

CYCLE TOURING THE UK

Pedalling Into the Drizzle: The Long Way Up



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SCOTLAND

United Kingdom

NORTHERN IRELAND

Ireland

ENGLAND

WALES

Guernsey Jersey

Paris

Inverness

Aberdeen

B

Dundee

Glasgow

Edinburgh

A

E

Isle of Man

B

D

C

B

A

I

Great Britain
Manchester

H

Sheffield

G

Leicester

F

Cambridge

E

D

Galway

Dublin

Limerick

Cork

Cardiff

Bristol

Southampton

Brighton

Plymouth

A

B

C

English Channel

Celtic Sea

Caen

Rouen



Thank You

I am grateful for the kind generosity of strangers and the random acts of kindness I experienced during our cycle tour of the UK. It was a humbling experience.

I also thank Ed and Esther for allowing me to use their photographs in this book.

A massive shoutout to Esther, who provided the hiking gear and who never hesitated to join me on our crazy adventure.

My sister Amanda played a significant role in documenting my travels by keeping my journal entries and photos well-organised. Without her, there would be no record of my journey.

I am much indebted to Val Abrahamse, my friend, for taking care of my personal and financial matters back home while I travelled the world. Her conscientious efforts made it possible for me to achieve my dream.

CYCLE TOURING THE UK

Peddalling Into the Drizzle: The Long Way Up



Cycle Touring the United Kingdom

Peddalling Into the Drizzle: The Long Way Up

Prologue

I didn't set out looking for answers. I set out because staying still felt impossible. because bicycles, like stories, are meant to move. The road ahead promised rain, hills, and the occasional questionable decision — but also castles, coastlines, and strangers who became part of the tale. This is the story of following curiosity into the drizzle, the wind, and the wide, generous world beyond the map.

Cape Town, South Africa – London, United Kingdom

Flying with a bicycle is one of those logistical puzzles that makes you question whether travel is worth it at all. I phoned several SAA offices, hoping for clarity, but each one delivered the same unhelpfully cheerful verdict: the bike must go as part of your checked luggage. Judging by the quoted prices, I braced myself for a bill so large it might require a small loan or the sale of a kidney.

My essentials weighed 25 kg, and so did the bike. I arrived at the check-in counter clutching my bank card like a talisman, ready for financial devastation. Instead, the fee turned out to be a one-off charge, far less than expected. I nearly burst out laughing from sheer relief. It felt as though someone had quietly removed a boulder from my chest.



Touchdown in the Land of Footpaths

The plane's wheels kissed the tarmac at 6:30 a.m. in London, and I disembarked in that familiar long-haul haze: stiff, puffy-eyed, and slightly resentful of gravity. My friend Ed — whom I'd met during the 2005 Tour d'Afrique — collected me, looking far too awake for someone who had voluntarily come to an airport at dawn.

Since it was still early, we wandered through a wooded area near Chelmsford. I was astonished to find such lush greenery on an island with the population density of a sardine tin. Over the next few days, I would discover that Britain is threaded with more walking paths than any country I've ever visited. It's as if the entire nation collectively agreed that the best way to get anywhere is by wandering there slowly.

Later, we ventured into the village to find a cycling map. I assumed this would be easy in a country so fond of hiking and cycling. It was not. We returned empty-handed, confused, and slightly offended.



Chelmsford – East Bergholt (66 km)

Into the Drizzle: First Pedals North

In any new country, I'm always impatient to get going, but it was after midday by the time we finally pedalled out of Chelmsford. Eddie kindly rode with me, leading along a rural path through Maldon, famous for Maldon Sea Salt. I was more intrigued to learn that Maldon was the starting point for canalising two rivers all the way to Chelmsford in 1797 — my first hint that the UK would be full of unexpected historical tidbits, the kind that make you feel both enriched and slightly undereducated.

We continued through Colchester, which proudly claims to be the oldest recorded town in Britain and the first Roman capital after the AD 43 conquest. Despite it being May, the weather was wintry, and it rained the entire day. The drizzle was relentless, but it did make the countryside impossibly green and picturesque — like cycling through a damp, slightly chilly postcard.

The villages looked as if they'd been designed by someone who had only ever seen England in children's books: double-storey, semi-detached redbrick houses, all neatly lined up as if waiting for a school inspector. As a cyclist, it felt like riding through a dream — a wet dream, but a dream nonetheless.

We scanned every shop for the elusive Sustrans cycling maps I'd seen online and naively assumed would be sold everywhere. No such luck. We finally camped near East Bergholt, and I realised there would be no racing through this country. Britain demands to be admired slowly, preferably while damp.



East Bergholt – Aldeburgh (70 km)

Lost Paths and Beauty Found

We left shortly after 9:30, heading to Woodbridge via Ipswich. The route threaded through a stunning patchwork of woodlands, estuaries, rivers, farmlands, mudflats, and heathland — the kind of scenery that makes you stop every few minutes to say, “Just look at that,” until your companion begins to question their life choices.

At Woodbridge, we finally unearthed a cycling map. Ironically, it only made things worse. It showed every tiny farm lane, footpath, driveway, and possibly a few hedgehog trails. We spent half the day stopping, squinting, turning circles, and arguing with the map as if it could hear us. Progress was slow.

Towards evening, we aimed for Leiston, where the map promised a campsite. On arrival, we discovered the caravan park didn’t allow tents. The place was enormous and completely deserted, but rules were rules. It felt absurd to be turned away from a field of empty grass because we had the wrong type of temporary shelter.

We moved on through scenery so beautiful it was easy to see why this coastline is part of an “Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.” Village after village tempted us to stop and explore. Riding straight through without dawdling was nearly impossible.

The weather was marginally better but still bitingly cold. It rained all night but, mercifully, not during the ride. By evening, we found a private campsite on a farm for a pittance — far better value than the caravan park, even without a shower.



Aldeburgh – Corton (62 km)

Ghost Stories, Curry Chips, and Cold Winds

A quiet country road led us to Walberswick and Southwold, two ancient villages on the River Blyth. The beaches are somewhat stoney and some buildings were built from beach-gathered stone. We wandered around, soaked up the atmosphere, and sampled the local brew before moving on to Lowestoft.

At least we didn't meet Walberswick's ghostly coach, supposedly drawn by headless horses and driven by the murdered Tobias Gill, hanged here in the 18th century.

Lunch was French fries drowned in curry sauce—apparently a local favourite and, to my surprise, absolutely delicious.

