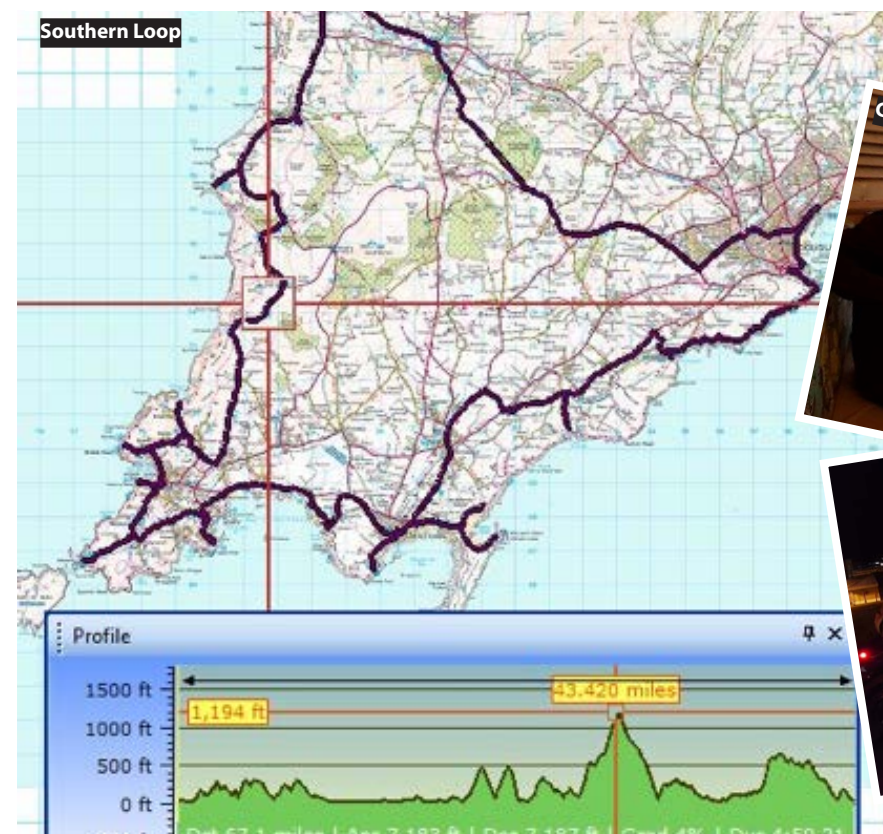


A RIDE OF THREE LEGS

This article is a recount of a long-weekend trip to the Isle of Man my touring buddies and I made in September 2018. I've included a fair bit of information about the travel logistics in case anyone is interested in undertaking a similar trip (which I can heartily recommend).



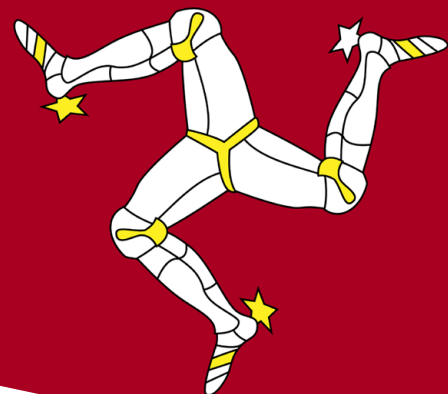
The Isle of Man is situated off the Cumbrian coast roughly midway between Barrow-in-Furness and Ardglass in Northern Ireland. It is about twice the length and breadth of the Isle of Wight, and hence has four times the land area. Whereas the IoW is hilly with an undulating Dorset-like feel about it, the IoM boasts a more rugged terrain with its own mountain called Snaefell. The land is green and very scenic with topology reminiscent of the Lake District. In effect the IoM is an extension of the Lake District, separated by sea.

It's a relatively wealthy place and, not being part of the UK or the EU, it has its own government and taxation rules which are considerably more generous than those imposed in the UK. The currency is sterling, using the same notes and coins as us, though these have different motifs on them. Prices are roughly comparable to those at home.

A long weekend is an ideal length of time for a keen road-cyclist to explore this scenic and moderately challenging rider's paradise. I'm sure it would be equally appealing to the off-road fraternity though I've not put that to the test - yet.

