

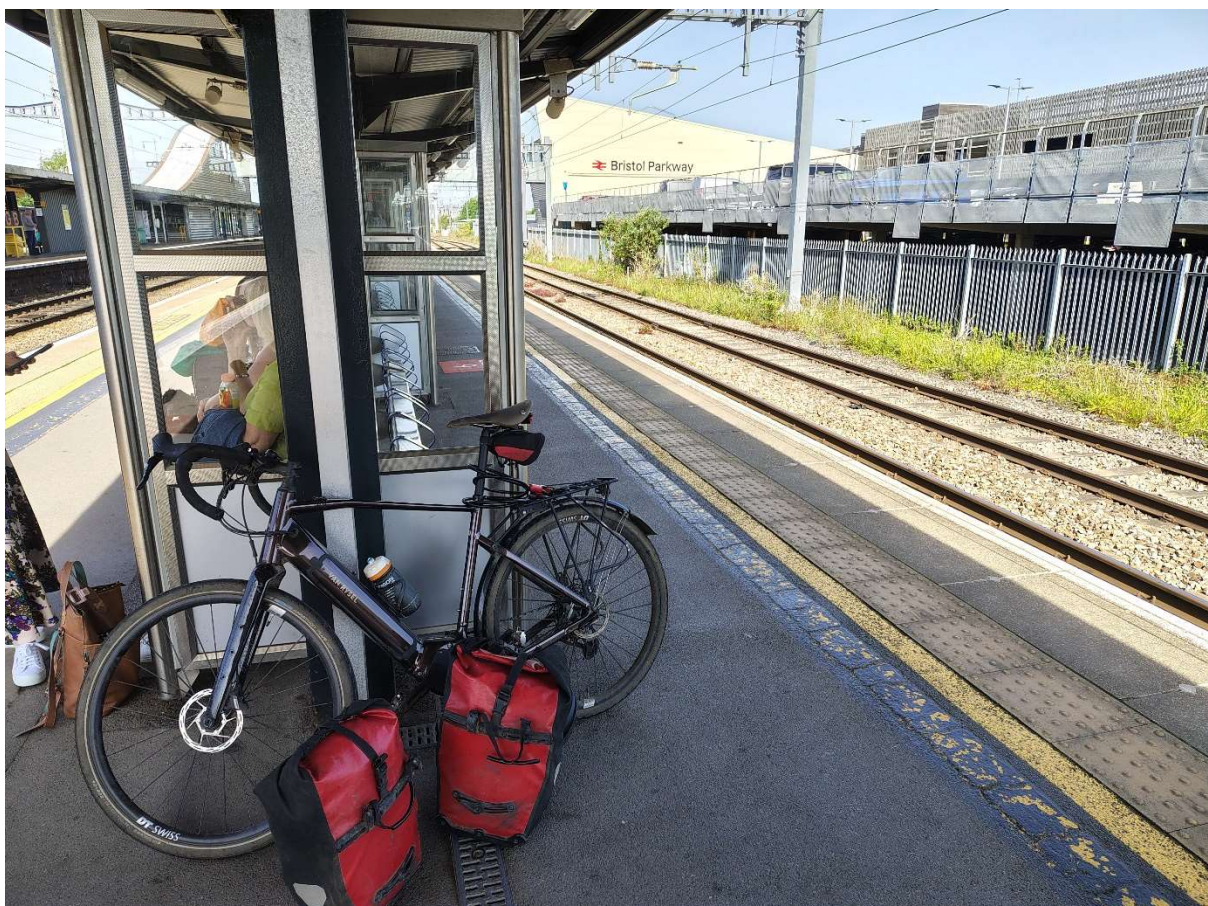
Getting there

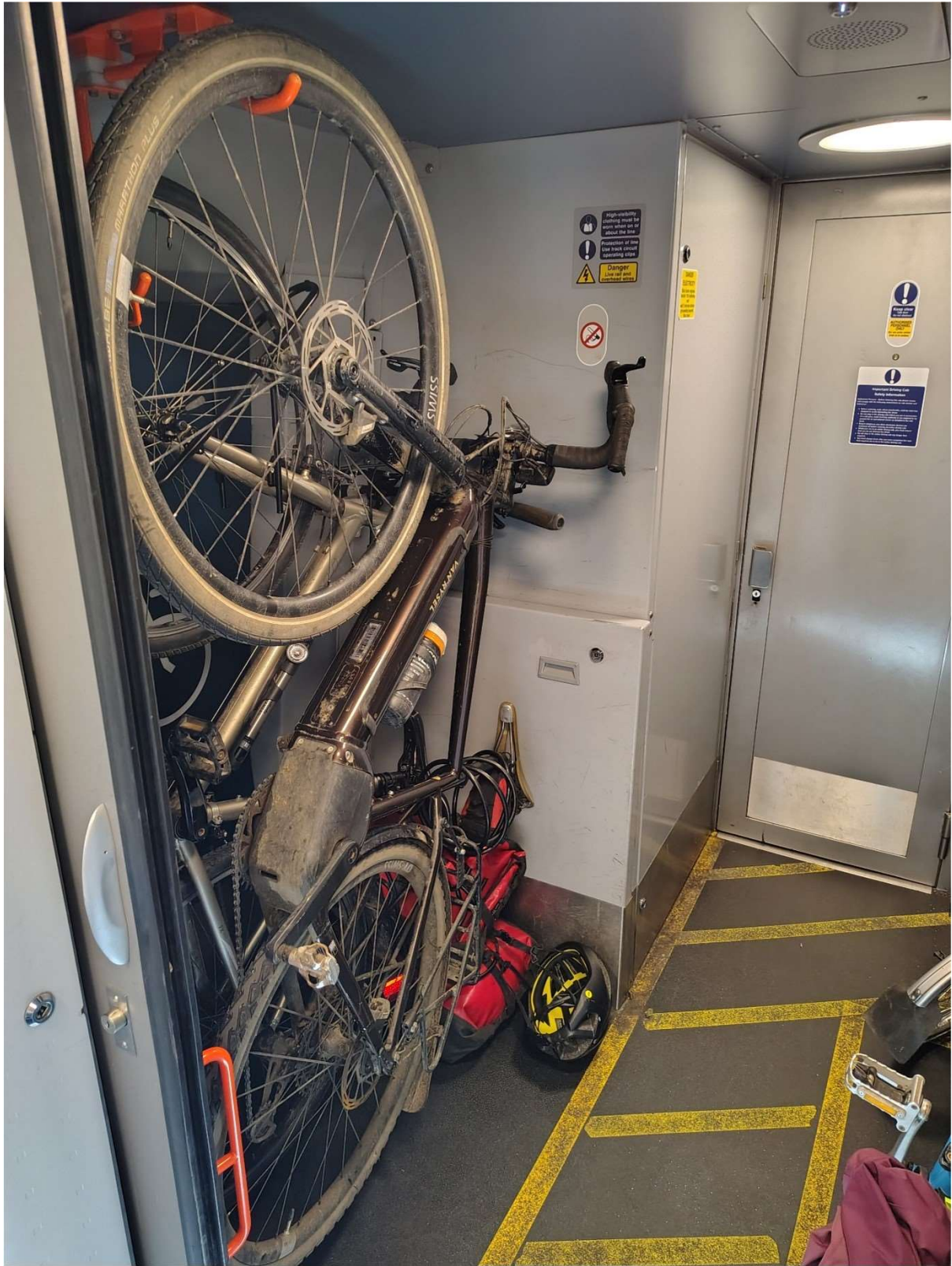
I needed to get to Thurso to start the final leg of my round Britain journey. Plane to Inverness and train or bus to Thurso is arguably the easiest but Easyjet who fly directly to Inverness from Bristol won't take electric bikes. If I wanted to get really silly, I'd cycle there but age has grown and enthusiasm waned, so I settled on the train.

