

THE GOOD AND THE GREAT



With wheels, feet and paddle, our intrepid band of adventurers takes on the beautiful Great Glen Way, enjoying some of Scotland's most breath-taking sights (and whiskies)

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It is of course possible to drive Scotland's Great Glen Way, from Fort William in the north to Inverness, and you would certainly be wowed by the fabulous scenery and stunning waterways. But travelling under your own steam, by bike, on foot and in a canoe, between the Glen's northernmost and southernmost distilleries, adds a trove of sights and sensations to the experience. Include a rucksack, bulging with Society whiskies, and you have an adventure worthy of the name.

For moral support - and, I partly suspect, to guard my precious liquid cargo - I shared my whisky odyssey

with two members of the Unfiltered design team; the rugged Renny Hutchison and dashing James Cargill.

Starting at the glen gateway town of Fort William made perfect sense. There's a train station for cyclists arriving by rail - and the welcoming but tucked away Ben Nevis Distillery, where we are greeted and regaled with stories by distillery manager Colin Ross. Ben Nevis has a colourful recent history, having been bought and sold several times over the decades, and many of the workers have been around long enough to tell you all about it.

A strong coffee and a sip of the robust 10-year-old dram gave us fuel for the first

leg of our journey by mountain bike. The distillery boasts one of Scotland's most famous natural landmarks as its neighbour, the magnificent Ben Nevis, which stands the tallest peak in the UK at 4,409ft (1,344m).

As if under guardianship of the Great Glen gods, the weather for our early Spring expedition was amazingly favourable and included a gentle tailwind to send us speeding along on our mountain bikes on the flat Caledonian Canal towpath.

The canal, designed by Scottish engineer Thomas Telford, was built in the early 1800s and joins together



a series of natural lochs to create a 62-mile transport link from the Scottish west coast to the east coast.

At Corpach, near Fort William, we stare in wonder at the UK's longest flight of locks, known as the Neptune Staircase. This stunning feat of engineering takes boats on an average 90-minute descent through eight locks and down 64ft (20m) from Loch Linnhe to the man-made canal.

Pedalling our brand-new hire bikes (courtesy of Alpine Bikes, www.alpinebikes.com) it is a delight to discover that cycling pace and height affords far greater scenic rewards than looking out of a car window. The rich

chocolate-peaty coloured water of the canal frequently glitters with early spring sunshine and the surrounding mountains seem all the mightier, veering steeply upwards from the glen's base.

A palette of gorgeous reds, russets, browns, oranges and purples paint the mountain sides, contrasting with snow left on the peaks by the recent winter and the first signs of fresh spring-time greenery.

More bright colours are spotted at Moy Swing Bridge, this time in the shape of the holiday barge Fingal, run by Caledonian Discovery and traveling the length of Great Glen Way throughout the summer.

Owner Martin Balcombe and his

dog Bracken welcome us aboard for a cup of tea. "The Great Glen offers a fabulous playground for all ages," says Martin, who readily agrees that the tea should be swapped for a wee dram of Cask No. 3.199: Life is a Beach.

The Fingal - and a new sister barge called Ros Crana - begin their 2013 season this Easter.

"Mmmm, bags of sweetness, scallops and toasted marshmallows. Like a hug in a glass," comments Renny, savouring the 3.199.

"Lovely aromas of vanilla and such a light and sweet, tingling taste," adds James.





The barge-based dram gave me a summery taste, reminding me of carefree days in childhood, when a cycling adventure took in a river-side picnic on a sunny day.

Tempting as it was to stay a while longer on the barge and drink another dram or two in the sun, we had an adventure to pursue, so with the aftertaste of *Life is a Beach* on our lips we set off again on our bikes.

Further along the glen, at the tiny village of Gairloch, the impressive views widen to take in Loch Lochy and the trail turns to wonderfully winding single-track. Focusing on the path ahead and making the most of front-suspension and fat, grippy bike tyres, we zoom along the tree-lined shoreline, enjoying the swooping and rolling route.

A short uphill takes us on to a section of quiet country road, which passes the entrance to Achnacarry, the former

home of Clan Cameron and now a museum. The story goes that in the 1700s, clan chief Donald Cameron fought for Bonnie Prince Charlie at the famous Battle of Culloden and became, like him, a fugitive in the Highlands before his escape to France. From a hiding place in the hills nearby he witnessed the burning of the original Achnacarry House by government soldiers.

Our own historic journey is far less fraught - but looking for a change of pace

and a fresh challenge we decide to leave the bikes with our support crew (the photographer Peter) and run a hillier 7.5-mile section of the glen to Laggan Locks.

Fuelled by jelly babies - "How nice it would be to have whisky flavoured jelly babies," we mused - and bottles of water, we set off at a steady pace, grimacing and puffing a little on the uphills and grinning on the downhills.

