



RIVER CROSSING: Clive Parkinson and (right) cycling at Jedburgh

The chance to mix sight-seeing with cycling saw **Shelagh Parkinson** head to the Scottish Borders for a healthy weekend break

CYCLING is great fun - but you do need to be fairly fit to enjoy it. So we decided to put in some hard training ahead of our sojourn to Scotland and pedalled furiously to Wrea Green one afternoon (punctuated by an hour lounging by the famous duck pond, ice cream in hand). That should do it, we thought.

Then all we had to do was throw the bikes in the back of the car, make sure our waterproofs were packed and chuck in the puncture repair kit, and we were off.

Should be a piece of cake, we agreed, knocking off the 55-mile route kindly prepared for us by the Scottish Borders tourism people. Fast forward 24 hours, and we were whizzing off on the Four Abbeys Cycle Trail, which as the name suggests, takes in the four abbeys of Melrose, Dryburgh, Kelso and Jedburgh.

The route is described as undulating, and it was not long before I had finally learned to use all 24 gears on my bike for the first time (the middle three usually suffice for the nicely flat Fyde coast). It was also important to keep stopping, to a) admire the view; b) check the map (AGAIN), and c) stop my calves from cramping up.

The Scottish Borders is already a popular destination among the golfing and walking fraternity, but is now keen to attract leisure cyclists.

We were trying one of the more challenging routes but there are trails from five miles to 250 miles depending on the ability of the cyclist. But what they do all have in common is that they take in some stunning countryside.

Our route started in the pretty town of Melrose and followed mainly quiet roads, with the route easy to follow thanks to the sign-posting. We crossed rivers, traversed a ford, meandered down quiet lanes, huffed and puffed our way up hills determined to keep pedalling, and then enjoyed the wind in our faces as we free-wheeled down the other side.

Cycling is a great way to explore any new area. You can cover more ground than on foot, yet feel close to your surroundings and spot things missed by those travelling in motorised transport. You can pause as often as you like, enjoy the companionship of fellow riders, and best of all is stopping for lunch and not feeling guilty about eating so much because after all, you have to fuel up for the second half of your journey.

As well as boasting some of the UK's most beautiful countryside, there is history on every side, from the Wallace Monument to the mound which is all that remains of Roxburgh Castle. Each of the abbeys on the route is worth a visit, although as the ride was set to take us all day, we did not have time to stop and peruse them on this occasion.

But you could easily fill a longer break alternating between cycling and sightseeing if you wanted a rest from the saddle on some days of your holiday.

The towns are also tempting to explore, and we were impressed by the young tennis players in Kelso playing on in the rain (the Andy Murray factor we wondered?).

We had driven up to our hotel The Buccleuch Arms in St Boswells the previous day. This fine building takes its name from the 5th Duke of Buccleuch who built the inn to "accommodate the aristocracy", so we knew we would be comfortable!

On being shown to our room, we were pleased to see relaxing furnishings and modern fittings, just suited to a country inn. A warm welcome was extended by staff who are more than willing to share knowledge of the local area with visitors. Owners Billy and Rachael

Hamilton have created a really cosy haven, not over-formal but where the service is just right. Since many of its guests are spending their days in very active pursuits - walking, golfing or in our case cycling - it is great to know that the dining room (and bar) serve award-winning food. The Buccleuch Arms took top prize in the Real Food Awards 2009 for the Borders at this year's Scottish Hotel Awards, thanks to its locally sourced ingredients.

Goats cheese bruschetta, haggis (of course) and home-made soup are among the delicious starters, while fresh fish is purchased from nearby Eyemouth for those wanting a catch-of-the-day for their main course. Cyclists can justify tucking into a calorie-packed sweet including the intriguingly named warm Border tart.

Breakfast is just as tasty, and kept us going for hours of pedalling. On our day out, we stopped off at Harestanes Countryside Visitor Centre for lunch, but the hotel also offers packed lunches if you want one.

For our second day, we were back on our bikes but this time for a rather shorter five mile circular

TRAVEL COUP

GAZETTE tourism writer Craig Fleming has been shortlisted for Travel Journalist of the Year at the England's Northwest Tourism Awards in Blackpool Tower on Monday with a portfolio of three articles - Chester, South Lakes and Southport - which have appeared on these pages.



FACTFILE

- Dinner, bed and breakfast at The Buccleuch Arms (right) ranges from £69 to £74 per person.
- Contact (01835) 822243 or log onto www.buccleucharms.com for more information.
- For details of cycle routes, see www.cyclescottishborders.co.uk



route from Melrose to Abbotsford, the historic home of Sir Walter Scott. Admission includes access to the ground floor of this stately home with its panoramic views over the River Tweed. Visitors can also stroll through the gardens and down to the river. After lunch, we had chance to potter round Melrose, which is a pretty market town well worth a visit in its own right thanks to its boutiques, craft shops and tearooms. Melrose Abbey is famous as the burial place of the heart of Robert the Bruce.