Jim took me to Bristol Parkway to catch the 0942 train that starts in Exeter and ends in Edinburgh. This is run by CrossCountry a train company owned by Arriva and not currently under threat of privatisation although they have been criticised by the Government for poor service. Because it is possible to buy split tickets I utilised the services of TrainPal who fixed me up with a ticket from Bristol to Edinburgh on CrossCountry and then a separate ticket from Edinburgh to Inverness on LNER, which is now owned by the tax payer. From Inverness there is a regular service to Thurso run by ScotRail, again Government controlled.

We arrived at Bristol with almost an hour to spare. The traffic through Bradford-on-Avon was as light as it gets and the M4 and M32 were flowing freely. The early morning sun was shining and I sat on a bench and enjoyed it until it was time to put the bike in a lift and make my way to the platform.

The train was pretty much on time, and I found the bike carriage, never the easiest things as the station staff never seem to know exactly where it will be, and hung the bike up by its front wheel alongside another that had travelled from further afield.





We were scheduled to arrive in Edinburgh at 17:07 giving me 26 minutes to change onto the LNER service that had come up from London on the East coast route, for the onward journey to Inverness with an arrival time of 20:08. Split tickets are fine if everything goes according to plan but, if it doesn't, you are

potentially at the mercy of rival train companies who won't accept that the fault is with them, not you.

All went well through Birmingham, the hub of CrossCountry trains, and onwards north, heading for Sheffield and the east Coast, travelling close to much of my cycle route last year. However, at Darlington, the wheels ground to a halt and we were left stationary for a while and then moving slowly. The train manager, for such is the name given to what we knew as a Guard, explained that there had been breakdowns ahead and we were suffering. The silver lining, if there was one, was the fact that the LNER train was immediately behind us and couldn't pass, so there was every chance that we would get to Edinburgh in time for me to make the change. I was able to follow this on my phone and deduced that it might be better for me to jump off the CrossCountry train at Berwick-upon-Tweed and wait on the same platform for 12 minutes and jump on the LNER train which I knew was going to Inverness. However, the station manager at Berwick told me that I was at risk of having to pay an extra fare, so I stayed where I was, knowing that I had to change platforms at Edinburgh, almost certainly involving lifts and escalators.

We duly arrived in Edinburgh an hour late and, as I suspected, because the LNER train was on a different line by now, only had about 5 minutes to make the change. I charged up escalators and bumped down steps and made it to Platform 9 as the LNER train pulled in. There was another cyclist, who was heading north for his first long distance ride, meeting a couple of friends to JOGLE in about 12 days, camping on the way. Together we found the cycle carriage which already had a couple of bikes in place. Having had the mad rush, the train then sat for a good five minutes before we were on our way! The train was full and I didn't get a seat until we were past Stirling. I've made the journey before, through Perth, Pitlochry and Aviemore and it's picturesque, especially in the evening sunshine. We sailed over Drumochter Pass, the highest point in the British rail network, and I thought of my past bike rides up it in both directions. The Scots taxpayer has funded a superb tarmac bike track that mirrors the adjacent A9 and is a joy to cycle. Finally at 2109 (and that's important) we arrived in Inverness, an hour and a minute behind schedule. There is now a rule that delays of more than 30 minutes are entitled to a refund, 50 % from 30-59 minutes and 100% from 60 -90 minutes. After that you're entitled to compensation. So, dear reader, because both legs were more than an hour behind schedule I've claimed for a full refund. LNER have confirmed, whilst I have to wait for CrossCountry to agree. So there's about £70 to come back which, as I've already accounted for it, I'll pass onto the air ambulance. The downside was that it was getting late and I hadn't eaten since breakfast. I'd purposely booked into accommodation close to the station, the Black Isle Hostel which is attached to a bar/ pizza house, itself an offshoot of the Black Isle brewery which produces a large number of different beers. Reception for the hostel was up 2 sets of stairs and was still, surprisingly, open when I arrived.

The accommodation is at first floor level and there's a lot of it. My bike went into a store room at street level, and I was booked into a 4 bed dorm with 2 sets of bunk beds. After struggling to get in because of a recalcitrant door, I dumped everything and made for the bar, just in time for a black pudding and goat's cheese pizza (very tasty) and a pint of Black Isle 60 shilling ale (£5.90 a pint). It did the job and I went back to my room to find another occupant already asleep. I was soon in a very uncomfortable bed and was disturbed at about 1 am when another couple of people turned up to make a full house. At 6 am the person who had been asleep when I arrived decided to get up and repack all his belongings in a large back pack, disturbing everyone. In the event it was totally unnecessary because, in conversation with him later, he was in no hurry to go anywhere – just a congenital worrier. After I departed, I wouldn't be at all surprised if he had unpacked and repacked again.

I had some time to kill before the train to Thurso left at 1041, so went in search of something to get the chain oil off my only pair of trousers, picked up when I was struggling to hang the bike up in the train. In the event I couldn't find what I was looking for so I'll just put up with the stains.

I got to the station with bike and panniers at about 1015 to find quite a number of bikes in the concours with more arriving by the minute. This was worrying because I know that the 2 carriage train to Thurso only has 8 bike spaces and there was a good chance that all the bikes in the station were heading that way. So, I got to the front of the queue and was first on board. In the event there was no need for panic as very few of the bikes boarded. I don't know where they were going but it wasn't Thurso or Wick. Bikes sit on a cradle rather than hanging and I found a seat alongside.



