



NEED TO KNOW

WHERE WE STAYED

- Blair Castle Caravan Park
Tel: 01796 481207
www.atholl-estates.co.uk
- Rothiemurchus Camp & Caravan Aviemore
Tel: 01479 812800
www.campandcaravan.com
- Black Rock Caravan Park
Tel: 01349 830917
www.blackrockscotland.co.uk.com

HOW MUCH?

- Camper hire: From £630 a week
- Fuel: £223
- Campsites: £140
- Total cost: £993

MUST SEE / DO

- The Cairngorms National Park
- The Shin Forest
- Velocity Cycling cafe Inverness
- The Black Isle

SPECIAL THANKS

- Amanda for helping us both along the way
- Campervantastic tel. 0208 721 6800
www.campervantastic.com

LE JOG with Bertha part 2

This month, our intrepid cyclists reach their destination, with a little help from a T5 California along the way

Words and photos Glenn, Tom and Amanda Martin

Last month, we left our dynamic duo battling with the traffic in Edinburgh, this month they head into rural Scotland, with John O'Groats firmly in their sights...

Day 12: going Forth

By the time we had reached Edinburgh, we were well on our way to completing the Lands End to John O'Groats challenge, with just (!) 320 miles and five days in the saddle left. As we crossed the Forth Road Bridge, we knew we had some wild and wide countryside ahead of us, but we had clear blue skies to help us on our way as we head north towards Perth, and our next stop at Dunkeld. My main worry in Scotland was the route I'd picked. I was concerned we'd be cycling along the busy A9 since the choice of roads is limited as you head into the Highlands. But we needn't have worried, the cycleway continued on minor roads and even

at times along sections of the old A9, which has become overgrown and is left for cyclists to use.

Amanda met us at Blair Atholl where we had booked and paid for a campsite. It's a great site with an excellent pub in the village, which was welcome as we knew the next day was going to be hard. We were heading up into the Cairngorms and stopping in Aviemore.

“ We knew we had some wild and wide countryside ahead of us ”

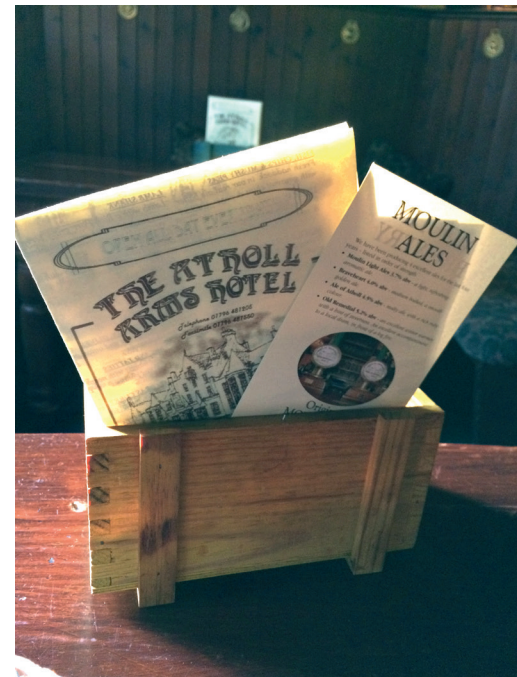
Days 13 and 14: wet, and cold Refreshed after a night in the Camper, we set off in the rain, and it did not relent all day. It also became very cold as we climbed up to the Pass of Drumochter (when you become wet on a bike, you also become cold – especially with the wind chill

going downhill – no matter how many layers you wear). It was not much fun, though there was a moment of comedy, such as when Tom asked how high we were, not noticing the huge sign behind him declaring we were at the peak of the Pass – 462m. The next 30 miles through the wet and energy-sapping cold were very difficult, and in the back of my mind I knew that snow had been forecast.

When we got to the Rothiemurchus Camp and Caravan Park we were so pleased because we'd made another great choice of site. I'm sure I was in the shower for 30 minutes just warming up! We felt very sorry for a Frenchman we saw arriving later

in the evening as he put up his one-man tent in the pouring rain as we sat smugly in the Cali with the heating belting out. Overnight, the heater was much needed. It had been frosty, but thankfully no snow fell, so we could press on to Inverness and our stop

at times along sections of the old A9, which has become overgrown and is left for cyclists to use.