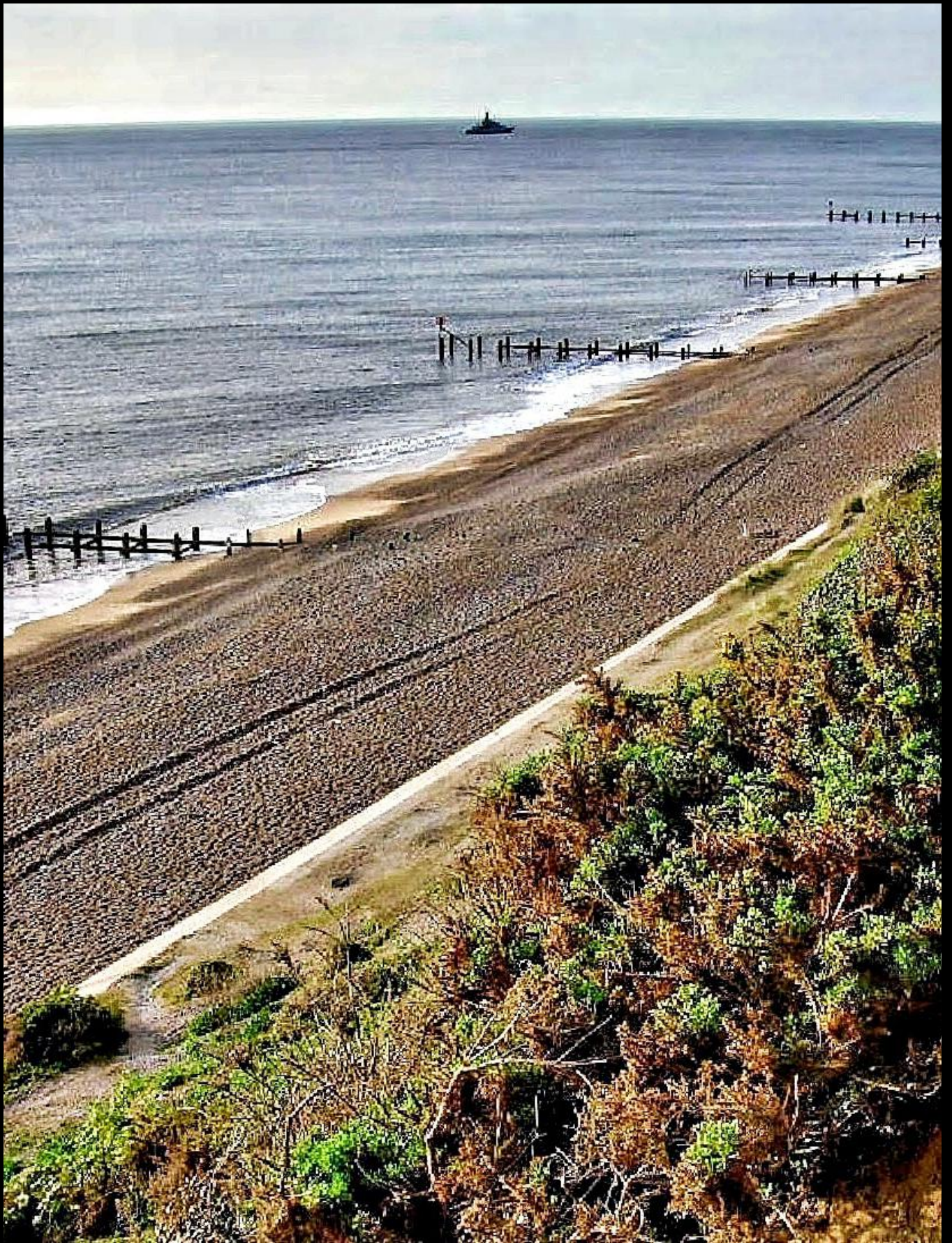
By late afternoon, we reached Corton, just as the drizzle began again. The weather felt endless and grim. I wore every piece of clothing I owned and still felt chilled. The saving grace was the abundance of cosy pubs, always warmer and more cheerful than huddling in a damp tent.

Campsites were a mixed bag. Some had manicured lawns, spotless toilets, and hot showers; others were little more than a field with a basic bathroom. The prices reflected the facilities.

Corton – Cromer (67 km)

Riding the Fast-Eroding Coast

Being May, the days were blissfully long, which meant at least one thing was on my side: daylight. It stayed light until around 9:30 p.m., so there was no frantic pitching of tents in the dark, no fumbling with pegs while muttering unprintable things into the wind.



From Corton, we drifted along the North Sea coast, stopping in Great Yarmouth where I found an internet café — a rare and precious sight in those days, like spotting a unicorn with Wi-Fi. A cone of French fries in the town square powered us all the way to Cromer, perched on a coastline eroding so quickly it feels like the sea is trying to reclaim the entire county out of sheer impatience.

Despite this geological enthusiasm, Cromer remained a pretty seaside town with a lovely seafront, a pier, and a lighthouse. It was the kind of place that would be perfect for a postcard, provided the photographer worked quickly before the cliff edge relocated itself.

Cycling in the UK was very different from Africa. In Africa, a loaded touring bike is an event. Children run across fields to wave or beg, adults stare and ask endless questions, and no one quite understands why you'd ride a bicycle without being paid. In Britain, you're just one more cyclist among many. No one bats an eyelid. You could be pedalling a unicycle while juggling flaming torches and someone would politely step aside and say, "After you."

We stayed at an expensive campsite where the showers felt like a long walk away — possibly in a different postcode. It started drizzling again, though we managed to get a hot cup of soup and a bread roll down before the real rain set in. It poured all night, as if the sky had been saving up.



Cromer – Sandringham (118 km)

Castles, Estates, and Endless Rain

We set off in a drizzle that simply never stopped. It was the kind of rain that didn't fall so much as hover — a fine mist that seeped into everything, including your soul.

Our first destination was a station where Eddie planned to catch a train home, but on the way, he changed his mind and rode on to Norwich instead, as it had better connections. I admired his flexibility, though I suspected he simply wasn't ready to abandon me to the weather quite yet.

After saying goodbye, I aimed my wheels at King's Lynn. Somewhere along the route, I finally got my hands on a Sustrans map (Route 1, Harwich to Hull), and it instantly made life easier. It was like being handed the Rosetta Stone after days of trying to decipher ancient hieroglyphics.