This is the third time I've made this train journey. It takes about 4 hours, stopping at 21 stations on the way, with some significant grades that really make the diesel engines work. It's a scenic journey following the coast until Helmsdale where it dodges back and forth over the Helmsdale river up to the Flow country, the largest remaining blanket bog in Europe, and then turning east towards the coast. I spotted a large herd of red deer and a hen harrier on the hunt. At Georgemas junction the train stops and reverses the 6 miles to Thurso before returning through the junction to finish its journey at Wick on the east coast. Only one other cyclist got off the train at Thurso along with a large number of hill walkers.

There is a Premier Inn beside the station but it was a lot more expensive than several alternatives and I've plumped for Pentland Lodge Hotel, B&B for £82. I have a perfectly adequate single room and the bike is in a locked shed. The owner is charming and recommended a restaurant in Scrabster, from where you can take a ferry to Orkney and Shetland, a ten minute bike ride along the coast. Owner/chef Jody Sinclair allowed me to park my bike by the kitchen and I've dined very well, if expensively, at the Galley restaurant, on a smoked mackerel Caesar salad and astonishingly fresh hake with a parmesan crust on a bed of leeks and mash, washed down with a glass of rose. My inner man is well satisfied.



It's been a lazy day with no need to rush and I'm looking forward to getting back on the bike in earnest for my first leg to Tongue 48 miles (and a lot of ups and downs) west of here, tomorrow. I travelled most of the route in the opposite direction 12 years ago but I'm making a bit of a coastal detour towards the end.

Day 1 – Tongue

After my most enjoyable meal last night I cycled back the 2 miles to Pentland Lodge without using the battery so that I had a full charge before setting off this morning. There was a bit of a climb out of Scrabster but nothing I couldn't cope with without the weight of the panniers. Lidl was conveniently next door to my lodgings, so half a bottle of South African red helped me compose the blog. I suspect that for the next few days shops will be few and far between so I'll have to make do with what's available at my hotel/hostel.

Setting off with 2 loaded panniers felt a bit precarious but I soon got used to it and made good progress west. There's a 3 mile long hill out of Thurso, not so steep as to need the motor but hard work with the lightish wind in my face, but, to make up for it, there's a similar downhill to the Forss river, one of the north coast salmon rivers that discharge into the North Atlantic. The weather forecast was for light rain at any time, so I had a showerproof jacket on and had thought to put on neoprene overshoes as my cycling shoes are my only outdoor footwear and I try to keep them dry: I carry a pair of battered deck shoes that allow me to shuffle around indoors.

A couple of miles later I spotted the familiar dome of the now decommissioned Dounreay atomic power station.

Work on a fast reactor started at Dounreay in 1955 and criticality was first achieved in 1959. It exported power to the Grid from 1962 to 1977 when it was decommissioned. A prototype fast reactor produced power from 1974-1994 but was dogged by problems and it was not until midway through its life that it achieved its designed output. All output ceased in 1994 and work to clean up the site will be ongoing for many years.





The road became a roller coaster up and down until it dropped down to the Halladale river, virtually at sea level as it makes its way slowly to the North Atlantic. Up again past Melvich to the top of the moor where I came across the Marie Curie cancer garden of hope: rather a curious thing to find in the middle of nowhere. The view across the moor to the distant sea was still



good, though it was starting to show signs of rain.



I knew from my previous journey along this road that Bettyhill was going to be the hardest climb although it is easier in this direction



Sweeping down past the Bettyhill Hotel, there was still a view over the river Naver to the Torrisdale bay beyond.



But at the bottom of the hill traffic came to a halt for roadworks to the bridge across the river and we were held for a good five minutes before we were clear to go.

I now had an option of cutting across the Borgie peninsula or following the coast which is what I did. In 2012 on the penultimate day of my first Lands End to John O'Groats I stayed in the Borgie Lodge Hotel and had an unforgettable night with the locals. This time I didn't stop but made my way



on narrow roads to Skerry Harbour in the deepening gloom although it was still not yet 2pm



I passed a pair of old thatched cottages, up for sale but not for me.



The mizzle got worse and my glasses were covered as I climbed once again onto moorland and past lochans



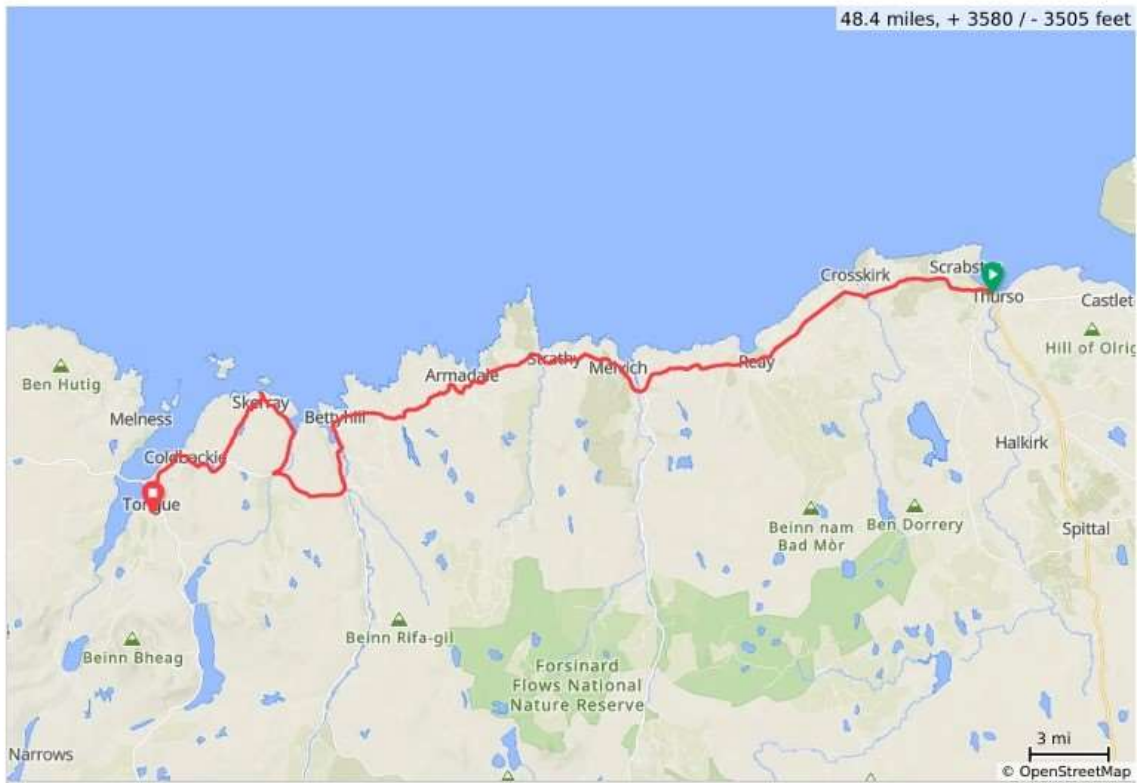
Now close to my destination I rejoined the A836 which was now a narrow road with passing places and I had to wait and be waited upon as traffic came from the other direction.

