

Trish and Fraser: Lands End John O'Groats 2011



When? June / July 2011

Who? Trish Greenhalgh (52) and Fraser Macfarlane (55)

How far / how long? 989 miles, 14 days

Why? Celebrating 25 years together (24 of them married)

Route: Adapted CTC 'youth hostel' route (but didn't stay in youth hostels), small detour into Yorkshire Dales

His bike: Bob Jackson custom 853 tourer, 11/28 and 30/39/52 gears, 700 x 25c wheels

Her bike: Paul Villiers custom 853 'Randonneur', 12/27 and 30/39/52 gears, 700 x 25c wheels

Kit: Specialized touring shoes, cycle shorts, leg/arm warmers, thermal base layer, jersey x2, waterproof jacket/trousers, overshoes, evening wear (Ron Hills + polo shirt), spare T shirt, underwear, toothbrush

Tools/spares: Puncture repair kit, 2 tubes, multi-tool (Allen keys, link extractor, tyre levers), mini track pump, CO₂ canisters, chain lube, 3 spare spokes, lightweight lights, 2 water bottles each, energy bars

Gadgets: iPhone, Blackberry, chargers, GPS, Camera

Getting to start: Train London to Penzance (book via www.thetrainline.com, book bike places on 0871 244 1545); cycle 11 miles to Lands End, stayed in Lands End Hotel.

Getting home: Specialist cycle carrier/taxi John o'Groats to Inverness (www.johnogroatsbikettransport.co.uk); sleeper train Inverness to London Euston (book via thetrainline, book bike places via ScotRail on 08457 55 00 33).

Day 1: Lands End to Golant (65 miles)

Terrain: Hilly

High points: The very first hour. Learning to manoeuvre loaded bikes on narrow lanes in the thick early morning fog. High hedgerows strung with giant cobwebs and specked with irregular colour from wild flowers (cornflowers, poppies) like daubs of impressionist paint. Being overtaken by a tight peloton of riders with smart bikes and Lance Armstrong cadence – and catching them up 9 miles later when they stopped to adjust their kit.

Low points: None yet!

Cornwall has: China clay, tin mines, villages beginning with Tre, obscure saints, pasties, seafood, hippies, carnivals, its own language.

Stayed at: Cormorant Hotel (very special, very pricey). Celebrated Fraser's 55th birthday in the evening with nouvelle cuisine and fine wine, overlooking River Fowey.



Day 2: Golant to Exeter (78 miles)

Terrain: Very hilly.

High points: Coming down off Dartmoor on the hottest day of the year, sky ablaze overhead, wind rushing in our ears, tarmac whizzing by beneath us, wild ponies nuzzling their foals on the open moor beside us. The downhill bends seemed to go on for miles, ending in a gentle freewheel through shady forest.

Low point: Climbing Dartmoor's dreaded Pork Hill before the above. Unremitting gradient, sun directly over us like a big yellow bully, tourist coaches squeezing past on narrow bends - uugh. Treating a fellow cyclist for dislocated shoulder on the downhill.

Devon has: Cows, wild ponies, cream teas, lush green fields, towns ending in 'ton', windswept moors, fudge.

Stayed at: Silversprings Hotel (small, friendly, excellent breakfast).



Day 3: Exeter to Wells (68 miles)

Terrain: Undulating.

High points: Lovely quiet B road from Ilminster to Curry Rivel through cute English villages. Passing Glastonbury on the last day of the festival (all sorts of road blocks, had to do a detour – see pic).

Low points: Odysseus' choice. Scylla or Charybdis. Tiny country lanes which meander all over the place including into farmyards where you go chain-deep in dung before being chased off the premises by yapping terriers. Or sharing the A road with Eddie Stobarts and holidaymakers who have forgotten that their caravan is 9 inches wider than their car.

Somerset has: Old cathedrals, apples (cider), cricket, strawberries, gently rolling hills, pigs, pop festivals.

Stayed at: Swan Hotel (right opposite the cathedral, smart, traditional).



Day 4: Wells to Ross on Wye (72 miles)

Terrain: Hilly (took in Mendips, Clifton, Offa's Dyke).

