

**WHERE** From the south of Scotland to the north  
**START** Mull of Galloway **FINISH** Dunnet Head  
**DISTANCE** about 500 miles **WORDS** Mark Haggar  
**PICTURES** Mark Haggar

**GREAT RIDES**



# A SCOTTISH END TO END

When the summer's a washout, there's always autumn. CTC member **Mark Haggar** toured from one end of Scotland to the other in October

**W**e were cycling in the dark along a narrow road over the moor. The autumn air was clear and still. Occasionally a movement on one side betrayed the presence of sheep. Do they really browse all through the night? We were riding, ultimately, towards Dunnet Head, the Scottish mainland's most northerly point, having set off from the Mull of Galloway, its most southerly.

We had both completed Land's End to John o'Groats in the last few years and wanted something a bit different. We hoped to pick up some October sunshine in a midge-free environment, which after an indifferent summer seemed a reasonable bet.

## STAG TO-DO

After the bonnie coastline and rolling hills of west Galloway, the next day's descent to the Ayrshire coast was more of a mix of agriculture and woodland. Our route still followed the railway, which sometimes soared over us on impressive viaducts, as we found our way past Rabbie Burns' birthplace in Alloway, where we caught the ferry to Arran.

The east coast of Arran was as delightful in the gloaming as it had been in the daylight the previous year on my LEJOG route. I passed my cycling companion, Peter, who chose to walk up the last hill. I said I would see him at the hostel. But on his way down, Peter was startled by six roe deer and a fine



## DO IT YOURSELF

► We travelled by Scotrail to Stranraer via Glasgow and I came back from Thurso. Scotrail seem more relaxed about bikes now, but cycle booking is advised. Club 55 train tickets are available outside the holiday seasons for travel north of the border. We enjoyed fine autumnal weather, but weather is a Scottish speciality – be prepared to enjoy it. Midges were away by October too.

stag, which ran off – but not before Peter had fallen off his bike in surprise. He suffered bruises and grazes and minor damage to the bike. That night, we heard the roaring of the stags through the night.

Next day we caught the wee ferry north from Lochranza, departing Arran, and made our way over the hill to Tarbert. Pete was bruised and sore and began to cycle slower and slower. He decided to pack. A reluctant bus driver accepted him and his bike, whisking him back to Glasgow and the train home.

At midday, I set off alone. I was soon in Kilmartin Glen, where I revisited the Dunadd fort and placed my foot in the ceremonial stone footprint where kings of Scotland were once crowned. After investigating some impressive standing stones, cairns and early Christian crosses, I pressed on to Oban.

## AUTUMN SKYE

Next day I caught the late morning ferry to Mull, in the company of one other cyclist and several coachloads of camera-toting tourists. From Mull, I set off up some steady climbs through Ardnamurchan. The hills were enriched by shades of brown from bracken, grass, heather and birch, whose leaves were turning. Swathes of green marked stands of oak trees, whose leaves had yet to fall, and ranks of Scots pine. The hills were studded with lumpy outcrops of rock, and hillside burns glistened in the autumn sunlight.



➤ The road followed the loch for a while, then went inland across Moidart, where a line of beech trees commemorates the Seven Men of Moidart, supporters of Bonnie Prince Charlie in the Jacobite uprising. There's a memorial nearby, which I visited before pressing on to Mallaig.

Another ferry to start the day: to Skye with one caravan and one walker. The sunrise was still lighting the Cuillins with a pink-grey glow. The road was quiet and the hills looked lovely in their variegated brown. The riding was easy, so I could enjoy the views eastwards across the Sound of Sleat to the hills of Knoydart and Glen Shiel and westwards to the Cuillins.

Later that day, I crossed the Skye bridge in sunshine, and rode to Kyle of Lochalsh for a café stop. I was only going to Achnashellach that day, so had an easy 25 miles to do, riding up the south side of Loch Carron.

### LOCHSIDE CYCLING

Next day I set off into a stiff headwind. Turbulent clouds danced in front of determined grey. It was uphill to begin with too, until the junction at Achnasheen. I worked my way past several lochs, past the Falls of Rogart, where there was a cluster of weekend visitors, and through Strathpeffer. I picked brambles from the roadside before rolling down to Dingwall.

At the second attempt, I found the minor road parallel to the A9, which provides fine views over the Cromarty Firth to the Black Isle and the parked oil rigs. At the top of a long climb on the B9174, I paused to look over the Dornoch Firth. Then the clouds closed in, making the steep descent to Ardgay cold, even at four o'clock. Fortunately, I was soon at Carbisdale hostel.

Next day I left by the ingenious footbridge hanging off the side of the Invershin railway viaduct, and cycled up to Lairg. Crask Inn came and went and then I was descending to Loch Naver at Altnaharra. I had lunch sitting on the rocks by the loch.

The final day was an easy ride to Thurso: a few modest hills, fine views over the sea, and a sequence of sandy bays. I passed Downreay nuclear power station, which was busy being de-commissioned. From Thurso, I set off to Dunnet Head, where I took the obligatory photo. That evening, I bumped into a couple who had just finished LEJOG on tandem. ⚙️



### IN THE PHOTOS

- 1) Most roads are quiet here, especially at this time of year
- 2) Dunnet Head is the Scottish mainland's most northerly point
- 3) Staying at hostels and B&Bs limits the luggage requirements
- 4) Autumn days are short this far north, but sometimes splendid
- 5) The Inner Hebrides are well worth the ferry trips
- 6) Lighthouse at Dunnet Head

## FACT FILE MULL OF GALLOWAY TO DUNNET HEAD

**Distance:** around 500 miles over 8 days.

**I am glad I had:** fine weather, camera, quiet roads, beautiful scenery and autumnal colours.

**Route:** take your pick. The routes are mainly deserted and navigation is easy.

**Next time I would:** merge last two days, see more of Mull and go via Tobermory to Ardnamurchan Point (the most westerly mainland point).

**Bike:** Audax bike with 25mm Gatorskin tyres. Luggage was a bar-bag and saddlebag, weight about 4.5kg.

**More information:** syha.org.uk and hostel-scotland.co.uk. For route suggestions in Scotland, visit [ctc-maps.org.uk](http://ctc-maps.org.uk)

**Accommodation:** SYHA (2), Blue Hostels (3) and B&Bs (3), booked in advance.

