



VIDEO

The easy new way to explore this secret corner of the UK

Attenborough-approved wildlife, the smallest harbour in Britain and rolling countryside all await in this striking pocket of Scotland — best discovered by ebike



There are about 150,000 gannets on the Bass Rock

It might sound melodramatic to describe East Lothian as the land where time began. But as I pad across the spotless sand at Seacliff beach, it kind of feels that way. In 1788 the geologist James Hutton came upon a contorted cliff a few miles south of here and divined that the Earth was created several billion years ago, not 6,000, as the Christian church had claimed.

That was at Siccar Point, and at Seacliff too the atmosphere feels prehistoric. The foreshore is schismatic and twisted, the breakers are brutal and the steps down to the strand have washed away with the tide. Even locals speak of this beach in hushed tones, like a dream place, and the only signs of human activity reflect civilisations past.

Out on the headland a rusted winching wheel guards the smallest harbour in Britain, the surf churning into a rectangle cut out of the rock. The last lobster boat in these parts long since abandoned this mooring. Behind me the rose-pink ramparts of the medieval Tantallon Castle spike surreally out of the cliffside. A lone beachcomber picks through the tide wrack and one mad bather hauls up onto her bodyboard. Offshore looms Bass Rock, a fist of white stone; this is where David Attenborough dropped in on 150,000 gannets, the world's largest colony, in his *Wild Isles* series.



The beach is on a private road with a £3 charge for vehicle access (coins only), but the sympathetic way to arrive is as I have, breeze-blown and ruddy-cheeked, on a cycle tour arranged by Crabtree & Crabtree, based in the town of Kelso, about an hour's drive south. The company has made a speciality of adding fancy trimmings to its cottage holidays, and ebikes brought to your doorstep is its latest innovation; not just the wheels, either — bespoke itineraries, maps, maintenance if you need it, even a private guide.

Looking after me today is Tina O'Rourke of the local cycling outfit Ezee Riders, a guide who is fond of adding a foodie garnish to her itineraries. She'll deliver my bike to the cottage where I'm staying later, but to see more of the area while I'm here I start by driving half an hour to meet her at her base beside the castle. Ahead lie 14 flattish miles and about 3,000 calories of staunchly local food, with a motor on the bike in case things get too taxing. It's cycling for gannets.

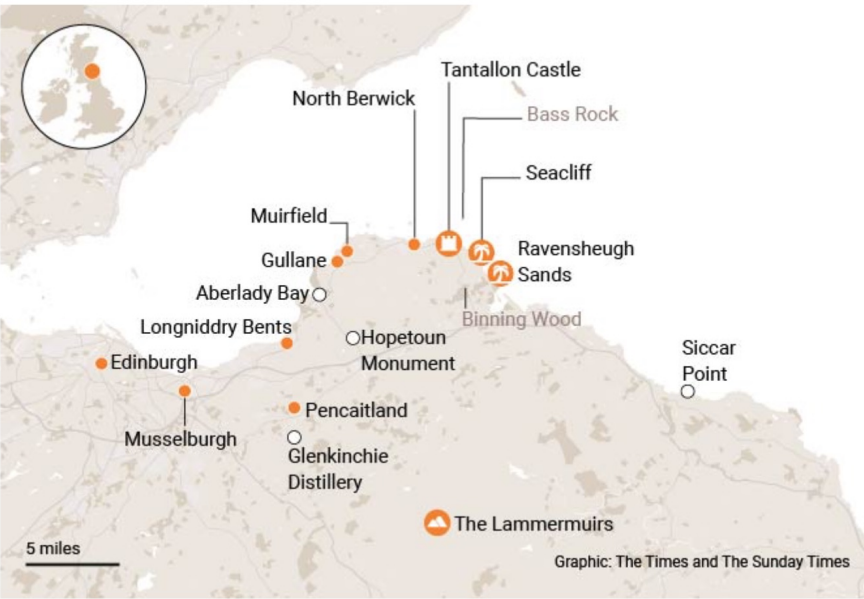
"You can't get too lost round here with Bass Rock as a touchstone," she says with a smile when we saddle up. "And even if you do, the beauty of ebikes is that you can switch them to turbo mode and they'll more or less whisk you home on their own."