During the day I saw plenty of cyclists going east but only passed one pair going in my direction.

It was about 1445 when I pulled into the carpark of the Ben Loyal Hotel where I am staying tonight. I knew that reception didn't open until 1500 but the manager spotted me waiting and I was able to book in before the appointed hour. My bike is in a store room and I shall eat and drink in the hotel.

As you can see from the profile it's been a bit of a roller coaster and I suspect there will be more to come over the next two or three days

24/05/26



Day 2 – Windy

Ben Loyal hotel has been owned and run by the same family for 16 years. It's the only restaurant in town open to all comers - the Tongue hotel caters only for residents. The bar was buzzing with an eclectic mix of locals, bikers and people of an age who were clearly doing the North Coast 500. Guinness at £5.95 a pint was hardly a snip, but the alternatives were Scottish pish. I dined on Whitebait, nicely crisp and served with tartare sauce and a venison burger which was pleasantly juicy. I rounded it off with apple crumble and custard which was excellent – big slices of apple and a large crumb on top. If anything, the portion was too big but, after a day of cycling I felt I deserved it. The shower was nicely powerful, and the single bed was comfortable. The heating system was hit and miss – when I arrived the radiator in the room was working but it soon went off. Not that it was necessary. The weather up in Scotland is still quite cool 12-15 degrees as against the 30 degrees plus in southern England. Breakfast was not the best but filled a hole. Neither of the FSBs I've eaten so far has featured good bacon but the sausage at Ben Loyal was tasty. Scrambled eggs were tasteless and rubbery. Knowing that I had less than 50 miles to travel I decided to delay my departure as the weather was forecast to improve as the day progressed, so I finally left at 1034 in overcast conditions but no rain. There is a good

view from the hotel over the Kyle of Tongue which I snapped before leaving.



A couple of miles from the village a causeway crosses the Kyle and it was



already blowing a Force 4 as I crossed, making it an interesting journey. There is no cycle lane but the traffic was light and courteous and I made it across safely.

You are immediately into a relentless climb for about five miles, not particularly steep but the motor came on on a couple of occasions. At the top of the climb there is a nature walk around a lochan alongside an abandoned cottage. Air BnB anyone?



Still no rain and that was the case for the rest of the journey but the wind was something else blowing relentlessly from the south west at about 15-20 mph. Once I had crested the hill I swooped down with views towards the open sea in the distance



My route now followed the shores of Loch Eriboll which extends inland from the Atlantic for about 6 miles. The road is narrow with regular passing places and I was able to use these so that I did not hold up the regular traffic. Because this is on the North Coast 500 route there was an army of camper vans and cars, mostly well behaved with the occasional idiot deciding they didn't need to wait for a passing place



Oh that wind, just occasionally the lee of a hill sheltered me, but it was a joy to cross the valley at the bottom end of the loch and make my way up the other side with the wind behind me.

25 miles into the journey the road turned north west and I came across a lovely little bay with golden sands and emerald water. An enterprising soul had rigged a zip wire across the valley above the beach and there was a queue of people waiting to use it, though none did whilst I was watching



I was now close to Durness, the only habitation on this coast but before I reached the village I passed Smoo Cave, which bears the unique distinction in the UK of being the only cave system that has a cave formed by the sea joined to an inner cave formed by freshwater action. I didn't make the £15 visit though there seemed to be plenty of potential punters on this Bank Holiday. The sea has cut into the coast forming a deep inlet alongside the caves.



Now the road turned back to the south-west and the wind was, if anything strengthening. A narrow road climbed relentlessly and, mainly because of the wind, I kept the motor running. A couple of miles past the village the road runs alongside the Kyle of Durness from where you can take a foot ferry to Cape Wrath 12 miles up the coast.



Lots of stopping and starting to let traffic past for the next ten miles, appreciably uphill into the strong breeze, making it hard work until I finally arrived at the turning to Kinlochbervie. I naively thought the journey all but over but there was still 4 miles of up and down, in one case 15% down that I shall have to climb tomorrow to get back on course. Still, I arrived at the Kinlochbervie hotel at about 1630hrs and checked in and stuck Lucy in a garage overnight. Food is only available until 1900 hrs, so I'll do the usual offices and get down for food and drink at about 1800.

It's been a tiring day; but my legs are fine. Tomorrow is probably the gnarliest in terms of climbing, only 50 miles but a lot of up and down: hopefully the wind will drop.

25/05/26

Departed: May 25, 26, 10:34 AM
Starts In: Highland, Scotland
Distance: 48.3 mi
Elevation: +3,356 ft/-3,434 ft
Max Grade: 11.4%

Total Duration: 5:54
Moving Time: 5:06
Stopped Time: 0:47

Max Speed: 27.8 mph
Avg Speed: 9.5 mph

43% remaining

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Day 3 – the sun does shine

Kinlochbervie hotel looks as though it needs a bit of TLC. It's at the end of a road that goes nowhere so you have to know about it to go there. Looking it up on t'interweb it appears that it has been struck off the Companies register and resuscitated as KLB hotel but under the same Directorship. Such are the vagaries of Scottish Company Law.



Anyway the bedroom I was given had a double and single bed and a perfectly adequate bathroom with a decent shower, albeit over the bath so I had to climb into the tub. I ate in the hotel as there was no alternative. There were 8 other people in the restaurant on a Bank Holiday Monday so I guess a bit of advertising wouldn't go amiss. The mushroom arancini were perfectly good and plentiful but not fantastic. A lamb burger with a spicy sauce was well cooked and tasty and I finished off with a treacle sponge swimming in custard. Altogether a pretty good meal which coupled with a couple of pints of Thatchers Gold sent me off to the blog feeling well satisfied.

Breakfast this morning was porridge and an FSB with much better bacon and a very good black pudding. I left at about 1030 as there was little hurry to travel the 50 miles to Lochinver, although the route chosen was very hilly.

I first had to retrace my steps for 4 miles back to the main road past the sea loch that I had followed the previous night



I was now back on the A838 a wide single carriageway road with a good surface. As yesterday lots of campervans, many of them German, and motorcycles who seem to hunt in 3s or 4s Anyway the cycling was easy with most inclines no more than 6 % though occasionally I had to blip the motor. Loads of scenery which looked better for the sunshine which was now creeping through.



As you can see the gorse is in full bloom, though the heather is not. About half way I crossed this bridge at Kylesku. Until it was completed in 1984 you had to take a ferry or travel many miles out of your way



It's a handsome structure designed by Ove Arup and cost £4 million against a budget of £2.75m (plus ca change), although that looks incredibly cheap in hindsight.

