**Am Heb**

There is a classic cycle route, Am Heb. The start / finish points, The Butt of Lewis at the north of Lewis, and Vatersay in the south. The cyclist can start at whichever they choose and cycle by whatever route they wish between them. There is not a huge range of options though as you will see from a look at the map. The route takes you through 9 islands; Lewis and Harris (one landmass with two names), Berneray, North Uist, Grimsay, Benbecula, South Uist, Eriskay, Barra and Vatersay.

This guidance is written for Caithness Cycling Club, although it is assumed that knowledge will be shared around any interested cyclists. Feel free to pass it on to anyone interested in cycling in the Western Isles. Although this guidance is fairly comprehensive, individual riders should create their own plan for their trip in accordance with their own circumstances. The information provided here is an aid to planning.

I have written this as a north to south ride, but I’ve also completed it south to north a few years ago. All you is read my days backwards! Try this after a few beers, it’s easy.

Getting to the islands - Those of us who live north of Dingwall know to change trains at Dingwall for Garve as an alternative to cycling the extra 14 miles between these two places.

Most riders of course will travel north either to Inverness, for Dingwall, or else to Oban. In my opinion there is no advantage or special difficulty in choosing one over the other. I’ve done both. In good weather they’re great, if not so good, the cycling can be very testing. West of the island chain there is nothing but water for 3,000 miles - so there is absolutely nothing to slow down the wind when it blows.

Special Note – your bike **MUST** be pre-booked on the train when you buy your travel tickets, otherwise the guard can and will refuse travel. Put simply, if other riders make a booking, why should you be able to by-pass them? Currently, there is a maximum of 4 bikes per train permitted.

Abellio have superb trains in service, but in Holland. Sadly it looks as if they are going to use the same crap refurbished 40+ years old crap (did I say that twice for their Stupid Sprinter trains?) instead of quality for their Scottish contract. I had an interesting chat with a Welsh tourist and it turns out their trains are rehashed by Bombardier after 40 years elsewhere.

There is a tourist map, “Philip’s Red Books – Outer Hebrides” which is helpful for route planning, especially for the various historic sites.

**Wind and rain can, on occasion, make this tour very challenging even for experienced cycle tourers.**

Day 1

Travellers from the south change trains in Inverness, then either the Wick train (change at Dingwall), or the Kyle of Lochalsh train will take you to Garve. Alternatively for both, just cycle from Dingwall.

Route – Dingwall is the former county town of Ross-shire. It has a small town museum and many food outlets. There is a tower overlooking the town, situated in the graveyard. This is a monument to General Hector MacDonald, a private soldier from the Black Isle who rose through the ranks to be a General. He took his own life in a hotel room in Paris in 1905. The large wooden cross you see at the station was taken from a battle site in Flanders to commemorate the men of the town buried there.

Take the road out for Strathpeffer, 5 miles. Strathpeffer became a ‘spa’, a place where people came to ‘take the waters’ for the good of their health. Spas became fashionable at the end of the 19th century across Europe. Two sites in Strathpeffer that are worth a look, the Museum of Childhood in the renovated former railway station, and ‘The Eagle Stone’, in a small garden a 2 minute walk from the road. In Gaelic it is ‘Clach nan Tiompan’, a literal translation is the stone of sounding, or sounding stone. We sound a welcome or a warning, so perhaps this was the recognised gathering place for the welcoming party, whether friendly or hostile. There is an eagle carved into the stone, so that’s what the stone is called in English. It is most likely a Neolithic stone with later carvings.

Continue for Contin and take the road for Garve. You have now cycled 14 miles from Dingwall. On the way, if the cyclist has time to spare – 1.5 hours – a walk to the Falls of Rogie is time well spent. A cyclist booked into the hostel at Ullapool doesn’t need to worry about ferry times as you can catch the first one in the morning. From Garve take the road north for Ullapool and just follow it for the next 32 miles. About 10 miles from the Ullapool is Corrieshalloch Gorge, take a detour up about half a mile and follow the signs. Worth it if you have the time. It used to be possible to view the falls from a wooden platform from the main road, but this is now gone. I suspect sensible concerns over safety when crossing the main road was the reason for taking it away.

