

Torrid times

With a few cheap lights and little hope of help in the event of a disaster, **mbr** throws caution to the wind amid the Highland splendour of the Torridon mountains

📍 & 📷 Andy McCandlish

Sitting against a tumbling dry-stone wall, my back to a copse of Scots pines, I looked to the sky. Grey. Getting darker grey by the minute. I tapped the Joystick headlight in my side pocket to make sure it hadn't dropped out somewhere, and looked to Andy.

"Well, we are as well going forward now. There is no going back!"

He grinned and nodded, turning to look up the isolated glen stretching away from us with a sliver of grey singletrack threading its way through a few twists before popping over a rise and out of sight. It looked good, but for how long?

We had left the van with the express intention of getting as far as we could on this route, but fully realising the late-summer darkness was setting in all too early in the day. It was simple: we would just turn back if time got on top of us.

But that was before we hit the lochside, rounded the remote cottage and started on a superb piece of narrow trail hugging the water. It egged us on as we rode faster and faster through the twists and turns, chasing each other's wheels. Before we knew it, nearly 10 kilometres had passed and we had some decisions to make. It was 5pm, heavy clouds were approaching and



Scottish hospitality, bothy style



Well worth it: the last long descent of day one

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the sun would be gone altogether in a couple of hours.

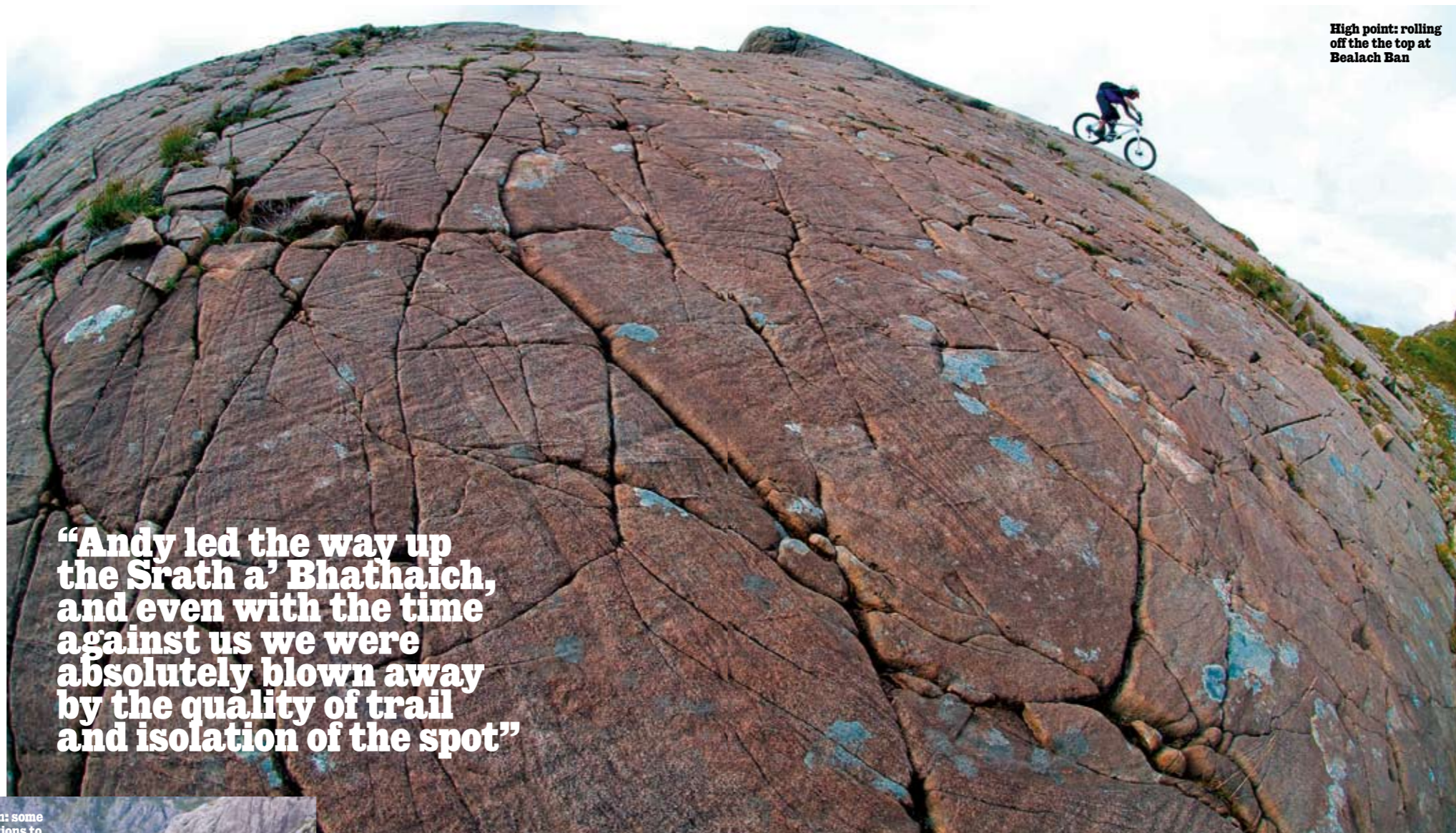
But it was true — there was no way we were going back now. On the map we were about halfway, although the ‘go-ahead’ option took us high over a mountain pass. It would be great to explore some more though, so we pushed off and started what turned out to be a long but extremely enjoyable haul up the glen. After all, we reasoned, I had a Joystick and Andy had some mini flashing LEDs he had picked up for £2 in Tesco. What could possibly go wrong?

