

# Scotland Scapes

## THE BEGINNING

Let's start from the beginning. I have been to Scotland so many times, eight times already, but the only places I know by heart are Edinburgh and Glasgow airport, the Nevis Range parking area and of course the famous Fort William World Cup downhill and 4X tracks because I raced there so many times. The way to Fort William on the windy roads through the highlands is already breathtaking but this time I wanted to see more than the World Cup start hut.

So my boyfriend Alex, our dog Merlin and I travelled with our converted Sprinter van to the UK in April. At the beginning I was concerned about the weather, I was worried about how Scotland would be in April. Everyone I told about our trip looked at me and asked: "Why are you going to Scotland in spring - you're gonna freeze Helene."

But we had the best time ever and we had the weather on our side. It hardly rained (maybe one week out of six) and we were there before the high season of the midges started. So watch out for these tiny biting monsters and check out the midges forecasts ([www.smidgeup.com](http://www.smidgeup.com)) when you plan your daily trips. Yes, you read that right, there is actually a midge forecast, because they don't like wind so you can predict where they're going to be.

## THE TWEED VALLEY

After filming in England with my Haibike family for my latest project, we made our way up to the Tweed Valley, where our MTB Scotland trip officially started.

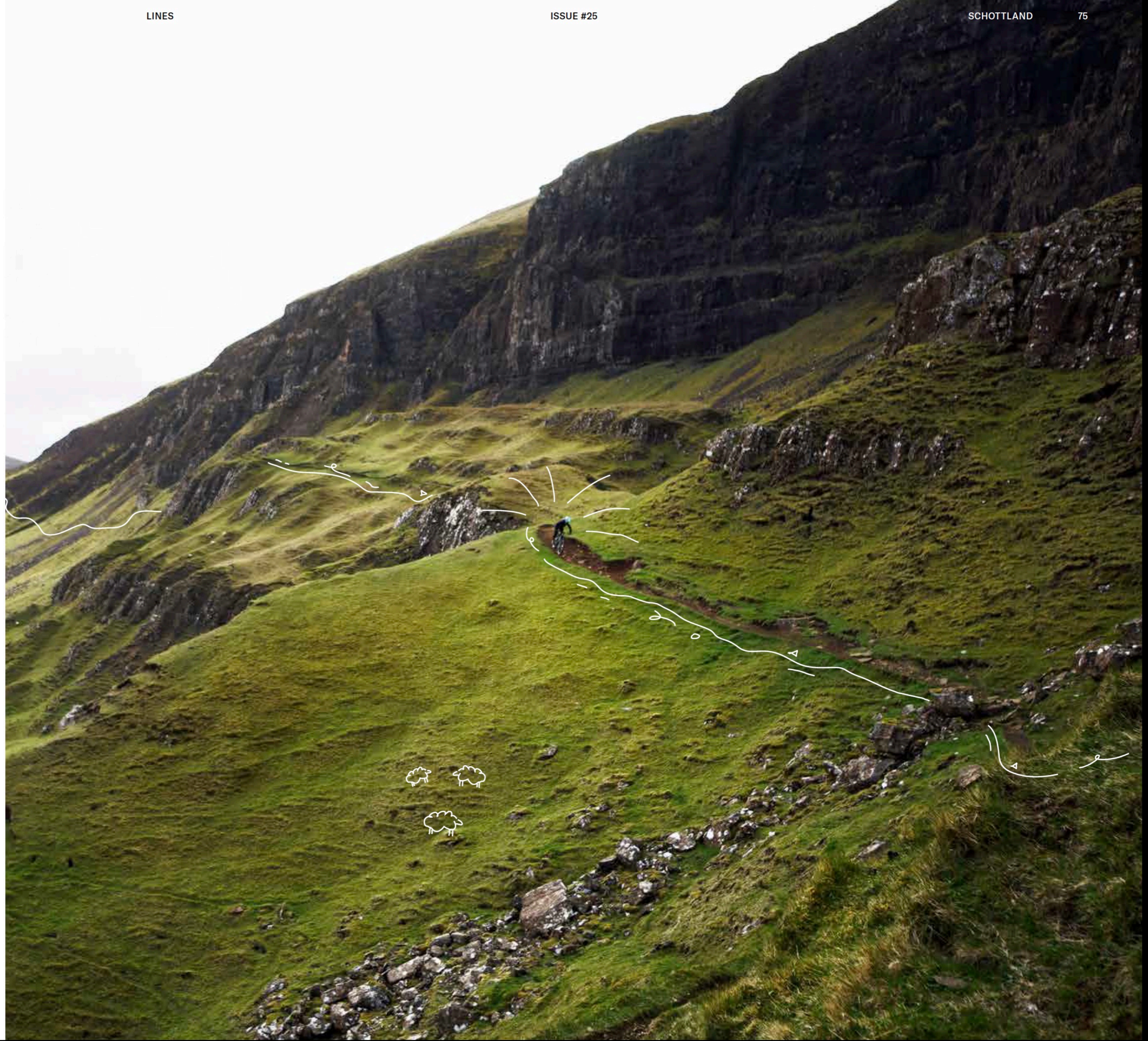
The Tweed Valley is located south of Edinburgh and you might have heard about it already because it's an Enduro World Series stop. The area combines Innerleithen, Glenfret and Golfie. It is so massive and we could have easily spent a few weeks there to ride all the 356 trails. But because we wanted to ride the steep and technical stuff we headed straight to the Caberston area, also known as Golfie, because it's next to a golf course. Nearly every trail is a black one and easy to find and access. You just ride up this one big fire road and the tracks are just dropping in along this road. Sometimes with an actual drop, so watch out. On our first day we were just lapping one trail after another with our enduro bikes and on the second day we were bombing up and down with our e-bikes to try to ride as many trails as possible. My favorite trails were Hangover, 2nd Base, 3G, NY NY and Dances with Wolves. Some of the trails were very flowy and I could leave the breaks open and just follow Alex blindly, and some - oh my goodness -, I was just glad I could hold on. To sum it up, Golfie is something for advanced riders and expect quite dark trails because the hand planted trees are so close to each other that the sun can't really say "Hi". If you can choose when you go depending on the weather, I would highly recommend going in the dry. When we were there, we were told the trails were the driest they had ever been. I don't want to imagine how they are in the wet.