The rest of the day, I cycled past magnificent estates, crumbling castles, and striking churches, all with histories stretching back centuries. The route was well marked, the scenery glorious, and I had an excellent ride despite an annoying problem with my gears constantly slipping — a mechanical reminder that nothing in Britain, including the weather, was going to make this trip easy.



Sandringham – St John’s Fen End (32 km)

Gears Fixed, Spirits Lifted

The campsite at Sandringham was pricey but well-equipped, with laundry facilities and a shop. I took full advantage, which meant I only left quite late — freshly laundered, well stocked, and feeling almost civilised.

From there it was a short hop to King’s Lynn, a substantial town with everything a cyclist might want, including a bike shop where they finally sorted out my gears. I also bought an odometer and a mobile phone. I briefly considered staying at the hostel, but it was closed — a recurring theme in my travels.

With daylight stretching to 9:30 p.m., I still had plenty of time and pushed on to St John’s Fen End, which had a lovely campsite complete with bar and restaurant. After days of drizzle and damp socks, it felt like luxury.

St John’s Fen End – Boston (56 km)

A Hotel Surrender

One of the first things I noticed in this part of the UK was the sheer number of piercings and tattoos. It felt like everyone had six nose rings, and there I was, feeling positively old-fashioned with just one. I briefly considered getting another just to blend in.

The UK struck me as an endlessly fascinating mix of people. On the way to Boston, Eddie surprised me by driving all the way from Chelmsford to meet me. We had lunch together before he turned back. It amused me how few people made eye contact on the street. Yet when Eddie asked around for a cyclist with panniers, they could tell him my exact time of arrival and departure. There was clearly a bit of pretending-not-to-notice going on.



Soon after he left, the skies opened and the rain came sheeting down. I gave in to the lure of warmth and booked into a hotel at a painful price. It's astonishing what one is willing to pay when it's wet and cold. At that moment, I would have sold a kidney for a radiator.

Boston charmed me, not just with its long history but also with its position on the Prime Meridian — a geographical novelty that made me feel briefly important.

Boston – Woodhall Spa (48 km)

A Flying Rack and a Boat Shop Rescue

The next morning, I reluctantly left my snug room. The rate was too high to justify another night, so I pointed my bike towards Woodhall Spa, only about 20 miles away.

Midmorning, my rear rack gave way and my tent, sleeping bag, and panniers catapulted into the road. Fortunately, it happened right in front of a boat shop. The helpful owner reattached everything and tightened the screws so well that, fifteen years later at the time of writing, that rack was still holding firm. If he'd been a surgeon, I'd have trusted him with my spine.

The rest of the day was pleasant riding across the Fens and along rivers lined with large boathouses. I quickly learned that British weather is almost impossible to predict. One moment the sun shone, the next I was diving for cover from a passing shower.

Woodhall Spa turned out to be something of a misnomer — no spa in sight, just a few dilapidated buildings. A cold north wind blew in a steady drizzle, and I decided it was a sign to take a rest day.



Sadly, the weather scuppered my plans to explore The Viking Way, a 237-kilometre long-distance footpath that passes through Woodhall Spa. I consoled myself with the thought that the Vikings probably wouldn't have enjoyed it in that weather either.

Woodhall Spa – Barton-upon-Humber (75 km)

Wrong Turns and the Humber Bridge Rising

A missing road sign sent me confidently pedalling in the wrong direction until a kind passerby stopped to tell me I was heading off course — proof that people *do* notice you in Britain, even if they pretend not to. They may avoid eye contact with Olympic precision, but they will absolutely intervene if you're about to cycle into Wales by mistake.

It was also the first day I encountered any real hills in the UK. After days of gentle terrain, these inclines felt like a personal attack. Unfortunately, the weather was once again dreadful, and I didn't spot a single campsite along the way. The drizzle had upgraded itself to a steady, joy-sapping mist.

I pushed on to Barton-upon-Humber, dominated by the 2.22-kilometre single-span Humber Bridge — an impressive sight rising out of the gloom like a giant concrete promise that civilisation still existed somewhere.

It was also the first day I shared a campsite with other cyclists. Despite the gloomy skies, it turned into a memorable day in the saddle — the kind where you're exhausted, soaked, and oddly proud of yourself.



Humber Bridge – Hornsea (48 km)

Mapless Again on the East Coast

The Humber Bridge is even more imposing up close. Peering over the edge gave me a touch of vertigo, which I pretended was awe. A nearby café provided coffee and muffins, which helped restore my courage.

Reaching Hull also meant reaching the end of my precious cycling map. Navigation quickly became frustrating again. Finding decent cycling maps in the UK turned out to be much harder than I'd anticipated — surprising for a country that seems to have a footpath for every citizen.

In the end, I rode on trust and a vague sense of direction to the seaside town of Hornsea, which offered little more than a seafront promenade and the ancient church of St Nicholas. It wasn't exactly bustling, but it did have a campsite outside town where I could pitch my tent and hide from the unrelenting, miserable weather.

Hornsea – Beverley – Malton (74 km)

A New Map and an Accent I Couldn't Decipher

After the frustrations of the previous day, this one went much better. A shop in Hornsea produced an excellent cycling map, and my spirits soared. It's astonishing how much happiness a piece of paper can bring when you've been lost for 24 hours.

My first stop was the charming market town of Beverley, where I grabbed a few photos of the impressive Anglican church, built around the tomb of a Bishop of York who founded the original monastery. Britain does churches the way Italy does pasta — everywhere, varied, and always worth a look.



Cycling into Malton felt like riding into the Arctic. At the sight of a B&B, I caved in and checked into a room above a ground-floor pub. The locals in the bar were friendly and quickly invited me to join them for a beer.

The only problem was that their regional accent was so strong I barely understood a word. After a while, I finished my drink and retreated to a quieter restaurant in the town square, where no conversation was required. It felt faintly absurd to be in the home of the English language and yet find the English almost incomprehensible.

Malton – Boroughbridge (50 km)

ATM Drama and Moorland Calm

I didn't leave pretty Malton until after midday. I'd finally found an internet café, and then an ATM swallowed my bank card. Untangling that little drama ate up most of the morning. There's nothing like standing helplessly in front of a machine while it calmly digests your financial lifeline.

When I did get going, my chosen route wound through timeless stone villages and over high moorlands laced with rivers and valleys. It was the kind of landscape that makes you forget about swallowed bank cards and other modern indignities.

