were standing in our pants on the end of Britain. The sea chewed at the land around us, and the wind and rain attacked from all angles. We had the skin of freshly plucked turkeys. Cycling 1,000 miles to the top of Scotland without any money, clothes, shoes, food or bikes, suddenly felt like a really stupid idea.

Land's End is frequented by three types of people: disillusioned holidaymakers who imagine that a trip to Britain's most south-westerly point is a rewarding experience; tourists who arrive there by mistake when they run out of road; and those who are starting or finishing the popular Land's End to John o' Groats expedition. We fell awkwardly into the latter category.

The plan was simple. We had three weeks to get from the bottom of England to the top of Scotland – by foot or by bike – without spending a single penny. Setting off in just a pair of Union Jack boxer shorts, we hoped to rely on the generosity of the British public to help us with everything from accommodation to food, clothes to shoes, and bikes to beer.

The idea of the penniless challenge was

founded on the belief that, as a nation, we have lost sight of the basic values of humanity and kinship. We tend to be very suspicious of those that we don't know, and of anything that falls outside the realms of normality. Britain is broken, or so we are led to believe, and every unfamiliar face masks an axe murderer or terrorist. We choose to close our doors and hide the outside world.

I wanted to prove this notion wrong. I strongly believed that there was still a lot of good to be found in society, and that there lies within everyone the desire to help others. By travelling without money and provisions, we were putting ourselves completely at the mercy of strangers, relying on their generosity to get us through.

Clothes were a priority.

We stood little chance of getting food, accommodation or bikes with our pasty bodies on full show. Also, it was freezing and we didn't want to become the first people to die at Land's End before crossing the official start line.

A KID'S BMX & SCOOTER RIDE LATER...

'We're looking for somewhere to stay tonight, and young farmer Ross from Morvah said

you might be able to help us out. All we need is some floor space or an outhouse.'

'Yes, Ross did phone and warn me that you might call past. You can sleep in the barn round the back. There's plenty of hay to use as bedding, but you'll be sharing with a bull,' said Harry Mann.

'Cool,' I said.

'Sounds... fun,' said Ben hesitantly.

We followed Harry through the dark, around to the back of the house, through a barn full of calves and into a stable.

'Here you go. You can move that hay around to make yourself a bed and you should be pretty comfortable. Don't worry about Surprise,' he said, pointing to the gigantic bull in the neighbouring pen. 'He won't bother you. He's a prize-winner and is the sixth best bull in the country.'

Surprise was the size of a small caravan and was thankfully separated from us by some metal bars. He poked his head through and gave a huge snort to welcome us.

'So, what do you think? Is this place all right for you?' asked Harry.

Ben looked panicked.

'It's fantastic,' I said, 'We'll take it...'

[Next morning] Surprise had been a

“WE’D TRAVELLED 14 MILES ON THE SCOOTER AND BMX. I HAD NEVER FELT MORE DRAINED”

› fairly quiet roommate. He had decided at about 6am to let us know he was awake by crashing into the bars and knocking over a large wooden board that had been propped against it. This in turn toppled onto our BMX and scooter that were leant against the wall, and these fell over onto my face.

There were flies swarming all around us. I pulled my whole body into the sleeping bag and scrunched it up above my head. Surprise was awake, the calves next door were awake, the sun was shining through the window bars, Harry and Caroline could be heard milking the cows and I was bursting with excitement. There was no use trying to get back to sleep...

Harry gave me some bailer twine so that I could construct a belt for my enormous pin-striped suit trousers. Caroline insisted on giving us two gigantic Cornish pasties and a couple of bananas to take with us for lunch.

After several attempts, Ben managed to squash the sleeping bag into the picnic set, leaving no room for anything else. We packed up our things and said goodbye to Harry, Caroline and Surprise. By the time we got going it was 10.30am and our aim to be in St Ives by 10am was already looking rather unrealistic...