Ullapool, is a custom-built fishing town to absorb people dispossessed by The Highland Clearances. There is a Telford (Parliamentary) Church, now a museum. There seems to have been worries by the ruling caste about civil disorder, so they had Telford design a church in the hope that it would lead people to stop complaining about having their houses burned down and their families driven off the land. It seems to have worked, The Clearances continued over a period of some 80 years, mostly without riot although not always. The museum is worth a visit. Another visit is to the best bookshop cum food stop cum live traditional music place north of Edinburgh / Glasgow - The Ceilidh Place. It’s a must, especially when a visiting band is engaged to provide the night’s entertainment.

Ullapool Youth Hostel, S.Y.H.A. is 01854 – 612254 and ullapool@syha.org.uk

Day 2

Take the ferry to Stornoway. (Ferry times from Calmac). This is a new ferry with a passenger deck giving a panoramic view of the sea and the islands, plus birds like gannets. I counted over 40 dolphins in small groups at different times during my most recent trip, June 2015.

Stornoway is the biggest community in The Hebrides, but there is no single focal point to it. There is Lews Castle being refurbished and will be put to community use. This was the home of one Mr Matheson who made his fortune in the opium trade. He and others persuaded the British government, as well as their allies France and of course the good ole U S of A, to combine and force the Chinese to accept imports of opium! Result, mass addiction and profit for the new white rulers.

From the morning ferry, docking in Stornoway around 12.30, bike up to The Butt. The road is easy to find, follow signs for Barvas and Butt of Lewis. The lighthouse is the cyclists’ start / finish, and is one of those built by ‘the lighthouse Stevenson’s’ whose most famous son is RLS, Robert Louis Stevenson. There are often photos posted of Am Heb starters / completers with the Atlantic as a background. This is dead easy, get someone just put their back towards the lighthouse and click. Spotted a whale near the lighthouse this trip.

You could also sign in and drop off your panniers on your way, at Galson Farm Hostel, Tel. 01851 – 850492 or, galsonfarm@yahoo.com Note that Galson has just 8 beds, kitchen, and 2 showers – enough for the size. Bikes are stored in the barn, it is working farm.

There is another new independent hostel I spotted a few miles from The Butt, at Eoropaidh, but I have no advice or details on this, it was just opening in June 2015 when we passed.

Day 3

The road south passes a road end with a small sign to the ‘Truiseil Stone’. This proves to be a megalithic standing stone in the middle of a field, and is about 4 metres high when assessed from the road. On to Barvas, and this time take right and south for Arnol. There is a well maintained ‘whale bone arch’ as part of a house garden just at the side of the road as you pass. Then, carry on to Arnol turn into the village for the ‘Black House at Arnol’ which is well worth a visit, as is the guided tour from the knowledgeable volunteers. The house has the kitchen where they keep a peat fire burning on the floor and also the bedroom with box beds. There is also the byre where the animals were wintered. The house walls seem to be about a metre thick and they have thatch weighed down with stones from the beach.

Further south there is an archaeological site and now reconstruction of a Norse / Viking age meal mill, a half mile walk in and out and worth it. Next pause is at the remains of Dun Carloway broch. Quite a good remnant as it allows you to see how the builders of 2,000 years ago created the internal stairs in the fortifications. Brochs are unique constructions found only in Scotland. My guess is that they were defences against Roman incursions, what’s yours?

Next stop is the major Neolithic site of Calanis, run by a small local co-operative. This is a ‘must see’. No argument about it. Expect to meet people from all corners of the world. The stones were erected about 4,000 years ago and were in constant use for 1,500 years. This is the most spectacular and main part of what was a large number of sites, all within walking distance.

