



WHERE Knoydart Peninsula, North West Scotland

START Kinloch Hourn **FINISH** Inverie

DISTANCE 16 (mountainous) miles **WORDS** Dan Farrell

PICTURES Dan Farrell



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BRITAIN'S LAST WILDERNESS

It's inaccessible by road and even the track is a mountainous bike-and-hike. **Dan Farrell** and two friends tackled the The Rough Bounds of Knoydart

With the rain beating against the glass, a sudden squall caused the windows to rattle in their casements. 'Turned out nice again,' said the landlord of the Tomdoun Hotel, appearing at the bar, in front of shelved rows of Scotland's finest malts. A light laugh came from the far end of the bar.

'When did it start raining, Mike?'

'May,' came the deadpan reply. 'And what can I do for you gentlemen, on this fine autumn day?'

We had left Killin the previous morning and, after riding over the rough Kirk Road from Glen Lyon to Loch Rannoch, we had traversed the treacherous peaty morass of Rannoch Moor, staying overnight at Loch Ossian. Black skies and heavy rain accompanied us up the Great Glen from Spean Bridge. Six miles along

IN THE PHOTOS

- 1) Above Skiary. In places it's really difficult to ride...
- 2) ...in others it's just technical
- 3) Barisdale Bay
- 4) Inverie, population 100
- 5) Another stream to cross

the ribbon of tarmac that leads from the A87 near Invergarry to the isolated outpost of Kinloch Hourn, we passed the Tomdoun Hotel. Seeing that the bar was open, we made a quick u-turn.

In our dripping waterproofs and squelching shoes, we edged our way past the piano and, eschewing the rug-strewn sofas for the wooden benches, pulled them up close to the fire. We contemplated our position – which looked much better in the warm and dry, with a big pot of tea and double whiskies all round.

UNFINISHED BUSINESS

Twenty years had gone by since our wheels had passed this way. Back then, we had pored over maps in the school library: at the end of a singletrack road lay Kinloch Hourn. And beyond that? The Ordnance Survey book, *Cyclist's Britain*, offered two off-road routes westward. With A-levels out of the way, we had taken ourselves, our bicycles, and a leaky tent to the highlands, camped at Kinloch Hourn and tackled the easier route to Corran. This was described very simply and matter-of-factly in the book, but those eight miles of hell remain deeply etched into our memories.

This time, we were back to attempt the other route. The harder route. I make no apologies for quoting the text from *Cyclist's Britain* in full, as in 1991 it had dissuaded us. It had remained an enigmatic challenge.

'Marked for reference only is the off-highway route known as the Rough Bounds of Knoydart, connecting the remote village of Inverie on the isolated peninsula north of Mallaig with the unclassified road that leads east to the A87 at Loch Garry. The remoteness of the

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Knoydart area, combined with the unrideable condition of much of the route, plus the pass below Luinne Bheinn, can make the expedition impractical for even the fittest and best-prepared. Do not consider this route unless truly experienced; large scale maps and camping equipment essential; consult someone who has tackled the route before attempting it.'

Some things have changed: accommodation is now available at Kinloch Hourn, at Inverie, and even at Skiary and Barisdale between the two, so camping equipment is not needed. The weather, the terrain and the remoteness of Knoydart remain the same as they have for hundreds of years – the former giving us full value as we dragged ourselves out of the Hotel and westwards towards Joe Williams' B&B in Kinloch Hourn.

The author James Hunter once proclaimed: 'There are few more scenically spectacular journeys to be made in Britain than the one that takes you from the Great Glen through Glen Garry to the edge of the Atlantic.' He may be right, but I'd wager the rain wasn't bouncing a foot above the road when he left Tomdoun.

WHISKEY AND WATER

Past Loch Quoich, where the tarmac twists and turns between lochans and rocky outcrops, we came upon a small traffic jam. A group of drivers were in deep discussion, the subject being the flooded road ahead. Having been soaked to the skin for several hours, we ploughed through without a second thought, following the raging white-water of the Loch Hourn river down towards the sea. Those travelling on four wheels had to wait until morning for the waters to subside.



DO IT YOURSELF

»This route is not to be undertaken lightly. But in good weather, strong, fit cyclists should have no real difficulty.

