

## Bealach Na Ba: Britain's biggest climb Rod MacFadyen

Bealach-na-Ba (Pass of the Cattle) is the UK's biggest road climb. It rises from sea level to 626m altitude in 10km. You're unlikely to have ridden it because it's set in a remote part of the West Highlands, the Applecross Peninsula, so it's very beautiful but also difficult to get to. I managed to sneak a trip up the Bealach in June when I was on holiday. I appreciated the chance to ride the nearest thing we have to a proper Alpine col. You can find a profile of the side I climbed on the excellent [salite.ch](http://salite.ch) website: [www.salite.ch/bealach2.htm](http://www.salite.ch/bealach2.htm) although I have my doubts as to whether the last kilometre really is 21.9%.



The Bealach road starts at a junction with the Shieldaig – Lochcarron road. The large sign, pictured, leaves you in no doubt as to what you're letting yourself in for. Nevertheless, things start innocuously with a flat stretch beside Loch Kishorn. The seaweed on the shore lets you know you really are at sea level. The road bears left and starts to climb at a steady gradient. We're on a singletrack road with passing places, the road surface is reasonably good, and there are great views over the loch into the surrounding hills. Beneath you are the faint remnants of the oil fabrication yard that once built production platforms for the North Sea. It closed in the mid-Eighties. Today is warm, sunny and breezy.

This isn't the first time I've been here. Many years ago I made a daytrip from Inverness to ride the loop over the Bealach from Shieldaig. I was on my first decent bike, a 531 racer my brother sold me. I remember this as being a totally leg-bending ascent which brought me to a gasping halt for a rest before I could carry on. I'm curious to see how a lifetime of cycling experience since then will affect my experience of this remote hill. The amount of holiday traffic tells me it's clearly better known these days. Looking ahead there's a rocky cliff rearing up in front of me. It takes a few minutes for the view to unfold.





This is real geography lesson stuff. The road has curved to the right and brought me into a classic U-shaped valley. The road clings to the right-hand side and ascends steadily. I'm in climbing mode now and spinning a gear nicely. Nothing too frightening yet although I don't have many gears left. After my previous visit here, I wrote an article for a now long-defunct cycling magazine. The article was titled "The Highest Road in Britain". I was soon put right about that. Several anoraks wrote in to list other, higher-altitude roads: how those people must enjoy the internet now. What the letters did clarify, however, is that this is Britain's climb with the greatest amount of ascent, or "denivelation" as the French usefully call it.



Ok, now I'm suffering. I've reached a sort of higher, hanging valley, the gradient of the road has pitched up and put me into my 34x25 bottom gear. What's more, the mountainside is channelling the wind, focussing it right onto me, and a couple of vicious sideways gusts have nearly had me off. I'm crouching to lower my profile. The wind swirls round, sometimes pushing me, sometimes in my face. I'm grinding along at 12kph, aware of cars coming up I'm going to have to let pass although I need a decent clearance in case the wind gets too playful again. But none of the cars are going very fast either.

Ahead of me I can see the spectacular hairpins that conclude the climb on this approach. When I get into the hairpinned section, it feels like home. I have many happy memories of going up and down the cols of the northern French Alps and am stupidly pleased to find the same thing in Britain.





This is an abstract thought, of course, the reality is that I'm heaving my sweaty self up a steep gradient and my burning legs are begging me to stop and give them a rest. But that can't be done, sorry, I'll stop on the way down for pictures, the ascent must be done in one go. I go round the hairpins on the outside to get a momentary relaxation of gradient.





The top of the climb is flattish. This is slightly disappointing in that it's hard to pin down exactly where the summit is. I'm watching my elapsed time. In the old days I reckoned I was climbing well if I could achieve 1000m of vertical in one hour. That rate would mean doing this climb in under 38 minutes. At 42 minutes I decide the carpark is the top and lean my bike against the West Ross Deer Management post. It's a shame there isn't a col sign – "Bealach na Ba, 2053 feet" it would say. To the West there are fantastic views across the sea into Skye. The road itself dips invitingly downwards past the carpark. But after a pause to take in the scenery and zip my jersey up, I head back the way I came.