I was in no mood for detours and called it a day at Boroughbridge, a small settlement with an old well and a main street lined with familiar terraced houses under red-tiled roofs. It felt like the sort of place where nothing dramatic had happened since 1842, and everyone preferred it that way.



Boroughbridge – Leyburn (48 km)

Devil's Arrows and a Brutal Headwind

My first stop of the day was the famous three standing stones known as Devil's Arrows, believed to date from the early Bronze Age. They may once have formed a row of five; the fourth was reportedly broken up in 1582 to build a bridge, and the fifth has vanished into history — presumably stolen by someone with a very large cart and questionable morals.

The day began promisingly enough, but the stretch between Boroughbridge and Leyburn turned into the toughest of the trip. A ferocious headwind tossed me around the road; I had to pedal hard even downhill in my smallest gear. It felt like cycling through invisible treacle.

At the first sign of a campsite, I surrendered, especially as the next one was much farther than I was willing to go. It turned out to be a blessing in disguise, giving me time to tackle the never-ending laundry.

I'd never imagined cycling in the UK could be this challenging. The hills were one thing — but the wind had ambitions of its own.



Leyburn – Middleton-in-Teesdale (56 km)

Castles, Coffee, and Kindness in Teesdale

Leaving Leyburn, I found myself in a particularly beautiful part of the country, and for once the weather cooperated. No wind, no rain — just a calm, pleasant day. I almost didn't trust it.

I stopped in Richmond, home to a magnificent Norman castle whose construction began in the 1070s. After exploring its walls and views, I continued towards Barnard Castle, another medieval fortress built between 1095 and 1125. Britain's ability to casually scatter thousand-year-old structures across the landscape never ceased to amaze me.

My goal for the day was Teesdale, a typical British market town with a central square and terraced houses flanking the main street. To my delight, the village even had a campsite. The caretakers greeted me warmly, offered me coffee while I pitched my tent, and their kindness was the perfect ending to an already good day.

Middleton-in-Teesdale – Chollerford (61 km)

Over the Pennines: A Day of 20% Pain

Although the sun finally decided to show its face, the riding was extremely tough. The road to Chollerford crossed the North Pennines, with brutal 20% gradients. These were the kind of hills that made you question your life choices, your fitness, and occasionally your sanity.

The landscape, however, was magical: rolling heather moors, deep valleys, tumbling rivers, hay meadows, and ancient stone villages. Progress was painfully slow. A few of the steepest hills forced me to dismount and push — something I did with great dignity, or so I told myself.



The road seemed determined to climb out of each valley only to plunge straight into another. Eventually I reached Hadrian's Wall, which I'd always imagined marked the Scottish border. It doesn't. This was mildly disappointing, like discovering Santa lives in a suburb.

A fellow cyclist pointed me towards a nearby campsite used by many hikers on the Hadrian's Wall route. The sheer number of long-distance trails in Britain made me itch to trade my bike for hiking boots.

I discovered I was now firmly on the Pennine Way, Britain's best-known and most demanding long-distance footpath.

Chollerford – Bellingham – (25 km)

Sun at Last and a Change of Plans

In glorious weather, I rolled out of Chollerford and soon reached a decision point: head west or turn east. The original plan was to go to Glasgow to visit my friend Esther, making the west the obvious choice. But the idea of exploring the East Coast tempted me.

Before I could commit either way, Eddie tracked me down again, turning it into a short riding day. We pitched our tents at Bellingham, a favourite stop for Pennine Way hikers and cyclists alike.

Bellingham – North Berwick (By car)

Castles, Coastlines, and Crossing into Scotland

With Eddie now travelling by car, it made little sense for me to pedal alongside, so we loaded my bike onto the roof rack.



The UK is a treasure chest of castles, and we passed and visited several, each one more imposing than the last. Eventually, we crossed into Scotland, and I was blown away by its beauty — dramatic coastline, rugged hills, and a moodiness all its own.

By evening, we reached North Berwick and checked into a comfortable B&B. The town charmed me immediately with its old stone buildings, narrow lanes, and rich history.

North Berwick – Glasgow (by car)

Stone Streets and a Warm Welcome

Late the next morning, we left lovely North Berwick — a town so charming it felt almost staged, as if someone had arranged the stone buildings and narrow lanes just so, then stepped back to admire their handiwork. We drove to Glasgow, where my friend Esther lives. Eddie dropped me at her apartment and then headed back to Chelmsford, probably relieved to escape the relentless drizzle and my increasingly damp cycling gear.

Seeing Esther again was wonderful. She was her usual warm, chatty self, and we spent the entire next day talking — the kind of marathon conversation only old friends can manage without needing snacks or oxygen breaks. That evening, I got my first taste of Glasgow nightlife: a lively pub, good beer, and plenty of people-watching. Glasgow does pubs the way Italy does espresso — with confidence, character, and no half measures.



Glasgow

A Pub, a Plan, and the West Highland Way

Somewhere between beers, we decided to hike the West Highland Way. Esther has a habit of owning at least three of everything, which made gearing up laughably easy. She produced spare backpacks, sleeping bags, and all the camping gear we could possibly need. If she'd rummaged a little longer, I'm convinced she would have found a spare canoe.

We packed our bags with tents, sleeping bags, food, a stove, pots, and the rest of the essentials. The West Highland Way runs for 95 miles (153.8 km) and was Scotland's first official long-distance footpath, threading through some of the country's most dramatic landscapes.

I was buzzing with excitement and felt genuinely privileged to set foot on such a famous trail — even if I was about to do so carrying a backpack roughly the size of a small refrigerator.

Milngavie – Drymen – 12 miles (19 km)

Into the Highlands with Packs Too Big

Early in the morning, we caught a train to Milngavie, just four stops from Esther's place. To my amazement, half the train seemed to get off there, all clearly intending to walk the West Highland Way. I hadn't expected such a crowd, nor that nearly all of them would be carrying only small daypacks. Meanwhile, our backpacks looked like we were heading for an unsupported expedition across Greenland.



The first day's walk was a gentle 12-mile meander from Milngavie to Drymen, along a broad, well-marked path with virtually no risk of getting lost. We began through beautiful deciduous woodland, crossing streams and skirting little villages. Halfway, we ducked into a pub for lunch and a beer — a pattern that would repeat itself with suspicious regularity.

That night, we camped on a farm about a mile before Drymen. Fortunately, it had a cooking shelter — very handy when the heavens opened just as we arrived. Scotland has a remarkable talent for timing its rain to coincide with tent-pitching.

