

In brief

Category: Difficult

Map Reference: OS Landranger Maps 14 (Tarbert & Loch Seaforth) & 18 (Sound of Harris); OS Explorer Maps 455 (South Harris)

Start and End Grid Reference:
NB 154 000

Cycling Distance: 73 km / 45 miles

Time: 1 - 2 days



Our walking and cycling routes are part of a series of self-guided trails through the Outer Hebrides. For more information scan here.



www.visitouterhebrides.co.uk
www.visitouterhebrides.co.uk/apps



Cycling is a great way to discover our islands and enjoy the outdoors. With routes to suit all ages and abilities, and minimal traffic on many island roads, cycling can be as leisurely or as challenging as you choose.

If you don't own a bike, a number of establishments offer bike hire – check out www.visitouterhebrides.co.uk for more details



Courteous and Safe Cycling

Most of the vehicles that pass you on your bike are going about their daily business, so we would ask you to respect these few guidelines to keep everyone safe and moving with ease:

- There are some roads that are single track with passing places. Please cycle in single file and keep to the left.
- Use passing places to allow cars behind to overtake and to allow cars coming towards you to keep moving.
- Do not block passing places – leave them clear to allow traffic to keep flowing.
- If you have to leave your bicycle, leave it off road and not in the way of other road users.

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You can also explore the islands by following the Hebridean Way Walking and Cycling Routes

www.hebrideanway.co.uk

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This is a route of two halves – a fascinating tour along the rocky bays and inlets of the east coast, followed by a journey past some of Scotland's most beautiful beaches.

Keen cyclists will easily manage the whole circuit in a day. If you're more of an occasional cyclist, you might like to split it into two leisurely days.

The Golden Road

1 The route starts in Tarbert, the attractive capital of Harris. Heading out of the village, turn left onto the A859 following the signs for Roghadal and the Sound of Harris ferry. Immediately the road starts to climb and for the first couple of miles it is all uphill. The gradients are rarely too steep however and the drama of this rocky, watery landscape makes the effort worthwhile.

Soon you will reach a small side road branching off to the left signposted 'The Golden Road'. Turn left along this, avoiding the long climb ahead on the main road, and swoop downhill into the little village of Miabhaig. This is the first of many villages you will pass through on the Golden Road, so called because its tortuous route through the intricate landscape of the Bays of Harris made it extremely expensive to build. Before its construction in the 1940s, all traffic between the villages went either on foot or by boat.



St. Clement's Church

3 The Bays of Harris has enticed many artists over the years - attracted here by the ever changing light and complex landscape. If you fancy a break, call in at one of a number of galleries along your way - some have excellent cafés.

Keep following the signs for Roghadal (Rodel), ignoring any side roads, and once there you will find St. Clement's Church, perched spectacularly on a rock. Well worth a stop, the church was built in the 1520s but has since been heavily restored. It looks out over the sea to the Isle of Skye - the home of its founder, Alasdair "Crotach" MacLeod of Dunvegan. Inside there are several stone effigies, including that of Alasdair Crotach himself, as well as some fascinating medieval stone carvings.

Just after the turn off to one of these – Holmasaig Gallery at Cuidhtinis – the road descends to the shore. Stop here for great views of common seals which haul out onto the tiny islands close to the road.



Machair and Beaches

4 Carrying on from Roghadal, you soon arrive at Leverburgh. This is the second largest village in Harris.

From Leverburgh, climb over a short but steep pass then freewheel down to Northton and its dramatic tidal bay. Cycle along the east side of the bay, admiring the redshank and oystercatchers feeding in the shallow waters, and continue past one of Scotland's most dramatic (and windy) golf courses.

Head north and follow the west coast, past the magnificent golden beaches at Scarista, Borge and Luskentyre. In summer the meadows here are ablaze with wild flowers. This is the machair - unique coastal grasslands formed when shell-rich sand blows inland on winter storms and sweetens the poor island soils. These fertile coastal fringes are where the majority of Harris folk lived up until the 19th Century, when most were cleared off the land and sent to the rocky east coast.

Harris, Twinned with Jupiter

5 On your left, across the turquoise sea, is the island of Taransay. Once home to hundreds, in the 18th Century it too was ruthlessly cleared by landlords keen to replace unprofitable islanders with lucrative sheep. Today, it is completely uninhabited.

Cross the salt marsh at Seilebost – another great spot for admiring wading birds – and then it is time to swing inland, away from the coast, and follow the road for the final climb of the day.

After the exquisite beaches of the west coast you quickly enter another world, a spectacularly barren and rugged landscape. Hardly a blade of grass can be seen between the great slabs of bedrock which cover the hillside. So alien is its appearance, this area was used by Stanley Kubrick as the surface of Jupiter in his famous film, '2001 – A Space Odyssey'.

The climb is long and unrelenting, but eventually you will be rewarded with a tremendous sweeping descent back to Tarbert.



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From West to East

2 After Miabhaig the road continues to thread its way past countless rocky outcrops and beautiful freshwater lochs. Although the scenery is impressively wild, with tremendous views over the Little Minch to Skye and the mainland, you are never far from civilisation. Every couple of miles you will come across another small settlement, usually at the head of one of the many sheltered inlets that break up this section of coastline.

This rugged landscape used to be virtually uninhabited – almost everyone in South Harris lived on the fertile west coast. From the 19th Century onwards, as landlords began to forcibly evict people from their homes to make way for more profitable sheep farms, hundreds of people began to make their way on foot over to the rocky east side of Harris. Here these enterprising people built new houses, improved the land for crops and livestock and began building boats to fish the rich coastal waters.

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