A mile or so later I left the main road for the B869. Looking at the profile for the day I realised that I was probably in for a lot of climbing, and so it proved. An immediate slope in excess of 15% then flattened for a bit before again dropping at 25%. I stayed at the top and watched a couple of cyclists make their way up slowly with no motor to help. They stopped and asked about my journey. She told me that they were doing the North Coast 500 and I wished them well before proceeding. The road now went up and down like a fiddler's elbow. It would have been even more fun if there had been slightly less traffic which meant a few waits.



More breathtaking scenery looking back towards Kylesku and amazing views down to azure blue sea lochs



Strangely as the day went on the traffic reduced. I can only conclude that most of the tourists use this route in the morning because, by lunchtime the only vehicles I met were local.



Glorious little white sand beaches on the way with very few people on them

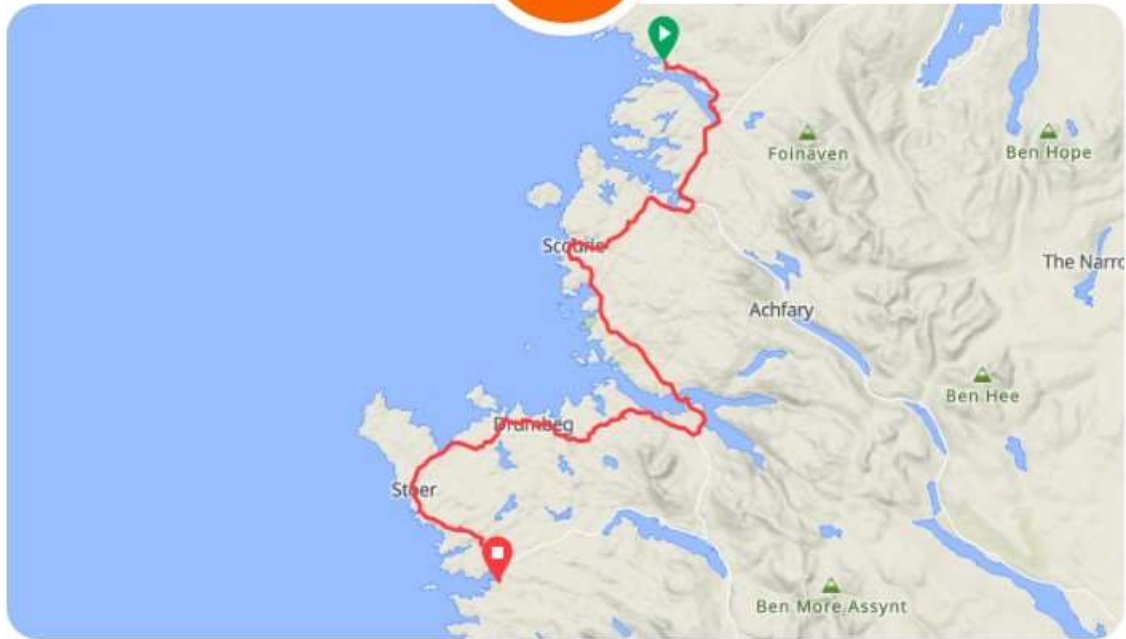


After this the road rose alarmingly to the highest pitch of the day and I had to select level 4 of the assist to get up and avoid the vehicles behind and in front of me.

The day finished in bright sunshine and yet more amazing views. Altogether it's been a most enjoyable day. It's not been overhot, no more than 12 degrees, and the wind that spoiled yesterday has died down.

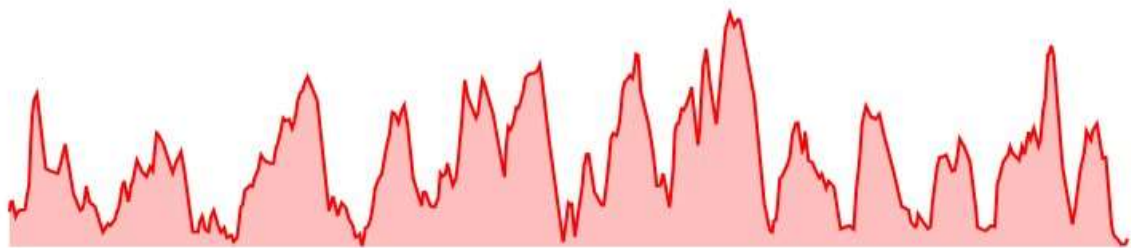


I arrived at Lochinver, a thriving little fishing port with a tourist industry, at about 1630 and eventually, after much trying, managed to get into the Hostel where I am staying the night. It's not great but it's a bed and I'll find somewhere to eat in due course.



26/05/26

51 **4,809** **5:13**
miles feet hours



 •  RWGPS Android

Day 4 – Getting Laide

I knew that I was staying in a Hostel and the price reflected the fact that I was in a 4 bunk bed mixed dorm. The entrance to the Bunkhouse was up a set of steep stairs and at the top was a keypad to open the door. I'd been sent joining instructions a while back but couldn't get the numbers to work, however much I tried. Eventually I found a number to ring, and it transpired that the numbers had been changed but I hadn't been told. Once the new code was entered all was well. The problem with being in a room with others is that you can't just spread out. In a hotel I just upend the panniers and do my charging and washing in my own good time. In a dorm you have to respect your room-mates and be a bit tidier, I eventually found a double power point hiding behind the bunks and purloined both to charge battery and phones so that was the number one priority taken care of.



The next problem was food: the hostel was called the An Cala Café and Bunkhouse and I'd assumed that I would be able to eat both in the evening and for breakfast today: unfortunately not, without any reason given there was no food available. When I arrived, I found a fellow hosteller Liz from the Wirral who was on a Highland sketching holiday, and she guided me towards the Culag hotel just around the corner. In the event it was really quite good. A couple of pints of Mc Ewen 80 shilling, a thick vegetable broth that was under-seasoned but rescued with salt and pepper and a bit of mayo and a very nicely cooked breadcrumb haddock and chips. Cherry pie and custard finished the deal. The cost of eating out has increased exponentially and £45-50 now seems to be the going rate for a three course meal. I was able to write the blog whilst eating and make use of the hotel Wi-fi which was infinitely superior to that at the hostel. So blog written and published earlier than I would have managed and back to the hostel after a look around the harbour. Lochinver used to be a deep sea fishing port but now mainly lands shellfish



My roomie was Sue, a Brit who has been living in USA for a while and uncertain whether she wants to go back there. She was walking and trout fishing in the abundant locks. Last night she was on a long conference call followed by an even longer chat with a friend and she was kind enough to vacate the room so that I could go to bed. She and two others eventually followed. I didn't sleep well but I rested enough that I didn't feel drained this morning. Breakfast was a problem as there was nowhere close by, but Liz was kind enough to donate some bacon, as she claimed that she wouldn't be able to eat it all before she goes home tomorrow. There was some Hostel bread, so I had a sarnie and a cuppa to see me on my way on what looked to be a sunny day

My route took me out into the country on some lovely narrow roads, similar to the ones I was on last evening with stunning views in all directions.