Drymen – Rowardennan – 14 miles (22.5 km)

Conic Hill and the Shores of Loch Lomond

We left Drymen with a pleasant stroll through woods before the path delivered us to Conic Hill — our first proper taste of the Highlands. The climb was steady, the views spectacular, and the wind determined to rearrange our hairstyles.

On the way to Balmaha, we did what was fast becoming a habit: stopped for lunch and a beer. From Balmaha, the route followed the shores of the legendary Loch Lomond, and I could hardly contain my excitement. The views across the loch to the surrounding mountains were outstanding — the kind of scenery that makes you forget your legs are tired and your socks are damp.



The trail took us past Ben Lomond and through ancient oak woodlands, every turn revealing another picture-postcard scene. By day's end, we emerged at Rowardennan, exactly where we hoped to be. There was a hotel, a hostel, and wild camping. Esther chose the hostel, and it felt like utter luxury: warm, dry, and comfortable — three things Scotland does not always offer simultaneously.

Rowardennan – Inverarnan – 14 miles (22.5 km)

Wild Goats, Rob Roy, and a Night of Singing

Leaving the hostel, we hoisted our backpacks and immediately felt their brutal weight. Esther has a gift for packing the entire house plus the proverbial kitchen sink. The young man at reception stared at her pack and asked if she knew about the luggage transport service. Only then did we discover that hikers routinely send their packs ahead by van.

It took almost no persuasion. We handed over our bags and walked off carrying only small plastic bags with snacks and daily essentials. Other hikers, used to seeing us groaning under giant packs, stared in disbelief as we sauntered past.

Once again, the trail hugged Loch Lomond's shore through natural oak woods. I even spotted wild goats clambering about the rocks — creatures that looked as though they'd been designed by someone who had only a vague idea of what goats should look like.

The area is steeped in stories of Rob Roy MacGregor; there are so many tales it's hard to know which are true. The path was hillier than in previous days, and I was very glad we weren't hauling full packs.



We camped at Beinglas Farm, which had a great bar/restaurant and a cooking shelter — a blessing in the foul weather. Later, we walked across the river to a bar believed to be more than 300 years old. Inside, a roaring fire and a massive wooden table set the scene for a memorable night of singing and far too many glasses of red wine with other hikers.

We had such a good time that I left my wallet in the pub — a classic sign of an excellent evening.

Inverarnan – Tyndrum – 13 miles (20.9 km)

Lost Wallet, Found Bluebells

The next morning, heart pounding, I dashed back to the pub — and there was my wallet, still waiting. What a relief. By then, everyone knew the South African had lost her purse, which was a bit mortifying, but at least it was intact.

With the wallet safely recovered, we followed the route along the River Falloch past dramatic gorges, waterfalls, and rapids. Eventually, we joined an 18th-century military road, now little more than a narrow track.

The hills wore a soft blue-purple hue and were carpeted with bluebells, making the views even more spectacular. The trail passed “the King’s Field,” where legend says Robert the Bruce was defeated by the MacDougall in 1306.



The beauty of the day was only slightly marred by the arrival of the dreaded midges — tiny, more vicious than mosquitoes, and seemingly everywhere. Esther, walking in short sleeves, was soon covered in bites. They got into our hair, ears, and even up our noses. I began to understand why Scottish folklore is full of battles and suffering.

We trudged on to Tyndrum and camped at a place called “By the Way.” In the village’s famous Green Welly Shop, which stocks everything from food to hiking gear, we finally bought ourselves small proper daypacks. Walking with plastic shopping bags was not ideal.

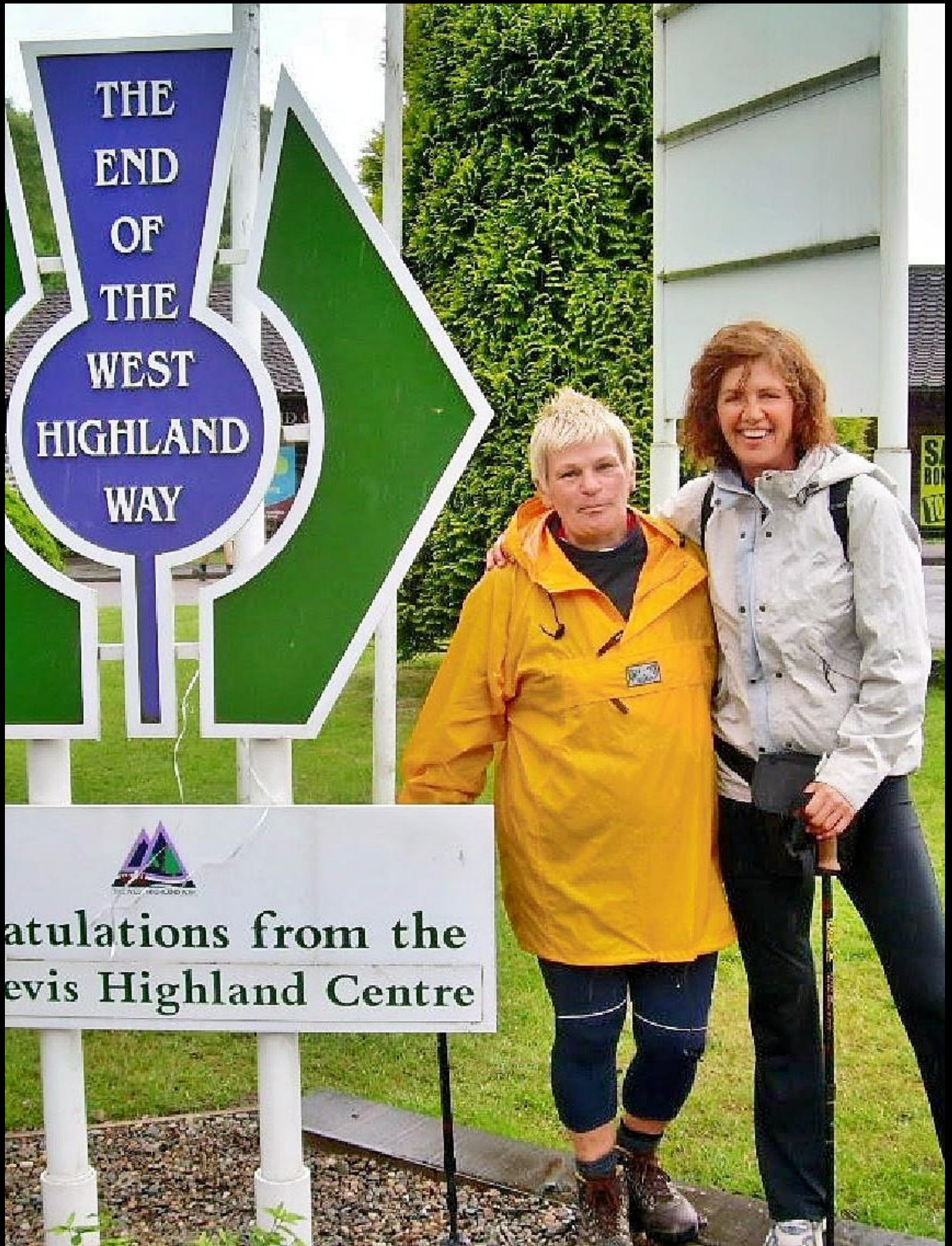
Tyndrum – Kingshouse – 20 miles (32.1 km)