If driving the Great Glen, the A82 sticks to the east of Loch Lochy. Our west-side



“ We look across at the piles of dry driftwood and embark on fun-filled fire building that results in a warming blaze and the perfect accompaniment to another sip of 29.121 ”

jog, on the undulating forest trail, via a mixture of birch, elm, oak, rowan and commercially planted conifers, is a world away. Far from the sounds of zooming traffic, we enjoy breath-taking tranquillity and impressive loch-level vistas. Loch Lochy is in fact the third deepest loch in Scotland and is said to be the home of Lizzie, a sister of the Loch Ness Monster.

From here, the Great Glen Way heads first along the line of the old railway. Built between 1896 and 1903, the line, from Spean Bridge to Fort Augustus, was closed in 1933 and was last used during World War II before being dismantled. It now offers a lovely, flat off-road cycling and walking route.


Continuing along the shores of pretty Loch Oich, and through the native woodland of the Letterfeirn Nature Reserve, the trail becomes a little more challenging with lots of gnarly tree roots to negotiate and more ups and downs. Seeing a driftwood-strewn beach just before the Bridge of Oich, we decide on a snack stop. Another SMWS bottle neatly packed into a rucksack encourages a tasting with the drinking tip: “A nice outdoors dram - especially on the beach - anytime, with or without food.”

Delighting in the aromas of Cask No. 29.121: Seafood Party on the Beach, I smell hints of the sea, mixed with smoky tobacco and oaked wood.

There’s a little taste of barbecues on the tongue, mixed with something sweet.

“It makes me think of camping and beach fires,” adds Renny. And, as if on cue, we all look across at the piles of dry driftwood and embark on a fun-filled fire building activity that results in a warming blaze and the perfect accompaniment to another sip of 29.121.

With only a few miles to reach our hotel for the night and a flat towpath, sandwiched between the Caledonian Canal and the winding River Oich, we make quick progress on our bikes, nursing slightly tiring leg muscles.

Beyond Kytra Lock, located next to a neat lock-keepers cottage, another 



flight of locks leads us down the towpath to Fort Augustus, the gateway town of splendid Loch Ness.

Well rested at The Lovat hotel and refuelled on a superb Scottish breakfast, the second day of the tour looks set to be just as fine, and aided by more tailwinds. While Loch Ness can often be the dramatic scene of white horses and heart-in-the-mouth cross winds, our trip is blessed with a mirror-like perfection.

Loch Ness is the second largest Scottish loch by surface area, after the more southerly Loch Lomond, but due to its great depth, it is the largest by volume.

Today we decide to detour from the

official Great Glen Way on the west side of Loch Ness and instead canoe, then run and cycle the amazingly quiet eastern shores. Our Canadian canoes are delivered to the southernmost banks of the loch by Monster Activities and we head off for the loch-side village of Foyers.

Despite this being James and Renny's first time in a Canadian canoe, they quickly pick up the paddling technique. Good weather makes for speedy progress and we enjoy the gentle stillness of the loch and awesome views north along Loch Ness and up towards the high-rise mountain-scape of the glen.

Spotting the infamous monster would

obviously have made our day, but we have our eyes more firmly peeled on the eastern lochside as we search for a hill to run. There are many waymarked wildlife and walking trails on the banks of Loch Ness, and one such route heads gently upwards to a hilltop with yet more fabulous panoramas.

Recent heather burning had left much of the hillside scarred black, and the not-unpleasant scent of barbecues and charring prompted a re-tasting of SMWS Cask No. 93.53: Ricotta Sorbet Ice cream. We had enjoyed a dram of 93.53 the night before in The Lovat lounge, but sipping it outdoors brought so many more flavours

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Monster Activities' four legged assistant Juno keeps track of the kayak

to the mouth.

“Charcoal, charred meat and blackcurrants,” said Renny. “Heathery, leather, something salty and a bit of vinegar,” added James. The aroma that caught my senses was pepper and a wood-burning fire, while the taste was of (more) toasted marshmallows.

Chatting animatedly about how you can't beat a dram in the great outdoors, we jump on our mountain bikes for the truly splendid, mostly downhill, bike ride on the B862 towards the Highland capital of Inverness.

Cycling mountain bikes on tarmac is



not the easiest way to travel - and certainly the slick tyres of a road racer would speed up the journey - but we are in no rush.

Our final destination, north west of Inverness, is the Glen

Ord Distillery. Taking the path past a less than inspiring maltings, we eventually came to the beautiful rambling stone buildings of the distillery itself. We're met by a young apprentice, who shows us round and chats to us about life at Glen Ord.

“A lot of the guys have been here most of their lives,” he said. “I'm learning a lot about whisky-making, but also

about the way the industry used to be, which I think is important too.”

Propping our bikes against the feet-thick wall of the old warehouse, we reward ourselves on completing the Great Glen Whisky Tour with a tasting of their signature malts, the Singleton, 12-year-old, 15-year-old and 18-year-old.

The 15-year-old “has the scent of freshly cut grass on a spring day.” says Renny. “I smelt some of that this weekend while we were cycling the glen.”

“It makes me think of summer and new adventures,” adds James.

I taste something bittersweet; something tasted and enjoyed, yet now finished. Rather like our fabulous Great Glen Whisky Tour. 🍷

Please note: Drinking and cycling is never a good idea, so our adventurers limited themselves to sips or nosing on the road



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