

## TRAVEL FEATURE

**T**HE haul up the trail paths out of Fort Augustus was tough, bordering on brutal, forcing us all onto our feet. All, that is, bar 21-year-old Magnus, our guide who was, by at least a couple of decades, the youngest of those on bikes. He was not first to the top because he had been busy sheep-dogging his way up and down the hill, making sure everyone was managing, but as he rode up to join us he was not the least bit out of breath, a reminder that this fearsome slope would by no means be considered exceptional by competitive cyclists.

Still, for those of us whose time in the saddle has been highly restricted since school-days, it was a fair old achievement when, after a bit of a respite along the side of Loch Tarff, we completed the day's second climb to get one of those rewards in which Scotland specialises, a 360-degree view from a breezy hill-top, offering sight on a clear day of seven more lochs. In fairness, the morning's Scotch mist meant we could see only two of them clearly, but the Great Glen still lived up to its name.

A decade or so has passed since I first cruised across Loch Ness and simultaneously experienced both pride and dismay at living so close to this part

# The *wheel* deal

**Keen to challenge himself physically while also enjoying panoramic Highland views, Kevin Ferrie joins a four-day bike and barge cruise ... but can he handle it?**

of the world, only to have spent so little time savouring it. Since then there have been many visits including taking part in the Monster Challenge as part of a team relay running and cycling our way around Loch Ness and a "boot camp" trip to Fort Augustus. This may, however, have been the best option to date in terms of combining vigorously active enjoyment of our beautiful countryside, while enjoying a bit of pampering along the way.

As so many of the best things in Scottish life are, the "Bike and Barge" concept has been imported from the continent, resulting in Caledonian Discovery's recent addition of a "Bike the Great Glen" option to their range of canal cruises connecting one side of Scotland to the other.

The company is by no means the only one taking advantage of the

astonishing Thomas Telford-inspired feat of Highlander-powered engineering which links Scotland's coasts. However it has done a particularly impressive job of turning journeys into adventures for those looking to do more than simply cruise the 60-mile route that, travelling west to east as we were, sees man made stretches of water connect Loch Lochy, Loch Oich and Loch Ness in turn.

On their two barges – The Fingal and Ros Crana – they offer 14 wide-ranging options. Tellingly of the 52 available in 2018, 19 are already completely sold out, while on only half a dozen or so are there no bookings at all to date. As the crew readily point out, that is at least partly down to their route having featured on television's "Great Canal Cruises" during which, accompanied by husband and fellow thespian Timothy West, Fawlty Towers actress Prunella Scales



evangelised about the other-worldliness of being on this stretch of water surrounded by such scenery. However, as demonstrated on our trip (a third of our number had travelled on The Fingal previously) a high percentage are re-bookers or have been introduced by word of mouth. That is, in its way, remarkable given that people are evidently signing up in the knowledge that unless their group has booked out the boat, they will be



**Biking along the Great Glen canal on a Caledonian Discovery cruise**

spending their holiday in what is a fairly intimate space with complete strangers.

Our gathering assembled at Banavie, just above the wondrous construction that is Neptune's Staircase and, after a brief run down of sensible and far from restrictive rules and regulations in relation to on-board protocol, over coffee and the first of each day's freshly baked cakes, there was a chance to get to grips with our main mode of transport,

pedalling the mile or so to Corpach on our western coast.

The next hour turned into what might be termed something of a boatman's holiday since, by an odd coincidence, our route took us past a sports field on which the shinty players of Newtonmore, upon whom I been reporting over the previous two weekends were, unbeknown to me, playing their last match ahead of the Camanachd Cup final. Such expertise as

has been acquired in attendance at all of half a dozen such clashes of the ash, was tested to the limit by the questions from Huck and Nadine, the Americans in our party, but they seemed to buy my bluffing.

The Fingal had moved up the canal in our absence and we caught up with it at Spean Bridge where, after a couple of gins from the well-stocked bar, we were introduced to the skills of Kevin, our chef: baked cod with salsa verde and crushed potatoes, followed by chocolate fondant accompanied by vanilla ice cream, ahead of the arrival of a hefty cheeseboard, all providing reassurance that we would be well fuelled throughout our travels.

The first full day's cycling was set up perfectly by a commensurately excellent breakfast and Magnus steered those intending to cycle the full distance along an undulating 14-mile morning route past the bridge from which Liam Neeson's Rob Roy leapt to evade redcoat capture and down the Dark Mile, which inspired a more recent movie of that name, featuring a guest appearance from The Fingal. We met up with the rest of our party at The Eagle Barge – a floating pub which sits at Laggan locks – arriving to find it closed, but happily making our packed lunches last long enough to be there for the Sunday 12.30pm opening, allowing us to refuel with a beer before heading on to Fort Augustus where, with 25 hilly miles completed on the day, another hearty meal preceded an early night ahead of the third day's 28 miles.

As, next morning, we took on that climb out of Fort Augustus, two of our party, Liz and Trisha, seemed to have

been judicious in avoiding the early morning exertions by opting to join us at the day's halfway point, but they were made to pay something of a price. The incline that has helped create the lovely Falls of Foyers also makes for a challenging ascent from The Fingal's mooring to the café in which the rest of us were relaxing after our morning's labours.

From there on to Dores and one last Loch-side pub stop, September sunshine helping turn it into an idyllic setting before the day's last few wooded miles to a little jetty where Steve, The Fingal's bosun, met us with a powerboat to return us to base.

The following morning with inspirational septuagenarian Mick in the lead as ever, we all headed down to the Beaully Firth now forming a convivial group as those who had cycled the full length of the canal received their congratulations and, on returning to the boat, a certificate that has claimed pride of place on the Ferrie fridge.

By the standards of the modern mamils (middle aged men in lycra) it may have been a modest feat while the, er, nutritional intake described is such that this trip is hardly going to impact significantly on overall fitness. However, for those of us who like to think we can still manage a bit of exertion but no longer want to rough it on our holidays, it is hard to imagine a better way of enjoying the best Scotland has to offer ... it's creature comforts as well as its countryside.

*Kevin Ferrie was a guest of Caledonian Discovery*