

Demelza's Land's End to John O'Groats Challenge 2026



From mid-May to mid-June 2026, I cycled from Land's End to John O'Groats, to raise money for the Association for Promoting Retreats (APR). Accompanied by my partner, Ben, we covered the 1180 miles in 23 days, stopping at 17 different APR member retreat houses and meeting 3 more retreat leaders along the way.



I had cycled the 'End-to-End' about 30 years ago, but this time, we wanted to take it at a more leisurely pace and along a more unusual, meandering route. And the whole experience has been one of the most enjoyable and memorable things I've ever done – I loved every minute!



I particularly enjoyed watching the geology, geography, flora, fauna and industrial heritage of the country change as we travelled north – and it was a joy and a huge privilege to be able to combine this with a kind of personal pilgrimage connecting a network of retreat houses and leaders across the country. Thank you all. Your unfailingly warm welcomes were the highlights of many of our days!



We travelled mostly along designated cycle paths – usually small country lanes, disused railway lines or canal towpaths – although our route did



Photos (left, top to bottom): Blessing at Land's End; Demelza near the [Haven](#) in Porthcurno; Meeting Steve, Larissa and Bowie, guardians of [Epiphany House](#), Truro; the road over Bodmin Moor; a brief pause at [Tinhay Retreats](#), Devon; Demelza and Sarah Horsman at [Sheldon Retreat Centre](#).



Photos (right, top to bottom): Outside Exeter Cathedral; Demelza with retreat leader, [Vanessa Cole](#); a railway line near Gloucester; with Chris Whittington (of the [School of Contemplative Life](#)); Demelza at [Holland House](#), Cropthorne, with warden, Helen Stanton.





occasionally have to pass right through the middle of busy city centres, such as Leeds and Edinburgh. Some stretches were hilly too, and over the course of the 3½ weeks, we effectively climbed the height of Mount Everest – twice!

We experienced every kind of weather along the way as well – leaving Land’s End in bitterly cold 40mph winds, and then cycling through cloud, drizzle, showers, relentless rain and hail, as well as bright sunshine and a three-day 30°C heatwave. To complete the litany, we even saw snow in the Cairngorms! Mostly, however, the weather was cool and cloudy, with a gentle to moderate tailwind – just perfect, in fact, for a long bike ride!

Not counting the joy of meeting so many wonderful people who lead or host retreats, it’s difficult to choose any individual places or events as other highlights of the trip – although if pushed, these might include:

- our windy Ascension Day blessing at Land’s End with Revd Adam Thomas
- our first cooked breakfast (in Newlyn) as the rain hammered down outside
- cycling through the eerie 2-mile Combe Down railway tunnel in Bath
- avoiding a noisy and crowded Aston Villa victory parade on the streets of Birmingham by cycling along the

Photos (left, top to bottom): Demelza outside the [Greenhouse at Barnes Close](#); with Chris Polhill at [Reflections Gardens](#) in Staffordshire; cycling along the [Caldon canal](#); with Craig Newton and his team at [Shallowford House](#), Staffordshire; outside [St Chad’s House](#), Leek.

Photos (right, top to bottom): Crossing the Pennines; a picnic lunch at Winscar reservoir; Demelza and Brother Philip at the [Community of the Resurrection](#), Mirfield; the chapel at Mirfield; Demelza with retreat leader, [Helen Evans](#); Demelza at [Holy Rood House](#), Thirsk, with warden, Sue Hammersley, on the hottest day of the journey.





- empty (and probably considerably prettier!) lower-level canal towpaths
- a laughter-filled lunch at Shallowford House in Staffordshire, and an easy and enjoyable supper at the Coach House Kilmuir
 - celebrating the halfway mark in the cool of Holy Rood House's garden
 - breakfast on Hadrian's Wall
 - the vast unspoilt heather-covered moorscapes of Northumbria, the Cairngorms and northern Scotland
 - being serenaded by cuckoos the length and breadth of Scotland
 - our first view of the North Sea (and a very brisk tailwind urging us onwards to John O'Groats on our last day)

There were, of course, lowlights too, such as:

- a broken wheel-spoke on Dartmoor (although we didn't have any punctures)
- arriving at a less-than-adequate AirBnB in the Midlands, drenched from an afternoon's relentless rain
- trying to beat the fading daylight to reach our accommodation after a hilly 70-mile cycle over the Pennines

We were both extremely touched by the generous hospitality we received at all the retreat houses we visited – thank you all for making our trip so memorable, and for feeding us and/or hosting us on our ride. It was a particular joy to be able to visit retreat

Photos (left, top to bottom): the bridge over the river Tees at Yarm; another disused railway line; outside [St Antony's Priory, Durham](#); the Angel of the North; Demelza with Jan at [Shepherds Dene](#); and its garden.

Photos (right, top to bottom): Breakfasting on Hadrian's Wall; a Northumbrian stream; Demelza with Amanda at [Whitchester Christian Centre](#); the road across the Hawick moor; the 'Kelpies' at Falkirk; Demelza with Robin, Gwen, Khulan and Amber at the [Bield at Blackruthven, Perth](#).





houses I'd never been to before, to put them into context, and meet some of their staff. And thank you to *all* of you who kept us in your prayers, or who followed our progress on Facebook; we couldn't have done it without your support and encouragement too.

Although the bike ride was a personal challenge that I had wanted to do for myself for many years, we also chose to use the opportunity to raise funds for the [Association for Promoting Retreats \(APR\)'s Bursary Fund](#). Established in the APR's centenary year in 2013, the Fund helps support 60-70 people each year to go on retreat when otherwise they may not be able to afford the full cost themselves. Our goal was to raise £5,000 for the Fund – that's an extra 50 bursaries – and we're well on our way to exceeding this!

It is not too late to sponsor us. Just visit promotingretreats.org/cycling-fundraiser, or you can email Demelza on promoting.retreats@gmail.com to make a bank transfer, or post a cheque (made out to Association for Promoting Retreats) to 2 Brookfield Cottages, The Strand, Lymington, Exmouth EX8 5ES.

Thank you.

Photos (left, top to bottom): A typical pastoral view in lowland Scotland; Demelza at [Kinnoull Monastery](#), Perth; a wet road outside Pitlochry; celebrating having cycled 1000 miles at the Tomatin Distillery; Demelza with Nancy and Ruth at the [Coach House Kilmuir](#), near Inverness.

Photos (right, top to bottom): the view of the estuary from the garden of the Coach House Kilmuir; a moorland road near Lairg in the Highlands; one of many long straight roads in Caithness; our approximate route-map; Demelza and Ben, still smiling, at John O'Groats.

