

A cyclist wearing a camouflage jacket, black shorts, and a white helmet is riding a mountain bike on a dirt trail through a forest. The bike is equipped with a yellow pannier rack on the rear, which is filled with gear. The cyclist is viewed from behind, and the background shows tall trees and a dense forest. The text "THREE OF A KIND" is overlaid on the image.

THREE OF A KIND



ANDY MCCANDLISH AND FRIENDS TAKE OFF ON AN OVERNIGHT TRIP IN THE CAIRNGORMS WITH JUST MOUNTAIN BIKES AND KIT TRAILERS FOR COMPANY



THE SOUND OF GRIT crackling under tyre was just heavenly. All three of us had spent a busy few weeks with work but had arranged for a quick rendezvous in the Cairngorms, turning lightweight mountain bikes normally used for skipping round local hills into workhorses laden with camping gear for a short but sweet tour. Euan Wilson was leaving his mountain bike guiding company, Highlands and Islands Adventures, on autopilot for a rare break, while Andy McKenna was doing likewise with his adventure transport business Go-Where – that is, when we finally prised the chirping iPhone from his twitching fingers.

And now, we were finally on the move. After a quick dash round the shops for last-minute snacks, we hitched our trailers behind the bikes and set off into the freedom of the backcountry.

When deciding how to carry a load on any bike there are a number of options. Panniers are the traditional choice, but have limited carrying capacity. And in the world of off-road cycling where bikes have to be lifted over gates and fences, or carried for short, rough sections, they can be more of a bind. Instead, we have all gone down the more expensive, but far more effective route of using BOB trailers. A single wheel at the back supports a metal cage in which a waterproof roll-top bag can be stuffed full of gear. This, in turn, is linked to a fork at the front which wraps round the back wheel to hang on a special skewer through the rear axle.

Trailers carry a ridiculous load that can be added to with bungee straps at any time. They can also cope with just about any off-road trail, and be unhitched in just a few seconds when negotiating gates. Most importantly, they are far more robust than pannier and rack systems; ours certainly bore the **D**

PHOTOGRAPHY: ANDY MCCANDLISH

Scars of previous trips bumping and scraping over some of the most remote and rugged terrain that Scotland has to offer.

And that is the strength of mountain bikes and trailers – the bikes allow you to cover a lot of ground, while a trailer can pack enough gear and supplies for several days away from civilisation. As a result, you get to see a lot of countryside.

PEDALLING FREE

There are few feelings that match the lifting of responsibility from your shoulders as each crank of the pedals takes you away from everyday cares and further into the landscape you love. And as we left the cars behind and pedalled up a riverside trail out of Nethy Bridge, registering the tug of the trailer as we began the steady climb, that feeling was there in spades. Daffodils lined the trail, the river tumbled over the rocks on our left and even the sun started to make an appearance. All was well in our world.

The trail burst out through some houses, turned left and then took us on a gradual ascent into and through Abernethy Forest. We were aiming, if aiming isn't too pro-active a word for our relaxed meandering, for the Ryvoan Pass with a view to touring the gorgeous Caledonian pinewoods of Rothiemurchus before finding a suitable spot to pitch camp for the night. With freedom and light weight in mind, not to mention the springtime lack of midges, we had all packed Gore-Tex bivvy bags along with a tarp for cooking and sleeping under.

More used to the recent cold spells than the springtime



“TRAILERS CARRY A RIDICULOUS LOAD THAT CAN BE ADDED TO AT ANY TIME”

warmth, we stripped off layers as we travelled. With jackets bungeed on top of the BOBs we carried on up the wide tracks until they narrowed into the more rocky offerings of the Pass of Ryvoan. Up ahead, bird-watchers huddled round a telescope in the middle of the track, pointing at a nearby stand of pine and chatting excitedly as we passed.

As the trees disappeared, the view opened out and we found ourselves gazing south and west over the Braes of Abernethy and Bynack More, with the rest of the northern Cairngorms spread out further to the east. The sun continued to shine as we scratched up steep inclines and stood high on the pedals to negotiate the rocky and shallow rutted descents, splashing through burns and stopping now and then to take in the view.

On one pause we were caught by a lone mountain biker on a lightweight Cannondale. It was a moment of mutual admiration: he loved the idea of the trailers and vowed to go and look them up, while we licked our lips at the thought of bouncing over the rocks and roots on an unladen bike.