It's soon apparent that behind its brawny shores, East Lothian is ideal cycling territory. A rumpled carpet of countryside embroidered with wheatfields, the county rolls east out from Edinburgh and south to the Lammermuirs, possibly the least pointy range of Scottish hills. Its landscape of freewheeling lanes and red-grey sandstone villages is easy to navigate thanks to the excellent Spokes cycle map (spokes.org.uk). It's all anchored by North Berwick Law, the plug of a 300-million-year-old volcano that hunches above the shore. In truth, proper cyclists won't need the push-button power surge you get from an ebike, but for lazy ones such as me it brings all the highlights of East Lothian into easy weekend range.



The first stop on O’Rourke’s tour comes after precisely 500 yards, at the ingenious Drift café, a prime dolphin-watching spot and purveyor of the most panoramic brunch in the county. Its owner, Jo McNicol, farms the surrounding fields and has plonked a glass-walled shipping container on a crag above an unspoilt bay.

“Everyone on this coast has either dropped out or diversified,” she says. “It’s making for a really vibrant food scene. We bake all our cakes on the farm and we’ve just planted an apple orchard to make our own cider.” Wonderful, but for my money her best idea is adding herb aioli to a bacon-and-egg bun — I could eat it until the dolphins come home (£7.50; driftalong.co.uk).



After this our route dawdles south, playing hide-and-seek with the seaside and scaring yellowhammers from the hedgerows. We spin past Seacliff House, a fire-scorched ruin straight out of the Daphne du Maurier novel *Rebecca*, and through Binning Wood, which offers something for everyone — a den-building zone for the wee ones, a “forest-bathing” cabin for frazzled grown-ups and a rather affecting burial glade for those pushing up the daisies.

There’s also a pudding-based picnic among the deserted dunes of Ravensheugh Sands, where O’Rourke empties her pannier of tooth-throbbing treats: sour-cherry chocolate from Ailey Mae in North Berwick and homemade tablet — a sweet made of butter, sugar and condensed milk — from the nearby Sugar Mountain shop, all washed down with sea-buckthorn juice pressed from the berries of the silver shrub that has hemmed our trail. “It’s full of antioxidants and tastes as sharp as its thorns,” O’Rourke says with a grin. “I have to bring special pliers for the punctures.”

Our last stop is the holiday honeypot of North Berwick, a resort town so genteel that it turns its back on the sea. The Victorian high street is a block back from the beachfront, so there’s little to dent the serenity of the bay. Instead of neon-lit arcades, the chief children’s attraction is Dobby’s vintage carousel, “circa 1920”. Instead of fish and chips there’s a snaking queue on the quayside for the lobster shack, serving harbour-hauled hens for £48 a pop, with an optional side of Pierre Mignon Premier Cru.





The town also has a museum (free; coastalmuseum.org), the standout Herringbone restaurant (mains from £15; herringbone-northberwick.co.uk) and the Lodge Grounds gardens, host to the annual Fringe by the Sea, at which the Texas singer Sharleen Spiteri once had her set interrupted by a stage-diving puffin (August 2 to 11; fringebythesea.com).

There is also the Scottish Seabird Centre, perched on the promontory and recently reclaimed by nature — its exhibition rooms are still closed after flooding in February. This means that its live nest-cams on the offshore islands are out of action, so to see the gannets plummet and puffins pootle you must book one of the daily boat trips and visit them in the flesh (from £28, March to October; seabird.org).

North Berwick once had a seawater swimming pool, where O'Rourke remembers braving the bone-numbing cold as a girl. "There was a cup of Bovril for everyone who survived," she says. That pool has gone and instead the lawns behind the bay offer visitors two diversions: golf ... or putting. Long reaches of this coast have been tamed to serve the cult of one glove — 21 courses within 30 miles, including Musselburgh, considered the oldest links in the world, and Muirfield, which might be the best. A guest round in summer at the latter costs £340 — good value for hackers like me, at roughly £1 a shot (muirfield.org.uk).