We had driven north that day, taking five hours to follow the wide A9 through Inverness, narrowing onto A-class road towards Ullapool, before finally winding our way down the singletrack roads into Torridon village on the north-west coast of Scotland. The sun was out, the sea sparkling and the new van was living up to expectations.

CAMPER VAN CONVERT

I had recently finished chipping away at a van-to-camper conversion, and what better way to test it out than to load up the bikes and take off for some new trails? We stuck the kettle on and unzipped the laptop for some Memory-Map inspection. Taking a few days off from his new self-catering business, ‘Innerhaven’, by the trails in Innerleithen, Andy McKenna had been keen to get back to Torridon ever since, a year ago, he had scoped out some superb routes in the area. So, when I said I was heading north, he was already in the passenger seat with destinations in mind.

Although we arrived after 3pm, we were itching to get out. That was when we



High point: rolling off the top at Bealach Ban

“Andy led the way up the Srath a’ Bhathaich, and even with the time against us we were absolutely blown away by the quality of trail and isolation of the spot”



Eyes down: some techy sections to keep your attention



stumbled on the only problem with the Torridon area: all the routes are big ones. There are few opportunities to just dash out for an hour and pop back in, fresh-faced, for a pub dinner and a relaxing evening. In the encroaching darkness, we were finding that out the hard way.

Andy led the way up the Srath a’ Bhathaich, and even with time against us we were absolutely blown away by the quality of trail and isolation of the spot. Right in the thick of the mountains, we were the only human beings in a vast tract of countryside, and enjoying every minute of it. The trail climbed gently — there were technical bits, so you needed to keep your eyes on the trail, but not enough to prevent them from straying to the widening vista on occasion. Near the top of the climb, we inspected the map to find another trail on the opposite side of the glen.

“There!” Andy pointed, drawing his hand across the flanks of Beinn na-h-Eaglaise, immediately dubbed ‘Julio Iglesias’. “It cuts right across that scree slope and up the side of that burn.”

Sure enough, there it was, climbing impossibly up into the Bealach a’ Choire Gairbh, before disappearing over the top and descending to a trail Andy had ridden the last time he was up here.

“Looks a bit of a beast...”

We committed it to memory and set off again, unsure of how fast we could do our descent and unwilling to sacrifice its possible enjoyment to the darkness.

