

Something in the Ayr

The birthplace of Robert Burns provides poetic landscapes, grand castles and one incredulous pub landlord

Words **JAMES SPENDER**
Photography **FRED MACGREGOR**



Eighty mile? Eighty mile? You never been eighty mile on a bike today. Get out! Out my bar!' cries the landlord of The Roxy to howls of laughter from the locals. I try to explain that while it might seem like a long way to a non-cyclist, it's not an outrageous distance for road riders on a big day out. He remains unconvinced. Another one of the pub's ridiculously inexpensive beers is thrust down in front of me (I wouldn't usually

drink John Smith's but today it's a pound a pint), and the kindly bar girl, sensing my discomfort at being threatened with ejection, leans over to explain the landlord thinks I've been riding at 80 miles an hour rather than for 80 miles. I nod and attempt to correct the towering figure behind the bar, but he's moved on to the next part of his stand-up routine, much to the mirth of his audience. I resist bringing up Guy Martin's recent land speed record attempt.

Soon I'm laughing along with the rest, although always conscious of being a very obvious Englishman in a locals' bar in Girvan on Scotland's west coast. And it's the day of the Scottish Referendum. I don't want to be marked out as an envoy of the evil English empire, yet it seems I have nothing to worry about. John, an employee of the nearby Grant's Whisky distillery, indirectly addresses my alien status by turning to those around the bar for a straw poll. 'What've you voted then?' One by one, each member of the collective answers 'No'. 'You see,' continues John, 'we like our lives as they are. I love working at Grant's, I love drinking at The Roxy - even if I do hate the bastard behind the bar - and you go out into the countryside or over to the Isle of Arran and there's no other place like it. I don't want to do anything that would

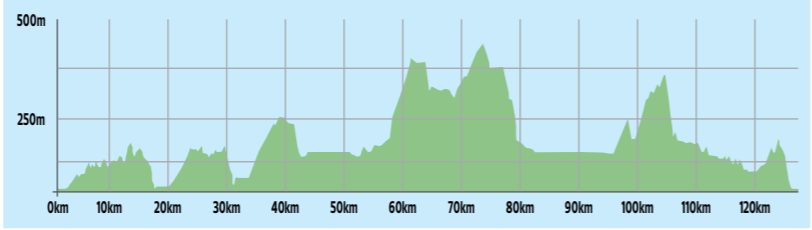
Ayr and back

Follow *Cyclist's* ride or download it to your bike computer

The route (which is at tinyurl.com/nhy4u5m) is straightforward, and while we rode it as an A to B, it's easy to join the dots and get back to Ayr for the cost of another 32km (nicely making it a century mile ride to boot). From Ayr follow the Ayr Road/A719 south before swinging inland at Turnberry. Head to Barr, then go south through Galloway Forest Park, looping back round at Straiton to Balloch. At Balloch head west with the River Stinchar on your right. Cross back through Barr and follow the B734 until it intersects with the A714. At the junction industrious riders might want to head 20km south to Glenapp Castle (glenappcastle.com) for afternoon tea in a grand old stately home. Otherwise, turn right for Pinmore and follow the A714 to Girvan for fish and chips at The Harbour cafe on Knockcushan St.



Total distance:
127.7km
Total elevation:
1,638m



risk this place changing. No one here does.' The others murmur agreement.

