

Headstart On Pedals

Reaching a remote Corbett after a rough, rocky mountain bike ride

by FIONA RUSSELL

THE walk to the summit of Beinn Dronaig might be relatively short, but the route to reach the mountain in Wester Ross, north-west Scotland, is long and lumpy.

Even after careful planning and consideration, the 12.8-kilometre (eight miles) track from Attadale Gardens, just off the A890 single-track road, took my friend Rachel and I by surprise.

Given that it was late winter and the days were still short of daylight, we decided to use mountain bikes for the first section of the adventure.

We also tied in with the train service from Inverness to Attadale – a request stop – on the Kyle of Lochalsh line. The first train arrives at 10.50am so time was short.

From the remote station, we pedalled off at speed on a short section of tarmac road to the entrance of Attadale, carrying rucksacks laden with winter outdoors kit – including crampons, ice axes and walking poles.

The beautiful Attadale Gardens are



One of the many steep uphill climbs

Leaving the bikes



top tip

Ensure you book a bicycle reservation on the train because there are limited spaces.

open to the public and I made a note to revisit them for a wander around another time.

Skirting the southern edge of the gardens, Rachel and I then turned south-east and continued on the wide track, following the route of River Attadale.

Around 1.5km (a mile) of easy cycling came to an abrupt end after we crossed a footbridge south and over the river. The first of many steep hills over the next 11km (seven miles) was eased slightly by tight zigzags, but we were still forced into our lowest gears to continue the climb.

The track levelled for a short while before continuing a more gentle, but still muscle-challenging, ascent over many smaller ups and downs to reach an elevation of 198 metres (650 feet).

We stopped a couple of times to catch our breath and look behind us at the superb views over Loch Carron and across to the Applecross mountains in the distance.

At tiny Loch an Droighinn, our route swung north-east and, although we were still riding uphill, Rachel and I



“I was looking forward to the views in reverse”

Kit List

- ▲ Mountain bike
- ▲ Large walking rucksack
- ▲ Cycling clothes
- ▲ Bike helmet
- ▲ Gloves
- ▲ Footwear – cycling shoes and walking boots
- ▲ Walking clothes
- ▲ Waterproof jacket and trousers
- ▲ Spare layers
- ▲ Spare hat and gloves
- ▲ Walking poles
- ▲ Ice axe
- ▲ Crampons
- ▲ Emergency bivvy bag
- ▲ Map and compass
- ▲ Mobile phone
- ▲ Food and water



Snow-clad hills

were convinced we had completed the toughest sections. Sadly, the steepest gradient was still to come – it was simply hidden around the next corner, just past Loch na Caillich.

I confess I didn't manage to stay on my bike – despite trying very hard to grind the pedals round and round. As well as being a testing incline, the track had become much rougher with loose rocks and stones to negotiate.

I could only watch as Rachel, a more skilful mountain biker, continued to ride while I was forced to get off and push my bike the final 24m (80ft).

Back in the saddle, we enjoyed an easier upwards slope until we reached 335m (1100ft) above sea level.

The reward for our morning's efforts came with a fabulous vista of many remote mountains spread out to the north-east, including our target, Beinn Dronaig. They were all capped in picturesque snow.

From here, the track began to descend and swiftly we cruised to a height of 198m (650ft). Losing so much height so quickly would normally be spirit-lifting, but Rachel and I realised this would mean we had a greater height to climb on foot.

We passed Bendronaig Lodge, just to the north, which serves as a bothy for passing walkers and cyclists. The lodge is maintained by Attadale Estate and, while offering basic living and sleeping accommodation, it also has the bonus of a remote toilet.

Soon after, we spotted the start of our walking route of Beinn Dronaig, which at 797m (2614ft) tall qualifies as one of the 222 Corbetts in Scotland. »



At the summit



Swapping from cycling kit to walking clothes and boots, we locked our bikes together and started out on foot, heading east away from the track. The ground was wet and boggy, and we spent some time trying to jump between raised grassy tussocks before giving in to a squelchy hike towards the shoulder of a high crag.

Back again at 335m (1100ft) elevation, we joined a narrow and craggy path south, which rose in steps until we suddenly encountered snow 60m (200ft) higher up.

Without an obvious path, Rachel and I decided that a generally southerly approach uphill made sense.

The Route:

Start and finish: Attadale, Wester Ross.

Distance: 30km (20 miles)

Total ascent: 1370m (4500ft)

Extend the trip: Enjoy a couple of nights, before and after the bike and hike, at Strathcarron Railway Cottages. See www.strathcarronstation.co.uk Strathcarron is the train station before Attadale on the Kyle of Lochalsh line.

We were grateful for our crampons and ice axes on the slippery ground – especially when the snow became deeper.

Every so often, we stopped to take in tremendous views of numerous mountains, including the recognisable peaks of Torridon.

The summit finally came after turning east at around 731m (2400ft) elevation and homing in on a trig pillar. This is a mountain to reserve for a clear sky because of the wide-sweeping panorama, including Loch Monar to the east, the Mullardoch and Strathfarrar mountains and west to the Isle of Skye and the rugged ridge of the Cuillin.

The plan was to return by the same route – although this can sometimes feel like a less exciting choice than a circuit, I was looking forward to the views in reverse.

The descent from Beinn Dronaig was straightforward simply because we could follow our snowy footsteps. We were cautious at icy sections and on steep rocky areas but, in seemingly little time, we found ourselves below the snow line and back on the boggy lower slopes.

Donning our cycling kit again, we hopped back on our bikes and started with a delightful ride downhill. We both grinned as we zipped along on the rough track that had seemed so much more daunting on the climb up.

Passing the lodge again and then rounding a corner and over a bridge, we were presented with the first section of uphill. It was a long ascent on tired legs and we were forced to drop the gears and settle into a slow climb.

Then came the final and joyful downhill section – we'd been looking forward to it, and it didn't disappoint.

The flatter track around the garden estate took us back towards Attadale Station, and any worries that we might not make the limited service were alleviated as we realised we had more than an hour to wait for the 5.49pm train. 🕒