

## **LEJoG de Matt Day 14 Part 1**

**69.2 miles (1029.13 miles)**

I woke up just before 7am and got my things together as quietly as I could while my dorm-mates slumbered. I went down for breakfast and was hungry enough to actually enjoy my cold animal pasta with tuna and caramelised onion sauce, despite the funny glances it attracted from a fusty-looking middle-aged couple eating granola and apples. I hadn't bought any coffee or tea and, unsurprisingly, there was none to be found in the kitchen. Just as I was starting to feel sorry for myself, I saw one of the scruffy chaps from yesterday rummage through the 'free food' section of the fridge. I had glimpsed briefly in there myself the night before and I knew that there wasn't much there apart from a bag of wilting lettuce. Right on cue, he took out the bag, sat down at the end of my table, and began to munch thoughtfully at the leaves. It put a capstone on what had been a depressing stay at the Inverness Hostel.

I checked out and brought my panniers out to the bike shed. A couple of young women were also getting their bikes out and looking at a map, speaking in German about how to get through town. They looked away when I smiled at them - maybe they'd had an even worse experience at the hostel - so, not being the most extroverted person in such situations, I didn't venture to tell them what I'd learned the previous night. I did, however, in a fit of passive helpfulness, cycled slowly through town and towards the bridge in the hopes that they'd follow me, which they did for a while, before heading off in another direction - presumably the eight-mile detour - at a roundabout. I didn't take it personally.

It was another perfect day. I didn't know what I'd done to deserve such beautiful weather, but I was very grateful. On the far side of the bridge I found the little B-road and cycled across the Black Isle, which was immeasurably more cheerful than its moniker - in actual fact, it wasn't an island, either. I had never been so far north in all of my life and yet the landscape felt lush and comforting in the hazy sunlight. Spying a cycle path sign pointing towards the eastern tip of the Black Isle, where ferries could take you up the coast, I was almost tempted to venture in that direction, but kept going north.

My destination was Helmsdale, a town half the way up the Sutherland coast, right on the North Sea. Unlike most of the places I had stayed at, I knew absolutely nothing about it. I was staying at a B&B, which would have to be an improvement on the previous night, and although I didn't have many expectations about what would await me there, my mindset was really only to check the

penultimate day off my list. The fact that I would be stuck on the A9, the only road heading up the northeastern spine of Scotland, reinforced my singular purpose. As I turned onto it, I wondered about why so many vehicles were on the road. It seemed remarkably busy for a road going, well, pretty much nowhere. It was as surprising, in its way, as the tranquility of many of the Highland roads I'd been on, which were similarly monopolistic in terms of the available transport options.

Along the way, at about 11 am, I passed Glen Morangie distillery. I had a long think about whether or not to stop. I loved distilleries and distillery tours, but my saddle-bound inertia kept me pedalling. Plus it was 11am, not too early for an academic taste, but risky all the same. I recalled being at the Bushmills Distillery in Northern Ireland back in 1996. Michelle and I had hooked up with an American couple on the Leaping Leprechaun bus tour and decided to go on the tour. The driver of the bus, a German who had immigrated to the North of Ireland because he felt things were getting too fascistic in Germany, instructed us that, when asked if we wanted to become a whisky taster at the end of the tour, we should say yes with alacrity. Twelve shots of whisky in the span of about ten minutes later, I found myself bouncing off the walls of a tunnel leading to the sea. In the picture that provides my only recollection of the next few hours, I seem to be having a good time.

So, I decided to keep going. In actual fact, as tasty as a Glen Morangie might be, I was really dying for a coffee. A few years ago I was heading out to do some scrambling in the Rocky Mountains with my friend, Cory. Less than thirty minutes into the drive, we passed a coffee shop. I asked if we could stop, as we had started so early I had forgotten to brew one for the road. Cory looked at me with incredulity and blurted out, 'I can't believe it, you're addicted to caffeine, aren't you?'

I denied it at the time, but we stopped nonetheless and a few years later he was 'addicted', too. I was fifty miles into my day and hadn't yet developed the caffeine headache that was indubitably on its way, but was gagging from some of the bitter black liquid in some form or another. In Canada, you can't swing a dead beaver without hitting a coffee shop. Tim Horton's, 7-11, Macs, Second Cup, Starbucks, greasy spoons aplenty - they were everywhere. Where we lived in downtown Edmonton, there were 4 Second Cups within a half mile of where we lived. When I had 5am shifts at a golf course, I'd often cycle by the local Tim Horton's and see that there was a queue in the drive through - now those people had addictions - or had just made bad life choices.

Here, way, way up on the A9, there was bugger all. There seemed to be a few towns just off the A9, but I was loath to venture too far - cycling inertia again. I stopped to eat my lunch on a bridge and started to feel the caffeine headache creeping across my cranium towards where it would

eventually settle behind my eyes. I had to find a coffee. And soon. I wolfed down a dry bread and cheese sandwich and ate my apple on the hop. With each crunch, I could feel the neurons in my head growing increasingly irritated. Then, just as I was thinking about knocking on someone's door to ask for a cuppa, I spotted the sign to Golspie and a sign for a coffee shop. I managed to find it without too much trouble just off the main road that went through town and gleefully ordered a large latte and a slice of carrot cake. It was heavenly. No one can say that decent coffee hasn't come to Scotland; I even found it in Golspie.

I sat outside in the sun with a rather haggard-looking young guy wearing well-worn hiking boots. He had long hair and had brown, freckled skin. He'd clearly been outside as much as I'd been. I wondered if he was a walking LEJoGer and realised that, if I had been walking, I'd probably made it only as far as Bath - if I was lucky. It was another type of quest altogether and one that might be fun to undertake. At least my crank wouldn't break down if I was walking.