Then, from Garrynahine, you must make a choice. Either take the single track road and follow it to Stornoway, or continue south and turn off for Kershadder for your night’s hostel accommodation.

Heb Hostel, Stornoway, Tel. 01851 – 709889 or, christine@hebhostel.com The Heb Hostel is popular, so it’s busy with 26 beds that seem all to fill up – so book well in advance. The kitchen / dining area can best be described as a wee bit wee for the numbers using it. A cereal breakfast is included in the price with plenty tea / coffee and bread /toast. Bikes are stored in a shed and there are washing machines for your bike kit.

Just 1.5 miles north of Stornoway is Laxdale Bunkhouse, which I’ve never visited. Tel. 01851 – 706966 and info@laxdaleholidaypark.com

The alternative is to carry on south for Ballalan and then turn of left on to the B8060 for Kershadder. Ravenspoint Hostel is part of the community co-op and the shop is attached. Tel. 01851 – 880236, and hostel@ravenspoint.co.uk it’s a while since I stayed there, but it’s good, clean, quiet, and if you get there in time food supplies are next door. They might accept a telephone order and pop it next door if you will arrive after the shop closes. Don’t forget to settle up in the morning of course.

Day 4

Your miles and destination tonight depends on your choices for yesterday. Cycle south over Clisham. This climb is a beast and you will remember it for the rest of your life as quite a cycling achievement. The road climbs from sea level to over 2,000 feet and then, just when you thought the road was going down as fast as it came up and it is time for a wind-blown joyous descent, you have another wee climb. Well, OK then, not all *that* wee, but it’s still not as relentless as Clisham. You will remember cycling over Clisham. Honest, you will.

Tarbert is the next sizable place on the route and it has a hostel. I stayed a night here a decade ago and it was OK. Just OK, no big deal. It has been refurbished since then and is now known as Tarbert Backpackers Stop. I assume it is now better than Just OK. Since it is in a ferry port you can assume it will be busy and need to make an advance booking. Tel. 01859 – 530485 and lickisto@live.co.uk

Continuing south, up and over the hill which will take the wind out of you a bit (again!), there is another hostel off the main road and there is a road sign with various names on it, including Drinishader which is where the hostel is. You know you’re there when you see a jetty on Loch Tarbert and the hostel looks like a modern croft house, which it is. Tel. 01859 – 511255 and info@number5.biz Great wee hostel, great location.

Back up on the main road again there is a road on your left for Rodel, through Manish and Finsbay. This is a very hilly route if that is what you are looking for. The whole road has become a kind of colony for artists, in fact there are artists’ studios all over the islands and you won’t have time to visit them all. You can also take right when you come out of the hostel gate and stay on the east, and hilly, road all the way. Rodel has the ruined Saint Clement’s kirk, a pre-Reformation church that then became a reformed congregation even if not actually from 1560. It was a burying place for Gaelic poets of the late medieval period. You then have about 4 miles to Leverburgh.

Or, just carry on south on the main road around to Leverburgh, named after Lever Brothers, one of whom became Lord of the Western Isles. I kid you not. He was told he couldn’t have the title of ‘Lord of the Isles’ because that is taken by one of the royal family. The brothers Lever set up a processing factory that worked for a while, long enough for their name to be superimposed on the Gaelic name, (An t-Ob) but if you want to know what that is just read the road signs as you approach. Look out for some ultra-modern architecture in housing above the road. There is also a local museum a few miles before your stop.

Am Bothan, Leverburgh, Tel. 01859 – 520251 or, ruari@ambothan.com I’ve never stayed here but when I spoke with the owner (his hostel was full the night I wanted) he sounded friendly and helpful, and he suggested Drinishader. The hostel is less than a mile from the ferry.

Of course, if you get there in time, you can take the last ferry over and stay on Berneray. Again, it is a choice, and it will depend on some of your earlier choices you made.