High points: Crossing the Severn Bridge into Wales singing Land of My Fathers. Entering the Forest of Dean on a hot afternoon and feeling the cool shade of thick oak trees which (thankfully) went on for 10 miles. The last few miles into Ross along the bank of the River Wye.

Low points: BEES which got in our helmets, behind the lenses of our sunglasses and down the back of our jerseys. Wind against us all day.

Herefordshire has: Bulls (beef), fly fishing (trout), poetry festivals, orchards.

Stayed at: White House B+B (friendly, central, good pub food adjacent).



Day 5: Ross on Wye to Forton (80 miles)

Terrain: Undulating with some fast flat stretches (at last!).

High points: B4361 to Ludlow was quiet, flat and picturesque. Sneaking our bikes into our hotel room!

Low points: Long tiring day. Ring road round Telford went on for ever.

Shropshire has: The industrial revolution (iron bridges, steam trains), winding rivers, rolling fields, lambs, barn conversions, breweries.

Stayed at: The Swan at Forton (friendly pub/restaurant with rooms above, good food and good value).



Day 6: Forton to Bolton (68 miles)

Terrain: Flat (at least compared to what we've been through).

High points: Nantwich (which from the map looked like it would be one of those middle-of-nowhere towns, all twin sets and half-day closing) turned out to be a rather quirky place with a very fine coffee house above a bookshop and a jazz busker filling the square with clarinet music. Excellent pub lunch at the Bulls Head in Northwich (see pic: penne pasta with mushroom and white wine sauce + pint of orange squash).

Low points: Wind in our faces for the 3rd day running. Fraser has a cold.

Lancashire has: Hot pot, pot holes, orange cheese, red roses, memories of my childhood.

Stayed at: Mercury Bolton (roadside motel specialising in cycle/motorcycle tourists, basic but very welcoming).



Day 7: Bolton to Hawes (70 miles)

Terrain: Hilly (West Pennine Moors) then undulating then hilly again (Yorkshire Dales).

High points: Slogging up a hill out of grimy Blackburn and seeing majestic Pen Y Gent in the distance. Dales in afternoon sunshine. Ribble Head viaduct. Arriving at our cottage and shocking the neighbours (we are looking grubby).

Low points: Traffic as usual. Chain smoking tourists in all the outdoor cafes.

Yorkshire has: Brass bands, quarries, tarns, farm shows, sheepdog trials, Wensleydale cheese / Wallace and Gromit, fell running, strong tea.

Stayed at: Our cottage (in Burtersett near Hawes)



Day 8: Hawes to Carlisle (62 miles)

Terrain: Undulating / flat.

High points: Dales absolutely sparkling in the Sunday morning sun. Only us and some sleepy cows for the first hour. Later, church bells rang us through the villages. Lakeland Fells in the distance to the west; Northern Pennines to the east - and us sneaking along the flat bit in between!

Low points: We both have colds and are aching a bit. Thank goodness it was a short and easy day.

Cumbria has: Red squirrels, lakes, meandering rivers, big country houses converted to care homes, Wainwright, Hadrian's Wall.

Stayed at: Cornerways Guest House (upmarket B&B, very welcoming, great breakfast). Really special local Italian restaurant (Gianni's).



Day 9: Carlisle to New Lanark (80 miles)

Terrain: Flat then undulating (Scottish Border Hills and Southern Uplands).

High points: Pre-lunch roads were time-trial flat and Roman-road straight. The gentle following wind meant fast progress for minimal effort. Topping up our tan on the 7th consecutive sunny day. Gorgeous meander through farmlands for the last 10 miles into Lanark (though it turned out we'd gone a bit off course).

Low points: Getting overtaken by a cow. In mitigation: (a) cow had just been released from a cow-box and discovered freedom; (b) cow was running downhill, we were cycling uphill; (c) cow didn't have panniers. Humbling nonetheless. Post-lunch roads wiggled all over the place and their surface was so bumpy it brought back bad memories of racing Paris-Roubaix on cobblestones 25 years ago (those were the days...).

Cumbria has: Open cast mines, game, castles, pine forests, legacy of Robert Owen (18th century industrialist and social pioneer).

Stayed at: New Lanark Hotel - fabulous place in fabulous setting.



