



GRADE: Moderate road route

DISTANCE: 40 miles/64km

TIME: 3-5 hours

Cycling by
West Loch Tarbert



Map: OS 1:50,000
Landranger sheet 62
(North Kintyre and
Tarbert)

Distance:
40 miles/64km

Time: 3-5 hours

Start/Finish:
Tarbert, Loch Fyne
(GR: NR864686)

Terrain: Busy A-road at
the beginning and end
but in between the road
is quiet and pleasantly
undulating with one
longish climb.

Coffee & Cake:
Port Ban campsite café,
01880 770224
(closed Sundays)

I CYCLED this circuit of the Knapdale peninsula while riding the Caledonia Way, Sustran's National Route 78, which runs for 237 miles from Campbeltown to Inverness. It came at the end of a long first day after I had tackled Paul McCartney's long and winding road up the east coast of the Kintyre Peninsula, and I was very glad to find the lovely campsite at Port Ban.

On this shorter ride I was still thankful for the Port Ban campsite, but since I wasn't camping this time it was the campsite's café that attracted my attention. Try their seaweed scones – they are outstanding.

I began the ride in Tarbert and followed the ancient route of Magnus Olafsson who, in 1093, had his followers carry his longship across the isthmus between Tarbert and what we now know as West Loch Tarbert. He had been promised by the king of Scotland that he could keep those lands he could encircle by boat so not only did he become master of the islands but laid claim to the whole of the Kintyre Peninsula as well.

This A83 is a busy road and can be avoided by using the quieter B8024 but I liked the notion of following in the wake of the Norwegian raider's boat. Nevertheless, I was thankful to turn off the main road onto the route of NCN78 near Stonefield.

From here the cycling is lovely, an undulating and quiet road through mixed woodland with the waters of West Loch Tarbert shimmering to your left. This is an ancient landscape with signs of man going back to prehistoric times. The peninsula is littered with tumuli, chambered cairns, old forts and cup and ring marks. The name

Knapdale comes from the Gaelic – Cnap meaning hill and Dall meaning field. Geologically the land has been scoured by glaciers, while the Atlantic Ocean has carved out a marvellous coastline.

The road winds gently alongside the shore before running inland from Dunmore. Views to the south are expansive and if you feel like a short break there is a nice little beach at the head of Loch Stornoway.

From there the road continues west before abruptly turning north to Kilberry and its award-winning seafood restaurant. Across the road, close to the shore, are the remains of Kilberry Castle, destroyed by pirates in 1513. The remains were later incorporated into what is now Kilberry House. There is a group of sculptured stones on display in a purpose-built shelter in the grounds of the house, including cross-slabs and medieval grave markers.

Once I had enjoyed my coffee and seaweed scones at Port Ban I saw a lot more of the coastline. It was wonderful to gaze across the sea towards Islay and Jura with the Paps of Jura, three great cones of rock and scree, rising from the sea and dominating the view.

From Kilberry onwards the landscape changes dramatically, from a wooded road to open country and even more undulations. Eventually the road drops down to sea level near Kilmaluig and follows the shore through Ormsary and Tighnahoran before turning inland at Clachbreck and the beginning of the ride's major climb.

From sea level the road rises for about 200 metres to Loch Arail. The climb is fairly gentle and is well sheltered by forestry but the change in landscape is very noticeable when you top-out just after the loch. From here, you can look forward to a long downhill run back to the A83 and the ride alongside the shores of Loch Fyne back to Tarbert.

Cameron McNeish