

Over the Cabrach to Glen Avon and Lairg Ghru August 2009 Part 1 – by Mark Brazier

I guess it's difficult for all of us shivering in one of the coldest winters for years to go out cycling on one of these typical winters' days when the temperature hardly gets above freezing. You are wrapped up in loads of layers of gloves, clothes, overshoes etc etc, it seems impossible to imagine days when it's so hot it's equally unbearable. Last summer those days were few and far between but one I recall easily because it came at the start of what turned out to be one of Anne and my most memorable trips by bike up to Scotland, to Glen Avon in the Cairngorms

We have been going up to Scotland very regularly since 2003, I had got a plan to take our bikes into the remote area of Knoydart west of Fort William, and got hold of a book about mountain biking in the area by Peter Koch-Osborne, this guy had been a member of the tandem club in the 1980s, in Yorkshire but had moved up to the highlands to write a series of mountain bike and walking guides to the glens. We eventually acquired the whole series and winters would be spent planning epic trips into the vast unknown of Highland Scotland. I got great inspiration from these books, and although now a little out of date they are unsurpassed in the detail contained within, plus they are written and illustrated both with maps and drawings in a style which is humorous, quirky and committed to the cause

The Cairngorm Glens was Peter's first book, published in 1991. This area of Scotland contains enough for a lifetime of cycle exploration. Of Glen Avon he says "the great Glen Avon approach to the Cairngorms is unsurpassed, it is long, very long and the views into the mountains always spur you on. It is also a very committing route, Faindouran lodge is about the remotest place in mainland Britain and any expedition into this area must be regarded as serious"

So on August 19th on what was forecast to be one of the hottest days of the year we set off from Ledbury railway station at just after midday after I finished work to cycle the 75 miles to Bicester. As we toiled up Stanway hill and over the Cotswolds on the expedition mtbs loaded up for the few days away, the temperature read 34 degrees on the computer, the strong and not especially helpful southerly wind felt like the draught from a blast furnace oven. Later that day 5 o'clock saw us in a pub in Bicester where numerous drinks failed to rehydrate, the train to Marylebone was hot, and the trip down the Euston road jostling with Boris's buses even hotter

Nearly all our journeys to Scotland have started at Euston on one of the two overnight sleeper trains, and my favourite is the Highland sleeper. Leaving at a civilised 21.15 there is time to eat and drink, a surprisingly good value menu on offer, before off to your compartment to sleep. At 4.00 in the morning while you are asleep, in Edinburgh this train is split into three portions, for Fort William, Inverness and Aberdeen, this time we were on the Aberdeen. To wake up in Scotland on the train is absolute magic, and the run up the Scottish east coast is very scenic and rather underrated. However today the forecast cold front has passed overnight and yesterday's heat has been replaced by drizzly rain and 13 degrees!

Off the train at 7.30 am we head out on NCN 1 through the Granite City's rush hour, it takes us over an hour to get away from traffic but west from Inverurie its like cycling used to be in our county 30 years ago, the pleasure of empty roads. We are climbing steadily through Kennethmont to Rhynie, and here we get on the evocative road over the Cabrach to Dufftown. Through sets of snow gates I'm reminded that this road is regularly on the news as closed by snow in winter,



today though as we grovel over the top, we see the vast Cabrach stretched out before us, a haze of purple heather as far as you can see. We descend for mile after mile through this purple backdrop, then after Dufftown it's uphill again around the brooding bulk of Ben Rinnes before arriving at our base for the next couple of days, SYHA at Tomintoul. This is a General Wade military town dating after the 1745 rebellion, its over 1000 feet up and here we have our first glimpse this trip of the magnificent Glen Avon. We planned to do the off road trip up Glen Avon (pronounced Aan by the way) on the third day as the weather looked first rate, so the day after our arrival saw us complete a 100 mile plus road circuit into Speyside, back over the purple Cabrach, into the upper part of the Don valley before dragging ourselves over another regular winter road closure the A939 from Cockbridge over the Lecht, well it was worth it for the 7 mile descent into Tomintoul!

A beautiful if cold start the next day saw us start the long climb up Glen Avon nice and early. The tarmac road disappears quickly and the estate track (a royal one much favoured by the Queen etc) becomes rough. The sense of remoteness is palpable with mountains closing in all around, your only companions wildlife like the deer and of course the occasional soaring eagle. In the valley the Avon is constantly reminding you of its



presence as it rushes down to join the Spey, but for Anne and I its all uphill, and on guard at all times on the loose surface, this is when you wish you had knobbly tyres, no good for all that road work though. The valley tightens its grip as you ascend. 15 miles from Tomintoul you reach the end

of the track at Faindouran lodge, its taken us over 3 hours to get here, you can travel on by rough path to the fords of Avon, even over the Cairngorm itself, not for us with bikes though, we sign the book in the bothy, its downhill on the way back. Collecting our panniers later that evening we cycle the 20 or so road miles to SYHA Aviemore, the next day we were to undertake a foolhardy trip into the Lairg Ghru, but that's a story for another issue

Peter K-O says "It's a rare privilege just to be in Glen Avon, to experience its unique remoteness and quiet and to savour that feeling of being so very far away from the rat race. It's indeed a place to put life itself in perspective"

We will continue this with the story of our trip up the Lairg Ghru the next day!