UPGRADING: PINKY AND THE FALCON

We had travelled about 14 miles on the scooter and BMX. This may not sound like a lot, but I had never felt more drained in my life. The energy it takes to propel a scooter with foam wheels up a Cornish hill, or pedal a miniature BMX over a long distance, is immeasurable.

Our thigh muscles were burning, our knees were bruised from catching the handlebars on the BMX, our heels were completely blistered from wearing the rigger boots, and our backs were aching from being in such unnatural positions. With hindsight, it would have been far less painful and probably quicker if we had walked from Land’s End.

After just a few seconds on our new bikes [given to us by Roger Badcock near St Ives], we felt like we had been born again. We decided to alternate the bikes regularly, as they were both very different but each had their advantages. The pink, girls’ mountain bike – or ‘Pinky’ as we imaginatively called



In the photos
1 George ‘somewhere in Scotland’
2 On the A82, near Loch Ness



CTC’S END-TO-END PACK... FOR FREE!

››› We can’t guarantee you won’t need to spend any money on your own End-to-End, but as a CTC member you can download CTC’s End-to-End pack for free. Visit ctc-maps.org.uk/routes/route/1024. You’ll need to log in using your CTC membership number and surname.

The pack includes:

- › Three separate route details: a main road, fast route using busy A roads; and the more scenic B&B and YHA routes over 14-16 days;
- › Background information covering how to transport your cycle to and from both ends of the UK.
- › Record sheet to track your progress, allowing you to apply for a certificate/badge/T-shirt upon completion of the ride.
- › Details of cycle-friendly accommodation the length of the route.
- › Non-CTC members can purchase the pack for £12.50 (including UK P&P). To obtain it, call the CTC Information Office on 0844 736 8450.

it – had a comfy seat, 12 gears and decent brakes. It was rather small, though, and the fat tyres meant it was quite slow. The racer – or ‘The Falcon’, as it became known – only had five gears, a seat made of the hardest material known to man, and handlebars that were about a foot lower than the saddle. It had nice slick road tyres, though, and seemed faster than Pinky.

I did the first shift on Pinky and Ben started on The Falcon. We decided to attempt another 10 miles or so, to try and make up for the time we had spent in St Ives.

For the first time since setting off, we felt like we were making progress towards John o’ Groats. The road had opened up in front of us and we could feel ourselves eating away at the 1,000-mile route that lay ahead.

We had yet to establish a route for the trip. Seeing as we had to get everything for free, we weren’t able to bring a route book or map. We knew at some stage we would have to ascertain how to get to John o’ Groats, but in the meantime, we knew that if we roughly followed the A30, we would be heading in the right direction.

We had made it our aim to avoid A-roads as much as possible. They might be quicker and more direct, but they are no fun to cycle along and you don’t get to see the country in the same way that you do via the back roads. We made an exception on this occasion, however, as we wanted to have covered a

FEATURE
End-to-End
for free



In the photo
Made it – after 19 days and budget of nothing

› respectable distance. We joined the A30 just after the village of Lelant, and aimed to get to Camborne before dark. It was 7.30pm on a Sunday, and we had the entire A30 to ourselves. Not that you need both lanes of a dual carriageway when you are on a bike...

WEST COUNTRY HILLS

We spent the rest of the day cycling along lanes that were so quiet that grass grew in the middle of them. It was lovely and peaceful, but extremely tough going. Despite swapping bikes regularly, alliances were beginning to be formed. Ben clearly favoured Pinky, and I preferred The Falcon – despite Ben claiming it was physically impossible to ride it up hills. Cycling uphill on The Falcon was an art that Ben never mastered. In fact, he didn't cope much better on Pinky, and she was supposedly a 'mountain' bike.

'These ***** hills!' Ben shouted, getting off to push yet again. 'Why can't we stick to the A-roads?'

'The A-roads have hills too, you know.'

'Yeah, but not like this. This is ridiculous. We've not seen any flat ground

in two days.'

