

LEJoG de Matt Day 13 Part 3

Ironically, after spending the late afternoon and early evening in Inverness, I wished I had been detoured even more and, at the very least, spent a few hours at Culloden. I had wondered where to stay once my free accommodation petered out in the north of Scotland and, as was my unfortunate tendency, I opted for the cheap option, ultimately paying for my parsimoniousness in other ways. I had spent three months hosteling in Britain in 1996 with my then brand-new wife. Then, we didn't really have the option to stay anywhere other than hostels, but it was a preposterous way to spend one's honeymoon - in separate dorm rooms, stuffed into a creaky bunk bed while drunk German wankers made full use of the Anglo-Saxon tongue. Now, money wasn't so much of an issue, but I still went for the cheap option. Old habits, and all that. Would I ever learn? Not on this trip.

In this particular case, my miserly ways found me in the Inverness Scottish Hostel Association hostel. It took me a while to find it and, once I did, I was sorry I had. It was a sprawling institutional complex with a large car park and a dreary light grey paint job that depressed even in the bright afternoon sunshine. Out in front a group of 5 or 6 scruffy-looking middle-aged men sat in the sun smoking cigarettes. I thought long and hard about leaving my bike with them while I went inside to check my reservation. None of them looked particularly fit enough to get the bike up the slope of the driveway without me catching up, so I left it unlocked and periodically checked while I was waiting in the queue.

The front desk clerk didn't appear to be enamoured with his job. He was in his early twenties and had the complexion and physique of an aficionado of online role-playing games. I asked him for the key to the bike shed and he obliged with a sigh, handing me a key attached to a ludicrous 18-inch stick. I made a lame joke about whether the stick was used on bicycle thieves, which elicited another sigh. Looking like a bobby on the beat, I went outside and, luckily didn't have to use the stick on anyone.

When I returned to check in, there was a gaggle of Spanish students trying to get a room together. The harried clerk kept explaining in his brogue that there was a rock festival that weekend and that all the rooms were taken. It was my turn to sigh, as I had been contemplating whether to stuff my reservation up his arse and find somewhere nicer. If the rooms at the hostel were sold out, I had little chance of finding a spare b&b on a Friday night. No, it was cramped, smelly dorm for me, hopefully accompanied by loud festival freaks who would return to the room reeking of dope, stale pee and chip shop at 3am. Normally, I might not have minded that much, but tonight I needed some sleep. I started to think that rooming with the denizens outside might not be so bad.

By the time all the Spaniards had gotten sorted out, however, I realised that the hostel population was much more mixed than just students and the homeless. There were a fair number of men, and some women, who appeared to residents and, as such, the next best thing to hobos. I don't know how they managed the £18 nightly rate for a dorm room - which added up to £500 per month - perhaps there was a monthly rate. There were also plenty of students, mainly continentals, along with a fair number of thirty-somethings, like me, who also reflected a mix of nationalities. Then there were quite a few young family units and middle-aged couples, many of who looked more suited for a b&b than I was. It was certainly a much more heterogeneous crowd than I remembered when I was last hosteling in the British Isles in 1996. Then it was almost exclusively young North Americans and antipodeans who were basically looking for a good time. The nights weren't often the quietest, but then we weren't looking for quiet and it was darned hard not to meet people. Indeed, part of the reason for hosteling was the price, but also the expectation that you'd meet people, even if you were a rather introverted person, with whom you'd have a good time. It was simply normal to start chatting with the other scruffy students making Knorr soup or Ichiban noodles in the damp, mouldy hostel kitchens. Here at the Invernes SYHA, that element seemed absent, as the residents, separated by class, age, ethnicity and language, went their separate ways. It wasn't what I'd remembered.

I went up to my room. It was a 4-man dorm (yes, they were still segregated) and, happily, the hostel's sterile atmosphere was reflected in the cleanliness of the beds and the shower, although my sleeping sheet had a big rip in it. I was too beat to make a fuss, however, and instead went out to get washed. After my shower, I said hello, but nothing else, to one of my dorm-mates, a motorcyclist, and took a look at my map. Despite rapidly running out of road, I still had some choices to make. I could either go on a rather large detour to avoid a busy A road, which headed out of Inverness and over a bridge that spanned the Moray Firth, or take my chances that the bridge had an independent cycle path attached to it. I didn't fancy cycling the extra 8 miles involved in the detour, but I wasn't keen on an A-road during rush hour. So, I decided to be unadventurous and do a reccie to scope out the bridge.

I was tired, hungry and would much rather have spent the rest of the afternoon in a quiet pub or along the river, but I was starting to get paranoid about my misadventures in navigation and felt compelled to walk the 2 miles to the bridge. And back. I suppose I could have cycled there easily enough, but at this stage in the trip I was loath to cycle any more miles than absolutely necessary. So I headed off in the hot afternoon sun.

Inverness seemed very different from what I remembered. I recollected the pedestrian shopping district, which had just been opened in 1996, but it looked rundown and many of the shops were shut. I kept looking for a decent pub to hit on the way, but most were closed or decidedly uninviting. As I left the apparently credit-crunched city centre, I saw that a fair amount of business had migrated to the outskirts. I padded past joyless box stores and cursed whoever came up with the notion of the 'retail sales park'. They made North American malls look like Italian piazzas in comparison, a frightening thought.

Eventually I saw the bridge and confirmed that I could cycle over it and wearily started to trudge back, stopping at a dreary petrol station to slake my thirst with some orange juice. Back in town, I located a couple of pubs, but wasn't inspired by either. I didn't want to go back to the hostel yet, but was also feeling famished. There were a few restaurants, but still feeling Scroogy and more than a bit scruffy - despite my shower - decided to go to reliable, if generic, Marks and Spencer, and walked back to the hostel weighed down by a heavy shopping bag and little optimism for the evening.

The kitchen was busy when I returned, but it lacked much cheer - pretty depressing for a Friday. A trio of swarthy men about my age looked at me suspiciously as I began cooking. I had opted for tuna pasta with caramelised onion sauce and a beer, followed by chocolate. I wondered if they were bemused by my use of a 500 gram bag of animal-shaped pasta, chosen because it was the smallest one available. I ate my lions, tigers and bears - oh my! - in silence, seated in an uncomfortable chair and thought back to staying with Helen and Hugh the previous night. A mere twenty-four hours ago I was seated in a luxurious black leather chair with a doting doggie at my feet and a single malt in my mitts. Sigh. Why did I always insist on the cheap option?

After dinner I watched a bit of TV, catching up on my journal, which I had happily neglected due to the hospitality of all of my excellent hosts. The people on the tatty couches had selected a programme that followed a team of rat-catchers gallivanting through London with a Jack Russell terrier. Basically, the rat-catchers would flirt with their pest-stricken customer and then release the dog, which would ransack the house in a maniacal search for the elusive rat, which it always tracked down and dispatched with gusto. I wondered if the rat ever got away. It was a thoroughly depressing show on multiple levels, yet the best that could be managed. Fifty-seven channels and nothing on, indeed. Luckily, having cycled up and down some of the highest roads in the

Highlands, I was exhausted and retired to my room at 9pm. If any one of my dorm-mates snored during the night or burst into the room drunkenly at 3am, I didn't hear them.