



WORDS & PHOTOS JOE SHEFFER

AN ADVENTURE UNFOLDS

Adventure cycling doesn't require exotic destinations or months of free time. Journalist **Joe Sheffer** spent three days travelling to Muckle Flugga by Brompton and packraft

For many people in Britain, the Shetland Islands exist only in a small box on the periphery of their weather forecasts. They are the most northerly specks of land in our country. They had never figured in my imagination or plans. I have always spent long summers pedalling across the Himalaya or through Alpine valleys and spent my winters dreaming of reaching places like the Karakorum. It was an old friend who drew my attention to the Shetlands.

Like so many British adventures, our plan was born at Lord's cricket ground. My friend Alastair had listened to a lighthouse keeper, Lawrence Tulloch, from the Shetland Isles, who was on his first ever visit to London. In a soft, lilting dialect – almost more Norwegian than Scottish – he described how he'd often listened to cricket matches as mighty waves crashed upon Britain's most northerly lighthouse,

on the storm-lashed rock of Muckle Flugga. Al was sent scuttling for his largest atlas, and then for his telephone. 'Muckle Flugga!' he shouted at me. The trip was on.

Our plan would be simple: to travel from the most southerly point in the Shetland Islands, right the way to the top, by folding bike and folding packraft, in time to pay homage to Mr Tulloch's former lighthouse on the eve of the Summer solstice.

There were to be no buses and no ferries. No outside interference at all in our journey from Sumburgh Head to Muckle Flugga. Our journey would take us further north than St Petersburg or Helsinki, towards a tiny island off the north coast of Uist, the most northerly of the main Shetland Islands. We would be over 100 miles north of John o' Groats (the northern benchmark for British cycle tourists). It would be a true adventure without leaving our own country.

And that is how we found ourselves at

the lighthouse at Sumburgh on a sunny day in June, with two folding bicycles precariously overloaded with lifejackets and dry-bags. Puffins watched without interest as we tried to lash two sets of bulky paddles to our already laden packs. Triumphant, we began pedalling north. Our three-day British micro-adventure was on its way.

SMALL-SCALE TOURING

There is something unique about touring on a Brompton bicycle, which makes you feel as if you are always pushing into a headwind. It is a sensation, which although frustrating at first, lent itself to a trip of our scale because, not only were we riding tiny bikes, laden with our tiny boats, but our adventure was only covering a tiny distance.

A strong cyclist who was lucky with the wind and ferries could cycle from Sumburgh Head to Muckle Flugga in



Right, from top

The Bromptons were just small enough to lash to the front of the rafts. The rafts, however, weren't easy to carry – especially without front carrier racks for both bikes. At shifts to the 24in (two foot!) gear. Wild camping is legal in Scotland, and it doesn't get much more remote than this. Shetland's weather is best described as 'variable'.



a single day. The distance is about a hundred miles, which made our 'expedition' look mundane. But the small distance, combined with our small transport, suited us. We couldn't hurry past. We were forced to slow down.

When Ernest Hemingway famously said that 'by riding a bicycle you learn the contours of a country best', he was wrong. Pushing your Brompton up a country's contours teaches the discerning cyclist about the true lay of the land. Our slow transport complemented the island's slow pace of life and allowed us to absorb the beautiful smells of the sea as we weaved our way across the lanes of the 'Mainland'.

We passed slowly by as fat seals basked on beaches. At our approach, they flopped and flapped to the sanctuary of the pale blue bay, where they raised their eyes above the water and watched us carefully until we remounted our overladen, underpowered 3-speed bikes and wobbled away.

Throughout our ride, the sea came and went at surprising times and in surprising places: we were never more than three miles from the waves. Long-fingered fjords ('voes') probed around our every corner, appearing first to our left and then to our right. By evening, the skies were heavy and the voes a dull gunmetal grey. The half-light felt calming, charming, soothing, as did the tiny hamlets we passed through.

By around 9pm we were tired but contented. We had made a colossal 35

miles of progress. We ate a hasty meal, pitched our tent and fell asleep in full daylight, nestled on a steaming peat bog beside a bubbling red peat stream.

