



sustainable tourism, our routes help contribute to their economies. We happily tucked into tea and cake.

Suitably reinvigorated, we pressed on, knowing we still had some distance to cover, photos to capture and notes to take. We'd seen that the weather was due to break. We hoped to coincide clearing skies with our first foray into the more remote wilderness and mountainous terrain. And as if to reward us for our efforts, the late afternoon sun appeared, picking out the array of colours on the hillsides and giving us a taste of what was in store for the rest of the ride. Day one done, happy in our accomplishments, we arrived at our accommodation, got spruced up and headed out for a curry.

Glorious Galloway

Day two dawned to dappled daylight and drying kit. The wood-burning

stoves in our bunkhouse had worked a treat: socks were no longer saturated and our shoes no longer squelched.

We headed to Kirroughtree Mountain Bike Centre to plan the day over breakfast and to meet up with colleagues from Saddle Skedaddle, who were joining us for the day. Saddle Skedaddle is one of Cycling UK's official partners, and provides supported cycling holidays on some of our routes. The team has plans to set up a guided holiday for Gallovidian Gravel from this summer onwards, so if you want someone else to take on the planning and luggage transfers while you concentrate on riding unencumbered, Saddle Skedaddle can arrange it. (Members get exclusive discounts with Saddle Skedaddle. See the website for more information: cyclinguk.org/saddle-skedaddle.)

After a warm welcome at the visitor centre, we set off for the most northerly, remote and stunningly beautiful section of the route. Galloway Forest Park is exceptional, and it's unmistakably Scottish in the sense of awe it inspires. Every turn and rise over each blind summit provided an 'oh, wow!' moment.

This section of the route evokes a real sense of wilderness without taking you to uncomfortable levels of inhospitability. Depending on the time of year, you may not see

Above: Saddle Skedaddle joined us to recce the route in preparation for their upcoming Gallovidian Gravel holidays

Below: Linking lochs via superb gravel roads and unspoilt landscapes



Fact file Gallovidian Gravel

Distance: Full route is 330km (205 miles). Shorter, taster loops will be available from different starting points.

Climbing: 3,900m (12,796ft).

Route: It encompasses the Galloway Forest Park and Galloway coastline, using a mix of forest tracks, byways and quiet lanes.

Conditions: Rain and wind on one day, sunshine and stillness on others. Epic scenery, ranging from established towns to sleepy fishing villages, rugged coastlines and mountainous valleys.

Getting there: Dumfries has a train station and is less than 40 minutes by rail from Carlisle. There are ferries from Belfast to Stranraer, if travelling from Northern Ireland.

Accommodation: There's a wealth of accommodation available on the route. Wild camping is permitted, too.

Bikes and equipment: We used gravel bikes and an e-MTB hardtail. Gravel bikes are ideal but wider (35mm+) tyres would provide some added comfort on the more stoney sections, as well as supporting luggage-laden bikes better.

Maps/guides: The official guidebook will be available from the Cycling UK shop on 25 June (shop.cyclinguk.org). A downloadable GPX file will also be available from 25 June, from cyclinguk.org/gallovidian-gravel. OS Explorer maps 312, 313, 318, 319 and 320 cover the route. If you prefer digital, you can get 35% off your first year of an OS Maps premium subscription (cyclinguk.org/osmaps).

I'm glad I had... Camera to capture the incredible scenery and wildlife. Companions to share the experience with.

Next time I would... Go later in the year to have longer days.