# ISLE OF SKYE

As nice as it is to get lifted up a hill, we decided it was time to move on, and headed west to the famous Isle of Skye. You can drive over the bridge at Kyle of Lochalsh, or take the ferry from Mallaig, like we did. I can honestly say that Skye in itself is well worth a trip. It is home to some of the most amazing rock structures I have ever seen, and the bright green hills look like they are straight out of a fairy tale. Spoiler alert, the greenness has nothing to do with fairy tales, it's because of the rain!

Our highlight of Skye was without a doubt the Quiraing Traverse trail. The Quiraing is located on the north of the Isle of Skye. As part of the Trotternish Ridge, it was formed by a massive landslide which has created high cliffs, hidden plateaus and pinnacles of rock, making it one of the most scenic places in Scotland. It is crossed by a 4 km long hiking path. A quick search on Trailforks and komoot confirmed our hopes, it was apparently suitable for bikes. I say "apparently" because it ended up being a bit of a struggle.

We decided to ride the trail from south to north, to maximize the descent. Very quickly, the look of surprise on hikers' faces when they saw us on bikes made it clear that it would not be as straightforward as we thought. Most of the trail was rollable on a bike but many places were not. Too rough, too rocky, too steep, too slippery... We had it all – it is a hiking path after all. But yes, the unique and incredible landscapes made the struggle totally worth it. What a place.



## TORRIDON



After an intense few days of exploration on and off the bike, it was time to make our way back to mainland Scotland, and follow the winding road north towards the Torridonian Highlands. The ancient rocks of the unusually geologically twisted landscape caught my eye straight away. Torridon is a small village with a lot of history and legends and lies on the shore of Loch Torridon. You will not find much apart from a nice little cafe/shop, a hotel, a bed and breakfast, a few houses, a campsite, youth hostel and an open air church. It's a very idyllic place and sitting in the morning on the landing stage doing some yoga stretches and looking at the mirror smooth water reflections makes you easily forget everything around you.