Azure blue seas and lochs are the expectation and mountains, some of them Munros (anything over 3000 feet) surrounded me most of the day.



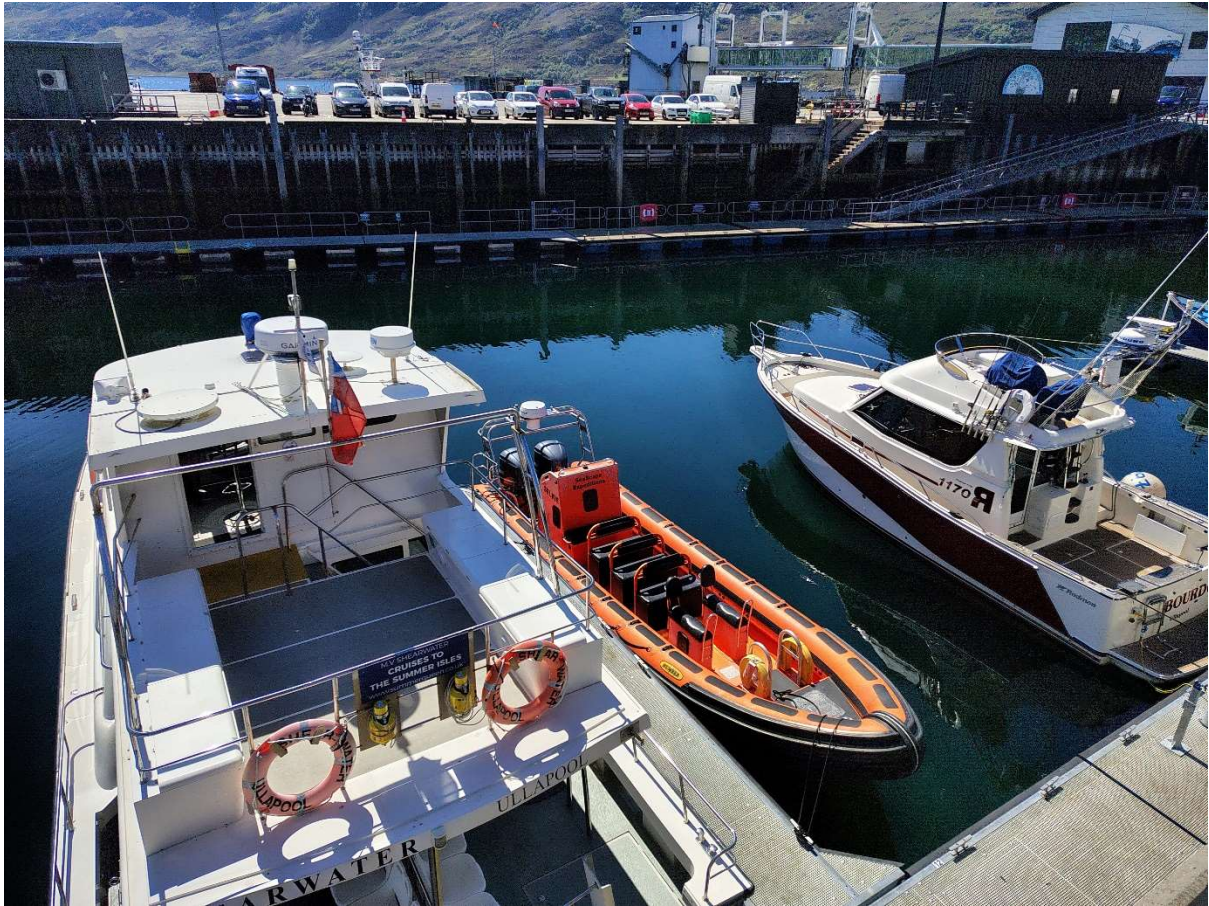
I was straight into some serious climbing that reminded me of the Pyrenees but the motor made it almost enjoyable. I was on back roads for the first 20 miles with little traffic



Riding the entire length of Loch Lurgainn before joining the A835 a nice wide and well surfaced road that allowed me to make good time to Ullapool, the largest settlement in Wester Ross with a population of 1500.



The town sits on the edge of Loch Broom, a significant natural harbour that hosts the Calmac ferry to Stornoway on the Isle of Lewis. It was about 1230 so I decided to stop for a sausage and bacon roll and a cuppa which I enjoyed whilst watching a sightseeing boat docking expertly with bow and stern thrusters working hard.



I continued on the main road the entire length of Loch Broom until the A832 branched off right at Corrieshalloch Gorge about 43 miles into the journey. This was fortuitous as Scottish National Trust have a visitor centre where I replenished my water bottle and topped up my energy with a lemon curd éclair. I didn't visit the gorge but there were plenty of people there. It's about a mile long, 200 feet deep and 33 feet wide.

