In brief

Category: Moderate

Map Reference: OS Landranger Map 31 (Barra & South Uist): OS Explorer (Map 452 Barra & Vatersay)

Start and End Grid Reference: NL66 983

Cycling Distance: 9.5 km / 5.9 miles

Time: 2 hours with stops

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.

You can also explore the islands by following the Hebridean Way Walking and Cycling Routes www.hebrideanway.co.uk

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.

“This cycling route takes you from Castlebay to the Island of Vatersay. This route goes along roads all the way. It takes in part of the Hebridean Way and gives you the opportunity to stop at the war memorial and a renowned archaeological site”.

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

www.hebrideanway.co.uk

Entrance to Easdail

War Memorial

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War Memorial
3 The War Memorial is at the top of the hill and has a welcome seat and terrific viewpoint. This is a relatively recent war memorial, dedicated in 1993, which commemorates the men of Barra and Vatersay who died in the two World Wars (I) in the first, 46 in the second. Most were in the Royal or Merchant Navy.

From here, it is possible to see what a marvellous sheltered harbour Castlebay is. It is hard to imagine today, but in the late nineteenth century, there were hundreds of boats fishing from Barra, mainly for herring. It was supposedly possible to cross the bay from Barra to Vatersay, from boat to boat, without getting your feet wet!

Thousands of people would arrive for the short season to work, gutting, salting and packing the fish. There is still a fishing industry in Barra, but the larger boats work out of Northbay on the east coast where there is a fish processing factory.

Ancient Settlement
5 As you enjoy free-wheeling down the hill, look out for the site of Alt Easdail on the right, shown on maps as Alt Chrysal. It is easy to miss, as it is not signposted at the road. If you get to the causeway, you have gone too far, so look again on the way back. The site was only discovered when the road was being built in 1990. The crew were looking for a place for their portakabins and it was realised that the best spot had been used before! There is evidence of occupation from Neolithic times up to the nineteenth century. At different times, there have been circular huts, an Iron Age house, a roundhouse, a wheehouse, a burial cairn and the relatively more modern black house. Each period of occupation re-used materials from previous ones. There are also “lazy beds”, where crops were grown. Go up to the site to see the information boards and historic remains.

Vatersay
Cross the causeway to touch the island. If you are lucky, you will be greeted by the Vatersay chickens. Look out for sea birds and otters on the shore.

This area of Vatersay is called Caolis, (“sound of water”), after the narrow gap separating it from Barra. Until 1990, when the causeway was built, you could only get to Vatersay by boat. The crossing was not easy: isolation had led to the island’s population halving in the previous six years, and in 1986 a prize bull called Bernie died whilst swimming the sound.

In the summer you may see Bonnie Prince Charlie’s Flower, (sea bindweed), found in Scotland only on Vatersay and Eriskay. Legend has it that the Prince brought the seeds from France.

Once you have explored Vatersay, return by the same route. The tug up the hill is easier from this direction and the return views of the bay are tremendous.

“it is well worth a visit (the castle is open in summer, courtesy of Historic Scotland) to see the tide cleaned toilets and marvel at its seeming impregnable. It even has its own fresh water springs and fish traps.”

Out of Town to the Hebridean Way
2 Head back up to the main A887. Turn left on the main road and then take the first road on the left signed for Horve until you again join the main A887. Turn left and continue until you see a road on the left signed for Naas and Bhatarsaigh (Vatersay). Turn left here. The route is now straightforward and will take you all the way to Vatersay without further turnings.

You are now cycling on part of the Hebridean Way Cycling Route (NCN Route 780) which runs from Vatersay to the Butt of Lewis. From Naas, you have wonderful views over the small, enclosed Bagh Beag and can enjoy a stunning sunrise if you are there at the right time. You will soon pass through Naas and start to climb up round the flanks of Beinn Tangabal; on the road built in 1990 to link with the Vatersay Causeway.

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