

Our ride is interrupted at the top of the hill for a phone call. Emily's house sale has gone through! Good news and bad as she reveals that she and her husband have agreed to sell their time trial bikes to pay stamp duty and solicitor fees. Emily sorrowfully tells me: "Cheryl must go." I am confused and express concern about the naming of bikes: Cheryl the Cervélo, Kelly the Kuota and Bianca the Bianchi — Emily's bike shed sounds like a bad Nineties girl band to me.

Eerie

We leave the Tweed behind, climbing gradually. A dam appears in front of us with a cobbled spillway and a tarmac slash running diagonally right to left across the dam which we ride up with Emily humming *The Dam Busters* theme tune as we pedal. The water of the reservoir is shimmering, the glints of sunlight look like they are striking off a giant glitterball submerged below the water, reflecting the sun back at us in shards of light. We ride along the reservoir for about four kilometres. It may look inviting now but Emily remarks it would be a frightening place at dusk or dawn. Large, imposing pine trees on the southern shores and sloping hillsides with not a soul around could feel eerie in low light or mist. It would be the perfect backdrop for a film set with a real 'Middle Earth' feel to it, like a scene straight out of the *Lord of the Rings*.

As we approach the end of the reservoir we spot a dramatic road at the end of the valley, a seemingly impossible climb straight skywards at the head of the reservoir. The valley itself continues bending around to the right, so we hope that the road we can see is not in fact a road, but maybe a pristine track and that the real road follows the

more gentle curve of the valley. As we get closer to the bottom it becomes apparent that there is no escape and we will be hauling ourselves straight up the wall. A 20 per cent sign at the bottom confirms its appearance is more than an illusion — it's steep.

As we climb Emily seems to be in a perfect rhythm tapping away in the saddle while I am swinging over the bars. She barely seems to break sweat. At the top her secret is revealed: a compact chainset and a cassette with the largest sprocket of 29 teeth — a combination that I would heartily recommend for anyone doing this route.

It's an unusual course design in that the steepest climb of Talla comes near to the start and the three subsequent climbs are easier.

Again my cynicism about course designers comes through as I expect the day to get tougher and I am pleasantly surprised when it doesn't. Most route designers seem to enjoy piling on the suffering at the end having lured riders into a false sense of security.

Perfect ride

Coming off the Talla climb feels like a roller-coaster with some flat sections that beg to be pedalled hard. It's like a river of tarmac flowing down the valley. Nothing is out of place and it feels as though it's been hand-built for cyclists, with no off-camber turns and a whole lot of flow. If Carlsberg did road cycling it would feel like this. That is until the abrupt bottom where you need to hold on to your teeth going over the cattle grid.

After the cattle grid, I ask Emily what she thought of the descent but challenged her to describe it without using the words beautiful, lovely, nice or 'daffodilly' — her four favourite adjectives. This causes silence but I know from the beaming smile that she loved it. I would rank the 10 kilometres from Talla to Megget Reservoir as some of the best I have ridden anywhere in the world. It's a microcosm of what you would want from a road ride: there is a fast, flat section along Talla reservoir, where you can push a big gear and fly along with your ride mates working together, followed by a short steep climb to challenge you and a delectable descent that is fast and flowing. It's like a condensed version of the perfect ride.

Throughout the ride I keep expecting us to be overtaken. Emily is also riding as if she has an imaginary friend, constantly checking over her shoulder. We establish that it is the humming of her deep-section wheels. On the climb the noise increases even further and if she accelerates them up to speed there is a sound like fabric being ripped, which is wheels slashing through the air. They sound fast and I have wheel envy. Apparently, according to Emily, my bike is quiet because I am not putting enough power through it.

Emily describes the third descent as feeling like mountain biking through berms. The road twists and turns like a man-made track descent to help cyclists hold their speed. It is fabulous and will be even better when closed.

THE BIKE

Known as 'Kelly', the Kharma was custom-built by Brucies Bike Shop in Kendal. It has a full-carbon aero frame, with great shaping around the rear wheel and top tube. It's not the lightest but is super-stiff due to the oversized bottom bracket and head tube, which give it a really solid feel. It has a Campag Centaur 'Red and Black' groupset, which has really smooth, accurate shifting. Mavic Cosmic Carbon SL wheels finish it off to give a speedy and comfortable ride that's great on both the climbs and descents.



