

Coasts & Castles North – Aberdeen to Edinburgh

9 June to 10 June 2012

Stats:

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| Bike | Giant CRS 3.0 Hybrid, 35c tyres |
| Total Distance over 2 days | 195.57 miles (actual route = 173 miles) |
| Day 1 | 115 miles |
| Day 2 | 80 miles |
| Ave speed/Max Speed | 12mph / 34mph |
| Time on bike | 17 hours |
| Elapsed Time | 30 hours |
| Start/Finish Time | 08:45 Sat / 15:30 Sun |

Day 1 – 9 June, Aberdeen to Strathkinness – 115 miles

It was an early start to day 1 with my alarm waking me at 4:30am. Getting the first train to Aberdeen at 5:45am from Inverkeithing sounded like a good plan, but was less appealing on the day.

I was a little worried that I might not be able to find the right carriage on the train for my bike, but with 2 bike carriages in a 4 carriage train this wasn't a problem. The conductor stepped off where I was standing, which made securing my bike to the right spot even easier.

The train journey to Aberdeen was largely uneventful apart from a 20 minute delay near Carnoustie because of signalling problems. The train passed through the places I would be revisiting on the way back down, which added a little interest to the journey.



So I arrived in Aberdeen at 8:30, quick coffee at the Costa to get me started and I was off. Little did I know that this was to be an 'epic' ride.



Making my way through the one way Aberdeen road system was a bit of an ordeal with the cycle way markings seeming to double back often and then wind their way slowly through some quiet back streets rather than take a more direct route. I had to stop 2 or 3 times to adjust the gears, which kept slipping. Eventually I found myself at the docks and then out onto the country roads I yearned for. Then it started to rain.

After another brief stop to put on waterproofs I was off again, happy to be making progress despite the weather.

The wind had picked up a bit, but wasn't too bad. The route wound around some quiet coastal roads to Portlethen before heading inland with many undulating hills and more wind and rain.

I made it to Stonehaven in good time. There was a slightly confusing moment where the signs tried to direct me up a closed road, but I made a slight detour and was away again up the hill to Dunnottar Castle. Again I had to adjust the gearing and began to have concerns. Half a mile after Dunnottar Castle I lost the ability to change gears on the rear cassette and had to stop again. To my horror I found that my gear cable had sheared at the handlebar end. This was not fixable and I wasn't carrying a spare! Thoughts of returning to a train station in failure crossed my mind, before I suddenly remembered that my Sustrans map had the towns with bike shops marked on it. Luckily, Stonehaven had one, so I got back on and cycled the 2 miles back in 8th gear.

I couldn't see the shop in the square so after a bit of asking around I found it on one of the roads nearby. It was a busy Saturday morning and they couldn't fit me in, so I bought the gear cable and changed it myself on the pavement outside. I couldn't cut it to size with the lightweight pliers on my multitool, so the guy in the shop kindly cut off the excess and put an end stopper on it. Fantastic. I had a working bike again and only an hour and a half wasted. After a quick sausage roll and a couple of pork pies from the Spar Shop I was on my way again.

I adjusted the gears on the fly, which meant stopping every 5 minutes and twiddling the adjuster to get it right. This was only a little frustrating because it was far better than the alternative long train journey home, but slowed me down until I got the gears changing properly. Oh for a lightweight mobile work stand weighing less than 100 grams and packing down to the size of a pencil. Inventors: get your thinking caps on!

It was then a straightforward and uneventful ride along the coast from Stonehaven to Montrose. The remains of Dunnottar Castle were very picturesque against the background of the sea. The route took me occasionally along the busy A92 where good progress was made at the expense of enjoyment. Most of Route 1 went along quiet back roads of varying surfaces and with very little traffic. There was an off road alternative to avoid the A92, but with fully laden panniers and tent, I didn't think this was a good idea.



I went off track on the run in to Montrose, but with all roads leading to the bridge this wasn't a problem. In fact the detour took me past a petrol station with an adjoining shop, which was great for stocking up on supplies of drinks, crisps and chocolate.

Montrose to Arbroath was similar terrain. When I reached Arbroath at tea time I saw a MacDonald's, the first of the trip, so I took a detour from the cycle path and then saw a KFC in the same business park. It was a dilemma, but the KFC won out because there was a cycle rack in front of the big glass front windows of the shop. I bought my meal and thought I was being good by refusing the endless list of add ons KFC ask you to buy; do you want to go large?; do you want to add extra chicken?; do you want hot wings?; etc. My 3 piece dinner with a coffee really hit the spot.