◀ Excellent pub grub at the Atholl Arms Hotel, Blair Atholl

▲ The view back towards Edinburgh as we head onwards to the Highlands



▼ Approaching the famous spans of the 8,296ft long Forth Road Bridge

▼ Two of the thousands of lambs we saw on our travels



▲ The view as we leave Pitlochry and head toward the Cairngorms – one of the best parts of our trip



▼ Leaving the Cairngorms



▲ Glenn's bike – we're not sure if this was pre chain gate



▼ Nearly there...



▲ Scotland – the land of fine whisky



Tom's bike, and a frosty saddle. One built for comfort, one for pain



► Snow on the mountains, and not another person in sight. Joy

▼ The simply beautiful Kyle of Sutherland



▲ The long, straight road from Lairg. Believe it or not, we found this almost as challenging as the hills

at Evanton. We set off, unfortunately having neglected some vital bike maintenance. Our chains had become rusty in the rain and we'd forgotten to oil them. Our feet were also getting cold, since our shoes hadn't completely dried overnight. After a quick stop at a general store, we both had new, dry, woollen socks and a can of 3-in-One, so our feet and bikes were in much better shape for the last 400m climb out of the Cairngorms. We arrived at Inverness in time for lunch, found a lovely cycling café called Velocity and sat down to enjoy some cake and coffee.

We then saddled up and headed across the Kessock bridge, onto the Black Isle peninsula and toward Evanton. Amanda had told us there was no beer at the campsite, but disaster was averted since there was a Spa shop just before the campsite where we filled our panniers with bottles before stopping for the day.

Whilst beer may not seem the isotonic drink of champions, the benefit of cycling all day was that we could really consume whatever we wanted to. Indeed, the problem was actually remembering to eat the day's allocation of flapjacks, nuts and pasties. While we certainly got a lot fitter during the trip, the constant eating ensured we only burned what we ate and nothing more, meaning we didn't lose any weight.

Day 15: the best road in Britain
The next day was, we're all agreed, the best of the entire trip. The plan was to get to the north coast of Scotland, via Lairg, then stop at the strangely-named town of Betty Hill. The skies were clear most of the day but the start was so cold I had to scrape the frost off my saddle. Tom and I raced through the glorious countryside towards Lairg as we took in the stunning views of the Dornoch Firth and the Kyle of Sutherland, both classic vistas that feature in any travel guide of Scotland.

We then met Amanda at the Pier Café in Lairg for lunch, which we found by chance but turned out to be an absolute foodie's delight. This was only the second time in the whole trip we'd met her for lunch. All the other days, she'd been so busy packing up camp, buying food and driving to the next camp that it was rare for our schedules to coincide at a suitable place for lunch.

From Lairg, it was just 30 miles until we reached the North Atlantic coast, and we felt great as we cycled along Britain's smallest A-road to meet it. The A836 was smooth, well maintained and would pass for a B-road, or even unlisted, in most other parts of the country. Following it, we reached a place called Altnaharra where there's a remote weather station that, if you follow the weather reports on the radio, you'll



▲ What's left of the Shin Forest. You don't find landscapes like this in the south east of England

hear mentioned as being the coldest or warmest part of the country, depending on the time of the year (it plunged to -27degC there in 1995!).

There are only two roads that head north from here, Amanda had picked the route to Tongue (yes, it really does exist) and maintains it's the most beautiful road she's ever driven. Tom and I picked the other road, which shaves off about five miles and was still very quiet and beautiful. We even saw a golden eagle on the hunt for prey. We followed the River Naver down to the coast where fly fishing seems to be the local speciality, judging by the number of rods we saw strapped on cars.

Amanda had found one of the very few campsites along this stretch, about 10 miles further up the road at Melvich, so did one of her many round

number of English voices to be heard, due to its proximity to Dounreay nuclear power station. Although the reactor was switched off in 1994, the dismantling program runs to 2025.

We found all this out, and more, because we stayed for the quiz night (and came joint second) and had a fantastic evening. Looking back, it was perhaps our unofficial end of the road celebration, since tomorrow would be our last one of the trip.