BIKES FOLDED, BOATS INFLATED

One of the sounds I have learned to dread over years of Scottish misadventure is the pitter-patter of rain on your tent in the morning. It's like Mother Nature's slow handclap, challenging you to get out of your warm, lofty bag into the wet and cold.

The Scots have a word for their default weather: *dreich*. It is defined by urbandictionary.com as 'a combination of dull, overcast, drizzly, cold, misty and miserable weather. At least four of the above adjectives must apply before the weather is truly dreich.' The following morning was truly dreich. We rode onwards considerably less in love with the Shetland Isles than we had been the day before.

The weather was not just an excuse to be miserable. It was also a cause for concern and seemed to reflect our deteriorating moods. For today we needed to take to the sea, paddling across the strong tides of Yell Sound to the next island. We arrived on a small rocky beach at around midday and stood mindlessly by the waves in silence. We folded our bikes. I felt very anxious. The current was flowing fast, the wind was brisk, and we could not see the far shore.

In a previous life, I spent a small amount of time motoring around the high seas with the Navy and so

FEATURE
Shetland
adventure



Above and right
The most exclusive – and most northerly – place in the UK to pitch a tent. The packrafts worked fine, but would struggle in strong currents, hence Al's concern

“PADDLING AROUND ROCKY COVES, WE SAW SEALS, SEA OTTERS, AND SEABIRDS”

➤ had consulted my old captain about the practicality of crossing Shetland's fearsome sounds in what amounted to glorified children's paddling boats. The captain's advice had been not to bother, but he muttered something about crossing when the tide turned. So Al and I stood nervously on the beach, waiting for the seconds to tick by and for the currents to slow. It was a long half hour.

Al (the more experienced packraftist) was the first to cast off. He sat looking nervous, five metres from the shore, bobbing around in the grey swell. I positioned my Brompton on top of my dinghy, double checked my lashings, and joined him, floating with my bicycle on the sea.

Despite my reservations, we made good progress – until suddenly, as if a switch had been turned, the tide began to race once more. We could make no further leeway and were forced to drag our craft onto the sanctuary of a small, uninhabited island. We pitched the tent and sat shivering in our sodden clothes beside a dilapidated croft, waiting for the tide to slow once more and – hopefully – the fog to clear sufficiently for us to see the island we were heading for.

For nearly six hours, we sat in low spirits, until the puffing smoke of the ferry broke from the fog on the horizon. Beyond the

dark and broad seas, was the island of Yell. We took to our rafts once again.

BRITAIN'S MOST NORTHERLY PUB

The paddle turned out to be quite easy, as we cut through the cold water with our bikes still precariously strapped to the decks. We reached the shore in a heavy, warm evening shower, heaving our gear onto the pebbles of the second island. We were cold and wet but elated at our progress: we were on Yell.

We shivered our way north, turning the pedals above rough tarmac that bore the scars of a dozen hard winters. Eventually, in near darkness, we reached Britain's most northerly pub.

Nervously, we tiptoed through the door and apologetically ordered platefuls of hot scampi and chips from the worried-looking bar lady. We sat there in our underpants, enjoying what felt like the last supper.

As the bar filled with locals for the evening, the men of Yell tried to understand why two grown men would attempt to cross between the islands on inflatable boats. The bar lady clucked and fussed over us, the patrons called us fools, wished us good luck, and eventually we went to bed in a freezing fog, not far from the pub, in our small tent. We both felt a palpable sense of dread.

ferry lay the port we were trying to reach. That glimpse of land through the mist was important.

There ahead of us, through the gloom, the

The next morning we woke up in another world. Few places on earth can match the beauty of wild Scotland on the rare occasions when the sun is shining and there are no midges. We wiped the previous day's sea salt from our faces and pedalled, in summer holiday mood, along the meandering narrow roads of Yell towards our next paddle.