The descent is standard fare for a steep, hairpinned road in that total concentration is required to pick correct lines through bends, brake to keep speed in check without frying the rims, avoid traffic and generally keep the rubber side down. I feel the air getting warmer and all too soon I'm back where I started from with a mere 22km on the clock and a happy grin on my face. It could be a while, but I'll be back



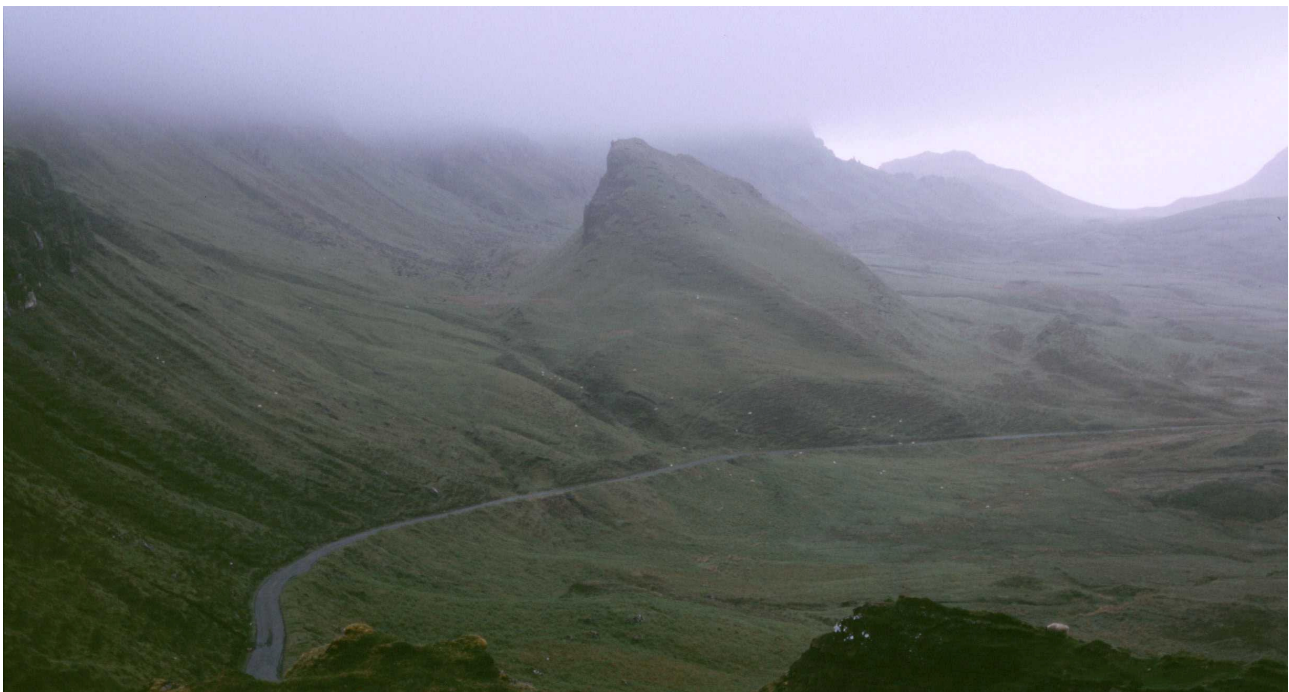
I found some other hills as well as the Bealach. One was the climb to Abriachan from the road along Loch Ness between Inverness and Drumadrochit. I grew up in Inverness and used to come out this way on my bike. I didn't know much about cycling back then but I was careful to put the biggest sprocket I could find on the back.

This time I planned an early morning ride since the loop isn't that long. Overnight the haar (summer sea mist) had come in and all was cool, grey and misty. Loch Ness was glassy calm. The occasional lorry came past and I was glad to reach the turn-off. Here's the start of that climb.



From memory this was a nasty little brute. It still is, meriting a couple of single arrows on the OS map and gaining over 200m in altitude in about 2km. Embedded in a sportive, you'd remember it. I returned via Blackfold, still not out of the mist, listening to cuckoos calling and ready for my breakfast. Later on we visited Chanonry point just as the dolphins swam past.

A few days later we were on Skye which, during a fortnight of blazing sun and warmth, produced clouds, wind and rain. Late one evening we took a drive up the Trotternish peninsula. A large bird of prey sitting sulkily on top of a pine tree was identified as a white-tailed eagle. We took the single-track road cutting across the peninsula from Brogaig to Uig.



Some road! Deserted and narrow, it rapidly climbs from near sea level until it crosses a line of crags at 270m altitude. A flock of sheep brought us to a halt. The picture shows the way we came. The white dots are more sheep. This remote and empty road now remains for me as an ambition to cycle.