But as soon as you try the red/black trail Torridon Lollipop it catapults you straight back to reality. Because this trail is no joke and brutal on your bike. So don't forget a repair/first aid kit and survival food bag, just in case. It takes a while, make sure you start in the morning, just to be sure.

It starts in the village of Annat with the 4 Loch Link trail making the loop (mix of the Coulags to Achnashellach + Maol Cheandearg trail) around the Maol Chean-Dearg peak and the 4 Loch Link trail down again. You have to face 38,4 km with 1.281 m of climbing and 1.295 m of descending, and the highest point is 647 m. The technical loose uphill will definitely bring your heart rate up and skills are needed otherwise you end up pushing your bike even more. You definitely need to be prepared for a biceps workout and to hit your shins while lifting the bike up the steps, if you are not a XC pro.

As some of you might know, riding technical uphill trails is my Achilles' heel, but having MTB legend Richie Schley's voice in my head saying "earn your descent" worked and I made it. At the end it's all about the mindset... or more about the rewarding descent, which was one of the nicest of the whole trip. A rough one for sure with rock slabs and loose rocks, but also one I will never forget.

After Torridon we drove along the coast to the North. It was very nice and we stopped at many stunning places like Durness and John O'Groats, where I spotted a whale with its fin cutting through the waves. For exploring and hiking, the north is amazing but don't expect any trails up there.

The hill Craig Dunain, also known as "the Mast", is located on the outskirts of Inverness. It is a mountain nicknamed after the radio mast that was planted at the top of it. The type of trails you will find here are best suited for intermediate to advanced riders. The trails here are not marked on Trailforks, for this spot Strava is better.

The hill is steep, and I felt it both up and down. There are two uphill lines, one on each side of the trails. I can't really recommend either as they are both as challenging as it gets. What I can recommend though, is to push through. If you survive the climb, you have a choice between a multitude of short, steep, intense trails with tight and slippery turns. Every trail we rode was just insane. It is a popular spot and we met lots of local riders who showed us different lines. There is also a jump line, which although it was not in the best condition when we were there, we were still able to ride sections. Note that some parts are big, very big!

## INVERNESS



## AVIEMORE

We finished up our Highland exploration in Aviemore which is located in the Cairngorms National park, and it is a must. From touring to enduro, you will find every type of riding here.

For the best enduro trails, we focused our riding on the "High Burnside", located in the hills west of Aviemore. The hills here are not as steep as in Inverness and more spread out, therefore the trails are longer, mellower and straighter. With smooth fire roads mixed with some flowy uphill trails to spice up the ride, climbing to the top is done in what feels like no time at all. For the downhill we still found some tricky steep trails, Antidote and the combo Top Trail, T.H.R. And Christ Almighty were my favorite descents. We also found plenty of easier flowy trails to cruise on.

If you are spending more than a few days in the Cairngorms and want to mix things up, head to Laggan Wolftrax, an official trail center, and its secret brother, Laggan Brown, right across the road.

>> [www.lagganforest.com/mountain-biking](http://www.lagganforest.com/mountain-biking)

## ABERDEEN SHIRE

Aberdeenshire is the rising star of Scotland's riding destinations, with trails such as Heartbreak Ridge in Ballater, and a multitude of bicycle friendly hills, like Drumtochty and Pitfichy just to name a few.

After carrying our bikes over the Cambus O'May Bridge turnstile, we rode along the river for a few kilometres, and then rode up the Pannanich Trail to get to the top of the Heartbreak Ridge. The uphill was ridiculously steep and in a completely straight line. With the e-bikes it didn't take us long. Especially as my preferred mode is always turbo.

At the top it was quite windy but the view was amazing. Because it was all open you could see the track far ahead and so we didn't have to touch the breaks too often. The trail is a continuous rock slab, the whole way down the hill. Offering flow in some places and challenging technical parts in others as well as multiple line choices.

The trail is also an amazing scenic ride, surrounded by heather bushes, very few trees and unbelievable views of the mountains and loch nearby.