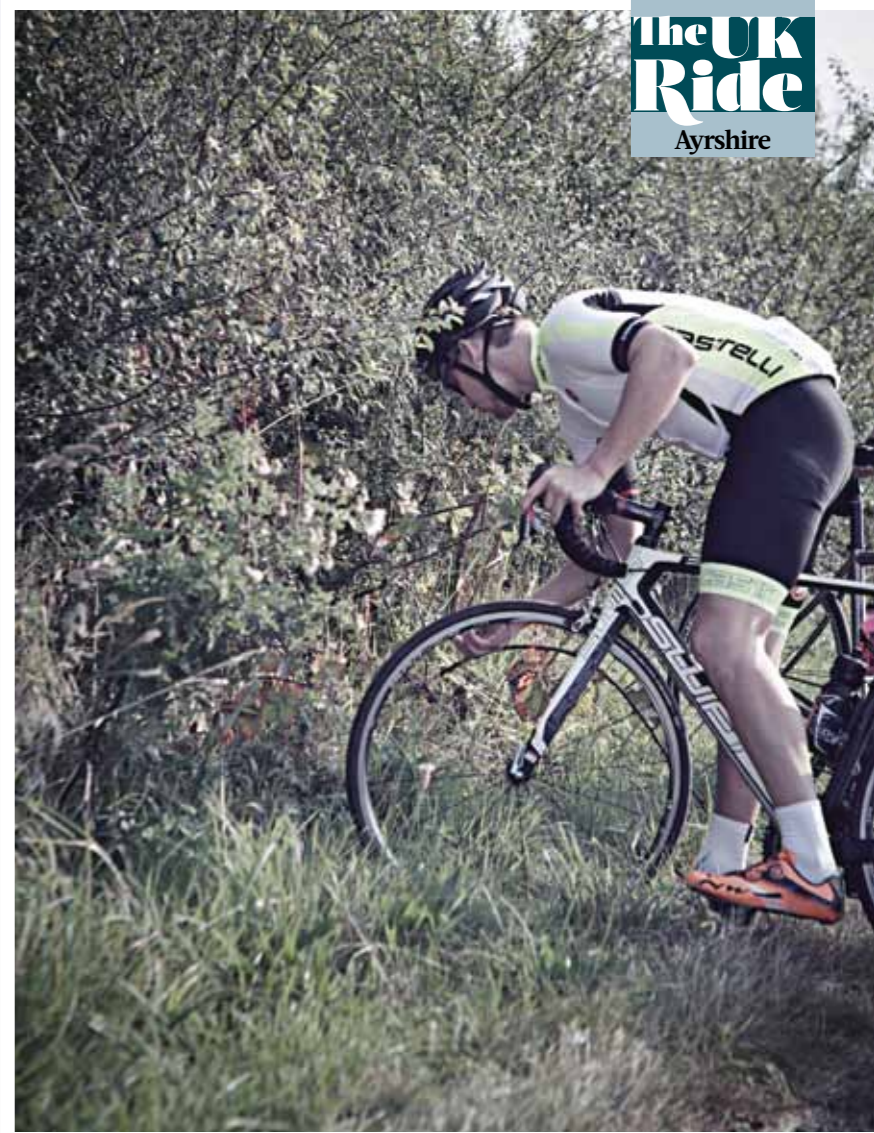
Late-night politicising aside, having just come back from a packed day's ride along Ayrshire's picturesque coastlines, rolling farmland and sprawling moors, I wouldn't want this place to go changing either. And not just because it might scupper my chances to include this as one of *Cyclist's* 'UK Rides'.

Shut up burning legs

We begin our ride out of the Savoy Park Hotel in Ayr, owned and run by cycling fanatic Rod Henderson and his 'long-suffering' wife Ann Marie (Rod has even installed a Tour de France style klaxon in the family car, much to the consternation of MoT officialdom. 'They failed the car because of it!' he tells me proudly). Joining us is Rod's friend Jason Kean, a recent convert to the joys of cycling and a man famous in the farming community as a dealer of high-end bull semen. It sounds like a lucrative industry indeed - Jason estimates that recently retired prized bull Picston Shottle netted over £10 million in his 15-year career. There's a job you don't come across every day.

After a few wisecracks from Jason about where I kept my bike last night - apparently a man was caught doing indecent things with his bicycle in a hostel room in Ayr not so long ago - we wheel out onto the main road and spin along next to the gentle trickle of traffic that counts as rush hour in these parts.

Before long we've left the cars behind, and any form of other human life has been replaced by grazing sheep and tumbling castles. One such notable structure is Dunure Castle, which Rod informs me was the scene of a roasting of a



We pass Turnberry, which has been at the centre of some fierce local debate after being bought up by Donald Trump

church cleric during the 16th century. 'There was a land dispute with the Kennedy clan, who wanted to buy a nearby abbey. When the abbey's custodian refused to sell up, he was taken here to Dunure and put on a spit over the kitchen fire.' Eventually the cleric relented, but not until he'd been roasted for a good two hours. And you thought climbing a 10 percenter was suffering?

Sweeping further north up the coast it seems the interest in owning bits of Ayrshire continues unabated. Before we break east and inland we pass the resplendent Turnberry Golf Course, and overlooking it a leviathan of a building perched on a hillock that looks more like a royal residence than the five-star hotel it is. Jason explains Turnberry has been at the centre of some fierce local debate, when last year it was bought up by US property tycoon Donald Trump. 'On the one

Cyclist forages for blackberries in the Ayrshire hedgerows, and then regrets wearing white kit



It's mid-September but it could easily be the middle of summer. Clear roads enshrouded in trees add to the tranquil riding experience



We rip down the climb known as The Screws, which at a generous 7% presents some rapid and technical corners and produces some whoops from Rod

Hand Trump has pledged to bring back The Open to Turnberry,' says Jason. 'But on the other he's renamed it the Trump Turnberry Resort and swans in and out in his private helicopter, and a lot of people round here don't like that.'

