

SHETLAND 152m



In early March 2020, I returned from a curtailed tour of Colombia to a face-masked and hand-sanitised Britain. A week later the country, and soon the world, went into lockdown. My first days were spent idly on the sofa. I searched online for a better sleeping bag, tent and water filter. Then – even though international adventuring was clearly off the agenda – I began looking for ideas on where I might travel next. That was when I came across the British Cycle Quest.

“The what?” my friends have asked, even long-term Cycling UK members. The British Cycle Quest, or BCQ, is a unique, domestic cycling challenge. There are 402 checkpoints to visit throughout England, Wales, Scotland and many of the surrounding islands. At each one, a place of interest that you might otherwise pedal past, you’ll find the answer to a clue. There are certificates and medals you can earn by completing checkpoint questions but there’s no time limit. The only rule is that you must arrive by bicycle.

As I explored the BCQ map of multicoloured checkpoint pins, an unexpected question popped into my head: “I wonder how it would be to visit all 402 checkpoints in one continuous cycling line?” There is doubtless a mathematical way to determine the shortest and most efficient route between 402 points but it’s beyond me. I decided to use my love of a linear route and my ‘let’s see how it goes’ approach to touring for a UK-based, post-Covid adventure.

A logical place to start was the most northerly area with BCQ points: the Shetland Islands. I’d then cycle south to Lizard Point in Cornwall, the most southerly point of mainland Britain. I would roughly follow the Sustrans JOGLE route, meandering about to visit as many checkpoints en route as I had the time and energy for.

### Post-Covid touring

As the first lockdown was lifting in July 2020, I arrived in Lerwick, Shetland, on a grey and drizzly morning. Getting

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there involved long, face-masked and near-deserted train and ferry journeys.

Reality struck. Not a single café was open for the cyclist’s breakfast fry-up that I had imagined as I looked over the squat, grey town while the ferry docked. The best I could find was a warm, soggy pastry and a machine-dispensed coffee from Lerwick Co-op. I ate breakfast huddled under the shop canopy, sheltered from the wind and drizzle but sadly not from the midges. A Google search for campsites or B&Bs revealed that everything this far north would remain closed for the foreseeable future.

Fortunately, wild camping is allowed in Scotland. I’d have nowhere warm and dry to shelter from bad weather, no handy power sockets, no bacon baps, no hot showers and definitely no comfy sofas to relax and eat cake on. But I could continue – and it did stop raining. I set off to find my first checkpoint and answer its question.

I spent a week questing around Shetland Mainland, from north to south and east to west. I hunted down war and whaling memorials, Sullom Voe oil terminal, magical sandy beaches, lighthouses. Cemetery walls were great wind protectors. The island’s abundant public toilets were all open for washing (myself and clothes) and water supplies. →

**Below:** Creating shade by the Lancaster Canal at Carnforth