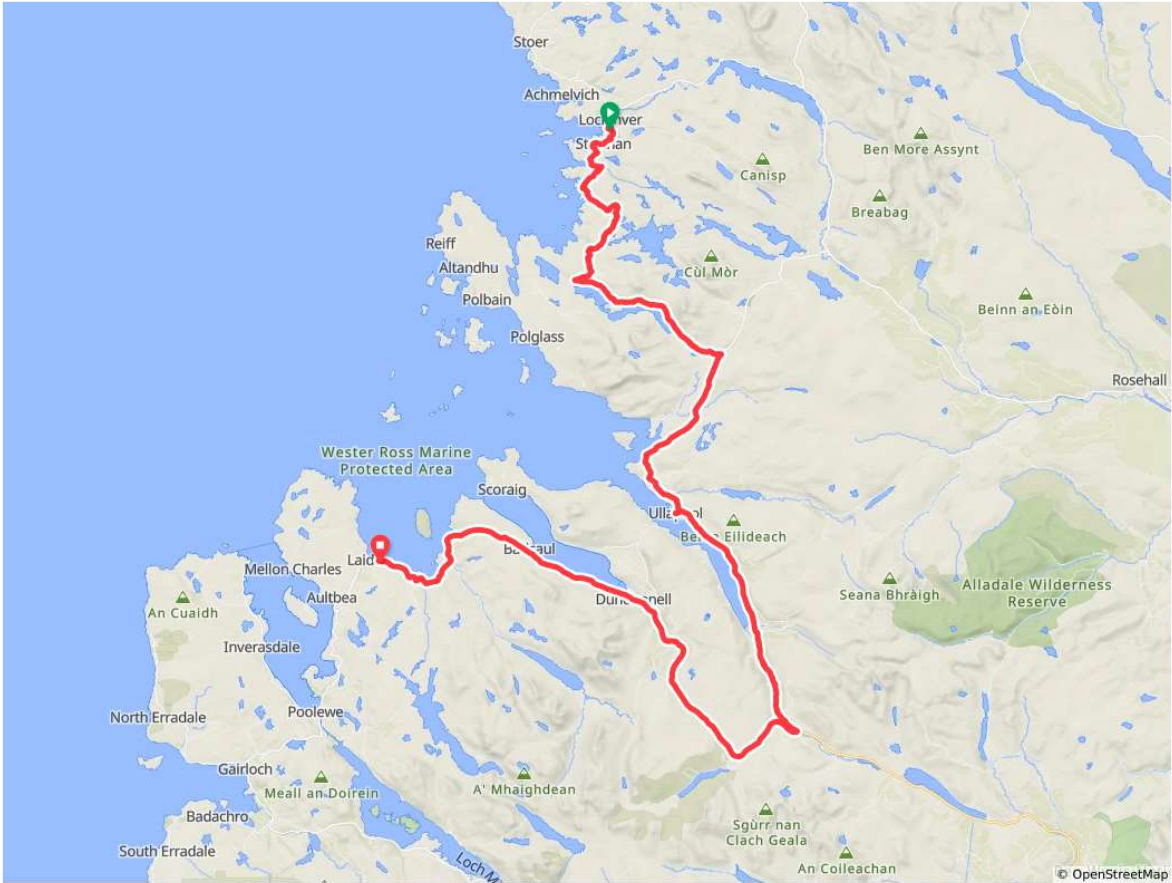


The A832 continued upwards, not steeply and in the sunshine it was a fun ride as the road is wide and the traffic light. It crested out after about 4 miles and then descended more steeply. Part way down road works led to a convoy system and I was lucky enough to be tail end Charlie which meant that the next ten miles were completely free of traffic behind me.

Back down to sea level at Little Loch Broom with about 13 miles left to cycle. I was getting quite weary and the sun had turned my knees red



Despite Gruinard Bay, which is the stretch of water opposite my hotel, being the same level as Little Loch Broom....(obviously) I had to climb over two substantial headlands before arriving at Ocean View hotel, Laide at about 1700hrs.



71.7 mi
DISTANCE

5,358 ft
ELEVATION GAIN

6 h 44 m
MOVING TIME



 RWGPS Android

Day 5 Laide-Applecross



Gruinard island lies in the bay directly opposite the Ocean View Hotel where I stayed last night. Its notoriety is now largely forgotten but in 1942 it was requisitioned by the British Government to conduct tests into germ warfare with a view to spreading anthrax to the German population and hasten the end of the war. Fortunately for the world it never happened but it seems amazing that we would even contemplate such warfare. Scientists from Porton Down took 80 sheep to the 520 acre island and exploded anthrax bombs to see what would happen. Success was absolute with all sheep dying within days, but the problem then was that the anthrax spores remained in the soil making the island unusable. At the end of the war the owner asked for the island to be returned, but it wasn't until 1986 that a serious attempt to decontaminate the island was made using formaldehyde and only in 1990 were the original owners allowed to re-purchase the island for £500.

The Ocean View Hotel sits on its own about a mile from the village of Laide. My room was a small single: it couldn't have been much smaller with a cupboard containing the shower and loo and a basin in the room. I washed everything and hung it to dry in the window which was enjoying the evening sun and a bit of a breeze: all was dry by bedtime. There was a good bar and I enjoyed a couple of pints of McEwens keg ale. Supper was a choice between

salads and pizza. I chose some garlic bread for a starter and followed it with a seafood pizza. All fine and after my lunchtime roll sufficient.

Breakfast was cold buffet including some of the best and thickest yoghurt I've ever seen. There was some salami and cheese to go with the bread rolls and toast. I ate sufficient.

I set off at 0911 and made my way through the village of Laide which has a post office and general stores with filling station attached. There was a steepish hill out of the village which got the blood pumping and I was then into much the same up and down that I've experienced since the start of the trip. I was tempted to call in at the Arctic Convoy Museum but it had not yet opened for the day so I sped past. I rejoined the coast at Poolewe, large enough to have a primary school and a couple of hotels. There was a charming rustic bench to enjoy the views over the bay



The village is also home to Inverewe Gardens, famous for sub-tropical plants and exotic species.

It seems that every time I get down to sea level, I'm immediately faced with a stiff climb over the next headland and this was no exception, needing the motor for a lot of the way. Great views from the top over Loch Ewe with a strange jetty with lots of satellite dishes on it



Once over the hill it was a swoop down to Gairloch, quite a substantial village with a population of 600 and a Co-op supermarket. I went in looking for suncream as my knees and thighs are roasting but I couldn't find any so moved on. The road follows the shores of its eponymous loch before ramping up again. I was overtaken by a lady cyclist who I saw later in the day on her return trip. I stopped by an unnamed loch and took this picture which seemed to my mind to show a crocodile emerging from the water



As you can see a cloudless sky and bright sunshine. The road now descended to Loch Maree which I followed for most of her full length although the view was largely obscured by trees. On the opposite side of the Loch was the imposing mountain Slioch



whilst to my right was a chain of peaks including Beinn Eighe. This is the Torrison Hills that I skirted round for the middle part of the day. At the end of Loch Maree if the village of Kinlochewe where I stopped at the general stores for 1.5 litres of water as it was thirsty work in the 20 degree heat. Here the road divides, the A832 on which I had ben travelling carries on towards Inverness whilst I took the A896. This was single track for most of the way with the Torrison peaks lowering menacingly on my right.



The clouds were gathering and I expect rain for the next couple of days at least. This road was quite gentle, climbing sedately before descending much more sharply to the sea at Annat where I had to step aside to allow a sheep farmer to transport livestock hurdles that covered the width of the road.