This was the one that had worried us most. Bluemull Sound is only a narrow stretch of sea but currents can race through at up to 14 knots: way beyond the capabilities of us in our packrafts. And so I felt as I was doing something terribly naughty as I pushed my bike through the queuing cars and past a couple of cyclists waiting for the ferry, to a small beach a stone's throw from the terminal. Excitedly, and in full view of the departing ferry, we once again inflated our sea craft and stowed our bikes.

We paddled easily across the gentle water in jubilant mood. Paddling round rocky coves we saw seals and sea otters as well as thousands of birds. We celebrated reaching Unst, Britain's most northerly inhabited island, with a swim in the clear, cold bay. Nothing could stop us now!

Unst is an island with an atmosphere of calm, gentle living. Yellow meadow flowers waved in the gentle breeze, grazed by eponymous Shetland ponies. Hills rolled ahead of us. On all sides was water. Tiny islands studded the glimmering sea. Small homes dotted the flanks of green fells.

We started pedalling past the last bastions

of British life. The last little shop, the last bus shelter, the last red postbox, the last house, home to what must be Britain's most northerly citizen.

SUNSET AT MUCKLE FLUGGA

Eventually, the tarmac ran out. For the final mile we pushed our small, heavily laden bikes across rugged moorland. Finally, we arrived at a little finger of land poking out northwards towards the lighthouse.

We pitched our tent on a patch of grass that was as flat and green as a snooker table. A pace away from the door was the cliff edge. The only sounds were birds and waves. It was the most exclusive campsite in the world.

Silhouetted puffins bustled overhead or veered crazily in to land, wings flapping desperately, orange feet splayed as they reached for grip on the cliff. Gannets and skuas swirled in the wind. Ahead of us, a small islet was completely white with guano and seabirds. The cacophony of the colony mingled with the turquoise waves smashing below us, and against the rocky isle of Muckle Flugga just offshore.

The lighthouse began to twinkle from the rocks. The long day waned. I

stood outside my tent in the soft solstice midnight light, looking out to sea. I was at the very top of Britain. I realized how little I knew of my own country.

Before our trip, I was suffering a little from 'adventure fatigue'. My spirit of adventure has been eroded by the drudgery of everyday life and by a constant stream of celebrities on my television, climbing Everest, pogo sticking across the Sahara and agonizingly trudging up Kilimanjaro.

Our folding bikes and packrafts were a little gimmicky. Why use a packraft when there's a ferry? Why ride a Brompton when you have a touring bike? But virtually all expeditions have a measure of artificiality to them; deliberately making things more difficult than they need be in return for the thrill of success against the odds.

There are still pockets of wildness open to everyone, even in Britain. You don't need to go to the North Pole or maroon yourself on a desert island. All you need is a little time and a big imagination. Try it tomorrow. Throw some essentials in a pannier, or put a toothbrush in your hydration pack, and just ride somewhere different. Pedal away from your house and carve your own micro-adventure. ☺



SHETLAND BY BIKE & BOAT

Distance: <100 miles

Time taken: 3 days

Daily mileage: 30-40 miles

Route: From Sumburgh Head we pedalled via Bigton and then the A970 across the affectionately named 'Mainland'. We made our first crossing near the island of Yell. On Yell we simply followed the A968, crossing again in the shadow of the ferry onto Unst, following the road all the way to the entrance of the RSPB reserve at Hermaness.

Conditions: The Shetlands famously enjoy all four seasons most days. This is Britain at its finest. Frequently the wind and horizontal rain can make cycling an interesting challenge; luckily even in high summer the islands are not plagued by midges. Some of Shetland's main roads can be busy with fast traffic, especially at weekends.

Accommodation: Wild camping can be difficult in Shetland due to the boggy



ground. There are bed-and-breakfasts in abundance.

Maps: OS Landranger 1:50,000 numbers 1, 2, 3, & 4.

Bikes: We both used borrowed Brompton 3-speed bicycles, as they fitted neatly onto the front of our boats.

Rafts: Alpacka rafts start at around £513.

I'm glad I had... breakfast at the Wind Dog Café on Yell. Thoroughly delicious.

Further info: joesheffer.com, alastairhumphreys.com

Video: <http://vimeo.com/27302646>