Our short visit certainly gave us a taste of an area which any cyclist looking for a new destination, or anyone looking for a break with a bit of a

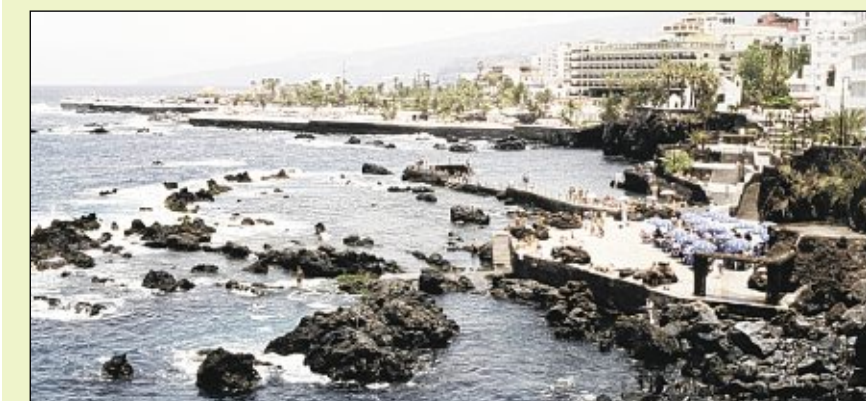
difference, will love to test their wheels in. There is lots of accommodation to choose from in the Scottish Borders and many are Cyclist Welcome accredited businesses offering lockable bike storage, a separate place to dry wet clothing and hot drinks on arrival, as well as information on cycle routes and even weather forecasts.

There are 37 town trail routes ranging from five to 26 miles which branch out from nine of the region's most popular towns and a free leaflet is available for each town.

Biking in the Borders maybe bracing and is definitely lung-busting but it takes you through beautiful landscapes - definitely worth the effort!



ONE OF THE SIGHTS: Abbotsford House at Melrose



Far more to Tenerife than sunseeking

After two decades of rebuilding on the southern coast of the island, Tenerife conjures up images of beaches, bars, bare earth and boisterous holidaymakers. But go to the north of the island and you can discover its quiet, green and cultural side. While the north, lying under 12,000-foot high Mount Teide, does get more cloud and rain than the sun-kissed south, it makes up for it with pretty coastal towns, lush vegetation and a touch of class.

Our first stop was the northern coastal resort of Puerto de la Cruz (above). We stayed at one of the island's top hotels - Hotel Botanico - by the town's botanical gardens.

The hotel, which frequently hosts royalty and film stars, boasts an oriental spa garden and is in lovely grounds with great views of Teide. Puerto de la Cruz was one of the first of the island's resorts to open up to tourism but still retains its working town atmosphere. One of the big attractions here is Loro Parque, Spain's biggest zoo. It has the world's largest collection of parrots - about 3,000 - as well as dolphin and whale shows, making it a full-day job.

At Puerto de la Cruz, we met our guide Jose Ramos. After two days in his company we were convinced there could not be a man who knew more about Tenerife.

First, he took us on a wine tour. The island's volcanic soil and Mount Teide-inspired weather conditions lend themselves to the production of interesting wines.

After a tour of one of the Monje winery at El Sauzal and a view of the wine production facilities, we were invited to a wine tasting. Alas, we cheated - swallowing most of the wine rather than spitting it out.

With a sober Jose doing the driving, we then looked round two picturesque small towns - La Orotava and Los Realejos.

Next day, Jose took us towards the island's two big towns - Santa Cruz and La Laguna. The cloud of the previous day had cleared and we had an uninterrupted view of Teide from our room. Before going into La Laguna, Jose took us up a windy route to the mountains of the north east.

We parked and looked out on weird rock formations, sweeping hills and the two big towns far below.

In La Laguna and in Santa Cruz we saw

ornate - and priceless - church artefacts, including beautifully carved statues of the Virgin Mary encased in silver.

Tenerife loves its fiestas and religious festivals and on those days some of the statues we saw are paraded through the streets while everyone has the day off.

We envied the locals not only their large number of bank holidays but also their magnificent religious icons, bemoaning the fact that the likes of Henry VIII and Oliver Cromwell had stripped English churches of much of their magnificence.

Another striking building in Santa Cruz is the remarkable opera house, officially known as the Auditorio de Tenerife.

This amazing construction makes the Sydney Opera House look quite ordinary. The huge sweeping white top to the building has been likened to a wave, but to us it resembled the head of a giant cobra. Having said goodbye to the splendid Jose, we drove on to our second and final stop at the beach resort of Alcala on the west of the island.

On the way we stopped for lunch at Hotel San Roque in the quaint coastal resort of Garachico. Once a major port, the town was wrecked by a volcanic eruption in 1706, so it lost its importance but not its charm.

At San Roque we were hosted by Laly Carayon who runs the 20-bedroom establishment with her son Dominique.

Her hotel was in contrast to the vast new complex of the Gran Melia Palacio de Isora

where we stayed at Alcala. Having negotiated a long, windy road from the north coast to the west, we were met with an elaborate, fountain-filled hotel right by the sea in a quiet old fishing port.

From here we were able to drive a few miles up the coast to Los Gigantes, a busy resort which takes its names from the huge cliffs towering above the town.

Just south of Alcala is Playa de San Juan, another comparatively quiet beach resort with good walks along the sea front. Back in Alcala it was fiesta time, with the main square festooned with coloured ribbons, music playing, couples dancing and plenty of food and drink on offer. It was a fitting and fun end to a fine tour.

Peter Woodman

FACTFILE

- Cadogan Holidays offers a range of breaks to Tenerife from Manchester. Hit www.cadoganholidays.com or ring 0845 615 6793
- Tenerife Tourism Corporation: www.webtenerifeuk.co.uk