Berneray (Gatliff Hebridean hostels trust) – this is a magical wee place. You can’t book in advance, you just turn up and hope there’s a bed available. Someone calls round to collect your money in the evening. There’s an ‘old fashioned’ feel to the place, like hostelling the way it used to be. Expect find a convivial group of hostellers who are cycling, fishing, walking, or taking very professional photographs. Gatliff was a senior English civil servant who liked walking. He spent his money on buying old croft houses and having them made ready for ‘basic accommodation’ for people like himself who like the great outdoors, whether on foot or bike. Berneray Gatliff hostel comprises two buildings right by the shore, but there is no bike shed so that has to stay out in the wet. There is no spare room for bikes inside either, so don’t try to negotiate - you’ll just sound precious. That’s my polite word.

Day 5

Either you catch the first Leverburgh / Berneray ferry, or you have woken up on Berneray. There are no more big climbs for cyclists.

You continue south again and cross the causeway over to North Uist and cycle on south to the junction. Most cyclists take left here for the shorter trip rather than the extended cycle around the north and west of this island. You choose. Your choice will depend on how much time you have and your interests. West offers several sites over 20 miles with standing stones, duns, a carved cross, etc. The route east is 8 miles and has fewer sites, because it’s shorter, but look for Dun Sticir. This is an unusual ‘double broch’ site with both built out on a loch that you walk out to over a narrow causeway. It is always the case that you have to go and look for these places, the road rarely runs alongside.

Both choices of road off North Uist meet up and your road continues south. The route passes the remains of Teampul Na Trionad, what remains of a pre-Reformation Catholic seminary, and a little further on Caranish stone circle. You then continue and cross the causeway to the island of Grimsay, and stay on it for less than a kilometre before crossing another causeway to Benbecula. Here again, you have two choices.

Benbecula west takes you past the airport as well as more ancient remains of an ancient convent, Baile nan Cailleach, which translates loosely as Nun Town so it’s no surprise that Nunton hostel is nearby, a bit before the remaining walls of Borve Castle. You join the road again at Craigory (Creag Ghoraidh). Either that or you have taken the more direct road to here.

You continue south over the causeway to South Uist. Another causeway over Loch Bi and you see up on the hill a statue. This is a Madonna, Our Lady of the Isles, from the 1950’s by Lorimer. It stands about 7 meters high and there is a paved way up from the road to it. A few miles south again and there is a turn off that takes you to an older road and Howmore Gatliff hostel.

So you have two hostel choices again for an overnight stay;

Nunton House hostel, Tel. 01870 – 602017 or, nuntonhousehostel@hotmail.com is a big stone built house, reputed to be the site where Charles Edward Stuart disguised himself as a maid, ‘Betty Burke’, while escaping ultimately to France in 1746. A breakfast of cereals, tea / coffee and toast is part of the price. An excellent hostel.

Howmore (Gatliff Hebridean hostel) is to be found on a minor road west of the main road and further south, on South Uist. Let me repeat, no advance bookings are possible. When you arrive you claim a bed and it’s yours for the time you stay. I have never stayed here but I assume someone calls to collect the bed night fees, as is the practice at the others.

Day 6

Your start will depend on where you stopped the previous night. The road to Howmore continues parallel with the main road and you can visit Ormiclate Castle. I never have so I can’t tell you what it offers. Soon after you re-join the main road there is Kildonan, a museum staffed by local volunteers. Good home-made food available as well as exhibits of South Uist. A reconstructed birlinn sits near the entrance. A little further on is the site of ‘Flora MacDonald’s birthplace’. Carry on over the causeway to Eriskay and take a ferry to Barra. There is a breed of pony named after the island, Eriskay Ponies of course, and this island is where Charles Edward Stuart arrived and departed in 1745 and 46. It is also where a merchant ship, ‘S.S. Politician’, ran aground in thick fog during the Second World War with a cargo of whisky. This incident created Compton Mackenzie’s novel, ‘Whisky Galore’ and of course the film of the same name. The ferry trip to Barra is about 40 minutes.