Out to sea, in full view of those rich enough to stay at the hotel, or those, like us, lucky enough to be riding south down the Ayrshire coast, is Ailsa Craig, a tree-capped granite island accessible only by boat and often obscured on misty days. Today we've been gifted clear skies, leaving Ailsa Craig to shimmer on the horizon. It's a strange looking mass, hatching out of the horizon like a giant egg, but one that Rod informs me provides the granite for two thirds of the world's curling stones, including many Olympic gold medal winners.

Familiarity breeds content

Once we've dispatched the low-lying coastal roads, we swing east to where the testing parts of today's riding will commence. Known by local cyclists as the Ayrshire Alps (see p98), the many and varied singletrack roads towards the Galloway Forest Park form a series of testing climbs and winding descents. So far the road surface has been excellent, but as we cross a bridge over the Water of Girvan river, the smoother tarmac gives way to the more typical UK country roads, which no doubt get slammed each winter by frosts and each summer by heavy farm machinery. 'I'm sure parts of Ayrshire are



The rider's ride

Swift Ultravox RS-1, £1,450 (frameset), approx £3,500 (as tested), swiftcarbon.com

Last year was a good year for this South African brand. A partnership with UK domestic outfit NFTO (not to be confused with Romanian dance duo NTFO) yielded a season of decent results that reached its zenith when Adam Blythe (see page 27) won Ride London aboard his Swift Ultravox Ti. The RS-1 pictured here is essentially the same bike as the Ti, save for a 110g weight penalty (taking it to a claimed 1,010g per frame) that comes from the use of different materials and slightly different cable routing. Equipped with Dura-Ace C24 hoops and SRAM Red the full build is 7kg (size medium) – not light enough to worry the UCI, but for the relatively short, punchy ups and quick downs of Ayrshire, the RS-1 was an excellent tool to have. The BB and head tube are incredibly stiff and taut and give the RS-1 a very direct feel, but this is tempered by a relatively slack 72.6° head tube angle and very stable 997mm wheelbase. This helps the RS-1 to behave confidently on descents and in corners.



Ayrshire Alps

An indispensable resource for anyone riding in Ayrshire

Trail centres for mountain bikes have been around for ages, but what about cycle parks stretching for hundreds of acres, meticulously mapped and signposted just for you and your road bike? Well that's the aim of Ayrshire Alps, a group of enthusiastic cyclists who have dedicated themselves to creating just that.

At the mission's core is Ayrshire Alps' superbly informative website, ayrshirealps.org, which for any out-of-towner provides detailed information about climbs in the area and clearly illustrated maps *a la* ski piste maps, with climbs coloured to designate difficulty.

Suggested routes are plentiful, as well as links to OS-style maps, lists of the town and villages riders should visit and up-to-date information about other local events, such as the Davie Bell Memorial Road Race, where UK domestic teams duke it out over 120 gruelling kilometres, and the Highwayman Audax, a 100km or 200km audax event open to all-comers.

◊ twinned with the dark side of the moon,' chuckles Rod as we bounce over the potholes.

It's difficult to put my finger on, but as we climb the first proper hill, a longish 4% drag known as Blackies Brae (most of the climbs here share similar statistics, and are mostly known by the names of the farms that sit at their feet and summits), I can't help finding the surroundings familiar yet strange. The arable land is as plentiful as it is in other parts of the UK, only up here it seems like someone has meticulously removed the hedgerows and replaced them with tussocky drystone walls, and sprayed a seaside scent on top of the musty silage and fragrant fauna.

Then, as if the land has sought to confound my befuddlement, a smattering of wind turbines comes into view at the climb's crest, their thick white trunks rising uniformly from the ground like an incomplete forest. I rather like the way their huge blades swipe with metronomic lethargy through the air, but it seems that Rod and Jason aren't so keen. Perhaps if I'd known this region before an enthusiastic sustainable



energy contingent dumped a bunch of metal on it, I'd feel differently.

After a quick breather to take in the view, we rip down the other side – a climb known as The Screws, which at a slightly more generous 7% in places presents some rapid and technical corners and produces some whoops from Rod. By the time we've reached the bottom we're nearly halfway through our route, which signals an obligatory coffee stop in the tiny village of Barr.