Across Rannoch Moor to the Shadow of Glen Coe

There were two possible routes to Kingshouse, and local advice was unanimous: take the longer one. The alternative was steeper and rougher, and you don’t argue with people who know the hills.

Though it was a long day, the path was mostly flat, weaving through muddy forestry plantations. I finally understood why proper hiking boots beat running shoes on this terrain.

We crossed Rannoch Moor, rewarded with sweeping views of distant lochs and numerous Munros (mountains over 3,000 feet). Descending towards Kingshouse, the dramatic peaks of Glen Coe and Glen Etive rose around us. I could easily imagine fantastic skiing and rock climbing here in winter.



THE
END
OF
THE
WEST
HIGHLAND
WAY



Congratulations from the
Lewis Highland Centre

We camped wild at Kingshouse, where there were no facilities, and spent as much of the evening as possible tucked into the warmth of the pub — a strategy that had become central to our survival.

Kingshouse – Kinlochleven – 8 miles (12.6 km)

The Devil's Staircase and a Sunny Day at Last

A relatively short walk took us to Kinlochleven through a landscape crowded with some of Scotland's most impressive peaks. It made me wish I were a climber.

We followed another stretch of old military road, climbing to the highest point of the West Highland Way via the Devil's Staircase. For once, the sun shone all day, and the views were nothing short of magnificent.

In Kinlochleven, we pitched our tents at MacDonald's campsite. The village itself looked as if it had been designed for a postcard and it boasted a large indoor ice-climbing centre.

Kinlochleven – Fort William – 13 miles (20.9 km)

Beer in a Ruin and the Final Miles

The path climbed steeply out of Kinlochleven through woodland, rejoining the old military road. In true Esther style, she'd packed a beer, which we enjoyed at an old ruin. By then, the other hikers probably thought we were slightly mad — we were forever stopping, laughing, and appearing suspiciously cheerful.

On reaching Fort William, we didn't, like most, head straight for the campsite. Instead, we wandered through town in our hiking gear, searching for pizza and beer. Priorities firmly in order.



Ben Nevis – 12 miles (19.3 km)

Into the Cloud: A Wet Climb to the Summit

The next morning, we lingered in bed until about 9:30 a.m. The weather was awful, and it's hard to muster enthusiasm for climbing a mountain when the rain is already drumming on your tent.

Eventually, cabin fever won. We pulled on wet-weather gear and set off to tackle Ben Nevis, Scotland's highest peak. The trail starts at the Visitor Centre, and on such a gloomy day, it was almost deserted. We saw no other hikers, which didn't surprise us.

The fog hung low, and a fine, constant drizzle made for a rather joyless climb. The path itself was less steep than I'd imagined, and I was struck by how quickly the scenery changed from green, rolling slopes to a stark, rocky landscape.

On the summit, even in midsummer, we found a large field of snow. We took a few quick photos, shivered, and turned around, hurrying back to lower ground.

Seven hours after starting, we walked straight into a cosy pub and celebrated with hot food and cold beer. Mission accomplished.



Glasgow

Drying Out and Dreaming of Ireland

After our West Highland Way adventure, we returned to Glasgow and started plotting the next one: a two-week cycle tour in Ireland.

Although Esther already owned a bicycle, it had clearly not seen much action recently and needed more than a squirt of WD-40. Once it had been properly serviced and we'd found her a set of panniers, we loaded our bikes and were ready.

Ireland

From Belfast to Donegal: A Comedy of Hills and Hospitality

793 Kilometres – 14 Days

Glasgow, Scotland – Belfast, Ireland (16 km)

Esther vs. Silver: The Toppling Begins

Getting to Ireland involved cycling from Esther's house to Glasgow Central Station to catch a train to Stranraer. That's where the comedy started.

Esther, unused to riding with panniers, toppled over — not once, but three times — between the apartment and the station. I kept turning around to find her lying on the ground, bike on top of her, legs waving in the air like an upended beetle.

To make matters worse, all of this took place in peak-hour traffic. Unfazed by the stares, she simply got up, dusted herself off, met their eyes, and announced cheerfully, "Take three!"



From Stranraer, the ferry carried us across the North Channel to Belfast, arriving around 16:30 — another busy time of day — and, right on cue, Esther managed one more spectacular topple.

The problem wasn't so much falling off as falling over. Her bike was too big, the top tube too high, and her legs too short to swing safely over it, especially with loaded panniers.

We laughed so hard tears were running down our faces, but somehow still managed to ride the six kilometres north of the city to our campsite. By evening, she had christened her bike "Silver," as it bucked and kicked like a stubborn horse, clearly not yet convinced about touring Ireland.

Belfast – Cushendall (69 kilometres)

Sunshine, Cliffs, and Five More Falls

The next day dawned bright and sunny — a rare and glorious Irish gift. With Ol' Silver loaded and packed, we followed the coast along a spectacular route lined with white limestone cliffs, tiny coastal communities, and ancient ruins like Red Bay Castle and Ardclinis Church.

Esther must have fallen over at least five times before we reached Cushendall. At camp, she didn't dismount so much as flop sideways, to the astonishment of the other campers. Good thing she wore a helmet. Still, we managed 43 miles (70 kilometres), which felt like a small miracle.



Cushendall – Ballycastle (32 kilometres)

Torr Head: The Scenic Route of Doom

Packing up took forever, so it was late by the time we pedalled out of camp. Shortly beyond Cushendall, a sign pointed to a scenic route via Torr Head. It sounded lovely. The warning — “Not suitable for caravans and coaches” — should have been a clue.