After paying a visit while a kind gentleman watched my bike I was off again, slightly sluggishly with a full stomach. It was 6pm and I still had long way to go, but I felt good.



I really enjoyed the standalone cycle paths between Arbroath and Dundee, through Carnoustie and Monifieth. They wound around many golf courses and were good surfaces to ride on, although sometimes quite busy with other cyclists and pedestrians. It rained on and off, but not enough to give me another soaking.

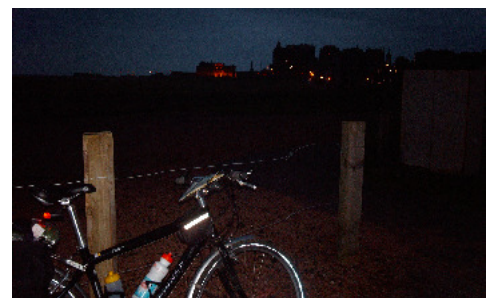
Dundee was busy with people walking their dogs along the cycle paths, which got really frustrating and slowed me down substantially.

It's not really their fault, but I do think the trend of combined cycle paths and pavements without clear markings to designate who should go where is not the way forward. I'd rather be on the road but as the route signs are on the cycle path, not the road, this makes navigation more difficult. In spite of the frustration I thought the cycle into Dundee along the Tay coast in the evening sunshine was very nice.

Unfortunately this didn't last. I lost the cycle path among some closed roads due to a remodelling of the sea front and ended up on the main road into Dundee. This wasn't a problem in itself because I'm used to busy roads, but when I couldn't find anywhere to turn off for a cycle path along the Tay Bridge I ended up with cars hurtling past me along the narrow 2 lane main carriage way of the bridge. The Tay Bridge should have been one of the highlights of the trip, but I had my head down trying to get across it as quickly as possible. I didn't see any signs to say cycling wasn't allowed, but it's definitely not advisable. Nerves frazzled, I made it to the other side. My other pet hate is City Councils that give no thought to re-routing cyclists around roadworks as well as cars (Edinburgh is just as bad for this). Excitement over, I set off along good paths through a wood along the opposite bank of the Tay.

Next came Tentsmuir Forrest. The dotted lines denoting an off road section on the map really don't do this track justice. The only saving grace was it wasn't too wet. It would have been impossible on my fully laden hybrid had it been raining. The track has simply a forest track complete with muddy patches and tree roots. It went on for about 6 miles and completely knackered my wrists. By some miracle the rear rack held up and I reached a tarmacked section coming out of the forest that was really pleasant in the fading light.

Decision time. Go on to past St Andrews to my intended campsite, which I would now not reach until after 10:30pm given the lost time at Stonehaven and Tentmuir Forrest, or pitch my tent on the outskirts of the forest in a picturesque spot. I felt ok, so I put on my lights and set off into the gathering darkness. In the dark I almost missed one of the most iconic images of the trip. I passed another golf course and thought "that view looks familiar". It was only the view up the 18th fairway towards the club house at St Andrews that I'd seen on the telly many times! I stopped, took a photo, and was on my way again as it began to rain yet again.



I was feeling pretty miserable on my way out of St Andrews. Must have been a mixture of the high fat intake at lunch and tea and the rain coming down. Plus the fact that I'd already cycled more than 100 miles, fixed a gear cable, braved the main carriageway of the Tay Bridge and undergone backside torture in Tentsmiur Forest. I passed a football pitch on the outskirts of Strathkinness at 10:30pm and thought "sod it, that'll do". I pitched the tent in the dark along the tree line at the far side of the pitch from the village and got my head down for the night.



Day 2, 10 June – Strathkinness to Edinburgh to Rosyth – 80 miles

I didn't have a good night's sleep, which is unusual given the exertion of the day. I felt sick and woke up quite a lot during the night. At 5am I'd had enough and as it was already light I broke camp, had a caffeine drink and a cereal bar for breakfast and was on my way again.

It was raining lightly as I passed the camp site I'd intended to stay at. Money well saved I thought, as I passed by, but I could have done with a full water bottle. I was down to the dregs with no idea where the next shop would be open on an early Sunday morning.

I continued to struggle through the villages on route, feeling awful and with very little water. I put it down to the high saturated fat content of my food the previous day. My liver and kidneys must have been struggling to cope. I felt sick every time I tried to eat something, yet my body needed more fuel. It was a constant struggle.