Day 10: New Lanark to Callander (62 miles)

Terrain: Undulating with one killer hill (Kilsyth).

High points: A very fine heron perched high above the rushing river as we left our hotel this morning. Carron Valley reservoir and forest - our first taste of Scotland's classic scenery. Views of the mighty Trossach hills in the distance.

Low points: The A73 between Lanark and Airdrie - every other car spouting pollution (don't they have emission standards in Scotland?). Some ghastly sink estates in the towns on the A73. Smokers.

Perthshire has: Whiskey, haggis, kippers, neeps, thistles, castles, lochs, Mary Queen of Scots, Bonnie Prince Charlie, Macbeth.

Stayed at: (we wouldn't stay there again).



Day 11: Callander to Glencoe village (65 miles)

Terrain: Mountains (Trossachs, Rannoch Moor by Glen Coe) but gradients very gentle - long climbs followed by long descents.

High points: The Highlands! Scenery absolutely spectacular - road sweeps round one loch after another with thick pine forest the other side; interspersed with open moors and ragged outcrops of rock; high peaks disappearing into the clouds - brilliant!

Low points: Incessant heavy rain and bitter head wind. Today was the annual rainfall record for Scotland so far this year ☹️.

Pertshire has: Salmon, glens, bends, bogs, bothys, bagpipes, games involving weighty objects (e.g. tossing the caber), some epic inter-clan massacres (e.g. Campbells vs MacDonalads).

Stayed at: Glencoe hotel (adequate and friendly but less charm than the website implied).



Day 12: Glencoe village to Abiachan (71 miles)

Terrain: Surprisingly hilly considering most of it was loch-side.

High points: All the lochs (Leven, Linnhe, Eil, Lochy, Oich, Ness). Snow-tipped Ben Nevis. The swing bridge over the Caledonian canal - we had to stop at a level-crossing style block while some tall sailing boats went past, then the bridge was swung round 90 degrees to make our road again! A little kid in a tartan tam o'shanter.

Low points: Tourist tack around Loch Ness - shops selling horrid 'Nessie' memorabilia and commodifying the spectacular countryside. Mild food poisoning from a dodgy bap in a roadside café.

Inverness-shire has: Heather, thistles, rare breed cattle, cashmere, burns, braes, Great Glen, golf.

Stayed at: Loch Ness Clansman Hotel (very friendly, good supper, great views).



Day 13: Abiachan to Altnaharra (80 miles)

Terrain: Undulating.

High points: Pole cat! Open moors between Lairg and Altnaharra - very isolated, very beautiful. Crowmarty Firth. The long descent into Bonar Bridge with views over Dornoch Firth and River Shin. Lots of cyclists (most going in the other direction JOGLE) - everyone waves and cheers.

Low points: Three dead owls. Traffic in Inverness. Head wind for the last 10 miles. Trish has streaming cold.

Sutherland has: Lowest population per hectare in Europe, pine forests, wind farms, peat, rhododendrons, cotton grass, fly fishing, Scotland's most northerly Monros (Ben Hope, Ben Clibrech).

Stayed at: The B&B, McLeod Crescent (friendly, good value, did dinner).



Day 14: Altnaharra to John o'Groats (75 miles)

Terrain: Mostly flat but some ups and downs round the north coast.

High points: The B road (871/873) north out of Altnaharra, narrow and very quiet (sheep saw it as an extension of their field). Much of it ran along the loch-side then over rolling moors to the coast. Saw wild deer on this road! The last 20 miles into J o'G was flat and fast, getting more remote and picturesque by the mile. The finish of course - various individuals and groups celebrating in the rain!

Low points: Some deprived and demoralised communities in the far north - not much industry, lots of unemployment, houses falling into disrepair. Still have a streaming cold.

Caithness has: Beaches, hardy sheep, clover, buttercups, oats, ruined farmsteads, tourist coaches, decommissioned nuclear power stations, ferries to the Orkneys. John o'Groats means 'Jan de Groot' - a Dutchman who set up the first ferry service to the Orkneys.

Stayed at: Gordon Asher B&B (clean, efficient, great breakfast). Supper at absolutely stunning Old Schoolhouse in J o'G - unmissable.