Depending on your time of arrival on Barra, you can see some more sights and sites, or head for the hostel if it is too late for that. The current hostel options are;

Barraigh Hostel, 183 Bolnabodach, Tel. 01871 - 810846 or, croft183@yahoo.co.uk whose owner is Peter Matheson, and his hostel is top notch. It is located about ½ an hour on the bike from Castlebay, but you have a steep climb en route.

In the village itself, and visible from the jetty is Dunard hostel, Tel. 01871 – 810443 or, info@dunardhostel.co.uk

Day 7

Around Barra – most will want to complete the circuit of the island as well as finish / start their trip on Vatersay. I’ll assume you have just come from the hostel. From Barraigh Hostel you take right and enjoy a lovey run to Castlebay. The descent for around a mile is quite steep in places so keep your fingers over the brakes, not the hoods. High up on your right us a Madonna and child overlooking the town and bay. It’s about a 40 minute walk up if you have the notion of a close-up view. This one is about a metre and a half.

SNH have a boat that takes visitors out to Kisimul Castle, the fort of the MacNeil of Barra. This is small, and once inside you will find there is the room kept ready for The MacNeil whenever he comes over from the USA. The one who had the ruin saved and renovated was an architect, and when he loaned it to what is now SNH he charged a pound and a bottle of whisky a year as rent. A visit is a ‘must see’ for the visitor. You have time to view everything in the castle in time for the boat off that brings the next set of visitors, but no more time should be spent on it. It’s a compact castle, surrounded by water. After the Battle of Largs in 1263 the Scottish king came with a small fleet the next year to examine his newly won possessions from Norway. A Scottish captain went into the castle, presumably to receive the keys, and the Norwegian commander hanged him from the battlements. The year after this (1265 by now) the king came back, presumably with more ships, and the Norwegian suffered the same fate as he meted out. Moral – never argue with your new king, he’ll take the pet.

Back ashore, a cup of coffee with some of the home-made cake in the former post office, now café obviously, is recommended. It’s just opposite the jetty. Then carry on to the junction for Vatersay and completing The Heb. A bit up from the junction is a modern war memorial to the men of Barra lost in action during the two world wars. There are more seamen commemorated here than I have seen on any other war memorial.

The road undulates around and over the final causeway until you come to a small Council house scheme, or a farm gate. Your adventure ends here in a wee bit of an anti-climax, but my companion and son-in-law Steven found it a bit of an emotion rush. We had endured quite miserable conditions during our trip, and here we were at the end. We turned back to the car park and walked up to the memorial to the wreck of the ‘Annie Jane’, a sailing ship out of Liverpool that was lost in a storm with all 182 people on board. The sight of waves coming in gently on to the beach below was enough to persuade us to pull off the bike shoes and cool the feet.

Back on Barra, the road takes the re-energised cyclist on a circular tour of the island, to see flights landing on the beach at Traigh Mor (Big Beach) maybe, or just the reconstructed church of Saint Barr with a replica of the Kilbow Cross. The original is over 1,000 years old. The grave stone of the writer of *‘Whisky Galore’* and *‘Monarch of the Glen’*, Compton MacKenzie is in the grave yard. Then it’s back around the north of the island and on to your hostel.

Day 8

The morning ferry for Oban sees cars and cyclists arriving half an hour before sailing as required. On a good day this is a fabulous five and a half hours. Superb views northwards of The Minch, Isle of Skye, Eigg, Rum and the Small Isles, as well as south to Coll and Tiree, with a clear view of Bac Mor (Dutchman’s Cap). Then the ferry passes the Ardnamurchan Lighthouse, built by the Stevenson family, yes the same ones who built the lighthouse at The Butt of Lewis. This one they modelled on ancient Egyptian buildings, which must have been coming in to fashion at the time with archaeological discoveries of their time. You then find yourself in the Sound of Mull, look out for a view of Tobermory with its brightly painted houses along the pier. The isle of Lismore alerts you that your cruise is coming to an end.

