

Lochs and lodges My adventure

Matthew Parris spots red squirrels and finds fairytale forests — on two wheels



There's a fine Steve Goodman song about a cross-country US train ride. "Good morning America, how are you? Say, don't you know me? I'm your native son," the chorus runs. "I'm the train they call the City of New

Orleans. I'll be gone 500 miles when the day is done."

In Britain we don't seem to sing so cheerfully about our railways. No one has written a hymn to Thameslink, or set the East Coast Mainline to music.

Perhaps they should start. I'm typing this on board London North Eastern Railway's Highland Chieftain service, blue sky and heath-clad hills outside, sipping a free glass of white wine that has just been delivered by a steward.

I'm racing south after a magical car-free few days in the Highlands, the electric bike that carried me over the hills stowed safely (I hope) towards the back of the train. This journey is every bit as worthy of song as that American railroad running down to New Orleans. It even goes further, travelling 581 miles every day in each direction, between King's Cross and Inverness. And it ties two nations together as no amount of political speeches about the importance of the Union ever can.

Earlier I'd hopped on board with my partner at the first northbound stop, York. The friendly conductor helped us to cram our two chunky bikes into a little booked locker obviously designed for something more boutique. No matter. Gazing out over the Northumbrian coast as what seemed like half the stag parties in London made their way north for the weekend, we raced up to Edinburgh before slowing down for the real part of the journey, passing Stirling and Perth and into the Highlands.

Farms gave way to fir trees, the rivers flowed more steeply, and then we stopped at Pitlochry's delightful blue-and-white timber Victorian station. We wheeled off our bikes, clipped on our luggage, tightened our helmets and powered up to start our adventure.

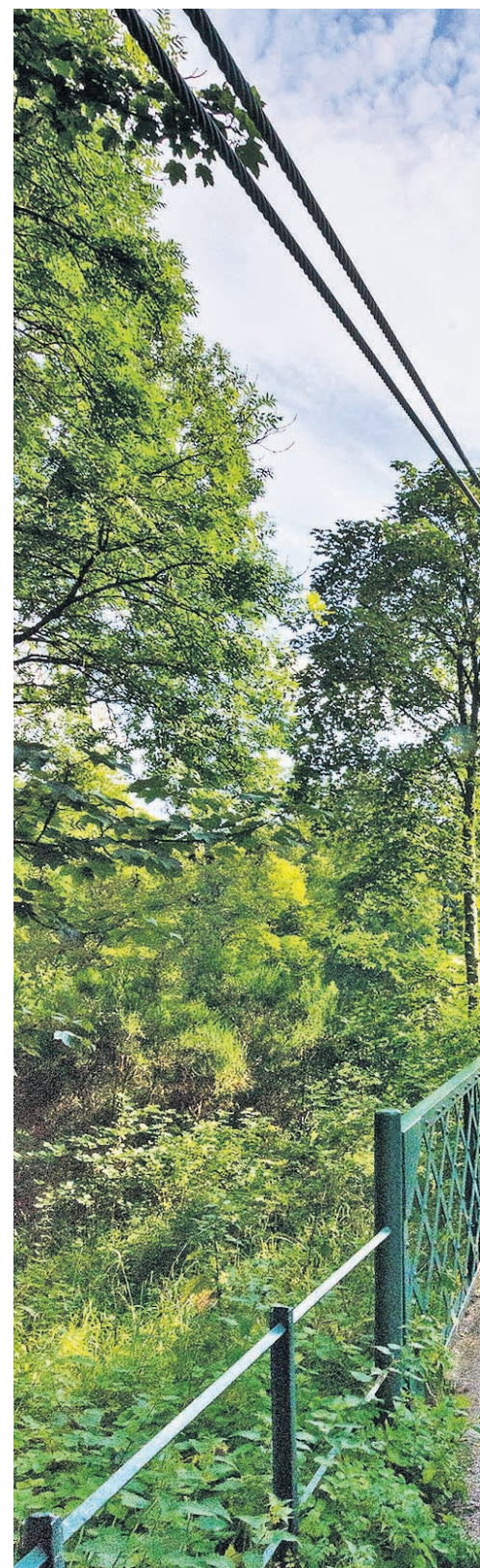
By now it was early evening, but I've become an old hand at cycling home from meals out in Derbyshire, and with bright modern bike lights the dark isn't an issue. On Scottish hills, as in my native Peak District, it's electric power that makes all the difference, turning what might be a near-impossible sweaty climb into something pleasant.

The Tory in me likes the fact that you still have to pedal: an e-bike gives you a hand-up, not a hand-out; effort is repaid with assistance; and, as the Good Book says, every valley is exalted, every mountain and hill laid low. In plainer prose, the gradients are flattened out for you.

We needed it as soon as we left Pitlochry, joining the well-signed National Cycle route 7, which became a familiar feature of our next few days.

