



WHERE From the UK's capital to its north-eastern mainland tip
START London **FINISH** John o' Groats
DISTANCE 655 miles **WORDS** Simon Legg
PICTURES Ian McSporran



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EIGHT NIGHTS NORTH

No time to ride LEJoG? **Simon Legg** describes how 35 members of CTC-affiliated club The Fridays rode instead from London to John o' Groats: LonJoG

Some people can do LEJoG, Land's End to John o' Groats, in under a week, but many more will take close on two weeks. Two weeks is a large slice of annual leave, particularly if you've got family. The Fridays wanted an epic trip that could be accomplished in a week's leave, and while John o' Groats is a destination of mystery and wonder, Cornwall and Devon didn't have quite the same draw. If you're leaving somewhere, why not leave the centre of things rather than the periphery, and find, in the contrast between The Great Wen (London) and The End of the Road, a dramatic contrast that LEJoG lacks?

And so LonJoG was born. Fifty members of The Fridays slipped away from Hyde Park Corner at midnight

“It was an exodus from the booming night life of the metropolis to the silence of peat, stone and sheep”



IN THE PHOTOS

- 1) On the road between Jedburgh and Kinross, day five
- 2) A hired van was driven by a relay of five people. It carried the bags each day, plus anyone struggling mechanically or physically

on Friday 15 June, some aiming for York, but the majority, 35, intent on reaching John o'Groats eight days later. A night/day stage of 119 miles was followed by another 536 miles spread over seven days. That's not going to break any records, but this was a mixed ability group of men and women, young, middle-aged and getting on a bit, riding bikes that ranged from hybrids to top-end road jobbies via small wheelers and a recumbent. In short, a club ride in which the strongest looked after the not-so-strong, a social ride that put as much store by friendship as it did on achievement.

FRIDAY NIGHT RIDE TO NOTTS

The night/day start will stay long in the memory. Watling Street took us from the perfumed, midnight clamour of Little Beirut, past the megapubs of Edgware, and on to the green ups-and-downs of Bedfordshire. We crossed Buckinghamshire, Northamptonshire and Leicestershire, coming to a rest in Bingham, Notts. Our second day took us through Sherwood Forest and across the flatlands to York, and our third along the River Swale, up on to the tops at Tow Law and on to Castleside. >



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“You can’t beat a club ride. There’s a spirit, a willingness to help, that goes with being in a cycling club”

› Day four saw the Hell of the North that is the A68, and then the long climb to the border at Carter Bar and a high speed descent to Jedburgh. Day five was an up-and-down affair over the Pentland Hills across Edinburgh and the Forth Bridge to Kinross. Days six and seven were proper Scotland, following the ‘old A9’ beside the Tay, the Tummell, the Garry, and the Spey, marvelling at the soft purples and greens of the Highlands before plunging down to the Moray and Cromarty Firths and in to Tain. On our last day we kept to the ancient jagged coastline of Caithness, beyond the conifer plantations to the flat horizons of the Great Ord.

It was an exodus, then, from the booming night life of the metropolis to the silence of peat, stone and sheep – a journey to stir the soul.

NOBODY GETS LEFT BEHIND

We stuck to the FNRTtC (Friday Night Ride to the Coast) format: a front rider, doing his best to limit the pace, Wayfinders taking junctions, and Tail-End Charlies sorting



DO IT YOURSELF

›› We hired the van from The Car Hire Company in Merton, and they sorted out our insurance. All told, it cost us just over £600. The materials for the timber platform cost £65. D&E Coaches brought us back to London in a 53-seater coach, which cost about £2800, allowing two dropping off points en route. That sounds quite a bit but divided by 35, that’s only £80 each.



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mechanicals and punctures. We stopped every few miles to collect and to allow the tail to draw breath. To this we added a van, driven by a relay of five, always in contact with the ride, picking up luggage from hotels, bed-and-breakfasts, hostels and campsites in the morning, dropping off in the evening and picking up the occasional big-time mechanical casualty and a couple of cases of exhaustion.

We each of us booked our own accommodation from a list, and found ourselves spread around the destination towns. Sometimes we met up in the evening and sometimes we found our own evening meal, but not a day passed when we didn’t stop for breaks together. To this end we booked ahead – making arrangements with cafés and teashops, prevailing on them to open on Sunday, or at odd hours, and letting them know, as far as



we could, what we'd be looking for. We phoned ahead to let them know when we'd arrive, and, by and large we were rewarded with good food and fast, friendly service.

CLUBBING TOGETHER

We had a list of every bike shop along the route, and when breakdowns occurred the van was despatched to pick up a spare, and so we kept going pretty much non-stop. Knowing that the trains south from Wick are small and infrequent, we hired a coach for the return trip, dropping people off on the way to London.

There are plenty of commercial tours available, but I think we demonstrated that you can't beat a club ride. There's a spirit, a willingness to help that goes with being in a club. It took six of us to raise a pre-fabricated timber deck inside the van to double the capacity to 26 bikes for the return trip. Twenty or more of us acted as Tail-End Charlies. That common purpose makes for a friendlier trip, and a cheaper one – those staying at hotels might have spent freely, but for those who booked hostels and campsites, £300 covered accommodation, van support and return coach.

Would we do it again? Next year 55 of us are off to a chateau in Normandy for a week, but I wouldn't bet against LonJoG '14...☺

IN THE PHOTOS

- 3) Crossing into Scotland on day four. While The Fridays were spread out on the road, they regularly regrouped
- 4) Jitter Bean Cafe, Edinburgh: free wi-fi – and seating for 35?
- 5) Northumberland and the Scottish Borders are ideal cycling country, although the A68 can get busy.
- 6) North Yorkshire meal break
- 7) Loading up the van again. This was how the bikes made their way back to London; the riders went by hired coach



FACT FILE LONDON TO JOHN O' GROATS

Distance: 655 miles over 8 days

Route: LonJoG route sheets, with accommodation, cafés, bike shops are available from The Fridays at fnrttc@yahoo.co.uk. They're free, but bear in mind that LonJoG is a trademark!

Assembling en route: MaccyD's in Hockliffe opened their doors to us at three in the morning. Teresa and her friends at Tesco at Wellingborough made us breakfast at seven. Windmill Wheels at Wymondham offered emergency mechanical help. Yeung Sing Hotel in Bingham took in 30 of us, and the Piano Café opened early for afternoon pasta. Ococo Food Emporium in Edwinstowe opened on Sunday for us, and the Lakeshore Cafe in Askern stayed open to serve us a late Sunday lunch. Café No. 6 in Corbridge opened early to serve us

breakfast on the fourth day. Alex Wallace at the Glen Bank Hotel in Jedburgh turned over his entire establishment and arranged accommodation for those who couldn't fit in. The evening meal for 35 was a halfway celebration.

Insurance: For group rides like this, it is important that participants have third-party insurance. Full membership of CTC provides this, as does CTC affiliate membership (a cut-down membership package available to members of a CTC-affiliated club). Affiliating to CTC as a club also provides organisers' liability insurance. For details, see <http://tinyurl.com/al2mmvy> email membership@ctc.org.uk or call 0844 736 8451.

More information: The FNRttC blog is at <http://fnrttc.blogspot.co.uk/>