To get there we did our usual trick of booking the train, in this case Virgin Intercity from Euston to Liverpool Lime Street, as soon as the advance tickets came on sale. This is the way to grab the cheapest prices and is essential for booking cycle passes, without which you are unlikely to get a non-folding bike onto the train. Cycles must be stored in the designated locker spaces, of which there are only 4 per Voyager or 6 on a Pendolino (which can accommodate 2 tandems!). To help reduce costs further we always use 'Two Together' cards, which cost £30 (or less if there's an offer on) and get you, and a nominated 2nd person, 30% discount on any train travel you do together (you must travel together) for a year. We generally save the cost of the card on one big journey. To give you an idea of how much difference booking early makes: when we arrived at Euston, Mark realised he'd left his Two Together card at home. Although we had seat reservations, the only way he and I could travel was by paying the balance for the full 'booked on the day of travel' fare. The price we had initially paid was just under £100 return for the two of us. With the balance top-up the full price was a whopping £498.40!! Luckily, we were told we could reclaim the surcharge retrospectively and this proved to be the case.

The 15:00 Thursday afternoon Virgin West Coast train from Euston got us to Liverpool at 17:10. From the station there's a 1 mile ride to the ferry port for the 18:15 IOM Steam-packet sailing. This allowed enough time for a food stop in Mathew St., where we enjoyed a late lunch of goat curry at a Turtle Bay restaurant situated directly opposite the Cavern Club of Beatles fame. The ferry arrived in the IOM's capital town of Douglas, with its elegant frontage of 5 storey Victorian hotels, at 22:15. A short ride along the promenade brought us to our sea front hotel by 22:30, just in time to dump our kit and nip down the road for a pint or two at The Queen. The Chinese owned hotel 'At Caledonia' charged £44 pppn in a shared twin-room with full English breakfast. The restaurant in the hotel served the best (home-cooked) Chinese food I've ever eaten, almost worth the trip for that alone!



by Malcolm Rawlins

The Rides:

A circumnavigation of the island is about 110 quite lumpy miles, doable in a day for a sporty rider but, with so much to see, it's worth splitting the ride over two or three days to get the best out of the place. I planned a loop of the southern half of the island for day 1, likewise the northern half for day 2. The infamous motorcycle TT Mountain Course we saved for the Sunday morning before catching the ferry home.

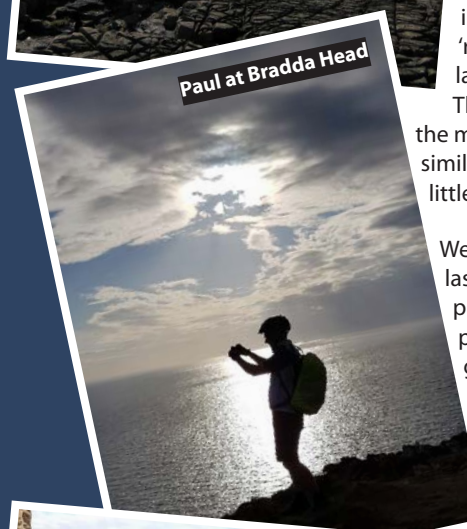
Day 1: Southern Loop

The southern part of the island has the more rugged coastline, with cliffs and many rocky outcrops. The views are stunning though, and well worth the effort involved in getting to the best viewpoints. I created a route that incorporated as many coves and viewpoints as I could practically fit into the ride. Due to the necessity to drop down to sea level and climb back up again many times over, this made for quite a high altitude gain overall (in excess of 7160 feet over the 66-mile route), with an overall average gradient of +4%.

The view of the Calf of Man, an island off the South Western most tip of the island, where visibly strong sea current 'races' can be seen between the two land masses, is particularly spectacular. There's a fairly big climb, highlighted by the map cursor, and a vertiginous decent, similar to Ventnor IoW's zig-zag road, a little further North at Glen Maye.

We set out South West from Douglas along the Marine Drive, with its photogenic but otherwise somewhat pointless towers. The coastline is rugged and for those with a geologist's eye, there were interestingly twisted strata visible in the cliffs that rise on the landward side above the road. Our first refuelling stop was at Castletown with its (you guessed it) castle, and pretty harbour.