Day 16: journey's end
Waking up on our last morning, we had just 52 miles to go but, as explained earlier, the first 10 covered the saw teeth from Betty Hill. This was relentless, but made easier with the knowledge it was our last challenge of the trip. Along the way was a poignant moment when we

“It's great having a Van to give you the flexibility of where you finish each night”

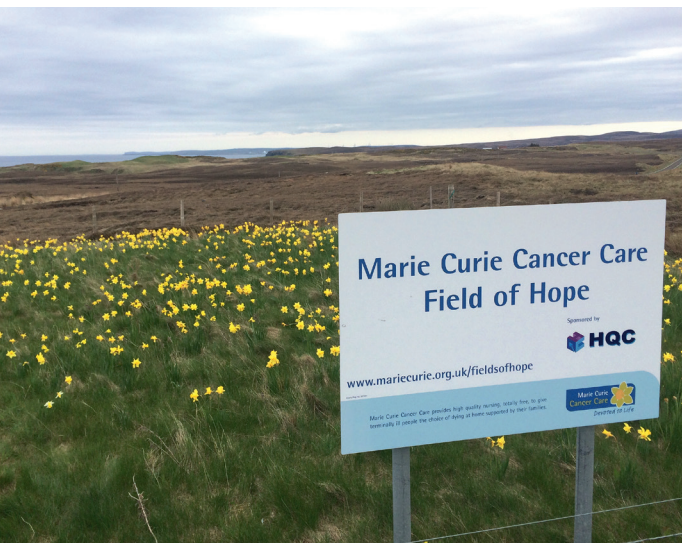
trips to pick us up. It's great having a Van to give you the flexibility of where you finish each night, but you then have the torture of seeing how many hills you have to cycle over the next day as you drive towards camp. The height profile of those 10 miles reads like a saw tooth graph, just relentless ups and downs, but we didn't care because it had been a splendid day and we had just one more left before our mission was complete.

Conveniently, the campsite was in the garden of the Halladale Inn, which serves wonderful beer and food and that night there was a quiz night. There were a surprisingly high

found a small plot covered in daffodils dedicated to Marie Curie Cancer Care with the view of the old nuclear power station in the distance. It was then I had a pang of guilt that I wasn't doing the ride for charity.

Soon the roads levelled out, and we freewheeled down into Thurso for lunch and a rest before setting out on the final 20 miles. The road to John O'Groats from here is largely flat, with plenty of green fields for the many sheep that roam about them, but very long and straight, which create a challenge as big as the hills – you just want to be able to turn a corner to end the monotony of straightness.

ROAD TRIP



▲ A poignant moment

▼ Without the excellent support of the Campervantastic T5 California there's no way we would have got this far. No pasties or nuts were consumed during the taking of this photo



▼ The sign that says you've made it!



As the Orkney Islands hove into view, we knew we were getting close to our destination. In truth, cycling the final mile or so was rather an anti-climax. Certainly the sense of achievement starts to sink in, but the end just came so suddenly.

One last blast down towards the sea and all the little touristy shops that gather around the bleak car park and we had made it to the mile post marking the spot we'd been aiming at for the last 16 days.

Amanda had decked out the VW with little Scottish flags and bunting and, realising we'd now 'been there and done that', she had also bought some LEJOG t-shirts for us to wear. We then all headed to the post pointing back to Land's End to take the photos that proved we'd done it.

Well, actually, we had another two miles to go, since Duncansby Head is really the most north easterly point of Scotland, and we didn't want to get caught out by any LEJOG nerds

that might pull us up for not fully completing the challenge. We dutifully finished this last uphill challenge and felt elation as we caught up with Amanda and the Van for the last time.

The bikes were then strapped onto Bertha, and we considered how quickly we could drive the 633 miles home. It was Saturday lunchtime, and we really didn't feel like sticking around in John O'Groats.

We decided to head back to Lairg and enjoy 'the best drive in the world' that Amanda had done the day before. With the weather due to close in, we set off and beat the rain, enjoying the stunning views one last time.

The VW California really came into its own on the way back, with plenty of space for big Tom to lounge around in, and the cruise control and sat nav easing us along in comfort.

By god, we had fallen desperately in love with Bertha. She'd kept us warm, dry and safe throughout our 971 miles of pedalling and, by the

time I handed her back, she'd covered just over 2,000 miles. If only we could have kept her forever, or at least for the rest of summer.

The whole trip had been a fantastic adventure, a real personal challenge and had introduced us to the joys of life with a VW Camper, albeit for just a short while. We hope one day to buy our own Bertha, the modern VW California SE sets such a high bar we wouldn't want to buy anything else.

“ The modern VW California SE sets such a high bar we wouldn't want to buy anything else ”

If you want to read more about Glenn, Amanda and Tom's adventure, head over to their blog (<http://lejoguphill.blogspot.co.uk/>), which features lots of information if you fancy doing your own LEJOG challenge.

▲ Beer helped keep us going throughout the trip, but none tasted as sweet as the champagne we celebrated our return home with