This stretch of coastline is separated from Scotland by the North Channel, and the views were spectacular. Unfortunately, so were the hills. They were the kind of steep that makes you question your life choices.

Esther claimed she didn't fall over that day because she walked her bike the entire way, resulting in blistered feet. The descent into Ballycastle was pure joy — until I realised Esther wasn't behind me. I rode back up and found her walking down the hill with a flat tyre.

The surprises continued: her wheels had no quick release and required a spanner. With no tools, we walked the bikes into town and onto the campsite. Every man in camp seemed to own the exact spanner needed, and soon the wheel was off. Esther was given a lift into town to buy a new tyre and inner tube. Irish hospitality at its finest.

Ballycastle – Castlerock (64 kilometres)

Bruises, Bungees, and Giants

The morning began with Esther providing the day's entertainment. While loading Ol' Silver, a bungee cord slipped and snapped her on the lip. By then she was covered in bruises from falling over, lumps from the “Wee Buggers” (mosquitoes), and now sported a fat lip for good measure.



We stopped at the bike shop to buy a spanner and a new front tyre — the old one looked as though it had survived a war.

The Northern Irish coastline was magnificent, and we stopped at the Giant's Causeway to explore its 40,000 basalt columns. The geology was impressive, but the legends were even better: Finn McCool, his Scottish rival Benandonner, and the baby disguise that saved the day. Only in Ireland could a giant be outsmarted by a clever wife and a fake infant.

After a particularly long hill, Esther declared the trip was killing her and that overdosing at home would have been quicker. Still, she pushed on another 40 miles. When we spotted a campsite at Castlerock, we called it a day. The lady managing the campground took one look at Esther and let us camp for free.

Castlerock – Quigley's Point (32 kilometres)

Lost Tracks and a Much-Needed Pub

Feeling refreshed, we stopped at the Mussenden Temple — a tiny 1785 library modelled after Rome's Temple of Vesta. From there, a short ride took us to Magilligan Point, where ferries departed for Greencastle.

Unfortunately, our map indicated a track beside the ocean that did not exist. After wandering around slightly lost, we reached Quigley's Point and pitched our tents at the first opportunity to give Esther's backside a rest.

With camp set up, there was only one sensible thing left to do: go to the pub.



Quigley's Point – Portsalon via Letterkenny (91 kilometres)

Rain, Wrong Ferries, and a Numb Hand

It rained all night, and we packed up in the downpour, reaching Buncrana soaked to the bone. We intended to take a ferry to Rathmullan, only to discover it wouldn't start operating for another three days. So much for mid-summer.

I loved the foreign-sounding names of the towns as we cycled from Quigley's Point to Portsalon via Letterkenny — a remarkable 91 kilometres. Esther was getting stronger and falling over less, though Ol' Silver still creaked and squealed like an old man protesting every uphill.

From Rathmullan to Portsalon was only 19 kilometres, but we took the scenic route and encountered several nasty hills before a steep descent into town. By then, Esther's hand was numb and entirely useless.

Portsalon

A Day for Books and Beer

The weather turned even fouler overnight: cold, rainy, and whipped by an icy wind from the north. It was the perfect excuse to stay put. We crawled back into our sleeping bags, zipped up the tents, and read books for most of the day.

By 5 p.m., we'd had enough of lying down and headed to the pub — a combined shop-and-bar establishment where a few locals were already seated. Soon the singing began, and the evening turned into a lively affair. It was three in the morning before we stumbled back to our tents. Suffice it to say, we had a good time.



Portsalon – Melmore Head (59 kilometres)

Hangovers, Arctic Winds, and a Hostel on a Hill

For obvious reasons, we didn't rush packing up. It was noon before we finally set off. The weather was horrendous: drizzle, strong wind, bitter cold. Even Esther wore long sleeves — a sure sign of meteorological severity.

We reached Carrickart and were told of a hostel "not far." In arctic conditions, we headed in the pointed direction. It was considerably farther than suggested, and up a steep hill. By the time we arrived, I was frozen stiff.

The hostel was extremely basic and remote, but inside it was warm as toast — and that was all that mattered.

Melmore Head – Letterkenny – Belfast – Larne (72 kilometres)

No Rooms in Belfast and the Kindness of Strangers

Esther needed to get back to work, so we cycled to Letterkenny to check public transport options. Buses ran to Derry, and from there straight to Belfast.

But Belfast had a surprise waiting: the city was fully booked due to a major international boxing event. Every B&B and hotel was packed — from the cheapest to the Hilton. We even considered the Hilton.

By then it was 10 p.m., freezing cold, and we were exhausted. I suggested cycling the six kilometres north to our first campsite, but Esther was having none of it.



The staff at the train station were wonderful. They found us a B&B in Larne, booked the ferry, and helped us onto the train. Irish kindness strikes again.

Larne – Oxford Island (91 kilometres)

A Farewell and a Marching Band

We woke to a scrumptious breakfast — pure luxury. The guesthouse was conveniently across from the harbour, making it easy for Esther to catch the 10:30 ferry. After waving her off, I pointed my mobile home toward Belfast and then south.

The weather was good, and being Sunday, plenty of cyclists were out, all stopping to chat. I followed the River Lagan to Lisburn, then a minor route via Moira to Oxford Island and Lough Neagh.

In one small village, I stumbled upon the Orange Order marching, band and all. I couldn't believe they existed in real life. I'd assumed their supremacist values were illegal by now. They were likely practising for the annual 12 July march.

Oxford Island to Ballyronan (72 kilometres)

Friendly Locals and Giant Legends

Fortunately, most Irish are friendly — even offering dope. What lovely people.

Lough Neagh is one of the largest freshwater lakes in Western Europe, so I followed its shore to Ballyronan. The route wound along tiny lanes past farms and small settlements.



The lake has a delightful legend: it supposedly formed when Finn McCool scooped out a clod of earth to throw at a Scottish rival. The clod missed, landed in the Irish Channel, and became the Isle of Man. Geography explained.

Ballyronan – Kesh (Lough Erne) (101 kilometres)

A Long Ride and a Not-Quite Campsite

As usual, I packed up in the rain, but the weather soon cleared into a glorious day. I headed west along the foothills of the Sperrin Mountains, via Omagh to Kesh.