You dock in Oban too late to do anything other than check in at the hostel and look around the town. (Any cyclist reading this and travelling on south to e.g. Glasgow, Edinburgh, or further, will be able to catch a train – they are timed to meet the boat. MAKE SURE YOU HAVE PRE-BOOKED YOUR BIKE ON BOARD).

Oban Youth Hostel, S.Y.H.A. is 01631 – 562025 and oban@syha.org.uk and it is big. It also has an annexe which was fairly recently refurbished. Meals can be bought and there are large washing machines. There are also 2 independent hostels in the town, I haven’t stayed in either so can’t offer any guidance. The SiH handbook does not say whether they offer bike storage. One is 01631 – 566040 and enquiries@corranhouseoban.co.uk and the other is 01631 – 565065 and jeremyinglis@mctavishs.freeserve.co.uk

Day 9

For those of us cycling back to Inverness and home, from whichever hostel you stayed the night, go past the Corran Halls and start the climb up out of Oban. There is the possibility of a visit to Dunstaffnage Castle off to your left. Keep on this road until decision time at Connel Bridge. The decision is – cross it, or carry straight on. Either decision, take a look at the fast waters flowing under the bridge as the tides change, the Falls of Lora. There is a standing wave which is fascinating, so be careful not to spend all of the rest of the day just standing and staring.

(9a) Cross the bridge at Connel – The bridge at Connel takes you over Loch Etive and then alongside Loch Creran and through Appin. There is the very picturesque island castle as you come around beside Loch Linnhe, Castle Stalker. There is no navigation to speak of all the way to Glencoe and you should have time to stop and follow the signed path to the cairn marking ‘The Appin Murder’. This killing was attributed falsely to ‘James of the Glen’ and although it was known he was innocent he was hanged for the crime anyway. This shooting forms part of the plotline of Robert Louis Stevenson’s , *‘Kidnapped’*. Under Ballachulish Bridge and carry on the cycle path to Glencoe village. The hostel is a bit after the village. Oban to Glencoe Youth Hostel is 45 miles and can be contacted via glencoe@syha.org.uk and 1855 – 811219. There is a bike shed.

NOTE - There is signage to indicate that the cycle path between Connel and Ballachulish is open, but I can’t give guidance on this as I’ve never ridden it. I can vouch for a good cycle path between Glencoe and Ballachulish.

(9b) Carry straight on - Take the road for Taynuilt and Crianlarich. In the Pass of Brander on Loch Awe, there is the first hydro scheme to generate electricity. The visitor centre issues you a ticket priced ‘FREE’ because you have arrived by bike! A bus takes into the mountain tunnel for an explanation of the construction and ongoing generation of electricity – very interesting even if you had to pay. The café sells excellent food. On the road again, you see Kilchurn Castle set in the loch. FIND NOTES ON THE 20TH CENT. MINIATURE ABBEY. After Dalmally take the B8074 through Glen Orchy. This is an enjoyable ride on single track road with little traffic, on to Bridge of Orchy. Then north and up over Black Mount and the edge of Rannoch Moor and descend Glencoe. The road to the hostel is on the right just after a wee loch with a cottage beside it that you will likely recognise from photographs and postcards, just after ‘The Three Sisters’ mountains on your left. This route is 63 miles.

Day 10

From the hostel head for the village of Glencoe and once on the main road look for the bike track to Ballachulish Bridge. Just before crossing, note the steps up to the monument at the place where James of the Glen was hanged, 30 feet up, his body encased in wire to keep his bones together after the birds had picked his corpse clean. No one was permitted to bury him on pain of possible death. Carry on to Fort William and use the pavements as long as they are available – we were told to do this by a resident of the area who shouted the advice. Good advice too, as it’s a busy road.