Don't expect to be able to ride much of the route, so make lightness of bike and kit a primary consideration. A hardtail mountain bike is probably best. We carried our kit in panniers, but we were on a week-long tour.

Do not travel alone: there is no mobile signal and it could be days before help arrives.

Known as the last true wilderness in Britain, the Knoydart Peninsula is not accessible by road. The only village, Inverie (population c. 100), is linked to civilisation by a passenger ferry from Mallaig. Overland, Inverie can be reached by mountain paths from Strathan (at the head of Loch Arkaig) via Glen Dessary; or from Kinloch Hourn via Barisdale, only 16 miles but a long day nevertheless. That was the route we were attempting.

Sitting by the B&B's fire with mugs of tea, Joe gave our plans cautious approval. 'The weather will be better, and the rivers lower, tomorrow. You'll be fine, but don't expect to stay dry.'

The rain continued into the night but the warmth, the whisky and the roof over our heads left us in good spirits for the day ahead.

LOCHS, GLENS, AND SUNLIGHT

Joe was right, on all counts. It was still raining in the morning but we could see the sky; some parts of it were blue. Feet were pushed into sodden shoes, waterproofs donned, and chains oiled before pedalling a mile to the end of the road, where a small sign sternly warned: 'Take Care. You are entering remote, sparsely-populated, potentially dangerous mountain country.' At this point the sun came out. In solitude at the loch side, with the light pouring over the tops of the mountains, Knoydart looked almost mythical in its beauty.

Whilst remaining easy to follow, the path quickly becomes narrow and rough, with only a few short rideable stretches. The first two miles are relatively easy-going – hugging the shoreline, at times almost on the beach – although there are a couple of rocky



> technical sections where one slip would put you and your bike into the water. Good footwear is essential; you'd be doing well to ride five miles out of the 16.

Shortly before reaching the house at Skiary, the path gives up the shoreline, heading inland and uphill. Between here and Barisdale there are three steep, arduous, ascents, only to 300ft but no easier for that. The path drops back to the sea after each one. Strength and fitness are essential, because if you are not carrying your bike you are lifting it repeatedly. The path is too narrow to push your bike unless you walk in the fiercely scratchy heather. Wear tights or trousers!

The second (and hardest) climb takes you behind a hill and into a narrow valley, before descending past the isolated house at Runival. This section is dramatic: the heather gives way to tall bracken and trees, and the path clings precariously to the edge of a steep slope that plunges down into the loch. Eventually the route returns to the shore and the terrain becomes softer.

There is another climb to come, but this is richly rewarded with spectacular views across Barisdale Bay and Loch Hourn to the Isle of Skye. By this time, a couple of heavy showers had passed over and, with a rainbow to east, the clouds parted and the dramatic vista was bathed in sunlight.

PASS STORMING

After four hours of riding, dragging and carrying our bikes along the path, we descended to the sea at Barisdale. We ate lunch on the beach, cleared the mud

“At the loch side, with the light pouring over the tops of the mountains, Knoydart looked almost mythical”



IN THE PHOTOS

- 6) Loch Hourn
- 7) Take waterproof socks; there are rivers to ford
- 8) Last climb before Barisdale. You'll want a light bike and little luggage



CLASSIC ROUGH-STUFF RIDES

THE WAYFARER

The Nant Rhyd Wilym, a 1600ft pass over the Berwyn Mountains in North Wales, is forever linked with Walter McGregor Robinson, one of the pioneers of rough-stuff cycling. A tough ascent from the Dee valley near Cynwyd to the 'Wayfarer' memorial at the summit. Descend over miles of remote moorland to Llanarmon Dyffryn Ceiriog.

LOCH SHIEL

This beautiful, 15-mile long track, on the eastern shore of Loch Shiel, leads southwards to Polloch and then onwards to Strontian on tarmac. Easy gradients and a good surface – no problem for touring bikes with stout tyres. The sting in the tail is the road after Polloch, which is very steep.

THE ELLARY TRACK

A stunning track linking Ellary in Knapdale with Kilmory. Only four (hilly) miles long, it opens up many more miles of deserted unclassified roads along Loch Sween and Loch Caolisport. Metalled surface, but care is needed to find the start of track at Ellary.