We needn’t have worried. Cresting the top of the pass and scooting round the banks of a small loch, the trail was laid out before us. It was a beautiful sight. Smooth, narrow singletrack that would make a trailbuilder fall to his knees in wonder

snaked off across the face of the slope, dipping into burns, crossing slabs of bedrock, before disappearing into jumbled boulder fields below.

We stood a while, congratulating ourselves on making the commitment to get there. The fact that we’d utterly misjudged what we were embarking on so late in the day was irrelevant; we had made the cut and were enjoying the fruits of the pay-off. As Andy rummaged for some Sainsbury’s oat bars in his pack, the grey curtains of a heavy rain shower dampened the backdrop of the huge Torridon mountains. We didn’t care though. We were already tooling up for a terrific descent to the lochside and some overdue food. It was 7pm and no amount of trail snacks could fill the gap.

Andy took off in front on the long-travel Kona Coil Air, quickly shrinking

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Water, water everywhere: by Loch Coire Fionnarraich



Smooth run-in: heading across Upper Loch Torricon



into a tiny speck, creeping through a massive landscape. I watched for a while, drinking in the scenery, before tightening straps and taking off after him.

The smooth path soon gave way to a more cautious drop through boulder fields and huge slabs of pink Torriconian bedrock. There was always the temptation of speed though, with the surface always rideable; always with a way through the obstacles. It was like a high-speed puzzle: approach the narrowing of the trail, read the rocks, let your brain unlock the maze, then commit to your chosen line.

More than once I came in too fast, the line through being barred by what Andy later described as a 'show-stopper' of a boulder in the way. A quick scrub of speed increased the time available for decisions, and had the added benefit of minimising the potential ill-effects of a crash.

Further down, it became a top-notch technical path, in typical Scottish style.

Rounding the final corner before being faced with a raging river, Andy was waiting with a grin like a lottery winner. "A bit spicy wasn't it?" he laughed above the roar of a waterfall. Too right. Perfect.

"We hopped across stepping stones over the river and scooted a fantastic last kilometre over pine-needle, root and rock paths"

We hopped across stepping stones over the river and scooted a fantastic last kilometre over pine-needle, root and rock paths, descending steeply through the woods to the lochside.

"Quick pint?"

"Well, it'll be dark in about 15 minutes and it's about three kilometres back to the van."

"I have a flashing Tesco rear light and you have your helmet light — I'll buy."

"Mine's a Red Cuillin."

Without going into gritty detail, we spent far too long in the Loch Torricon Hotel, sat between groups of mountaineers tucking into hearty dinners and climbers propping up the bar. By the time we heaved ourselves out it was pitch dark, and a shifting static of rain moved across my field of vision, lit up perfectly by the helmet-mounted light.

Heads down, we ground up the steep road back to where we had fortuitously left the van tucked into a rocky layby with an outstanding view. Of course, we wouldn't see that until the morning...

We were woken by the sun filtering through the screens before 8 o'clock, leading to a lazy breakfast of bacon rolls and steaming mugs of tea. We sat outside, ogling the view while tinkering with the gritty bikes.

I also reminded Andy about his previous night's excursion from the van to answer a call of nature.

"I think I'm pishin on your saddle," is not something any bike owner wants to hear from a voice outside in the dark. "I just heard this pattering noise..."

Thanks mate.

PLANS HATCHED

We polished and oiled and brought the bikes back to life, while discussing the day's objective. The plan, hatched the night before over yet more tea, had been to drive round to Coulags on the main road from Loch Carron and climb up into the hills from there. The rest would be dictated by the state of the trails we found. If they were poor, we would take another fork, or if they were all as good as we hoped, they would take us high, to nearly 700m, into the Beinn Liath Mhor group of mountains. All we could do was try.

The rocky singletrack up to the bothy was challenging to climb in places, but a real treat in others. The sun was beginning to disappear behind a haze of high grey clouds, but with no wind it was still a stunning day to be on the hill. We were down to thin base layers as we sweated up, constantly hopping over culverts for a time until the bothy hove into view.