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- [14 most beautiful places in Scotland for a UK break](#)

Golf central is the village of Gullane, which even has a course for children — its first fairway more or less starts on the high street. And it's in Gullane where the celebrated chef Tom Kitchin has planted his latest flag, converting a tavern into the Bonnie Badger, a Michelin Bib Gourmand restaurant with rooms. I dine there later, choosing perhaps the poshest haggis and neeps in Scotland. The woman at the next table is eating a seriously beautiful starter of sea trout with apple and sesame. "This tastes like food from space," she says.

Kitchin's commitment to local provenance is impeccable. In the lobby a map of Scotland is porcupined with two dozen pins: the pork, lamb, eggs, crab and wild garlic all hail from East Lothian; the lobster from North Berwick, of course. It doesn't reveal where he hunted my haggis, though (mains from £19; bonniebadger.com).



The Grieve's House, East Lothian
T BLOXHAM INSIDE STORY PHOTOGRAPHY

I'm staying at the Grieve's House near Pencaitland, a characteristically classy Crabtree & Crabtree crib converted from a tumbledown rural steading. The owners, Anna and Edward Hocknell, have crafted the cottage by filling in its broken stone shell with blue-larch planking, which makes it rather festive. The surrounding courtyard, with fire pit, well and games barn (table tennis, darts), suggests that you're the boss of a miniature estate. The sitting room, lit by log-burner, has Arts and Crafts wallpaper, while the sun-speared kitchen-diner has white-painted wainscotting. In short, it fulfils my essential requirement of any holiday house — I'd like to live here for keeps.

O'Rourke has dropped off my bike at the house, so the next day I'll be turbo-cycling solo on a 30-mile circuit that includes a glide along the John Muir Way, spooling behind beaches and bird reserves from Longniddry Bents to Aberlady Bay. I'll also fit in a tasting tour at the Glenkinchie Distillery (from £20; malts.com) and a climb up the Hopetoun Monument, a skinny stone candlestick with unlit spiral stairs that commands views all the way to Edinburgh (free; visiteastlothian.org).

But that's all for tomorrow. Tonight I plan to warm my nose in a Glenkinchie nightcap and dream as deep as geological time.

Vincent Crump was a guest of Crabtree & Crabtree, which has seven nights' self-catering for four at the Grieve's House in East Lothian from £1,094, including two days' bike hire and delivery (crabtreeandcrabtree.com). Add three hours' guided cycling for £69pp (ezeeriders.co.uk)

Three more cottages for an ebiking break

By Lucy Thackray

1. The Barn in Camber, East Sussex



The location, a few minutes' walk from the wild, grassy-duned Camber Sands, is just one draw of a stay at the Barn. Pick up your ride from EBike Hire, 25 minutes' walk down the road (from £30pp for a half-day; ebike-hire.com). The cottage has a new Hypervolt EV charger. With two double rooms and a twin, it's ideal for a family or two couples. The lofty living area has charming wood beams and cosy sofas, and there's an outdoor dining area. Up to two dogs are welcome for an extra fee.

Details Two nights' self-catering for six from £680 (camberholidaycottages.co.uk)

2. Bed in the Shed, Co Durham



This stylishly decorated stone-built cottage comes with a sapphire-blue tiled bathroom, a shed-style seating area with a wood-burner and bi-fold doors opening to a tranquil country garden. The owner can arrange ebikes for your stay (£10 a bike each day). Lovely cycling routes abound on your doorstep — you could explore Ushaw, a historic house and gardens within a couple of miles; pedal to Durham (5.5 miles) for its cathedral and riverside paths; or just pick up breakfast at the farm shop, two miles away. One well-behaved dog is allowed. **Details** [Seven nights' self-catering for two](#) from £572 (holidaycottages.co.uk)

3. Dragonfly Cabin, Cambridgeshire



CLAIRE HAIGH 2020

This dreamy little country cabin sits by a wild-swimming pond, so you can take a dip when you're not heading off exploring on two wheels. It's part of a peaceful farm estate where the owners can arrange ebikes for your stay (£30 a bike each day, including local route maps). Cambridge is five miles away, with a direct cycle path connecting you to its incredible architecture and summer punting fun; or just weave a wobbly trail between the cabin and the nearby village pub for dinner. You could take a train to Cambridge then a taxi here, making it a mostly drive-free break.

Details One night's self-catering for two from £110 (kiphideaways.com)

Where's your favourite place to cycle? Let us know in the comments below

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