After pausing for photo opportunities at the Calf of Man, we started out on the second side of the triangular route bringing us to Scarlett Point. Here you can see some impressive 'Limestone Pavement' stretching out into the sea



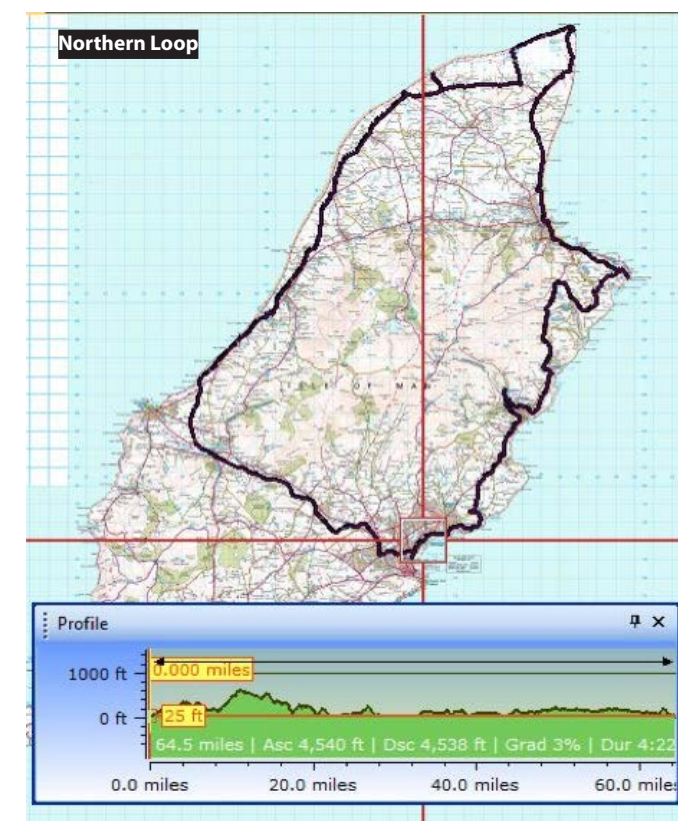
with large waves breaking over it, and Bradda Head provided the setting for an atmospheric photo of Paul silhouetted against a dramatic sky.

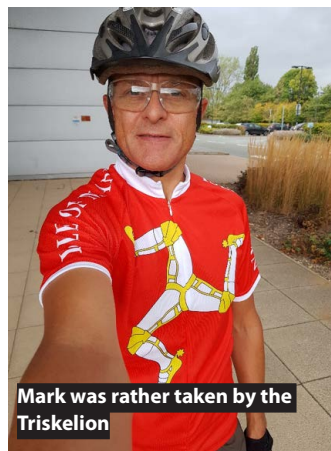
The route from Port Erin, heading north along the SW coastline, provided some steep climbs at times and accounted for much of the day's ascent. Peel, with another castle, marked the end of the second side of the triangular route; From here we headed back inland towards Douglas over a hump that runs down the middle of the island.

Day 2: Northern Loop

Although the mountain Snaefell is roughly in the centre of the northern half of the island, the northern coastal route is generally flatter and less rugged than the southern one. Again, our route was roughly triangular, in an anticlockwise direction this time, starting from Douglas and heading up the East coast to the most northerly 'Point of Ayre' where there is a lighthouse on the beach. We then headed East along a sandy scrubland foreshore, which my friends' various hybrids and MTBs coped with much better than my 28mm slick-tyre shod road bike. Finding the going rather slow we headed back inland onto proper roads again until joining the heritage trail. This is a disused railway line that runs down the North East coast, skirting around Peel, and ending at Douglas. Thus, the return ride was flat and relatively easy-going on hard surfaces, if not actual roads.

