

CYCLE TOURING

Ireland

EMILY WOODHOUSE

At the end of September, a friend and I decided to rehash the classic 3 Peaks Challenge. Instead of the overcrowded national challenge, we would climb the highest 3 peaks in southern Ireland – and cycle between them. It was a compromise between a walking and a cycling holiday. We only had two weeks, but we thought we'd try to cram in the best of both worlds.

Cycling is my favourite way to get to places. It is fast enough to see a good variety, but slow enough to experience the country that you're passing through. My family gave me the cycle touring bug as a teenager. We made the jump from package holiday to self-planned bike expedition and never looked back.

We weren't a family of cyclists. My parents didn't even own bikes until I was in my 20s. We all knew how to ride, although we rarely did any cycling in the UK. On our first cycle tour, we had no fancy clothing or panniers – or anything much really. I carried everything I needed in my school bag and strapped it onto my bike's pannier rack when I got fed up of carrying it. You really don't need much to have a go.

Fast forward to 2018 and cycling is my main form of transport, beyond walking. I commute by bicycle and have been on several cycling-camping multi-day trips with friends. In fact, I spent a large chunk of 2016 cycling to Switzerland and back... because, why not?

But, as I stepped off the ferry with a bike and a road atlas of Ireland, I had a feeling that this trip was going to be a little different.

LESSON 1: THE RAIN

It rained almost every day of the 14 we were in Ireland. It didn't ever rain for the whole day (I don't think) but rain it did. It's almost like it knew I needed a shower and didn't want to pay an extra 25 cents a minute for the privilege.

Personally, I quite like the rain. People have accused me of being related to a duck. But when you live in the south west corner of the UK you kind of have to love it or leave! Still, cycling in the rain is not very comfortable. Nor is arriving at your campsite, soaking wet, to put up your wet tent. Maybe there's a reason most campsites in Ireland seem to have a small kitchen block.

Other than dampening spirits, the rain meant it was really hard to dry clothing. Instead of merrily stringing my socks and underwear along the back of the pannier rack whilst riding, I had to resort to hanging damp socks inside the tent overnight. On all my trips longer than a couple of days, the weather has been generally dry. The persistent dampness really made me appreciate anywhere warm and dry.

Luckily the weather was consistently autumnal on cycling days. I ended up spending almost all day every day in my Ravelo long sleeved jersey. Two weeks of cycling and I never washed it... is that bad?

LESSON 2: THE HEADWIND

Now, anyone who knows a bit of geography would have seen this one coming. When I decided to cycle around the peninsulas in the south west of Ireland, I did not think about the headwind. That is, you're perpetually cycling into a headwind until you reach the point, then turn and get a tail wind. That was not fun.

In fact, on really exposed bits it was pretty scary. The Wild Atlantic Way is a driving route first and a cycling route second. This means that although it's incredibly well signposted, you are with the traffic on the road all the time. If a gust of wind catches you, there's not always a lot of room to wobble.

It must have been pretty comical for the drivers though. Imagine me, battling into the headwind and getting nowhere, like there's an invisible hand pushing me back again. Then, turn a corner and I have to put all my layers on to stay warm as I catch the tail wind. Honestly... I was glad everyone was very considerate on the road.

LESSON 3: UNUSUAL IS EVERYWHERE

It is possible to see the unexpected without travelling half the globe away. Although Ireland might look similar to my home, it was still full of surprises. Let me give you a couple of examples.

One evening, we were cooking by the beach. It was hardly a



A common view / Emily Woodhouse



Cloudy beaches / Emily Woodhouse



Cold and wet / Emily Woodhouse



Looking out to sea / Emily Woodhouse



Sea fog / Emily Woodhouse



A sunny day in the mountains / Emily Woodhouse

beach BBQ. I was jumping up and down to keep warm, staring at the Primus stove all the time. Surely that makes the pasta boil faster? A couple walked past, and we got chatting. They were visitors too, from somewhere near Germany by their accents. Apparently, their landlord had sent them out to look for a dolphin. The dolphin has lived in the water by Dingle for years. Unless I got completely the wrong end of the story, his name was Fungi. They'd walked all the way along to the headland and back. They hadn't seen it. Had we?

No, we hadn't, we assured them politely. It all sounded rather unlikely.

Later, we were walking towards our camping spot for the night towards the water. Mid-conversation, I stopped and stared in disbelief.

"I just saw the dolphin." It was a monster compared to the other dolphins I'd seen.

"Where?"

"There." It bobbed up again just to prove me right and proceeded to play with the sailing club's boats for the rest of the evening.

Another time, we were trying to buy some more gas for our camping stove. The sports shop sent us to the outdoors shop. The outdoors shop was all out of camping gas. "You can always try Foxy John's up the road," said the man in the outdoors shop. "He might have it."

Let's just say that Foxy John's Pub and Hardware store should

be an experience in its own right. Never before have I tried to order camping gas at a bar.

LESSON 4: LESS IS MORE

Never mind minimalism. When you have to lug all of your possessions about on a bicycle, suddenly the excess becomes obvious. I had 65 litres of space to fit everything I needed for two weeks. This didn't seem like a problem. After all I'd managed 50 days to Switzerland and back with the same amount of space. But I thought I'd got it down to the bare minimum for that trip.

In Ireland, I wasn't only cycling, but walking too. The trip to Switzerland and back was in August and September, with an average temperature of somewhere in the 20s. I've already mentioned the weather in Ireland this September. I had to take out some kit to make room for a heavier weight waterproof, a packable rucksack, and a bigger sleeping bag. What amazed me was that it all fitted. Even more amazing was that I didn't miss whatever it was that I took out. It made me really question the state of my bedroom at home. Why do I have so much stuff in my life? I barely need anything to live on at all.

We made it around the tallest 3 peaks in southern Ireland and back to Cork within two weeks. The walking was magnificent, but the cycling made the trip. It wasn't always easy, but I guess that's half the point of a challenge. But perhaps it would be better to go in the summer. Although maybe just outside the school holidays would be better for quieter roads? Perhaps I'll have to come back and find out. The Irish 3 Peaks challenge was far from the perfect expedition, but I'll take a lot of it away with me. As they say, you live and learn.



Our fearless Editor, Emily loves mountaineering, adventure, search and rescue, camping, cycling, cycle touring... oh and knitting. She loves inspiring others to do the things they've secretly always wanted to, but felt like they couldn't. Don't be scared. Show the world what you've got.