Words: John Walsh. Photographs: Russ Ellis



The Megget Reservoir is a paradise of sorts

With only two climbs remaining we struggle to find the fourth. There is no sign and no obvious road where we expect to be turning. We stop and ask a farmer on his quad bike, who jabs a thumb behind him and says "up there". The only indication is a sign saying "unsuitable for heavy vehicles". Emily carefully looks me up and down. I'm not sure exactly what that look is saying but I don't think its complimentary. After clipping out of sight the road finally

reappears as a diagonal slash cutting through the bracken. Emily eases off on this climb, much to my relief. She claims that with 94km already completed, this fourth climb feels harder than the 20 per cent climb at Talla that came second. I disagree; to me Witchy Knowe feels almost Alpine in quality with a gentle gradient that encouraging you to push your bike harder. Maybe the slightly gentler gradient is better for 'heavy vehicles'.

The fifth and final climb of the day is the fantastically named Paddy Slacks. It has been suggested that this is a corruption of "Pas des Lacs" as it was a route used by the French speaking Mary Queen of Scots, who frequented nearby Traquair House. However it came by its name the road is reminiscent of a French Alpine pass with its long but gradual ascent complete with pine forest near the top. Flying down the descent we are both grinning as our bikes swoop toward the finish. This ride has left us feeling euphoric for a change rather than exhausted, as each climb has rewarded with an exhilarating descent.

Quality

Roadies seldom talk about descents with any passion but nothing beats the feeling of glee that comes from a fast downhill. Cyclists tend to be obsessed with climbs, the real test of fitness and tenacity, but descents are where the fun happens.

For me this route will stand out as being one of the best all-round rides I have done in the UK. The climbing was not unduly challenging, the scenery stunning and the descents memorable. It's a masterpiece of route planning. It's got no headline climb, but everything is in there for its quality, no filler. It is also one of the most traffic-lite routes I have ridden. On closed roads you will be able to fly round taking full advantage of the road width to enjoy each glorious turn.

KNOW THIS

Getting there Start and finish is in picturesque Peebles on the Tweed Green, EH45 8AP. Peebles is just 45 minutes south of Edinburgh, if you are travelling a long way and want to make a weekend of it.
Staying there MacDonald Cardrona Hotel (which also supports the popular TweedLove bike festival — tweedlove.com) is three miles from the start. Complete with pool and spa it would make a perfect post-ride treat. Go to tourotheborders.com/accommodation for a wide range of places to stay.
Kit Despite the August date a lightweight windproof/waterproof is still a good idea for your back pocket.
Bike It can be ridden on a standard

double with an 11-25t cassette as all but one of the climbs are fairly gentle. A compact chainset (50/34t) with an 11-27t cassette will ease the pressure on the knees allowing you to dance up the Talla climb that includes a section that reaches over 20 per cent.
Bike shop For any last-minute spares or repairs head to bspoke Cycles in Peebles bspokepeebles.co.uk
Refuelling The freedom of closed roads is not to be missed but this is probably the quietest route in terms of traffic I have ever ridden in the UK so it can be enjoyed at any time. If you are setting your own date take plenty of snacks as the route does not touch any major settlements. The Gordon Arms (which you pass twice near the end of the route) is open Thursday to Sunday, thegordonarms.com

John Walsh rides a stunning closed-road sportive in the unspoilt Scottish Borders, with fantastic flowing descents and, mostly, friendly gradients

When I pick up a route map for the first time I am always suspicious of horseshoe-shaped sections or extraneous loops. Call me cynical but I have seen plenty of sportives with sections added just to get the mileage up — especially those that want to hit the 100-mile mark. On paper the first section of the ride looked like it might conform to this cynicism and be a bit pointless, or put in to string out the riders. Actually, it is a beautiful back-roads leg out of Peebles and, contrary to my suspicion, certainly not wasted miles. As the day went on it became very apparent that every inch of tarmac on this route is worth pedalling.

Once out of Peebles the ride starts by passing through Cademuir. My ride companion Emily and I are having one of those rambling conversations, as bike riders so often do, about random things cyclists see. Emily's hot topic is pheasants. I'm not sure what she has against them but she rants that they are the most ridiculous wildlife you can see with an IQ of two on a good day. Right on cue one flies out in front of us doing its silly low, flappy attempt at flying before diving right in front of my wheel. This sends me off course onto some Paris-Roubaix-style rough stuff, causing my bottle to bounce out of its cage and roll down the hill in front of me where I retrieve it with only a few added nutrients provided by the dirt encrusted around the lid. It would

appear that when it comes to pheasants, she could have a point. Shortly after 'Pheasantgate' we pass a sign that says 'Watch out for jumping lambs'. Emily suddenly pulls up and leaps off her bike. Like Bambi on ice, she skates along on her cleats trying to retrieve an escapee and return him to his field. After cramming in enough animal action in the first 12 miles to last a day we head up the Tweed Valley following the banks of the river. At Dreva we reach the first climb. Emily flies up ahead of me. The sunlight refracts through the trees patterning the tarmac with intricate shapes; watching my wheels pass through the patches of light and dark provides a welcome distraction from the leg pain of the climb.