Our first port of call after leaving Douglas was the village of Laxey. No trip to the IoM would be complete without visiting Lady Isabella. No, she's not some posh bird, or a woman of ill-repute, but the largest operating water-wheel in the world. A marvel of Victorian engineering, she was built in 1854 to pump water from the





Mark was rather taken by the Triskelion



Lady Isabella in all her glory



Point of Ayre



Keep your hands off our cats

Laxey mines. Today a climb to the top is rewarded with panoramic views over the Laxey Valley. With a diameter of 71 feet 6 inches she rotates at approximately 3 rpm and dominates the skyline on the hill above the village. All Manx National Heritage sites give free entry to UK National Trust members so don't forget to take your card, if you have one.

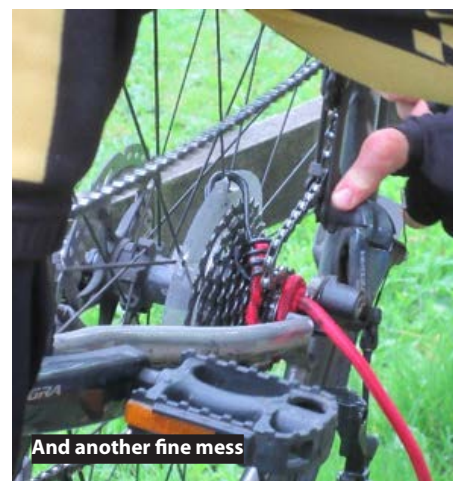
The national emblem and flag (Manx: brattagh Vannin) is a triskelion, composed of three armoured legs with golden spurs, on a red background. It has been the official flag of Mann since 1 December 1932 and is based on the Manx coat of arms, which dates from the 13th century. A keen observer might notice the triskelion on the Laxey Wheel is reversed, i.e. the feet point the opposite way, compared to the one on Mark's T shirt. In fact, the one on the wheel is wrong. This was due to a cock-up when transferring the image onto the wall. It's a mirror image of the symbol of Mann which, for historical reasons, has never been corrected.

A few miles further up the coast we made a detour to Maughold Point, the most Easterly point on the island, where a lighthouse can be viewed. From here we continued through Ramsey and on to the Point of Ayre, already mentioned, where there are actually two lighthouses; one on the beach and the other a little way inland.

Putting the lighthouses behind us, we picked our way along the foreshore until we met up with the Manx Heritage Trail running down the West coast. It was here that I suffered the only mechanical of the trip when a loose bungee-cord got intimate with my cassette and rear mech.



At Maughold Head



And another fine mess



Point of Ayre



A little father/son competitiveness in Ramsey

Day 3: The TT Course

The TT (Tourist Trophy) circuit is 37.73 miles long and consists of public roads located in the Northern half of the island, including one passing over Snaefell. The races started in 1907 on a short(er) triangular circuit starting and ending at St John's. It moved to the 'Mountain circuit' in 1911, where they have been run every year since except for the first world war years, resuming in 1920. It's a stunning but dangerous and unforgiving road racing circuit which has claimed 252 lives in the hundred years it's been running. The upside, for us cyclists, is that the road surfaces are maintained to the immaculate condition necessary when motorcycles are traversing them at well in excess of 200mph. You won't see a pothole or misaligned drain cover on the TT circuit, or pretty much anywhere on the island for that matter.

The TT races now start at the grandstand / pits area in Douglas, and what better place to start our cycle ride. The circuit is clockwise, heading out of Douglas to the sharp right-hand bend just before Union Mills. It then follows a lightly urban and mildly hilly main (by IoM standards) road through Crosby to Ballacraigne where we start a 600 ft climb past 'Sarah's cottage' as we head out into more open countryside and the viewpoint at Cronk-y-Voddy. The road then drops back to sea level as we head into Kirk Michael.

There then follows about 10 miles of pretty flat and straight road through Ballaugh, with its famous 'bridge', and Sulby with its famous 'straight' to Ramsey. This is where the real action starts; immediately after the Ramsey hairpin the road begins its relentless 1400ft climb to the summit (nearly) of Snaefell. The last time I did this climb I had my knees wrapped around the petrol tank of a Suzuki GSX750, and it didn't feel nearly as steep! Nearing the top, you pass along a section known as the Veranda, which offers spectacular views over the East coast of the island and the Snaefell mountain railway.