Reaching Kesh required cycling up a serious hill to the “campsite,” which turned out to be a mobile home park with no camping facilities. Bummer. The owner, however, was kind enough to let me camp on a small patch of grass and even unlocked a mobile home so I could use the shower and toilet.

Kesh and Surrounds – (32 kilometres)

Carb Queens and Forest Walks

Kesh is tiny — population under 1,000 — but lively thanks to its location on Lough Erne. I stayed to explore, cycling down the hill to another campsite where one could walk around the lake and through the forest.

I discovered dried fruit (delicious) and ate the entire bag. Speaking of food, I consider myself the Queen of Carbs, but the Irish outdid me. I found macaroni cheese served with French fries. I kid you not. Another shocker was a baked potato topped with beans — even I considered that a carbo overload, not to mention a crime against a good Irish potato.



Kesh – Donegal (Dún na nGall) (72 kilometres)

Tailwinds, Donegal, and a Change of Plans

The way to Ballyshannon followed Lough Erne, and with a tailwind, the route felt gloriously downhill. From Ballyshannon, I turned north along the coast to Donegal, still with a tailwind. I arrived early and set up camp at a hostel.

Soon afterwards, Eddie arrived by car. He wanted to travel Ireland but hadn't brought his bike, so we loaded mine onto the roof and explored the rest of Ireland by car. Later, I regretted it — the chances of returning to cycle that region are slim.

In London, I'd tried to obtain a European visa, but the Schengen visa proved elusive. It required applying in one's home country with a full itinerary and prepaid accommodation — not ideal for spontaneous cycle touring.

Frustrated, I moved to Plan B: fly to Hungary (no Schengen visa required) and cycle Eastern Europe. Eddie took time off work, and we packed our bicycles and flew to Budapest.



London, UK – Budapest, Hungary

A New Adventure Begins

From the moment I arrived, I was smitten with Budapest — its old buildings, cobbled streets, and views of the mighty Danube. I instantly understood why it's called "the Capital of Architecture." To this day, it remains one of my favourite cities.

If it were today, I would have lingered longer. But back then, I had bees in my bonnet and wanted to get going — a habit that took years to outgrow. Only later did I learn to enjoy the *touring* part of cycle touring, which, in my mind, is what the whole thing is about.

Epilogue

When the wheels finally stopped turning, I realised the journey hadn't ended at all. It had simply changed shape. Every fall, every climb, every rain-soaked morning had stitched itself into me — reminder that adventure rarely arrives tidy, but always arrives true. And somewhere beyond the next border, the next ferry, the next improbable plan, another road is already waiting.



About This Journey

Join me on my ride through the stunning landscapes of the UK and Ireland. With an abundance of cycle routes at your fingertips, the journey I share here is just one of countless possibilities. If you're using this book as your companion on a tour of your own, here are a few insights to enhance your experience:

The Distances: A Realistic Ride

While the daily distances I've mapped out may not vie for the title of the shortest routes, they are far from mundane. As I ventured through charming towns and scenic views, I often took detours, recording precise kilometres thanks to my trusty odometer. Please be aware that these distances might not always align with markers and maps, and sometimes, my readings varied. Each day's total included extra miles—I couldn't resist a market visit or a quest for the perfect accommodation!

Seasonal Context: Time Stamps and Changes

Take a step back in time to my travels in the UK during the enchanting months of May and June 2007. Bear in mind that conditions may have shifted dramatically since then; roads could be either newly paved or more rugged than ever. As for those rolling hills? They may not seem as steep now, but I assure you, they felt like mountains back then!

Safety First: The Essentials of Insurance

Don't hit the road without coverage! A solid travel insurance policy is your must-have safety net for theft, loss, and medical emergencies. Be cautious, though—many policies have exclusions for what they classify as "dangerous activities." While I've never considered cycling to fall into that category, it's wise to scrutinise the small print.

Dress for Success: Clothed for Comfort

With long days spent in the saddle, outfitting yourself for comfort is critical. Invest in quality, padded cycling shorts to keep you going. Personally, I prefer cycling in my everyday sandals, but any comfortable footwear works wonders. The unpredictable UK weather can swing from icy chills to warm sunlight, so embrace the elements and pack accordingly! Don't forget essential toiletries like insect repellent and anti-chafe cream, and, of course, always wear a helmet for added safety.

Your Ride and Gear: Comfort is Key

Choosing the right bicycle can make or break your ride. I swear by my reliable mountain bike, a trusty companion with a Merida frame, Shimano Deore components, Alex wheel rims, and Schwalbe tyres. For my gear, I rely on Tubus bicycle racks and the legendary Ortlieb panniers—expensive but well worth the investment! Master the art of fixing a punctured tube, as it's an invaluable skill on the road. For navigation, a phone holder on your handlebars is a game-changer; I use Organic Maps or Google Maps to stay on track. Don't overlook a handlebar bag, either—it's perfect for stashing your camera and daily essentials.

Further Reading: Expand Your Adventure

For a bit of extra guidance, check out the Lonely Planet guide. The e-book is not only budget-friendly but also a convenient companion for your journey.

Let this book be the spark for your own unforgettable cycling adventure, filled with the thrill of discovery and the joy of exploration!



About the Author

Hailing from the vibrant city of Cape Town, South Africa, Leana's journey into the world of cycling began not with years of training but with a single bold decision. In 2005, driven by curiosity and a spirit of adventure, she entered the Tour D'Afrique—a legendary mountain bike race stretching from Cairo to Cape Town. With little cycling experience, Leana purchased a bicycle, flew to Cairo, and set out on a route that would take her the entire distance from Cairo to Cape Town.

Returning home, Leana found that the rhythms of ordinary life could not compare to the freedom of the open road. The call of adventure proved irresistible, and in March 2007, she and her companion, Ernest Markwood, embarked on a journey that would evolve into a round-the-world cycling odyssey. Though they began together, the road eventually led them to discover their own unique directions—both in travel and in life.

Leana's travels have taken her across Africa twice, through the Middle East, Europe, the United Kingdom, Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, the Indian subcontinent, China, Southeast Asia, and Australia. Her wanderlust then carried her to Ushuaia, Argentina, from where she cycled the length of South, Central, and North America over several years. Along the way, she explored many of the world's larger islands, including Cuba, Jamaica, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, South Korea, and Taiwan.

Today, Leana continues her adventures in Southeast Asia, ever inspired by the promise of new horizons and the enduring joy of life on two wheels.





**There is an immense sense of freedom in carrying with you
all that you need.**