Legend of the hills

I'm going to stick my neck out and risk the wrath of the Barr locals, but I've definitely had better coffee. However, it is thick and loaded with caffeine (that's what four spoons of instant will get you), and it's just what I need to tackle the steepest part of today's course profile, the Nic O Balloch climb into the Galloway Forest Park.

Thus far I've been struggling to see where the 'Ayrshire Alps' label came from, but as the 7.8%

average road bucks and rears into the protected wilderness, I'm beginning to get the idea. At another time of year these wilting purple and green hillsides would no doubt be covered in wild flowers or dusted with snow, just like on the real Alps. And as ugly as it is, even the Armc that's appeared to signal the seriousness of our increasing height is adding to the Alpine feel.

We're silent for the first time today, with the result that it's only when we look behind that Rod and I see we've dropped Jason. I ask if we should wait, but just like any good cycling mate, Rod grins and says no. Back to the climb.

For mountain bikers or cyclocross riders the forest would no doubt present a plethora of stunning trails or off-piste tracks, but as road riders we're fairly limited in options. However with views like these it doesn't matter – there's more than enough for the eye to explore. The road flattens after an arduous 3.5km, and we pull over to take stock and wait for our comrade.

As ugly as it is, even the Armc barrier that's appeared to signal the seriousness of our increasing height is adding to the Alpine feel

Gazing around, I'm left with the distinct feeling that I've just been riding on the roof of the world.

Breath caught, it's time for another short oration about the local history from Rod. As with so many favoured cycling spots, Ayrshire has its own local legend, a keen botanist and even more industrious cyclist and hiker, Davie Bell. Or, as Rod enthuses, 'The Highwayman'. Widely credited as sowing the cycling seeds in this area through his travails, the experiences of which he put into his column in the *Ayrshire Post* from ◊

Above: Cyclist attempts to head up a flying V

Top left: The Alpine feel is in full swing up the Nic O Balloch climb into Galloway Forest Park



As the sun sinks, the riders know food and some well-earned rest isn't far away

I attempt to keep up with Rod, but I soon find myself easing off the speed in favour of arriving at my promised fish and chip supper in one piece

◀ the early 1930s until his death in 1965, Bell is revered for his hardman approach to all-weather riding and early cross exploits, shouldering his heavy steed up inhospitable slopes, carefully documenting his path on maps along the way. Fitting, then, that as we make our descent to the crossroads Jason signals for us to pull over and pay our respects at the Bell Monument.

Just up a grassy bank off the layby, we find a stone pile – or cairn – with a bronze relief on top depicting the hills and valleys of the park. Inscribed beneath Davie Bell's name are the words 'The Highwayman, who knew these hills so well'. It's a fitting and humbling tribute to a bygone age in cycling, and a reminder of just how spoilt we are today. No doubt there are several Strava segments that begin and end here.

Call it a day

Another short rise up to our highest point of 440m is followed by a precarious downhill section. But Rod, as a seasoned local, attacks the gravel-strewn road with gusto. I hear 'ye-haw!'

cries cascade back past me in the wind as I attempt to keep up, but I soon find myself easing off the speed in favour of arriving at my promised fish and chip supper in one piece.

The road loops back out of Galloway Forest, offering two back-to-back climbs upon our exit, neither very steep but both quite enough for weary legs, so I'm thankful when we finally make it onto flat ground again and roll gently back through Barr and the late-in-the-day traffic towards the coast.

Given more time we could have pushed on for a return to Ayr, but with 1,700m of climbing in our legs and the sun hanging low in the sky we opt to make our excuses and pull up at the local chippie in the coastal town of Girvan, home to three of the largest pieces of battered cod I've ever seen, as well as one of the most incredulous landlords. But you couldn't find a friendlier place, nor a better corner of the UK to cycle in. 🍷
James Spender is staff writer for Cyclist and has amicable relations with a large number of landlords around the UK

Thanks

We couldn't have done it without you...

No man is an island, and neither is any *Cyclist* trip possible without the help of some rather splendid people. In this case they were Julie Sloan from the Ayrshire and Arran tourist board (ayrshire-arran.org), who toiled tirelessly and drove photographer Fred around like a seasoned pro; Rod Henderson, who designed our route and put us up in his Savoy Park Hotel (savoypark.com) and Rod's riding buddy Jason Kean, who endured the whole ordeal without losing his sense of humour. Also thanks to the Thistleuk B&B (thistleukbandb.co.uk) for a comfortable night's stay and a cracking fry-up.