Fort William offers the West Highland Museum with its secret portrait of BPC, shorthand for Charles Edward Stuart. This is on a tray, and it appears to be a swirl of colours, very ‘modern art’, until a glass is placed on the centre. You can then see the colours reflected in the glass – but now as a portrait. Well worth the time to visit. Also in the fort is an Episcopal Church with a fine carved door and mosaic pavement inside, visitors are encouraged.

Leaving An Gearasdan, as Fort William is known in Gaelic, you pass the fort that gives it the name. At the roundabout take ‘The Road to the Isles’ to Banavie and Neptune’s Staircase, the first set of locks on the Caledonian Canal. Follow the single track road, checking on your right for the best view of the cliffs of Ben Nevis, until you turn up to the Commando Monument. The area in your field of vision is part of the training ground for the WW2 commandos.

You now have another choice of routes;

10(a) take left on the A82 for 21 miles, passing the three lochs of the Great Glen - Loch Lochy, Loch Oich, and Loch Ness. Just after the swing bridge at Laggan is ‘The Well of the Heads’. The story is that some raiders went into another clans territory and did mischief, including killing one of the chief’s sons. The chief sent men to avenge the killing and they caught the raiders and killed them, cutting off their heads to take back to the chief as evidence they had carried out their orders. On the way back they washed the heads in the well. The well is to be found down the steps and behind the monument to this event. As a famous English actor once said, ‘not a lot of people know that’.

At the swing bridge at Aberchalder (assuming your tyres are wide enough and robust enough) you can take the path along the canal to Fort Augustus. Otherwise, stick to the road on to Fort Augustus which also has own very photogenic locks.

There are 2 hostels, both independent although one is affiliated to SYHA. The first is situated at what was the gate house of the former school and abbey. I stayed there in 1997 during my second ‘End – 2 – End’ trip and not since. Let’s hope it’s improved, I’m sure it has. The other is the very popular, and I do mean very popular so make sure you book well in advance of your trip, Morag’s Lodge. Tel 1320 – 366289 and info@moragslodge.com

10(b) Take right for 1 mile to Spean Bridge and then left for Roy Bridge. You have 37 miles of not too strenuous cycling along Loch Laggan, to Laggan and Newtonmore. I can highly recommend the independent hostel which was set up and owned by two ladies who have between them considerable experience of trekking and cycling. Clean, good clothes drying facilities, and showers, lockable bike shed, etc., because hostellers know what hostellers need. It has 12 beds available. Newtonmore Hostel is sue.ali@highlandhostel.co.uk and 01540 – 673360, or put Newtonmore Hostel in your search engine. (I noticed on the web that it is for sale, so the contact e-mail may change).

Day 11

This will start where you left off on Day 10 obviously, Fort Augustus or Newtonmore.

11 (a) – this route assumes you got a bed in Morag’s Lodge of course, or the other place. I strenuously suggest you avoid the main road to Inverness, it’s busy with traffic just about any time of the day or night, and it just isn’t a great cycling experience. This main road takes you along Loch Ness through Drumnadrochit with its ‘Nessie Centre’ and passes Urquhart Castle, hence the tourist focus during the summer. This route along the main road is 34 miles to Inverness.

Instead, my advice is, come out of Morag’s Lodge and go back through the village and over the swing bridge. Where the main road turns up hill, you carry straight on. This is a single track road, B862, and you have one steep climb then carry on to the junction. Take left on to the B852 and you have one steep descent to Foyers, where there is an electricity generating plant. (I don’t know if they do visits for tourists). The road follows Loch Ness, so passing cyclists have photo-opportunities to take a snap of Nessie, no guarantees though, and if it turns out to be the real thing there should be enough money in it to retire somewhere the cycling is warm and sunny. There is a guaranteed view across Loch Ness of of Urquhart Castle. The road takes you right into the centre of Inverness just at the bridge and beneath the castle. This route is perhaps 35 miles.

