

Inspired by the movie "The Bucket List," along with the cosmic alignment of certain stars and enthusiastic encouragement from my wife, Shelli, I chose this year to fulfill a decades-long dream to cycle Great Britain from end to end.

The standard tour is between the far southwest corner at Land's End (yep, there really is a place called Land's End) and the far northeast corner at John O'Groats, Scotland. The nominal distance is 874 miles and is known by the initials LE-JOG. Hundreds of folks a year aspire to the trip, either by cycle, on foot or with some exotic idea (one guy reportedly tried this in the nude). Both Lands End and John O'Groats are distinguished by a pub, a hotel, souvenir shop and a directional sign.



The journey begins

I found three tour companies that lead LE-JOG for cyclists: Peak Tours, Saddle Skedaddle and Bike Adventures. Each has its own prerequisites and distinct personality. I chose Peak Tours. Their route is just under 1,000 miles through rural areas, small villages and along country lanes, and focuses as having fun along the way as much on getting to the end. Peak Tours recommended a hybrid bike mainly because some of the routes are on gravel paths (with hard surface alternative). Several of the riders did fine on road bikes using Gator Skin or equivalent tires. After weighing the difficulties of shipping my road bike, I chose to rent a hybrid from Peak Tours.



British Cycle Path

The ride turned out to be everything promised and more. We visited the villages that an average tourist never sees and we traveled roads even the native Brits did not know existed. Some of the cycle paths were so overgrown with flowers that we had to push them aside as we cycled through, or were canopied over with arching trees. Our overnight stops were typically in centuries-old inns. My favorite for quaint was a twelfth century inn known as "Hark to Bounty" in the village of Slaidburn. The halls were narrow and the floors creaked. I walked through the medieval era courtroom on the second floor to get to my

room. The village of Slaidburn was just large enough for one store that sold everything from food to clothes.

Another of my favorite spots was the village of Clun in the Welsh marches (the border area between Wales and England). The choice for entering Clun was either to ford a stream (my choice) or cross a bridge from the Roman era.



Going into Clun

The route we followed was a challenge to navigate, especially for me as a foreigner. In general, the idea is "Here is a bicycle, here are directions. Lunch is 34 miles away at the pub in Bomere Heath. See you there." No one marked the road with arrows. In practice, though, I usually rode with someone else in order to share the navigation operation.

As the only American among 20 native Brits, I tried to learn all I could about their everyday life. They responded happily, especially laughing at my feeble understanding of the distinctively British game of Cricket and showing me how to survive a British round-about. I tried some of their dishes. Their steak and ale pie or fish and chips were among my favorites. The luxury of the morning coffee break was a cream tea that includes a scone with clotted cream (something between butter and whipped cream) and jam. Mashy peas turned out to taste fermented. Someone explained that mashy peas are "an acquired taste." After one attempt I chose garden peas next time. In Scotland, however, I drew the line on haggis, which is made of parts of sheep that no one else wants.

One of my traveling companions commented his own countrymen, stating that "we British tend to speak the truth in a rather bleak fashion." This attitude was quite evident in a dour farmer we engaged in a short conversation late one rainy morning. He was dressed in oilskins with rain dripping from his hat, slogging through the muck to his barn. One of the riders asked, "Is it going to go clear today?" "Yes," he replied. Then he took another plodding, weary step and finished somberly, "till it rains again."

There were some distinctive stages to the ride. The first few days were through Cornwall across rolling hills through scenic farmland. The hills seemed to be overlaid with a quilt of pastures and fields with varying shapes and shades of green, decorated with white sheep. The whole was stitched together with hedgerows and aged stone walls.



Rolling hills in Cornwall

We crossed the Dartmoor, which was the setting for Doyle's "Hound of the Baskervilles" and where sheep and horses run wild. Along the Welsh marches the land was a little flatter and included a brief stop at Tintern Abbey, a beautiful and peaceful setting on the Wye River valley. After skirting around the urban area near Liverpool, we headed up through the stunning Lake District. Here are high mountains lush with green pastures and with streams rushing over stones into clear blue



