

GREAT BRITAIN

JOHN O' GROATS TO LAND'S END - PART 1



GREAT BRITAIN

Our senses were full of excitement as we climbed onto our motorcycles. The strong odor of gasoline and diesel exhaust, as hundreds of cars and trucks were all started at once. The high-pitched whine of hydraulic motors, that lowered the humongous boarding ramp to the dock. The intense morning light that poured into the gray metal confines of the ferry's car deck, revealing the technicolor greens and blues of the outside world. The tactile feel of our leather gloves, wrapped around the rubber grips and handlebars of our BMW G650GS motorcycles. With the excitement of new discoveries, we twisted the throttle and eased our tires onto the road surface, and onto the island of Great Britain – albeit on the left side of the road.

"Remember, left to live!" I said into our helmet intercom, as we entered the first roundabout that went in a clockwise direction.

"Yep. Stay left if you want to live long here!" Chantil wittingly replied.

We both felt the renewed buzz of being in a new region. The ferry MV Stena Britannica had delivered us comfortably from the Netherlands of mainland Europe, across the North Sea, to Great Britain – the largest island of the British Isles. We planned to enjoy all three countries of Great Britain to include England, Wales, and Scotland. Especially the more remote northern regions of the Scottish Highlands.

"It will be nice to be in a country where they speak the same language." Chantil said, as we passed signs written in familiar English.

"I'm also looking forward to some delicious fish-n-chips." I replied.

Chantil added, "How about some English-style breakfast as well?"

"Except without the baked beans!" I countered, "Not for breakfast."

"Or haggis, that doesn't sound appealing either." Chantil said, with a grimace of the thought of eating sheep guts, boiled in its own stomach.

Fortunately, Scotland had a lot more to offer than Haggis – So much more!



The Mythical Kelpies of Scotland

With the summer season drawing to an end, we pointed our handlebars north towards the highlands of Scotland, but not before stopping to visit a magical sculpture known as The Kelpies. This massive horse-head sculpture, designed by sculptor Andy Scott, was completed in 2014, and is the centerpiece of a park and series of canals named The Helix.

The two horses, modeled after the Clydesdale working horses of Scotland, are impressive to view as you ride by from the nearby M9 motorway, but they are even more spectacular when viewed at night. We made sure to rent a room at the nearby Premier Lodge, so we could park the motorcycles, pack our tripod and camera, and capture the magnificent colors of The Kelpies after sunset.

The Kelpies name reflects the mythological transforming beasts that lived in the lochs of Scotland and had the strength of ten horses. Scottish folklore suggests that Kelpies would appear as a gray or white horse, that would entice the unsuspecting to ride on their back, where they would be carried away to a watery grave. Seeing the imposing 98 feet (30 meter) high horses, affectionately named Duke and Baron, coming to life after sunset, felt like a mythological moment that filled my camera's SD card with wonderful memories.







GREAT BRITAIN

GREAT BRITAIN

The Scottish Highlands

As we pressed north, the roads began to narrow, and the urban jungle of cities and towns transitioned to the natural beauty of the sparsely populated, and low-lying mountainous regions of the highlands. This region of Scotland continues to be some of the least populated areas of Europe, making it perfect for adventure motorcycle camping and touring. Highlights of the highlands included lunch at the Glencoe Mountain Resort, where we decided to try our luck with eating Haggis for the first time. We chose to ease into the experience by ordering a double cheeseburger with one patty being made from traditional beef, and the other being a mix of sheep heart, liver, and lungs cooked with spices. To our surprise, it wasn't as bad as we expected – If one adds enough spices, even sheep organs can be edible!

Other highlights included the stunning natural beauty and switchback roads of Bealach na Ba Pass and the narrow winding road of Quiraing Pass on the Isle of Sky. Riding through these regions of the Highlands made it difficult to make much progress, because at nearly every corner I was clamoring to take yet another photograph. The moral of the story - Don't ride with a photographer if you want to travel fast.

Another reason we didn't travel fast is because there were many days when the weather was just not favorable for motorcycle touring. Expect rain – Especially along the western highlands, which is one of the wettest places in Europe, with an annual rainfall of over 120 inches. Seattle, Washington, in comparison, only gets 40 inches a year on average. Pack your rain-gear.





Scottish Castles

Do you enjoy the idea of exploring Scottish castles? If so, you'll be happy to know that there are over 2,000 castles that were built between the 12th and 19th centuries. We tended to stick to the more popular castles including the picturesque Eilean Donan Castle, and the Urquhart Castle on Loch Ness. Fans of the folklore of the Loch Ness Monster should also visit the nearby Loch Ness Centre & Exhibition, where you can learn more about "Nessie" and come up with your own theory about this controversial creature.

We especially enjoyed the seaside castle ruins of Dunnottar and Findlater Castles. Both offered some of the nicest seaside walking trails we've ever enjoyed, where we relished in the relative clear skies and abnormally sunny weather.

The Iconic John O' Groats Signpost

Tourism 101 suggests that if you build a sign marking "the end of the road" or "the furthest geographical point", then tourists will come. This is especially true when the John O' Groats signpost was installed in 1964 to mark the tip of mainland UK. In reality, the furthest northern point of Great Britain is actually Dunnet Head, located 15 miles to the west. However, this didn't keep us from reaching this iconic spot and snapping our own memorable photograph.

It's no coincidence the John O' Groats signpost was chosen as the starting point for the motorcycle travel series Long Way Down. Ewan McGregor was born in Scotland, making it an ideal starting place for the series in which Ewan, Charley Boorman, and their production film crew, traveled 15,000 miles from John O' Groats to Cape Agulhas, the southernmost point of continental Africa. Someday, Chantil and I hope to also make the journey to Cape Agulhas, but it will take us substantially longer than the three months it took Ewan and Charley.





GREAT BRITAIN

Where to next?

As we snapped our last photograph of the John O' Groats Signpost, the angry gray clouds overhead began to drop the first of what was forecasted to be a long day of rain. We continued along the eastern coast, and our ultimate destination of reaching the Land's End Signpost in Cornwall, England. Google Maps says the shortest distance between John O'Groats and Land's End is 837 miles (1,347 km), but we're not known for taking the shortest distance. More adventure awaits in part two of Great Britain...

About viajarMOTO

Travis and Chantil Gill have been full-time motorcycle overlanding since early 2020. They tend to take things slow – Enjoying as much of the sites and culture of a country before moving on to the next. You can follow them on their steady journey around this “pale blue dot” at www.viajarMOTO.com.