THE RIDERS

John Walsh John leads road cycling holidays in Europe during the summer. For all his guiding on the high passes of the Alps and Pyrenees, the Fred Whitton in his native Cumbria remains one of his favourite cycling routes. This month John is off to lead a cycling tour in Colombia. John is author of *France en Velo* (franceenvelo.cc) a guide to cycling across France.

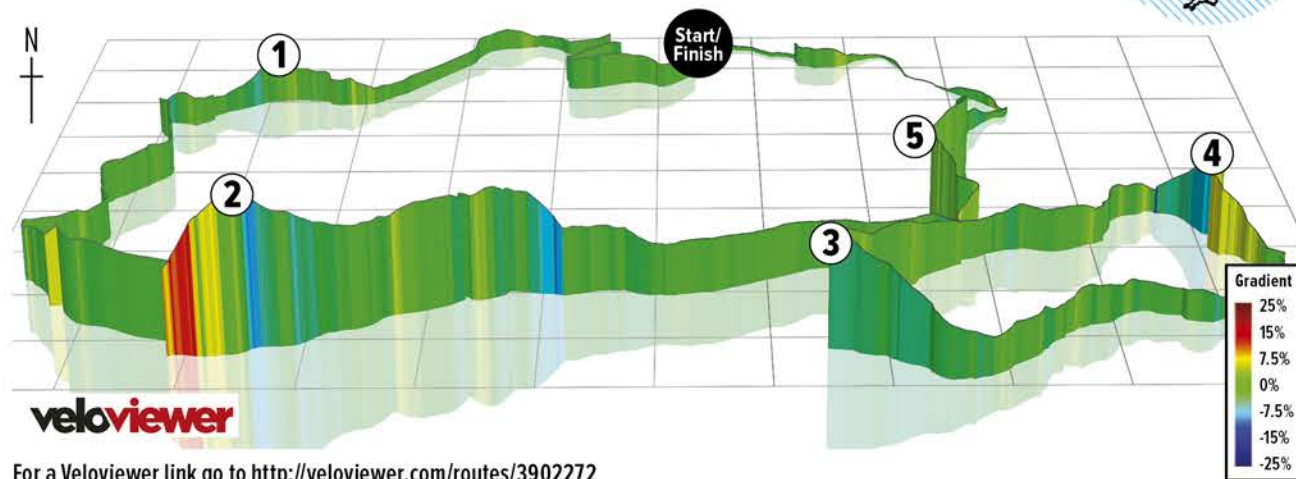
Emily Baldock Emily has been cycling for over 10 years, on both road and mountain bikes. Living in Cumbria means that she is no stranger to steep gradients and the Coal Road and Buttertubs feature in her favourite local loop. Emily is founder of Cyclista (cyclistaclothing.co.uk), a women's cycle clothing brand designed and made in Cumbria.