'But it's nice and quiet. Surely you'd prefer to be cycling along these country lanes than the busy A30?'

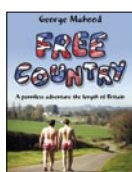
'No way. At least we'd get somewhere on the big road.'

'That's if we didn't get hit by a lorry. Besides, it's not about how quickly we do this trip, it's about seeing bits of the country, too.'

'I think I've seen enough already!'

We stopped talking for a few minutes and I thought he had calmed down, until I heard a shout of '***** PIECE OF ****!' behind me. I turned to see Ben throwing Pinky into the hedge. She fell back out again and landed at his feet, where he gave her a kick.

This seemed to clear his system, as he seemed slightly happier afterwards. The hills smoothed somewhat, and we felt like we were making progress again. ☺



This is an abridged extract from George Mahood's book, **Free Country** (£9.99, ISBN 9781471721151). Order it for a bit less from lulu.com or digitally from amazon.co.uk

DO LEAVE HOME WITHOUT IT

George and Ben's kit list by Glastonbury, compared to that in *Bike Britain* by Paul Salter

BIKE

- Bike with racks: *inadequate bikes, no racks*
- Panniers and handlebar bag *rucksack and pockets*
- Water bottles and cages: *water bottles, yes. Cages, no*
- Cycle computer: *as if*
- Small flashing LED rear light: *Tony the Tiger reflector*
- Spare nuts and bolts: *no*
- Appropriate Allen keys: *no*
- Wrenches, pliers, screw driver: *no, no and no*
- Zip ties: *what for?*
- Grease & lube: *is this something kinky?*
- Duct tape: *I knew it! No*
- Small rag: *that's what trousers are for*

CLOTHING

- Raincoat: *no*
- Rain pants: *bare legs*
- Mid-weight fleece top: *cardigans*
- Polypropylene underwear (longs and tops): *Union Jack boxer shorts*
- Hat: *baseball caps*
- Gloves: *no*
- 2 T-shirts or cycle tops: *4 t-shirts each*
- 1 Pair of lightweight shorts: *rolled up woollen suit trousers for me, cut-off tracksuit bottoms for Ben*
- 1 or 2 pairs of cotton socks: *3 pairs of ski socks each*
- 1 or 2 pairs of lightweight longs: *woollen suit trousers for me, no trousers for Ben*
- 1 or 2 pairs of cycling shorts: *no*
- Cycle gloves: *no*
- 1 pair of shoes: *old trainers*
- Sunglasses: *no*
- Reflector sash: *this isn't a beauty pageant.*
- Bicycle helmet: *no*
- Bike lock: *not one that we could unlock*
- Pocket knife with can opener: *yes*
- Small First-Aid and sewing kit: *plasters*
- Plastic bags to wrap gear in wet weather *what gear? No*
- Camera and film: *Get with the program. Everything's digital!*
- Toiletries and medications: *tooth-paste, brush and soap.*
- Maps: *route book, yes*
- Compass: *no. Asking people for directions is far easier*
- Personal documents: *like what?*
- Water purification tablets or filter *this is Great Britain, not Ethiopia*

CAMPING

- Tent: *no*
- Sleeping bag: *yes, 1 between 2*
- Sleeping mat: *no*
- Small towel: *2 enormous beach towels*
- Small torch: *no*
- Plate and spoon: *6 plates, 6 spoons, 6 bowls, 6 knives and 6 forks*

OPTIONAL EXTRAS

- Waterproof over-gloves and shoe covers: *Overgloves?*
- Matches and candle: *in case of a birthday party? No*
- Stove: *no*
- Fuel: *no stove*
- Pot: *no stove and no fuel*
- Rear view mirror: *it's a bike, not a car*
- Bottom bracket removal tool and parts: *no*
- Light plastic sheet with tent to cover bike while camping *awww, bless.*
- Handheld GPS: *no*