## FORT WILLIAM

After Innerleithen we headed up northwest to the Glencoe mountain resort for a quick stop, a very quick stop, just enough for the friendly crew from the ticket office to tell us that we needed either skis or a snowboard because it was not yet open for bikes. So we decided to drive the quick 30 miles to Fort William, the big brother of Scottish bike parks, where we stayed two days. How ironic! I came to Scotland to ride new places and my second stop was again the well known Ben Nevis. Of course I had to ride the downhill and 4x World Cup tracks to challenge myself. The 4X track was fine but the DH track was another story. I really hoped I was going to smash down it like I had done years before but to be honest, I am glad I survived and made it down in one piece. It was definitely way harder than I had remembered. Especially with this crazy short but high road gap which you have to enter with nearly zero km/h because of the difficult wood section at the start. Luckily I had some of the best riders there to show me how to do it, because the World Cup was just around the corner and pros like Danny Hart and Camille Blanche were flying down the track.

So to sum it up the World Cup track is a hard one and if you want to ride something easier choose the blue 'Blue Doon' or the black 'Top Chief'. The Blue Doon is a super long blue track with one sandy turn after another, perfectly suited for beginner to intermediate riders. The Top Chief is a mix of very nice rock slabs, wide boardwalks and technical trial sections. For all three trails you can't pedal up, you have to take the gondola.

>> [www.nevisrange.co.uk/activities/bike/](http://www.nevisrange.co.uk/activities/bike/)

### — Which bike choice? —

I would say the best choice is a bike which pedals well uphill and is good for technical downhills. In total we had four bikes – two enduro e-bikes and two enduro bikes – with us. No downhill bikes this time because in Scotland there are no lifts apart from the one in Fort William.

### What is the best way to travel to Scotland?

We took the ferry from the Netherlands (Hoek van Holland to Harwich). We chose that way because we had to meet my Haibike teammates Tom Cardy, Sam Pilgrim and Kara Beal in England for a video project. So a more direct option would be taking the ferry from Amsterdam to Newcastle to be closer to Scotland. Of course you can also fly to Edinburgh or Glasgow, and then rent a motor home from one of the many rental companies.

### The best way to travel in Scotland:

When you want to explore Scotland I would highly recommend living the van life/motor home lifestyle, because it gives you freedom and flexibility and hotels are few and far between.

### — What to expect? —

Stunning fairytale landscapes, sheep, hairy highland cows and deer, green grass, lots of peat bogs, tiny single lane roads with passing places, Caribbean white sand beaches, lots of Whiskey distilleries, amazing fish, sleepy seals, lots of boats and of course bike trails.

# WORLD CUP



Our trip was coming to an end, but there was one last thing on my mind. The 4X World Cup in Fort William. The same place we had been a few weeks before. The idea of competing again at the highest level had been on my mind for a while, and the stars had aligned. I was at the right place at the right time. I had the wrong bike and not much preparation, but I decided to give it a go. I was nervous and had no idea how this would end, but at the same time I felt so alive and hungry for a good result.

Practice went okay, I even managed to qualify second although I struggled with the gate starts. I hadn't practiced any gates for 5 years since my last 4X World Championship and, no surprise, it was my weak point. But I also knew that my passing skills are my strength. I made it into the finals and at the last turn I took the harder line with the jump and passed a rider. Crossing the finish line in second place made me realize once again how much I need racing in my life. The racetrack is my happy place.

## — Good to know! —

For a hot shower and to fill up with water: go to campsites and ask. It will normally cost you about 5 pounds.

Wash your clothes: bring them to a laundry, you find them everywhere, and they're not too expensive.

The north of Scotland is not very populated and there are often long distances between towns. The best is to plan ahead to fill up with fuel and do some shopping when you have a chance.

Dogs are welcome on most trails, just remember to check the length of the trail before you head off.

Don't expect jumps on the trails, there are none for insurance reasons.

There are no official signposts in the mountains, because of an old land law. "If you don't know where you're going, you shouldn't be there!"

Scottish people are friendly and helpful, the accent can be difficult to understand at first but your ear quickly tunes in.

## — Apps used —

### To find trails:

Trailforks, komoot, Strava, Instagram and the dmbins.com (Developing Mountain Biking in Scotland) website.

To find sleeping spots and campsites:  
Park4night

### To download maps:

Maps.me (because you do not get good internet reception everywhere)

For sightseeing and good food:  
Tripadvisor and Google Maps

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[bike.saalbach.com](http://bike.saalbach.com)