We waved our goodbyes and began the descent off the moor to the bustling Ryvoan Bothy with its convention of walkers that had stopped off for lunch and a seat in the sun. Dating back to the 18th century, the bothy was originally a croft but was finally abandoned in 1877. Climbers and hillwalkers took over maintenance of the building to

Eyes front (clockwise from left): negotiating a tricky section; gorgeous riverside views; passing Ryvoan bothy; forest signage; ideal touring country





keep it habitable until the early 1970s when the Mountain Bothy Association took on the job of keeping it in the fine condition it is in today.

A cracking spot close to Glenmore and with beautiful views straight from the door, the bothy is understandably popular for day trips. We breezed past with a cheery hello and headed down the glen where we caught our first glimpse of Rothiemurchus – part of the largest remaining stand of ancient Caledonian pines in Scotland, and our bedroom for the night.

COFFEE AND CAKE

We bounced onwards, clattering over awkward-sized rocks on the descent towards Glenmore Lodge and Loch Morlich. Any thoughts of stopping off in the lodge for a Guinness were quickly scuppered as we discovered the bar was shut, so we continued instead to the café in Glenmore. It was a close second choice for a stop, although the latte and yum-yum combo may or may not have been a healthier option than the Guinness.

As we supped and watched the red squirrels outside the window we decided there should be a plan. It was already late – we had left at 2pm – so there was limited time before dark. We decided to aim for the Cairngorm Club footbridge, a well-known local landmark, and find a place to set up camp for the night.

There was already a chill in the air as we left the café and it was with stiff legs that we hauled the trailers up onto the road and set off on the trail round Loch Morlich. However, it wasn't long before we were distracted once more, this time by the sandy beach that gleamed in the late evening sun at the head of the loch. It was an idyllic **D**



Forest dwellers (clockwise from left): picking up speed; campsite cuisine; arboreal art; a study in concentration

D spot, with couples walking dogs along the shore contributing to a picture postcard view dominated by the imposing backdrop of the northern corries.

But we couldn't stay forever. Rousing ourselves, Euan led the way onto a forest trail that climbed gently towards Rothiemurchus Lodge before breaking onto a narrower trail that ran past the 'Piccadilly' trail junction and the turning for the famous Lairig Ghru path. On this occasion, we weren't heading into the hills, so we stayed right and swept down through the trees, pedalling alongside the Allt Druidh to the Cairngorm Club footbridge.

Helping each other with the trailers, we negotiated the bridge and turned left up a track that dead-ended at the confluence of the Allt Druidh and Am Beanaidh. A flat spot under a huge pine caught our eye; with the crashing river on one side and the hills forming a seductive backdrop through the trees, it was the ideal spot for an overnight stay.

Teamwork kicked in once again as Euan and I got the tarp out and rigged it up in the trees in case of rain, while Andy cleared the ground of pine cones and sticks. Just as the last of the day's sun flickered through the branches we threw the bivvies out, cramming our sleeping bags in and sealing them up to keep out the evening dew.

With the light fading altogether, we rummaged in the BOB bags for our food and it wasn't long before the stoves were lit and pots filled with handy river water. Andy had sourced some tasty new camping meals from a company called Look What We Found and we had all picked out a main course before we left. There was much rubbing of hands and hungry looks as we boiled up some rice to accompany them.

PAST ENDEAVOURS

As we sat and ate, I was reminded of our last journey with the trailers – and my part in its near disastrous outcome. With winter in full swing we had intended to visit a bothy far up Glen Tilt near Blair Atholl. Although snow-free at ground level, there was plenty on the high tops, so we knew what we were potentially getting ourselves into.

Euan recalled the late afternoon of that day as we hit foot-deep snow with only a few miles to go before reaching the bothy I had carefully pinpointed on the map. We

elected to ditch the bikes, marking their position with a GPS in case the snow covered them overnight, before slinging the heavy trailer bags over our shoulders and trekking in to the welcoming warmth of the bothy.

I had pushed on ahead, stumbling through ever deepening snow, but sure of the path and convinced we would be triumphant. This meant I was also the first to arrive at our destination and realise that rather than a cosy building with four walls and a roof, we were faced instead with a night in an open cattle shelter. I wasn't very popular. The flicker of the meths burner flame lit Andy's face as he remembered me pointing to the map, helpfully noting that the bothy must be the next building marked several miles distant down the glen and unreachable given the conditions.