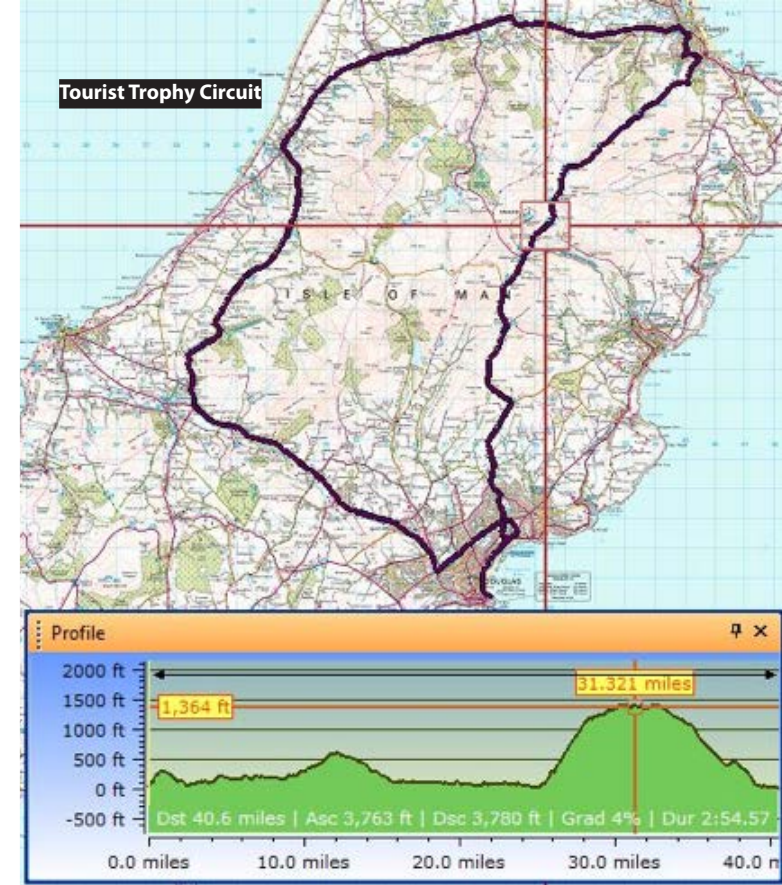
Topping the summit, we start a 5-mile descent that starts off shallow and gradually increases (though never getting quite as steep as the ascent), passing a right-hand bend at 'Windy Corner' which is definitely not misnamed! A right turn at a roundabout in Creg-ny-Baa brings us onto the final run down into Douglas again and the start / finish line. Just another 4 laps and you've done a TT!

The TT lap record of 135.462 mph was set in 2018 by Peter Hickman on a BMW.

In round figures, a GP bike puts out about 200hp, roughly 150kW. I averaged 13.5 mph at a sustainable peak power of 150W (maybe). Therefore; I did my circuit at 1/10th of the average speed, on 1/1000th of the available power, so I think I win!

After our TT circuit we caught the 15:00 ferry sailing from Douglas, getting us back to Liverpool at 17:45. A short ride later we were at Lime Street Station, with just enough time to grab something to eat before catching the 18:47 train, arriving in Euston at 21:03. A Three mile cycle ride across London, always fun (not), took me to Victoria for the train home. As usual on a Sunday evening, the line from Three Bridges to Horsham was closed for 'track maintenance'. Knowing that they won't allow bikes on the backup busses (having been caught-out before) I was carrying lights for the final ten-mile ride home.

Manx Mountain Railway viewed from 'The Veranda'



Total cost for the four days, including food and beer, was £398 pp. Not cheap but, unless you're camping somewhere fairly local, cycle holidays never are in my experience. Still a good 'bang for your buck' though IMO!

In general, the IoM traffic is light and unhurried, and the police are quite strict on speed limits. That said, there were motorcycles travelling very fast on the mountain section at times, but I don't believe any of us felt in any danger from them.

I won't eulogise over the Isle of Man save to say that, if you fancy some moderately challenging and very scenic riding, on what are probably the best maintained roads in the UK, then give this place a go, I promise you won't regret it •



Out on the Circuit



Douglas start/finish line