Looking for all the world like the owner had just walked out for a pint of milk, it was just beautiful. One of our plans had involved pedalling in with our gear, dumping it in the bothy, taking off over the hills and returning at night. But we had



Rubble at the top: descending out of the Coire Roill

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ruled that out the night before when we decided to take in a more challenging route that wouldn't fit in with an over-nighter there. Next time, we said, as we sat outside the door chewing on banana chips.

HIKEY BIKEY

Andy had already ridden this section and was prepared for the element of hikey bikey up near the Bealach na Lice, but it was hard work in the heat of the day.

We had been lured by the prospect of a full eight-kilometre downhill from the top of the pass. The Memory-Map gradient profile said it all — one long line, dipping like the share price of an American bank, all the way to sea level.

At the Bealach, a cairn marked the spot where our new trail came in. Straight on was the route Andy described as one of the best in the UK, but we were turning right into the unknown.

Skirting the hillside the gradient wasn't so harsh, so we were back in the saddle for a while, pedalling while trying not to be too distracted by the view dropping steeply off to our right.

After a short spell of shouldering, again the trail resumed normal service, and it was simply breathtaking. Views over to such famous mountains as Liathach and Beinn Eighe just added to the exposed feeling of being very high up, with no company for mile after mile. Smooth singletrack sped us round and into the final high corrie of the day: Coire Grannda.

Another wall at the end of the trail signalled another shouldering spell — just as well it was the last, as we were beginning to feel the excursions of the last few days taking their toll. Shoes slipped and stumbled on rocks. Curses flowed. We were weary, with the warm weather not helping much. I felt dirty, sweaty, hot and my legs were stiff with lactic build-up.



Warm work: hikey-a-bike hacking up the hill



Last orders: racing to the hotel bar

“The trail had a bit of everything — loose stone chutes, boulders and the odd bit of blindingly fast path, lulling you into a burst of speed”

At the top, we stopped for some time, sitting on boulders while looking down the long glen, past Loch Coire Lair and on down to Achnashellach Station, just out of sight round a corner and down a steep drop. Eight kilometres, and we'd earned it.

“I am done in. I hurt in a variety of places I don't even want to go into,” Andy said as he lay back on the stony ground. Four deer with a calf trotted off above us.

Taking off was a superb piece of trail; smooth, winding and great fun. Tyres crackled as we took each corner, conscious of the trail getting rockier and looser as we descended. This truly wasn't the place to fall badly. There was no civilisation nearby and no prospect of help for quite some time if either one of us took a dive. All you could expect was a brisk roll among pointy boulders and a long lie down like a contorted chalk outline of a murder scene, while the other rider went for help a long way off.

The trail had a bit of everything — loose stone chutes, boulders and the odd bit of blindingly fast path, lulling you into a burst of speed that could get you into trouble round the next corner. And it usually did. I caught up with a flustered looking Andy at one point:

“Oh man,” he said, “I came round that corner too fast and it all got a bit sharp edged and naughty. The bike took it

all, but... phew...” He rubbed his face with a sweaty glove. “Let's take it a bit easier, eh?”

The path cut across the wide valley floor, turning into fast and smooth trail, rising and falling with the hummocks in the ground. We followed it to a cairn that signalled the final part of the descent — the drop to Achnashellach.

It was another peach — bedrock technical trails dropping steeply, interspersed with smooth sections of speed and some bouldery stretches. It was a superb way of ending the day, and just as we rolled out onto the track at the bottom a warm sun came out. The six-kilometre, peaceful ride along singletrack road back to the van was an ideal decompression, although it was hampered by a recurring puncture in my back tyre after a lazy culvert hop. But we were soon loaded up and heading to Applecross for a last night before the long trip home.

With the sun setting over Skye in front of us, we sipped a few beers while laughing over the day's events.

Andy sat thoughtfully over his spaghetti, mulling over the saddle problems that had left him raw: “Usually skin grafts are done from your arse and put onto your face. I think I am going to need it in the other direction after this.”

It really doesn't get any better than that.