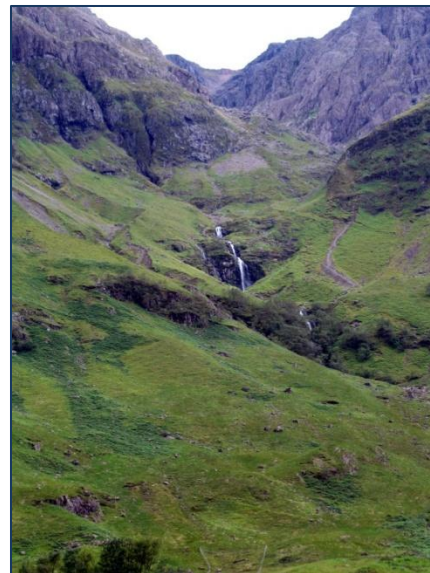
Tintern Abbey

lakes. No picture can capture the overwhelming sense of beauty. Those who sped by in autos could not drink in the awe-inspiring nature of the area.

The border between England and Scotland marked approximately the halfway point for our trip. We were greeted in the first town, Gretna Green, with typical Scottish weather - rainy skies and chilly temps. While

Georgia was sweating with 100 degree days, I was shivering at 50 wet degrees. My Georgia rain gear was insufficient so I bought a new jacket. I was not excited about the day's ride through the urban blight in the Scottish city of Glasgow, having enjoyed the back roads and rural areas, but that was our last urban spot.

After leaving Glasgow we were soon treated with a ride along the "bonnie banks of Loch Lomond" and the most beautiful valley in Scotland, the noteworthy Glen Coe. This valley is surrounded by rugged mountains green with pastures, accented by moors with blooming heather. The many streams run cold and a little brown as they spring from the peat. The smoky flavor of peat in the water gives Scotch whiskey its distinctive taste. Just as I turned from the breath-taking descent through Glen Coe, two military jets thundered through the valley, flying below the tops of the mountains. Entering the village of Glen Coe I was reminded of the north Georgia town of Helen, except this is the real thing.



Glen Coe

Our trip carried us from the west coast of Scotland toward the northeast, from Ft William through Ft. Augustus beside Loch Ness and up to Inverness. The route along the east side of Loch Ness (General Wade's Military Road) promised the hardest climb, one that I would relate for distance and grade to Hogpen Gap on Highway 348 in north Georgia, though this one was only 4-5 miles. There was a friendly competition for king of the mountains. The award went to two riders with times under 28 minutes. My time was around an hour.



The marker at the top of our hardest climb

The last two days of the ride were through the bleak and barren north of Scotland. The economic value of the land is to raise sheep, grow trees, collect peat and cater to a few tourists. Someone observed that we were near the same latitude as Juneau, Alaska. As an unexpected treat, though, one night the local pub had musicians playing traditional Scottish tunes, an event called a ceilidh, (pronounced **kay-lee**). On my last day a talkative sheep farmer (actually called a "crofter") invited me to film his sheep as they were being sheared.

Over the two weeks I shot some great pictures of landscape, people and milestones, but there were some scenes that I just could not capture. Once, early in the trip, we rode quickly through a small Cornish town, past St. Joseph's Hospice. Just as I sped by I spotted a elderly gentleman, decked in coat and tie, bent slightly with age, carrying a bag and entering the hospice. He was framed by the doorway and the sign overhead announcing the name. This was a scene that I could have crawled into: was he going for himself or a life-long friend, or even to see his

beloved wife? What were his memories and thoughts? On the other extreme, a few days later, I spotted two small lads, maybe 8 and 11 who were decked out in their Sunday best, each holding a handful of wildflowers, and standing tiptoe, looking down the road expectantly.

The road at the end was littered with folks (not in our tour group) who did not complete the journey. I met one fellow

who was 4 days out heading south from JOG who swore he would never ride a bicycle again. I doubt he made it much further. Another started with noble plans and a loaded bike trailer. He had thrown off one of his rucksacks after about 30 miles from the start and had major mechanical issues after 50 miles. Another reached Inverness, two days from the end, and surrendered, unwilling to make the final 140 miles across the barren, empty moors of northern Scotland.



The bleak moors of the north

The conclusion of the ride at JOG was time for celebration, pats on the back and the British expression "well done!". Through sun and rain, climbs and plains, we had made it: 1000 miles in 14 days. Though we had been strangers at the start, we understood at the end the camaraderie of facing a difficult challenge together, with appreciation for the friendship and support each had offered the other during our two weeks together. It was not just the contentment of reaching a destination, there had been a great happiness to be found in the journey.



Began as strangers, ended as friends