Edging out of the town, we crossed a thin iron suspension bridge, a plaque boasting proudly that it was the gift of an Edwardian toff, opened on Empire Day 1913. The exact date wasn't specified: presumably everyone back then knew when to celebrate our imperial possessions. Perhaps it's the next thing Boris Johnson will bring back. Nadine Dorries would enjoy the row. As the light faded we pedalled our way on between dark conifers, on a silent lane safe from traffic. A sign pointed up to an ancient Pictish stone, carved with mysterious symbols. We dropped down to cross an old rail bridge on a long-extinct branch line, rescued for cyclists like us. Soon our first stop came into view: the Grandtully Hotel, and dinner.

Call me unkind, call me out of date, but I'd always imagined restaurants in the



Highlands to be covered in too much tartan and over-eager to sell you shortbread. The Grandtully is not like that and all the better for it. A log fire warmed tables outside, the smoke helping to keep any Highland midges at bay. Inside there was a stylishly lit bar with a cool cocktail list, as well as every kind of whisky you could name, and a restaurant that struck just the right balance between informality and very fine cooking (mains from £14; ballintaggart.com).

We refuelled on venison carpaccio, grilled oysters with honey and bacon, langoustines with garlic, and a salt-and-pepper squid dish so delicious, locals have not allowed the chef to take it off the menu, even though he tried.

Signs pointed invitingly to the hotel's bedrooms, but our travels weren't over.

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in the Highlands by e-bike

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Kenmore village and Loch Tay



A room at the Grandtully Hotel



Letterellan lodge

After dinner and a double espresso, we had another 15 miles to go, under the stars, to the shore of Loch Tay and our home for the next two days.

Home is the right word. It is hard to capture in words just how welcoming and comfortable Letterellan is. A small indicator came as we arrived: our host Jonathan was waiting patiently outside to guide us in, torch in hand, even though it was past 10pm. We shed our boots, plugged in our bike batteries — our e-bikes run for miles, but I like to know there will be enough power when I need it — and slipped into this elegant Edwardian lodge.

Jonathan and his partner bought their house not long ago and restored it during lockdowns to a level of luxury and taste that simply isn't captured by the terms "guesthouse" or "B&B". It has just two

Need to know

Matthew Parris travelled independently. Letterellan has B&B doubles from £200 (letterellan.com)

bedrooms, oceans of squishy pillows, fine linen, log fires downstairs and a perfect view over the loch. It's hard to leave. But before breakfast — smoked salmon, dark coffee and fresh juice my choice from a huge list — my partner and I walked down through lichen-clad oak trees to bathe in the loch. Letterellan has its own little beach, the walk out on pebbles made easier by borrowed neoprene socks. I braced for freezing water, but in mid-September, after a warm Scottish summer, the temperature was perfect.

If we'd had the energy we could have set out to climb nearby Ben Lawers, at almost 4,000ft one of Scotland's highest mountains. But a lazy morning seemed more enticing. Later we made it up through woods behind the house to a bench set high amid grazing sheep; it has a superb view down the length of this enormous loch, snaking through the mountains. Occasionally a speedboat far below raced tourists around on what those who tried it told us was a great ride. But we moved more sedately, cycling along another little lane that took us to the Ferryman's Inn at Taymouth Marina in Kenmore, a cheerful place selling sourdough pizza to a family crowd sitting by a flaming, open brazier outside near the head of the loch (mains from £10; taymouthmarina.com).

The next day we were off again, pedalling hard to spare our batteries, with a

long journey ahead. We needed all the assistance available to get us up the steep road leading to Cluny House, to walk around gardens that are really a Himalayan forest — they were planted over two generations by the family who still care for them. The trees were remarkable, but just as exotic, to English eyes, were the red squirrels darting between them, feeding from little hatches of nuts (£5, cash only; clunyhousgardens.com).

Soon after we passed the Grandtully Hotel again and stopped — how could we not? — for lunch. We made it back to Pitlochry station in time to pick up the Highland Chieftain train once more, our bikes booked this time for the hour's journey north to Aviemore. At £9 each in first class, with a coffee, a beer and a sandwich thrown in, it's a bargain way to see the Highlands unfold. Our train pulled up steep glens and at one point passed the remote little Dalwhinnie Distillery.

“After dinner we had another 15 miles to go, under the stars, to the shore of Loch Tay

By now the routine was becoming familiar. We unloaded at Aviemore — despite its fine station, an unlovely (but useful) base below the Cairngorm mountains — and while others marched off to find taxis and hotels, we set off in the dark for another 20-mile trip along that faithful cycle route 7. Our big, heavy bag awaited us at our destination: a great tip for cyclists is that, for £19, sendmybag.com will collect your suitcase from your door and deliver it (via Royal Mail) to any other UK door.

We spent that night and several happy days with friends in a rented lodge far into the mountains by the banks of the Findhorn River, luxuriating in the sensation of having arrived on a bike rather than in a smart Land Rover. We took the plaudits for our efforts with false modesty. But really we knew that our pair of e-bikes recharging outside had done all the hard work.

Scotland's weather has a daunting reputation, but for us the sun often shone, and even the early autumn mists were lovely. Many happy memories, many lofty hill-tops, many fairytale forests, many sensational views and much good food and fine whisky... but the picture that will not leave my mind was taken in the saddle: my trusty bike beneath me, green hills rising beside me, and before me an earth road with grass between the tracks, winding up the river valley ahead towards who knows where.