THE WALNA SCAR ROAD

Linking the peaceful Duddon Valley in the south-western Lake District with the town of Coniston, the Walna Scar Road owes its existence to the once-vibrant coppermines that flank either side. Hard riding (and indeed some pushing and carrying) is rewarded by superb views in all directions.

THE CLAERWEN TRACK

From the road end by the Teifi Pools, east of Pontrhydfendigaid, this stony track leads through the Mid-Wales wilderness to the Claerwen reservoir, following its shoreline to join the minor road to Rhayader. Passable, with care, on a touring bike.

For more ideas, visit rsf.org.uk



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from our brakes and set off south. Below the bulk of Ladhar Bheinn, this well-surfaced track stretches for almost two miles and is welcome relief for the legs. It does not last. After passing a couple of houses – where we started a walking party who weren't expecting to see anyone, let alone three cyclists – the track drops to the left, and a well-marked path strikes boldly up the mountainside towards Mam Barisdale, a 1,500ft pass between Luinne Bheinn and Ladhar Bheinn.

With the gradient approaching 1-in-5, your feet are soon off the pedals and onto the grassy track. It's hard work but completely different from earlier efforts. You can make good progress along the wide and smooth path, and the ascent soon seems less daunting. It is on this stretch that, as the path climbs ever higher and the rocky landscape unfolds beneath you, the vast scale of the Knoydart wilderness takes your breath away.

Ninety minutes of solid effort saw us by the summit cairn, drinking in the panoramic view with the help of a wee dram. A small celebration was in order, for despite being little over half-way to Inverie, it is largely downhill from here – albeit on a rocky path that, for much of its descent, defies attempts to ride at any speed.

By the shores of Loch an Dubh Lochain, the mountain path meets a rough stone track that sweeps easily down the valley, around the Brocket Monument and, finally, joins Knoydart's only metalled road, known to locals as the 'K1'. From there it is scarcely half a mile to journey's end at Inverie which, whilst appearing to be just a string of sturdy white cottages along the shore of Loch Nevis, can boast a café, a shop, and the remotest public house in Britain, The Old Forge.

There was some discussion about whether the 'Rough Bounds' would have been easier tackled from west to east, and I think more of it would have been rideable that way. But plates of haggis and tatties, and a fine sunset over the loch, left us in little doubt that Inverie was the best place to finish this challenging ride – 20 years after we first contemplated it. 🌀



IN THE PHOTOS

- 9) Following the route is straightforward, if strenuous
- 10) At its highest, the path is 1,500ft above sea level
- 11) The Mallaig ferry: the easy route in and out

FACT FILE
THE ROUGH BOUNDS OF KNOYDART

Distance: Kinloch Hourn to Inverie – 16 miles

Terrain: This is wild, untamed, mountain country. Nearly 3,000ft of ascent. Only about five miles is rideable.

Conditions: Knoydart is one of the wetter parts of the British Isles, and being on the western coast the weather can change rapidly. Be prepared for anything.

Accommodation: We stayed at Kinloch Hourn Farm (approx £50 for dinner, bed and breakfast) and at the Knoydart Foundation Bunkhouse in Inverie (£15).

Maps: The route is easy to follow and is fully covered by OS Landranger 33 Loch Alsh, Glen Shiel and Loch Hourn. Carry a compass in case of poor visibility.

Getting there/back: Surprisingly accessible, even by rail. Kinloch Hourn is a day's ride from Fort William. There's a regular ferry service from Inverie to Mallaig.

I'm glad I had... Waterproof socks – there are rivers to ford early in the day. A good, lightweight camera (Olympus Pen) – Knoydart is beautiful.

I wish I'd had... Less stuff! Some things are essential (e.g. warm togs and a survival blanket) but be ruthless with kit.

Further info: Kinloch Hourn Farm kinlochhourn.com, Knoydart Foundation knoydart-foundation.com, Tomdoun Hotel 01809 511 218, Bruce Watt Cruises/ Knoydart Ferry knoydart-ferry.co.uk, The Old Forge theoldforge.co.uk, 01687 462 267 (book food in advance).