I was relieved when I hit Freuchie at just after 8am and found the village shop open. I stocked up on water, sports drink and some scotch pancakes. There was a cycling event being held later that day, but I was too early for it and the people I asked didn't know much about it.

The route was now in familiar territory. Some of my local rides from Rosyth had been through Freuchie and Falkland so I knew what was coming. A long hard slog up a narrow road from Strathmiglo to Kinross. It didn't disappoint, and with the added thrill of rain coming down so hard it bounced back off the road. It turned one steep downhill into a river with a mud slide at the bottom that almost took me off. How I stayed upright I'll never know.

The weather brightened up near Kinross and 3 cyclists (the first I'd seen going the same way as me) overtook me. We chatted for a while and I found out they were cycling to London in 5 days the following week.

Having company for the first time on the trip inevitably ended with embarrassment. The Route 1 signs I had been following since Aberdeen turned off the main road to Kinross in favour of a narrow cinder track, so I stopped and tried to pull my bike onto the pavement up a large curb. I was weaker than I thought due to the sickness and lack of food, so instead of pulling the bike up onto the pavement I toppled over with the bike on top of me. As I got up, I assured the other riders I was ok, apart from my pride taking a dent, and they carried on along the road. In fact, I'd bruised my knee and hurt both wrists in fall, which were painful for the rest of the ride.

I then looked down the loose surface of the new cycle track and then looked down the nice smooth road. "Sod it" I said, not for the first time this trip, and set off down the main road again into Kinross.

Kinross features in many of my cycle rides, and it's road surfaces are from hell. I gingerly made my way down the high street with my newly damaged wrists crying out at every jolt and bump. However, a bigger challenge was on the way. The climb between Cleish and Dunfermline is a bugger at the best of times, but fully laden, feeling ill and after 150 miles with little sleep? I really wasn't looking forward to it. Interestingly I met my first LEJOG cyclist at Cleish. He was French and looking for a road to somewhere I'd never heard of, which isn't unusual. He seemed to think he could find his way, though, and didn't want to follow my directions to Kinross.

I managed the Cleish hills at a steady pace as I think the sports drinks must have kicked in. It was decision time again. Should I continue on into Edinburgh without stopping at my house in Rosyth on the way, or should I pop in for a quick cuppa and perhaps not have the enthusiasm to continue. The fact that my rough camping had lacked a proper toilet made my mind up, and I headed for home.

20 minutes later I was off again heading for Edinburgh over the Forth Road Bridge. Although I ride over the bridge every day to work, this was a special crossing. I stopped in the middle to take a photo. I had seen countless other cyclist do this on their own special journeys. Every day is a different view from the bridge, depending on weather conditions, and the view, even when there isn't one, is always magical. I consider it a real privilege to be able to cycle across it on my way to work.



The Coasts and Castles North route ends at The Mound in Edinburgh. However, riding a bike through Edinburgh is hell. Whole sections of roads are completely closed, throwing the unsuspecting cycling off into a never ending array of one way streets, cobblestones, traffic lights and potholes that drive you completely insane. It took me 30 minutes to cycle the mile from Haymarket to St Andrew Square. I began to set off on foot for The Mound, but the centre of Edinburgh was packed on a Sunday afternoon and I'd had enough. I finished the ride at St Andrew Square, which is recognised as being in the centre of Edinburgh. Then I set off again through the roadworks and over the cobblestones for home.



Overall

Overall I enjoyed the trip very much. Good signs on route kept me on track. I followed the map as well for reassurance, but did not need to refer constantly to it.

This section of Route 1 is really nice in sections, and awful in others. Tensmuir Forest and Edinburgh should be bypassed and the route out of Aberdeen should be simplified, as it winds far too much along uninteresting back streets. The cycle paths around the golf courses along the coast from Carnoustie to Dundee coast are great, but very slow going as you need to pick your way around pedestrians. The hills between St Andrews and Dunfermline provide a challenge and interesting views.

There are not many shops or toilets on route other than in the main town centres you pass through, which have little in the way of a secure place to park the bike. This is probably because roadside cafes and service stations are on main roads and Route 1 doesn't use these main roads.

Edinburgh not good place for cycling and left me feeling frustrated instead of elated at the end of the ride. I love Edinburgh, but the council does not seem to have got to grips with an integrated cycle network, and the tram roadworks play havoc with any predefined routes.