



PHOTOGRAPHS HUW KINGSTON

The Hebridean Way is a popular sightseeing route for cyclists and walkers wanting to explore the islands of Scotland's rugged Outer Hebrides. HUW KINGSTON set off with a cycling group in June, and found a European summer doesn't guarantee mild weather in the North Atlantic.

IN GALE FORCE WINDS and rough seas, the ferry jolted to starboard as I was plunging a very sharp knife into a sultana cake. My chair tumbled over and the knife left the cake's embrace, coming with me to the floor and narrowly avoiding slicing my arm rather than the cake it was intended for.

I was on one of the Caledonian MacBrayne ferries that form the threads linking the gems of the Hebrides together. In distinct black and red livery, CalMac ferries pinball between rocky reefs and push against strong currents to provide a lifeline to these dozens of islands off Scotland's west coast.

A week earlier at Oban we'd boarded our first ferry, bound for the island of Barra. The plan was to ride the Hebridean Way, a cycling journey weaving its way some 300km through the Outer Hebrides. This chain of islands faces the stormy North Atlantic where most trees have given up trying to survive. Humans have honed their defences by way of little whitewashed cottages, but it's a tough life, particularly through the dark, cold and wet winter months.

Our first ferry crossed a millpond on a mild summer's day. Dozens of porpoises surfed the wake, a few seals flapped their approval, and two minke whales acted as escorts alongside. At Castlebay we rolled our bikes off the ferry ramp.

I was the blow-in in our group of 10, the others all linked as friends from college 40 years ago. Mark, a mate of mine of similar vintage, had invited me along, driving up from Spain with bikes on the roof, one for him, one for me. The 8km ride to camp on the little island of Vatersay, linked to Barra by a causeway, was enough to show me that the bike Mark had kindly provided had a few issues. We'd played plenty of practical jokes on each other over the years and I did wonder.

During summer in many parts of the world, there is often an annoyance. In Australia, we have our bushflies and mozzies; across the Tasman they endure the sandfly. In the west of Scotland, it's the midges, tiny insects with a bite belying their size. Often worse at dawn and dusk, the midge can make life miserable at best, unbearable at worst. Every inch of skin must be covered or sprayed; head nets worn.



TOP DOWN TO THE CAUSEWAY LINKING BARRA WITH VATERSAY. ABOVE CLEAR FOR TAKEOFF AT BARRA AIRPORT; OTTER CROSSING; CALMAC FERRY.

OPPOSITE PAGE ON THE ROAD TO RODEL, HARRIS.

“This chain of islands faces the stormy North Atlantic where most trees have given up trying to survive.”





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP OLD FISHING BOAT ON VATERSAY; BLACKHOUSE ON BERNERAY; AN 11PM SUNSET, BALRANALD, NORTH UIST; ROLL ON, ROLL OFF, ARRIVING AT LEVERBURGH, HARRIS.

That first camp was a stunner, a narrow neck of land with a curving beach of white sand either side, the machair – soft green grass scattered with wildflowers – to sleep on. But the midges were out.

Unable to sleep much due to remnant effects of jetlag and a mere four hours of darkness so close to the summer solstice, I wandered along the beach. I met Dougal, who was out checking his lobster pots, a catch destined mainly for Spain and France. Dougal spoke of the added Brexit burdens: extra paperwork, extra checks. “Aye, it made life a wee bit more difficult,” he told me. Britain is perhaps the only country to have voted to impose economic sanctions on itself.

The next day we pedalled back to Barra and on up the island, following narrow, single lane roads. Numerous passing places allowed traffic to flow in a staccato manner. Driving through the Hebrides requires patience and an endlessly waving hand.

Barra Airport was surprisingly busy and, like Sydney’s, has a curfew, one imposed by tide, not time, as a wide, sandy low-tide

beach serves as the runway. A short ride away we caught the ferry to Eriskay, then we rode along another causeway linking to South Uist, before camping near a hotel which provided a fine dinner and a fearsomely direct and dour proprietor.

The increasing wind helped blow us north, passing a monument marking the birthplace of Flora MacDonald, a local lass who, in 1746, helped Bonnie Prince Charlie escape, following his defeat by the English. Soon a more modern monument appeared, possibly the ugliest church in Christendom. A nearby roadside egg stall gave warning of the potential risks of egg buying. ‘Please be careful when opening box due to high winds. Open at own risk.’

From South Uist on to Benbecula and thence North Uist, signs on causeways warned of otters crossing. A long day finished with a welcome pint, before camp, at the Westford Inn.

It was a stunning ride along the north coast of Uist, all little lakes and beaches. As the rain began again, a sign guided me to a small house. Corinna Krause, once of Germany, now of Uist, produces beautiful work as a bookbinder. She, too, bemoaned the barriers of Brexit and how they had cost her much of her European trade.

Onward to the small island of Berneray, with its little harbour and informative museum. The ferry to Harris picked a complex route through reefs, rocks and islets to Leverburgh, where the mountains rolled down to the grey, whitecapped sea. Despite conditions making it difficult at times to stay upright on our bikes, we could still appreciate the indented coast of mini fiord and narrow peninsula.

The campground at Lickisto was a welcome sight, more so for the little blackhouse, or traditional croft, that served as a social club to squeeze into and stay warm and dry. With ferries to Skye cancelled due to bad weather and broken boats, it was a good place to shelter for two nights. fortified by fine venison stew and fish pies that Jo, the owner, cooked up in the storm.

With news the ferry was back running, we ventured away into the wildest of wind and rain and along the most rugged of coastlines to Tarbert where, soaked, we poured ourselves into the Isle of Harris Distillery, the warming fire of more interest than any whisky. This was rather fortunate as Leona, the distillery guide, explained. Some eight years ago the distillery was started, in part to provide employment on the island, but the first barrels of whisky are yet to be bottled and sold. Cash flow has been helped by distilling gin, using local kelp as one of the botanicals.

A far cry from such artisan production, I remembered back decades ago when working for a Scottish outdoor clothing company. The first time I visited the factory, the machinists insisted I join them for a drink after work. There I experienced the delights of mixing the national hard and soft drinks of Scotland in one glass – whisky and Irn Bru. Never again.

The Outer Hebrides are undoubtedly a grand place to tour by bike or motor. We certainly encountered some wild Scottish conditions, Atlantic gales driving rain across the isles. But, thinking positively, it kept the midges at bay, such weather blowing the little critters far, far away. **HL**