The 'man in black' leads a climb, for once

Tour o' the Borders

THE ROUTE & KEY CLIMBS

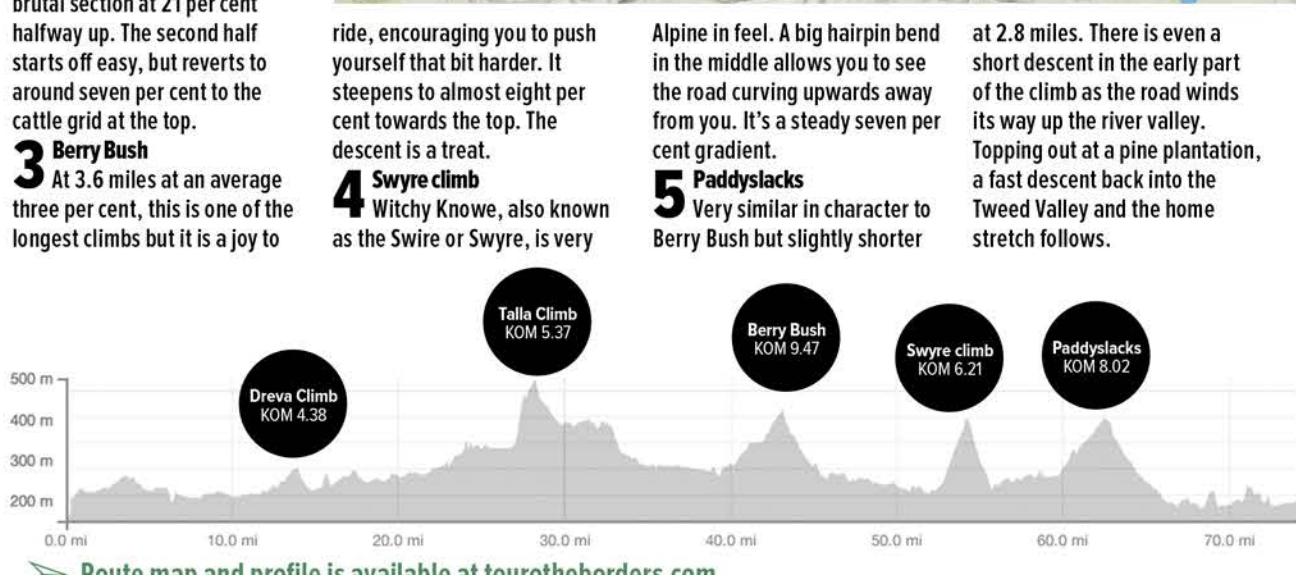
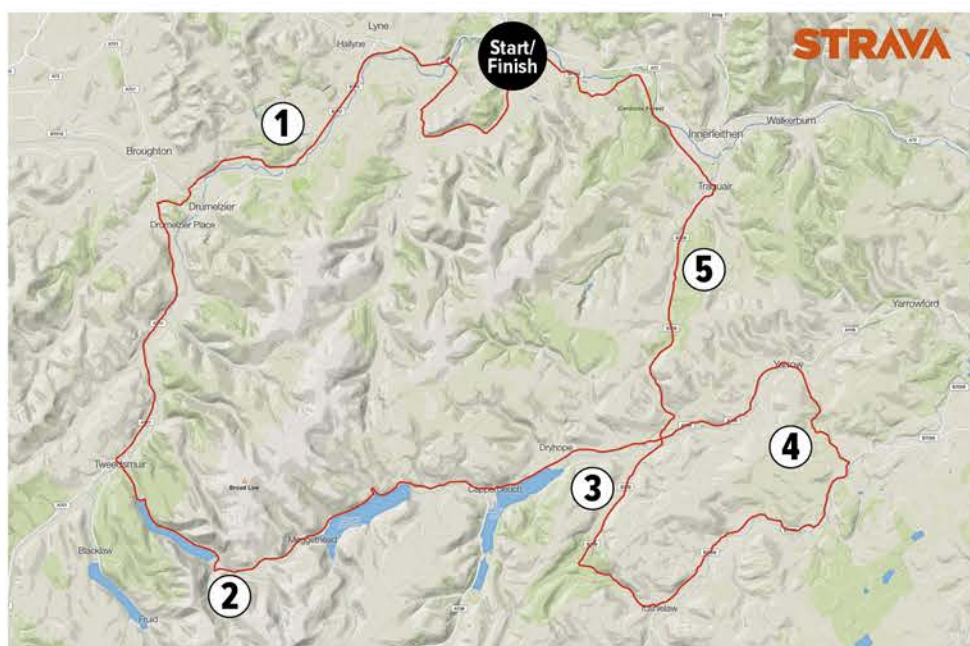
This routes take you through the beautiful and unspoilt borderlands of Scotland, in and around the wool town of Peebles. The route is a joy with some beguiling climbs and exhilarating descents.



For a Veloviewer link go to <http://veloviewer.com/routes/3902272>

CLIMBS

- 1 Dreva Climb** The Tour O' The Borders' organisers have produced a great map naming all five climbs — refreshing in the world of purple lines on GPS units in which we now ride. Dreva is a friendly introduction and barely noticeable if you are feeling fresh with a modest average of two per cent over 1.6 miles as the route climbs through the valley high above the Tweed.
- 2 Talla Climb** As unfriendly as Dreva is amenable. Talla is a tarmac wall just over a mile long. The eight per cent average does not tell the whole story, with a short, brutal section at 21 per cent halfway up. The second half starts off easy, but reverts to around seven per cent to the cattle grid at the top.
- 3 Berry Bush** At 3.6 miles at an average three per cent, this is one of the longest climbs but it is a joy to ride, encouraging you to push yourself that bit harder. It steepens to almost eight per cent towards the top. The descent is a treat.
- 4 Swyre climb** Witchy Knowe, also known as the Swire or Swyre, is very
- 5 Paddy Slacks** Very similar in character to Berry Bush but slightly shorter



Route map and profile is available at tourotheborders.com