Inverness YHA hostel is a former school. It is big, busy with school and youth groups, and has a big bike shed, as well as all you would expect from a modern hostel. They also provide breakfast and an evening meal at extra cost if you decide not to use the members’ kitchen. There are also independent hostels, but these appear not to have a secure bike shed.

11(b) – leave Newtonmore for Kingussie, Aviemore and Carrbridge by way of the ‘old road’. There are independent hostels accessible along the way for those who might want to extend their trip. Kingussie has the ages and stages of croft life as well as a detour for Ruthven Barracks for any 21st century Jacobites in the club. Aviemore has a steam train for nostalgic folk, as well as a small Neolithic stone circle in the middle of a housing scheme! Carrbridge has the remains of a mediaeval pack bridge just beside the road.

For Inverness there is a route that runs parallel with the A9, appears to go under bridges and then take a meandering route into Inverness. I don’t know it and we took the longer way, which is, take right after Carrbridge to the B9007. This meanders northwards until the turn off which takes you to Cawdor, complete with the castle of ‘Hail Thane of Cawdor’ fame. Maybe Shakespeare passed this way on his bike and picked up the story? The castle is open until 5 o’clock during the tourist season. From Carrbridge you’ve come approximately 30 miles and you had 22 miles from Newtonmore to there.

From Cawdor you take the B9090 for just over a mile and then the B9091 for the 10 miles or so into Inverness. You pass ‘The Cumberland Stone’ where the Duke of that name watched the battle unfold on Drumossie Moor. Those with the time and inclination can make a slight diversion to the Neolithic period Clava Cairns and even the Culloden Muir battle site and interpretation. Miles for the day for us were about 62 – and I would have loved it but for the 3 hours of afternoon rain interspersed with midgies!

Day 12

We had booked the train back to Thurso about 6 weeks in advance. Just as well, all trains north had their full quota of bikes that day.

**Useful / essential sources for planning your trip.**

 [www.scotrail.co.uk](http://www.scotrail.co.uk) or just call in at Thurso rail station, which is more user friendly and indeed helpful, while helping with the staff’s passenger enquiries statistics. Ask about a Highland Railcard, an annual fee buys you savings on train journeys for a year. Bikes travel free but absolutely must be booked when buying your travel tickets. Book as far in advance as you can or you may find that End 2 Enders have got in before you.

 [www.calmac.co.uk](http://www.calmac.co.uk) covers most ferry routes for 22 islands, and all of them for this trip. The site has a route planner, and they over a ticket that allows you a good saving when you buy all your ferries in advance. Ask for it at Oban or Ullapool terminal, no need to buy or book in advance even with your bike.

 [www.syha.org.uk](http://www.syha.org.uk) is the SYHA, or Hostelling Scotland site. This is a member owned association which began life with Broadmeadows hostel in 1937. Membership is £8 per year for an individual, or free if you can prove you are a student with a student card. This investment saves you £2 per night in all the association hostels you stay in for a year. It also gives the same discount anywhere in the world through Hostelling International. There are some independent hostels on this site, as well as SIH, which are ‘associate hostels’.

 [www.hostel-scotland.co.uk](http://www.hostel-scotland.co.uk) is the site for SIH, Scottish Independent Hostels. These are the same as SYHA, except they are privately owned. Read their sites with the eye of a touring cyclist – because not all of them have secure accommodation for your bike. This can be particularly true of independent hostels in cities as their market describes themselves as ‘back packers’. These hostels sometimes self-describe as ‘backpackers hostels’ or ‘bunk houses’. Encouraged by Visit Scotland the standards have gone up markedly over the last decade.

 [www.visitscotland.com](http://www.visitscotland.com) takes you into the whole country’s tourism. Click on ‘Scotland’s Regions’ and then select ‘Outer Hebrides’. This gives you access to what they call an interactive map and you can research each separate island in the group. Very informative.