

Pack Up, Saddle Up

A bikepacking trip into wild Scotland is as easy as riding a bike

by FIONA RUSSELL

THE adventure begins several days before we set off, with my friend Paul and I exchanging texts about the weather, what to pack, how to pack and how we'll share the load.

Competitively, we send each other photos, revealing our quest to lessen the load of clothes, camping gear, food and water. Yet we are also mindful of the need to stay warm and safe as we cycle and camp an 80km (50-mile) route through one of the UK's last areas of wilderness.

We are still debating our kit as we board a train one Monday morning on Scotland's famous West Highland Line, from which we plan to alight at Rannoch Station.

"Did you pack spare socks?" I quiz Paul. "And what about your toothbrush? Did you cut off the handle?"

Meanwhile, he was wondering about food.

"Do we have enough snacks? Did you remember the stove and gas?" The balance of weight versus warmth and comfort over discomfort are serious issues when you'll be on a bike for two days.

As relative newcomers to off-road bikepacking, our aim is fairly conservative although thrillingly off-grid.

From Rannoch, we will navigate a network of trails and paths through the estates of Corrou and Ben Alder to reach another train station at Dalwhinnie, on the edge of the Cairngorms National Park.

It's a mountainous area, but we have plotted a route that is long and flat, rather than short and steep – and we are pleasantly surprised by how rideable it turns out to be.

After a mile on tarmac, we turn on to what was once the main Road to the Isles to Mallaig. A well-travelled cattle drovers' route, it is now a rough track that undulates gently through rugged moorland as it heads northwards.

As if by magic, we find ourselves suddenly amid a landscape that feels wild and distant. Looking out across Rannoch Moor, the grass and ferns have faded to an autumnal tapestry of ochres, russets and browns.

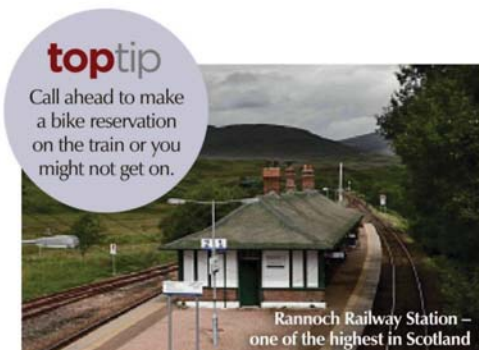
Beneath a big sky of slowly drifting clouds, we spot ragged-edged lochs and numerous distant peaks.



A well-maintained track hugs the northern shore of Loch Ossian

top tip

Check the weather forecast before you go – but pack for any eventuality!



Cycling side by side, Paul and I continue companionably, checking our route on an OS map app. We are aiming for Loch Ossian, some 16km (10 miles) away where we hope to wild camp for the night.

I am not a skilled mountain biker but the miles roll by with relative ease and it is only when we reach a few steeper inclines that I notice the weight of the specialist bikepacks. I'm grateful now that I didn't add many extras.

Paul is impressed by how secure the packs feel, having previously ridden with panniers attached to a rack. "There is very little wiggle, is there?" he says.

Finally, we reach a high point at 548 metres (1800 feet) and we can see the narrow loch, situated at the heart of Corroul Estate. One of Scotland's most remote hostels perches on the water's edge at the southern end. Hostelling Scotland's Loch Ossian Youth Hostel is the back-up if the weather turns nasty.

The Scottish Outdoor Access Code allows people to wild camp – as long as they do so responsibly. With such a vast wilderness to choose from, the toughest decision is often where to set up.

Indeed, I'm not going to reveal the exact location of our overnight because these spots should be kept secret. However, you'll easily find your own.

Because I was keen to reduce the weight of the bikepacks, I've only a bivy bag for shelter, a warm sleeping bag and an inflatable mat.

I also packed a small portable stove, a gas canister >>

Prepare For All Weathers

Even if the forecast is bright and sunny, make sure you pack waterproofs, gloves and a hat. The weather can turn unexpectedly, and if you're far from civilisation you need to be prepared. Take extra layers for the cooler evenings, too.