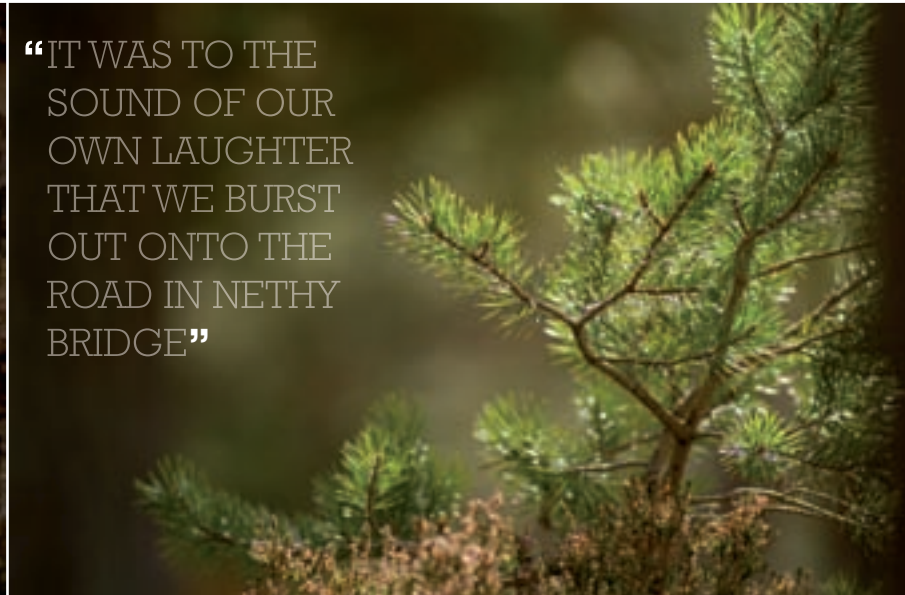
Fortunately, we had carried in a load of coal, food and enough warm gear to conquer the Arctic, and so settled in for the night, burning a fire to keep the worst of the chill out. I remember being thankful I was with a good humoured, experienced bunch of lads and that we all had the right gear to survive a night in the open.

Polishing off our main courses, we continued to swap stories from other trips. The BOBs are perfect for trips out to the Hebrides where car fares can be prohibitive, but bikes travel for free – even with a trailer packed full of gear. Rainy days on Coll followed by balmy hot days drying gear on a Tìree beach were recalled as I savoured my pork and herb sausages. Afternoons hiding in cafés on Harris as the rain howled outside made us smile as we prepared a speedy custard and malt loaf dessert.

Of course, trips can go badly wrong too. As Euan



“IT WAS TO THE SOUND OF OUR OWN LAUGHTER THAT WE BURST OUT ONTO THE ROAD IN NETHY BRIDGE”



passed around some of his closely guarded 30-year-old malt, Andy lay back on his bivvy and recalled how he had almost come to tears on an abortive trip across Rannoch Moor. Aiming for the train station, he had slopped through deep, muddy puddles, yanked his bike onwards as it stuck fast in gloopy bogs and tried to manoeuvre a fully-laden trailer up and over locked deer gates. He had eventually collapsed well short of his destination and spent a midge-infested night in the open.

But, we all agreed, you can only appreciate the good when you have conquered the bad. We raised a drink to that before extinguishing the last stove and retreating to our bags for the night. I fell asleep to the blissful sound of the river just a stone's throw away.

EARLY START

The next morning, woken early by the light, we wolfed down our porridge and cleared camp before it was even 7am. We hauled our bikes and trailers back onto the heather-lined track as Euan brushed the area with a branch to remove any signs of our stay, and then set off down the trail towards Inverdrue.

With rain forecast for the afternoon we had planned to get back to Nethy Bridge around lunchtime, and that's just what we did. The ride up and over An Slugan was only slightly marred by the forestry work that had ravaged the hillside, but the view behind more than made up for it: looking back over Rothiemurchus and the northern corries was a good enough reason for a stop and mid-morning munch and it was with heavy hearts that we eventually turned our backs on the view one last time and headed down the rocky track past Milton Farm and onto the road.

But even the roads in this area are a pleasure to ride, and we chatted away the miles climbing up to Tulloch and on to the final descent down into Nethy. Suddenly, with only two miles to go, Euan screeched to a halt by a narrow, unmarked trail that zipped off the road to our right. 'What the hell,' we thought, before plunging into the trees and off the radar of the map.

Of course, the trail was superb, twisting and turning over roots and through open woodland as it worked its way over the hillside to join the marked trails behind the

village. Popping out over a few bridges we picked up speed and ended up racing the last mile down a heathery trail into the back of the village, chasing Andy's trailer as it slid from side to side through the tight corners.

And it was to the sound of our own laughter that we burst out onto the road in Nethy Bridge and cruised the final few hundred metres to where the cars had been left. It was a perfect finish to the trip and one that softened the blow of our return to civilisation and the world of work. ■