More ups and downs until I reached Shildaig where I left the main road and encountered the steepest climbs of the day. Unfortunately a large number of camper vans and motor cyclists also decided it was a good route. It twisted and turned with pitches up to 17%, definitely not good roads for large vehicles and I had to take to the verge on a couple of occasions. Also along this road the Council was laying fresh tarmac which is not a great surface for cycling and I felt most unsafe as I made my way through. However there were great views as a reward





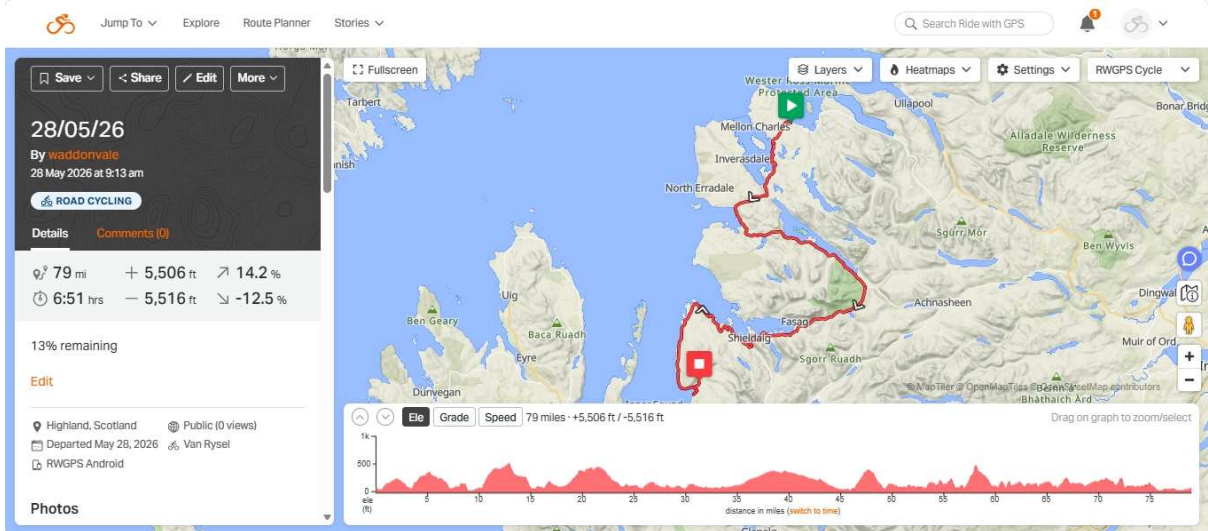
Now about ten miles from my destination I was feeling very weary and fortunately once I turned the corner and headed south the road was a bit less hilly. I looked across at the island of Raasay and, in the distance, Skye which I shall visit tomorrow



As I'm staying in hostel I realised that I should have to find food elsewhere so made my way to the village of Applecross where I had excellent haddock and chips with a couple of pints of Applecross brewery Pale Ale, hoppy and good. There were a lot of like-minded people.



Tomorrow I'm almost certain to get wet. I will get a continental breakfast at the hostel before setting off about 64 miles to Skye and the ferry to Mallaig which I've already booked.



Day 6 - Let the wind blow high let the wind blow low

Whilst I was enjoying my fish and chips and the local Pale Ale at Applecross last evening I got chatting with Stewart, a dry stone waller from Derbyshire who'd packed his wife and kids off to Barcelona whilst he did the North Coast 500 on a motorbike. He'd covered most of the ground I've been cycling, albeit much more quickly, and, undoubtedly, passed me on the way. A couple of my age sat down at the same table and joined the conversation. He's a keen fisherman and looking to explore the local lochs. A pleasant hour or so chatting before I went off to book into the Hartfield Bunkhouse, about a mile from the village up a long driveway. Part way there I was somewhat surprised to meet a red deer hind crossing the road.



I'd booked a room to myself, but it was a double bunk nonetheless. Next door was a shared shower and loo: I'm not sure how many were sharing it but I was able to shower when I got in and, this morning, got in without undue delay.

There seemed to be quite a number of French people staying.

For an extra £5.50 I got a packed breakfast, a couple of croissants (very good), butter, jam, a small portion of cheese and a carton of orange juice – not all that generous but it gave me a start.

I don't know why but everywhere I've been so far, I've heard loads of cuckoos and there were a couple going at it this morning.

The weather forecast was terrible with light rain and strong winds threatened throughout the day. I set off at 0834 because I was due to catch a ferry from the

Isle of Skye to the mainland and would rather arrive early and wait, than miss it. It was spitting with rain and the cloud was low on the hills but the wind didn't seem too bad. It clearly wasn't going to be a day for photography, indeed the camera has stayed firmly inside my pocket all day.

After cycling the mile or so back to the village I embarked on what was going to be the biggest climb of the day, just over 5 miles from sea level to 2055 feet, over the Applecross Pass. The gradients weren't steep but the road was narrow with passing places. On the way three red deer crossed the road in front of me. I got about half-way, and the wind was picking up to gale force, to the extent that I had to stop and GOAP for fear that I was going to be blown off the road and down a steep slope. After a couple of hundred yards, I rounded a corner and was able to get back on and cycle a bit further, but the road snaked again and I was brought to an abrupt halt. Fortunately, at that moment, a camper van stopped alongside me and asked if I needed help, which I very much did. Steve and his wife and dog had been touring the Highlands for the week in their newly acquired campervan. He pulled over and put my bike in the back, and I rode with them to the top of the Pass and back down to sea level before I got out and we went our separate ways. Steve is a tree surgeon from County Durham and does some Enduro mountain biking, and was kindness itself. Heaven knows how I would have got over the pass otherwise.

At the bottom of the pass, I'd covered about 12 miles of the 64 I was due to cycle and used about 50% of the battery which was a bit alarming. The road followed the seashore until, just past Stromeferry the navigators suggested I turn right down what looked like an alarmingly steep hill with goodness knows what to come. I knew that staying on the main road would get me to Kyle of Lochalsh and reckoned I was better to stay on a main road than chance what the side roads would throw at me. In the event it was a mistake. The main road climbed higher and took a more indirect route, as I can see looking at the maps after I finished. Easy to be wise after the event but the extra climbing had taken its toll on the battery. I had to get over the Skye bridge, in good weather an easy feat but with the strong winds I was concerned that I would either be banned from cycling over it or be in danger of being blown off. As it happened it was no problem as the wind was blowing directly in my face and the road was sheltered by the topography. No pictures from my camera but here's one from t'internet



I could see it from a long way off as I approached Kyle Of Lochalsh but it seemed to take forever before I crossed it, now becoming quite concerned by the amount of battery I had used. The only way to Skye before the bridge were ferries at Kyle of Lochalsh and Armadale and although a bridge had been proposed at the end of the 19th century it was not until 1971 that it was constructed with private finance that was to be re-imbursed by tolls. Over the following twenty years mass protests at the level of the toll led to fines and imprisonment for non-payment until, following the creation of the Scottish Parliament the tolls were heavily subsidised. Finally following intense political pressure, the Scottish Executive agreed to buy out the PFI holders for £27 million and tolls ceased

Once on Skye the terrain was not too lumpy but, with the wind still in my face it was hard work to make progress without the motor. I still had about 24 miles to travel to Armadale where I was booked onto the Calmac ferry to Mallaig leaving at 1645. At least time was not a concern as I had 3.5 hours to make the connection, but I finally arrived at the port with a virtually empty battery. But I made it and arrived in Mallaig at about 1715 and booked into the Marine Hotel, conveniently located in the town centre.

Not a day I shall remember fondly and it looks as though there's more bad weather to come!