Meal Prep

Cooking kit: All-in-one stove, gas and pot, or a small stove with separate gas canister and pot.

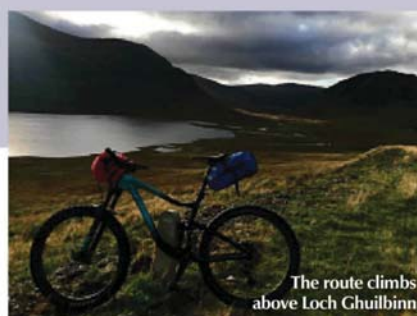
Food: For dinner take dehydrated camping food or packet meals to eat from the pot. Cereal bars and coffee bags make easy breakfasts.



Water: Carry water in a bottle fitted to a bike bottle carrier, and fill up at fresh water supplies, using a water filter before drinking.

Kit List

- ▲ **Bike:** A mountain bike is best.
- ▲ **Bikepacks:** Specialist bike bags, like those from Alpkit, which fit neatly to the frame of a bicycle. See www.alpkit.com
- ▲ **Small rucksack:** A small rucksack for water, gloves and items that you want to keep handy.
- ▲ **Camping gear:** Bivy bag or lightweight tent, sleeping bag and inflatable mat.
- ▲ **Tech:** A smartphone with a map app, such as OS Maps, plus a paper map and compass.
- ▲ **Bike kit:** Helmet, puncture repair kit, pump, bike lights and a lock.



and basic food for an evening meal and breakfast. My luxury items are chocolate and a flask of whisky.

After a fairly warm and cloudy previous day, in the morning we find the weather has changed to sunny but cold. Sadly, the tailwind has also switched.

The day's ride is 65km (40 miles) and we have a train to meet so we set off early. It is surprising how much slower trail riding is compared to road cycling.

Following another good quality Landrover track along the northern shore of Loch Ossian, we pass a variety of trees and plants, many of which were planted by a former owner of Corrou, Sir John Stirling Maxwell, in the late 1800s. The estate is now in the ownership of Lisbet Rausing, the Swedish Tetra Pak heiress, who rebuilt Corrou Lodge in a modernist style after a devastating fire.

We turn north, cycling slowly upwards on a rough track through a wide and winding glen flanked with high mountains. My bike feels lighter now that I've eaten most of the packed food.

Again we enjoy a long descent and then pass through a gate into the neighbouring estate of Ben Alder – owned by the Swiss financier Urs Schwarzenbach.

We follow the shore of Loch Laggan and then head

“I enjoy the drama of a landscape of mountain peaks”



into wild countryside to reach Lochan Na h-Earba. We then pass into another forest and take a path along River Pattack towards picturesque Loch Pattack.

We then ride into a flatter – and boggy – plain and towards the western shore of the long ribbon of Loch Erich. This is the hardest part of the route and I need to push my bike around some of the wetter sections.

Stopping to look back, I enjoy the drama of a landscape of multiple mountain peaks as far as I can see.

The final nine kilometres (six miles) to Dalwhinnie looked straightforward on the map and although the track is fairly smooth it is also hillier than expected. Or perhaps this is because of our tired legs. Yet, we reach the station with time to spare and enjoy a quick stop at a local cafe.

As we board the train to return home – and to civilisation – it feels as if we have been away for a lot longer than a couple of days. I reflect that bikepacking into a wilder, remoter and quieter world involves very little hassle at all. 📍

Alternatives

- ▲ If you prefer not to wild camp, the Loch Ossian Youth Hostel offers dormitory overnights. See hostellingscotland.org.uk
- ▲ In the summer, you can eat and stay at the more luxurious Station House on Corrou platform. See corrou.co.uk/station-house
- ▲ For a shorter bike ride, get off the train at Corrou Station and ride to Dalwhinnie. See www.scotrail.co.uk for timetables.

Pictures: ALAMY, REXSUTTERSTOCK